

MIAW 2021 Francesca Leo

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SPEAKERS

Francesca Leo, Rebecca Toal, Hattie Butterworth

Hattie Butterworth 00:02

Welcome to the Musicians' Injury Awareness Week with Things Musicians Don't Talk About.

Rebecca Toal 00:07

Chronic playing injuries are a part of our lives as musicians, either through our own experience or that of our friends and colleagues. Playing related pain is even more common with up to 90% of musicians reporting pain in relation to their instrument at some point in their lives.

Hattie Butterworth 00:23

After asking openly on our Instagram whether someone would like to speak about their injury experience, the response was overwhelming. It became clear to us that this is an issue about which musicians feel misunderstood. We are determined to explore it further.

Rebecca Toal 00:38

Musicians' Injury Awareness Week was created by us at Things Musicians Don't Talk About for the week of the 15th to the 21st of November, in the hope that we can share the stories of musicians, teachers and physicians. Through podcasts, social media content and resources, and live events in partnership with the UK conservatoires, we are ensuring that anyone struggling with injury can have access to peer support and the correct medical advice.

Hattie Butterworth 01:03

We urge you to take part in any way you can, use the hashtag MIAW2021 and tag us @tmdtapodcast if you want to share your own journey with an injury.

Rebecca Toal 01:15

It honestly means the world that you're here and you're listening, and we can't wait to share some inspirational stories with you.

Francesca Leo 01:24

My name is Francesca Leo, and I'm a flutist and educator and a performing arts health researcher and advocate. I founded the website playingwithoutpain.com back in 2017, which was the product of an IRB reviewed research study that I did actually as a part of my honours thesis for my undergraduate degree. And my motivation in conducting this study what actually came from a long history of struggling with a performance related injury myself. So I first experienced pain while playing my instrument around aged 16. So I was about a sophomore in high school. And at the time, I had never heard of anyone being injured from playing an instrument before, so I kind of just disregarded it and thought that "oh, maybe there's something wrong with me because I don't think it should be hurting to play this instrument right now". And I ended up mentioning it to one of my doctors around the time and the only advice I got was to just stop playing my flute if it hurt. I was initially diagnosed with forearm tendinitis in both forearms actually. And the the advice was to stop playing, ice, heat when it hurt and put heat on it when it hurt and take painkillers which I now look back on and kind of cringe thinking about myself following that advice, just with how many more possibilities I know there are for treatments that we know now that really are helpful to musicians. So at the time, I really wanted to pursue a career in music performance, I was really set on auditioning for music schools in a couple years. So not knowing that I had any other options, I just ended up playing through the pain, and of course, it got worse. By the time that I had gotten accepted into a music performance programme, or committed to going to study music performance in undergrad, I got there and I was still in a lot of pain, but I was at the point where I was kind of just ignoring it, trying to pretend that it didn't exist and just playing through because I was so afraid of falling behind. I was also dealing with some pretty severe mental health challenges as well. I was really, really incredibly hard on myself with it, which I think a lot of listeners can relate to. And it's kind of the culture that is perpetuated in music school and music conservatories, at least that I've noticed, so if you already have a tendency to be really, really critical of yourself and you're in an environment where that's kind of encouraged, that's really difficult to manage. If you would have asked me at the time if I was struggling with my mental health, I would have said no, because that was how little that I was aware of how much I was actually struggling but looking back, I realise that it was a really, really difficult period of time. And I ended up kind of punishing myself for not feeling that I wasn't working hard enough by just practising every opportunity I got, and of course that just led my pain to get worse and worse. And combined with my elevated stress levels at the time it it only just worsened the pain symptoms that I was experiencing. So it ended up spreading to my shoulder ... around my junior year of undergraduate, so my wake up call where I finally sat myself down and said, "Okay, I really need to get help for this. This is really bad and I'm very scared that this could affect my ability to have a career in music performance in the future" was when I was at a summer festival, the summer of my junior year, I was very much in the same cycle of like, just practising every moment I got, running the same runs over and over again, just being feeling really, really unhappy, but always feeling like I needed to do more and work harder to catch up, because I didn't deserve to rest or take a break. I got to a point where I couldn't play for longer than five minutes without experiencing shooting pain up on my left arm. That was really scary for me, because I really wasn't sure what was going to happen or if I had to stop playing forever, because that was the only advice that I had ever received was just, you know, "if you are in pain, stop playing." I think that's part of the reason why I avoided going back to get my my pain symptoms checked out for a couple years after that. So I finally just decided to start taking the steps to treat this injury that I had been dealing with for several years. And I ended up getting an updated diagnosis of shoulder tendinitis, and I was prescribed physical therapy at that time, which was

my first experience with physical therapy. That was also when I started Alexander Technique lessons at my undergrad. So the two of those combined allowed me to manage my symptoms pretty well, until I graduated. But I was just thinking about how much I struggled and wondering why - ... if there were any other musicians that were struggling with these experiences as well, and just not talking about it. I had heard of some cases of professional symphony musicians getting injured and not being able to play, but those stories are always very stigmatised and it's ... it was portrayed to me at least as kind of like a warning sign like, "Oh, if you get injured, you're just gonna have to quit, you can never play again." So I was just afraid to admit that to myself. So I started getting kind of introspective. And just asking myself, "well, if I'm experiencing this, how many other people in my school are and just in general are and just feel like they can't talk about it", because I felt like I couldn't talk about it. So I approached the point where I had to pick a topic for my honours thesis for my undergraduate and it was my private teacher at the time who actually recommended that I start a research study in performing arts health, because he knew that I had been dealing with these issues and that I was passionate about making a change. And so I ended up going through the IRB review process, I conducted a study on the prevalence of performance related injuries in collegiate musicians and the stress connection. So I was examining specifically at the institution that I conducted the study how many participants ... what percentage were experiencing currently or have ever experienced performance-related pain, and the percentage we found was high: it was 88% of participants, which is a finding that corroborated the other similar studies. The largest scale ones that I have seen so far demonstrate about 70% of collegiate musicians experiencing or have experienced some form of performance related injury. And then my study specifically examined the stress connection. So we found a general elevated stress levels amongst all participants, and a positive significant relationship between elevated stress levels and pain severity and frequency, so that was a really interesting finding, and really just revealed how strong the mind body connection was, and how we need to address not only injury prevention from a musculoskeletal level, but also implementing good mental health habits and really just learning how to take care of your mental health. That study led me to creating my website playingwithoutpain.com, which I created as a resource, which is something that I really wish I had when I was going through my own injuries. So that was kind of my motivation in creating it, actually. So it consists of a resource database with peer reviewed studies. I started out with a referral network for Ohio and Michigan specifically, because that's where I was based at the time, of Performing Arts health specialists in the area. And I've since began to expand that globally as I make more connections with performing arts medicine specialists. There's now an interactive portion of it. So I run social media platforms attached to the website, and we have been doing several workshops, having meetings over zoom, especially during the pandemic, so I just wanted to create a community that was a safe space for musicians to talk about these issues because I know how helpful it would have been for me to be able to talk about it. So moving forward, my ultimate goal is to expand this project. And I'm currently in an MBA programme right now, so studying business administration. I would love to create a nonprofit organisation out of this project at some point, just serving as a resource specifically geared towards collegiate musicians, but not limited to. I want this resource to be accessible to all musicians who need it, just really beginning to conduct performer self advocacy initiatives in music schools, specifically to increase performing arts health education and resources for for all music students. If you go to a medical professional and you're given the advice to either stop playing, or apply ice and heat when necessary or even take painkillers, which I just cringe so hard at that every time I hear it, because I think that's a really dangerous path to go down. If you're given that advice, which just first know that you're not alone, I've received that advice several times, it is

very common. In those instances, I think it's always important to get a second opinion from a different medical professional if you're able to, and especially talk with a specialist. There's more and more specialists that are becoming available to specifically talk about musculoskeletal performance related injuries in performing artists. And if you haven't checked out the Performing Arts Medicine Association, that's a really great resource. I believe there are partner organisations in the UK and Australia that also serve as as resource and referral databases for specialists, so I would highly recommend seeing a specialist if you're able to, and I'm trying to find them on on those resources. I have some available on my website, mostly based in the US. A lot of them do virtual consultations, if you don't live in the area. So what's been helpful for me is to know how to advocate for myself in those situations. So it's really important to be able to specifically identify your pain symptoms and the characteristics of your pain, so have a good idea of the general area, which you're experiencing pain, when it occurs - so if it occurs when you're playing your instrument, if it happens after if it's kind of just like, always there, how long it lasts, after it begins, on average, if it is a direct result from playing, you might want to notice how soon into playing that you experienced the pain. So just knowing those, those pieces of information ... and also like does your pain feel like it's a burning sensation? Does it feel like pins and needles? Does it feel achy? Just being able to describe the feeling is really helpful too. And then also just really emphasising that you are trying to find the best way to continue playing your instrument and it's really important that you continue playing, if you feel that it's really important to you, and just really emphasise that it is your career path, and it's something that you are hoping to pursue in the future, which I think, sometimes there's a disconnect, and a lot of people don't really understand that. They view music as a hobby, sometimes, and I think that's often why that advice is given because they think that maybe it is something that you can give up for a while. But I would just really emphasise that it is your profession, it's your career path, and it's really something that needs to be taken seriously. The most beneficial thing for my healing over the years has actually changed a little bit. So initially, physical therapy was really helpful for me, it remains to still be incredibly helpful. But I find that, for myself, the combination between my physical therapy exercises, with the incredible amount of unlearning I had to do when I started Alexander Technique and body mapping, to be able to learn to play more freely and with more ease, has been incredibly beneficial, and that's still a journey that I'm very much in the middle of. And I anticipate being on that journey for the rest of my career. I'm just constantly learning and I'm learning how to play with more freedom. I've been really positively impacted by the practice of meditation specifically, because I suffer from high levels of anxiety and meditation specifically during the past year with the pandemic and everything that we've dealt with has been really helpful in kind of managing my anxiety in the moment and also putting tools in my tool kit that I can use in really stressful situations. I do still experience pain flare ups from time to time, I actually recently experienced one earlier this year. And I try not to shame myself for experiencing them. And I try to remind myself that healing is not linear. And each time is actually a learning opportunity to be able to learn more of what works for me, and maybe try some new treatment methods with the guidance of a professional of course. This past time, I really took it seriously and I ended up taking a full month off of playing, which is not something that I had done in the past. And that was really helpful, because during that month, I learned really effective methods of mental practising and how to practice away from my instrument, which continued to benefit me to this day and will continue to benefit me for the rest of my life. I also worked a lot on my physical therapy exercises, especially on body mapping, and really just sitting down and seeing where my mis-mappings lie. I'm currently a trainee in the Association for Body Mapping Education. Body mapping is a somatic education practice so it's a movement-focused practice, specifically designed for musicians

and performing artists. It's really similar in concept to Alexander Technique, so the end goal is to learn to play more freely and with more of a sense of ease, but body mapping kind of breaks down the anatomical portion of it. I like to tell the story of how when, when you're born, you develop a map in your brain, and it's characterised by the way that you learn to crawl and the way that you learn to walk. And throughout our lives, many of us learn inefficiencies in our movements, and so body mapping is kind of a way of retraining your map and your brain of your body in regards to its structure, function and size. So the work involves a lot of looking at pictures and models, and then kind of palpating on yourself. And seeing like how big my collarbone actually, just really getting to know the size and structure and function of your own anatomy, and then eventually relating that to playing your instrument. And there is so much unlearning that happens in that process. Unlearning and remapping. And it's just really ... it's really fascinating. And it's something that I think all musicians should just know how to do that combined with Alexander Technique, and Feldenkreis, I would say are the big three, at least from what I have experienced, the Big Three somatic education practices that are really helpful to performing artists, because it's just another layer. Once you identify your injury and begin treating it, now, how do you come back to your instrument and not go back to the same habits that were causing the injury before? I think that the collaborative approach of working with medical professionals and also working with somatic education professionals is really crucial to kind of solving the process of avoiding re-injury in the future. When I was first starting college and experiencing pain, I really wish that I knew that it was okay to talk about. Sometimes it can feel really scary. But you can start by just opening up to your support network, your trusted friends, your close ... your close family, close friends, and just kind of letting them know what's going on, just so that you can start talking about it with somebody who is a safe person to talk to it about. And then hopefully, the dialogue will become less stigmatised, the more that we all learn to do that. But also, I really just wish I knew that it was okay to make mistakes, and it was okay to fail. And it was all a part of the learning process. And I, I really wish that I had truly believed that when I was first starting college because I think that would have prevented a lot of suffering for me. But I wish that I would have allowed myself to do that in my own practice space, because I think I would have grown so much more and just built confidence out of that too, just knowing that it was ... it's okay to make mistakes and it doesn't mean that you're any less committed to the process or any less talented or worthy of the successes that you've had so far.