

Mental health, mental wellbeing has been in focus for some time now, with various charities and social media campaigns working hard to rid some of the stigma surrounding mental health issues. 1 in 4 of us suffers from some type of mental health issue, and somewhat worryingly, a recent survey by Help Musicians UK found that a staggering 71% of musicians suffer with anxiety and panic attacks and 68.5% with depression. Why? The answers could be found in both the make-up of the creative brain and the shear pressures of an industry often glamorised and misunderstood by the outside world.

To be creative requires some level of introspection. So with a view to a musician's brain, that either means creative people are more susceptible to depression or that emotionally fragile people need to create to process self-analysis. There is also argument to the left side / right side theory. Creative people activate the right side of their brain more readily - accessing ways to process information in an artistic format; music, painting etc. Whereas left side activation promotes logical processes. With less focus on the logical processing this can cause emotional fragility, and so the rollercoaster begins to roll.

But it isn't just a physiological or genetic predisposition that means musicians are more likely to suffer. The pressures of the business, from grassroots to world-dominating rock stardom are unlike any other field of work. This is something that has been recognised for years within the classical side of the industry - I've been working with students at the Royal College of Music, London in this very field for well over a decade - but when we delve into the mainstream it is awash with big companies caring more about shifting units than caring about the artist they represent, the support simply isn't there. Things are starting to change. Through various campaigns raising awareness and a roster of broken artists, some of those tragically dead, record companies and the general public are starting to take notice and ask important questions. And it's not just artists that suffer, touring & live venue staff, managers, agents, the pressure lies heavy on everyone.

It all looks so great doesn't it? Musicians get to play for, what, 45 minutes an evening, have a few beers, chat to people, go on tour with their band mates, see a load of places... get paid for what amounts to be an extended holiday right? \*sigh\* Lets break it down.

Those 45 minutes on stage have taken hours, weeks, months and in most cases years of practicing, writing, learning a craft that others drink in at a gig like their warm, over-priced lager. Those 45 minutes encompass just one gig, one gig that may have taken weeks to secure from the clutches of other bands biting at the bit for the chance to get up on the same stage. Those gigs are inconsistent unless you are a promotional maverick or you have an agent. Those gigs will always be in what would be deemed as unsociable hours in any other line of work, and that gig will often come after a full day's work at a day job, and

normally at the end of a long drive, loading and unloading gear, sound checking and a lot of waiting around in between.

Then there is the uncertain income. If you are lucky enough to be doing this full time, unless you are on a signed roster (and sometimes even if you are) the fee from the gig will have to cover your fuel, agent if you have one, the split between your fellow bandmates and the tax man. You can top up your earnings by selling merch, mingling and chatting away to your fans to coax that tenner out of their sweaty hands for a t-shirt - which you'll probably have to pay to print up in the first place anyway. You'll need to have a keen promotional and business acumen to make sure this pays as much as it can, to get the gigs in the first place and to put in the hours of tweets, Instagram shots and Facebook posts to get the 10 people you're trying to flog t-shirts to the gig in the first place.

Then comes the competition. Yeah your mates' band might be really great and you'll wear their t-shirt on stage to promote them, but *you* want the gigs, *you* want the fans to come to your show too, and you'll often be sharing the same fanbase. Then when you get out of your local gigging circuit you'll have to convince the five hairy-scaries at the back of the room that you are indeed their new favourite band... and for the promoter to want to book you again. There is any amount of other bands trying to be right where you are right now. The pressure is enormous. You're smiling right? You should be because you are achieving success in this glittering career, you shouldn't feel stressed...

Then there's the peer pressure, the environmental factors, the rock 'n' roll lifestyle to live up to. Now I can sit here with my wellbeing advisor hat on and tell you to 'just say no' (ask your parents if you are under 30, it was big in the '80s). My mantra would be to eat healthily - again tricky when on tour, pasties and pizza make for a fat and miserable stomach. Drink in moderation - up to 4 units per day for you lads, 2 for you lassies. And never touch drugs. They just complicate things further, and while they may offer some relief from the stresses and strains, all they really do is turn you into a nob. All of this is easy to achieve with will power and a likeminded peer group, but it's so easy to fall off the tracks, even just a little bit. If you are weakened by tiredness, financial insecurity and missing home, it's all too easy. And that's even if you don't have an underlying mental health issue.

And then, yes there's more! Then there's the performance anxiety. Getting up on stage night after night, acting out every evening the person you want to be perceived to be. Watching each face and pair of ears judge you. Performance anxiety is different to other anxiety, all anxiety can be debilitating but performance anxiety isn't something that many mainstream medical practitioners easily understand, which means accessing the appropriate help can prove tricky and time consuming. You will need to get up on stage because touring is where

the money is. In a digital age where streaming has devalued music it is now the only real revenue stream. If you are signed to a major, they will push you, you are their product and most majors still, after years of high profile acts having breakdowns, are refusing to recognise there is a mental health epidemic that needs addressing. Small indie labels may well be more personal and will give their artists the breaks and the help they need, but then usually they are friends and with that comes the personal responsibility of them losing a lot of money that they have invested in you.

So why bother? Well, you're a musician. Musicians make music and are musicians. It's not the music that makes you ill, it's the business. So where is the help? If you are lucky enough to be a professional musician, or indeed a music student in higher education, you can access help via BAPAM and Help Musicians UK, who have a database of practitioners working specifically with musicians. This is also funded depending on your circumstances. But what, if like most of us, you aren't?

We owe it to ourselves and to our band mates to look out for each other. Eat, drink and live as healthy as possible. Find ways of dealing with anxiety - yoga, meditation, anything to enable you to take a step back will help; the basics of Alexander technique in the performance anxiety write up can help. If depressive feelings or anxiety become more problematic, ignoring it, hoping it will go away won't help. See your GP to get a referral for CBT or other talking therapy, medication can also help. Shamefully, referral times in a seriously underfunded NHS can be quite lengthy so talk to others and ask for help. If you can afford it, consider private therapists and look for recommendations. £45 per session may seem a lot of money, but could prove invaluable.

It takes a lot of work to slow yourself when you are trying to achieve so much in such a fast paced industry, but it's imperative. Break worries down. Are they something you can actually do something about? If so, make a to-do list and give yourself time to work through each task. If something doesn't feel right then don't be pressured into it.

At present there is no dedicated helpline or counselling service for musicians. Help Musicians UK are currently looking into starting one, but funding is short - like everything in the arts - so will take time. Mind are the national charity for mental health awareness, they provide advice and support to empower anyone suffering a mental health difficulty. Their helpline is 0300 123 3393.

The Samaritans offer a dedicated 24/365 confidential helpline. Their national freephone number is 116 123, or you can email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org).

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If you, or anyone you know is in immediate danger then call 999.

Remember, it's 1 in 4 of us. **You are not alone.**

Karina.