

Students' Mental Health and the Voice Studio: How to Help Without Losing Lesson Time

Denise Bernardini and Lauren DiMaio



Denise Bernardini



Lauren DiMaio

MENTAL DISORDERS PLAGUE THE YOUNG SINGER. In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 18 million students were enrolled in college. Nearly three out of four of these students have experienced a sense of “overwhelming anxiety” at some time; just under 30% report having felt overwhelming anxiety in the previous two weeks.¹ College students are not the only people suffering; children under the age of 18 also are experiencing increased anxiety. According to the CDC, 4.4 million children aged 3–17 years of age have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders.²

COLLEGE STATISTICS

Universities and colleges report an increase of students with mental health needs who bring these issues into the classroom.³ When surveyed, 2 in 5 college students described being depressed to the point that they “struggled to function,” while 3 in 5 felt “overwhelming anxiety” during the previous year. Reinberg suggests that 1 in 5 college students “are so stressed they consider suicide.”⁴

The Mayo Clinic describes “college depression” not as a separate clinical diagnosis, but rather as the onset of depression that starts during college.⁵ Symptoms of “college depression” include persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, angry outbursts, loss of interest in hobbies and activities, and a sense of worthlessness. Institutional counseling centers and medical clinics are not created equally, and, as a result, some are overrun and too underfunded to handle the growing need for students to navigate the world of mental and physical health.⁶ Students may not be aware of the resources on campus, nor are they always willing to access them.

University life is an adventure—a chance to be challenged, meet new people, and gain exciting opportunities. While these exciting interactions can be part of the college experience, participation in a competitive, high stakes artistic environment can present genuine challenges. Students must navigate campus culture, meet academic expectations, and juggle financial, social, and personal aspirations. Managing these demands can create or trigger mental health matters and jeopardize student well-being. In addition to these general complexities, individuals who hold identities that are marginalized

in U.S. higher education spaces (e.g., students of color, LGBTQ+ students, undocumented students, students from low income families, international students) face additional burdens: emotional stress and labor arising from daily microaggressions, taunting, harassment, or worse.

The causes for the increase in mental health issues are highly debatable. Blame is directed toward cell phone usage, social media, fake news, helicopter parents, or absent parents. However, when students are in a voice studio, the reason for the mental health issues is not relevant. It is now, in part, the voice teacher's issue, too, and must be addressed ethically.

HIGH SCHOOL STATISTICS

High school students experience mental health issues, too. Flannery writes, "By high school and college, many students have run out of steam. Anxiety—the mental-health tsunami of their generation—has caught up with them. Today's teens and young adults are the most anxious ever, according to mental-health surveys"; he further states that 70% of teenagers report anxiety and depression as being a major issue.⁷ It is important to note that these students don't always know how to express their feelings. They may use words that they have heard before, such as "anxiety," without understanding the true definition of the word.

Adolescence is a period of time when youth are prone to increased impulsive and risk-taking behavior. Parents, teachers, and pediatricians ask why teenagers are at risk for drug, alcohol, and self-destructive behaviors. Neurological research reveals how some youth partake in these behaviors because of developmental changes and their predispositions.⁸ People often believe that teens engage in risky behavior because they are not good at evaluating risk. However, research in this area demonstrates that adolescents are just as good as adults at determining the danger of risky behavior.⁹ It is important to know that the teenage brain is not fully developed.

Adolescents place importance on peer perceptions and relationships, and this pressure may be part of mental health concerns. Research demonstrates that a brain region known as the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex might be critical in helping people cope with negative evaluations from peers by reducing distress.

Adolescents rarely use this brain region.¹⁰ Another area of the brain, the lateral prefrontal cortex, is responsible for mature self-regulation that develops gradually over the adolescence period. These brain regions are a factor in students behaviors because they tend to take more risk when around their peers. The differences in adult brains and the ever changing teenage brain may also be why there is an increase in mental health issues. Some mental health issues stem from poor and risky decision making, which can be related to the development of their brains.

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

While this article assumes an academic perspective, independent teacher needs are also addressed. However, one significant difference between a university setting and an independent voice studio has to do with the resources available. Independent teachers ordinarily do not have immediate access to a counseling center, administrators who make policies, or other colleagues who can be sources of advice and support. However, independent teachers can create their own policies and resources. Independent teachers must think through this article with a mindset of protecting themselves and their students. Look for places to increase responsibility, hold yourself and students accountable, and be prepared for issues to arise that have not occurred before.

Many universities now have reporting offices as resources if a student's grades are at risk. If there is grave concern, teachers can alert the institution that the student may need support for their mental health. The private studio doesn't have this luxury; however, the private studio can use aids to create a safe space for both voice teacher and student.

Having a response ready to use in challenging situations is useful. For example, if a student begins to monopolize lesson time with personal issues, the teacher may say, "I hear that these issues are important to you. There is support on campus or your school counselor, or perhaps your parents will be able to help you. But right now is lesson time. What can you do to transition back into this lesson?" Giving students the power to change the dialogue is essential; it gives them a feeling of control and not being chastised for their emotions.

Using the same response each time allows the student to recognize when a boundary has been crossed and

needs to be corrected. Remember, students don't share personal issues during math classes, and voice time is just as important. Once students come back to the voice studio after seeking external help, they may share information, such as their anxiety disorder. Validate their support and knowledge. One may say, for example, "I am glad you have a name for what you are experiencing," and then redirect them to class time, "And now let's begin with our usual breathing exercises."

Students may not choose to obtain counseling or may ask you not to speak to their parents due to stigmas surrounding mental health, or may not want to be a problem. In truth, students do not have to share why they may or may not have accepted mental health support. If students do not receive help and still disrupt instructional time, then the teacher may focus on the disrupting behavior. For example, the voice teacher may state, "I am concerned about you, but I cannot be your therapist. You have the information for support, but this time is for you and your vocal skills. I want the best mental health professional for you and that is not me." Tone of voice is important and compassion can be expressed in the way the words are said.

CULTURE OF A VOICE STUDIO

The voice studio is a place where teachers wear many hats. Right or wrong, voice teachers often touch on roles beyond teaching voice, such as referrals to a laryngologist, medical doctor, and a mental health provider. The uniqueness of the voice teacher and student relationship can quickly build a meaningful bond. Students may feel like they can confide in their voice teachers.

How do voice teachers have a healthy relationship with students without seeming cold, unempathetic, or, worse, apathetic? It is challenging to navigate the world in which voice teachers are so often thrust. How can a teacher be supportive and still get to the business at hand, teaching voice? Because the teacher is in the position of power, it is the teacher's responsibility to establish a learning culture that sets up each student for success.

The voice teacher is the expert. Teachers of singing spent countless hours getting to this point in their careers and can lean on this expertise. During the first meeting, educate students about accomplishments, degrees, and years spent honing the craft of teaching.

The students are paying for this expertise and deserve that knowledge. Reviewing the voice teacher's education may help establish the professional relationship and reinforce that the lesson time is for voice issues only.

Establishing Boundaries

Preventing ethical dilemmas is always best. The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Code of Ethics states, "Members should maintain appropriate boundaries in psychological, emotional, and personal contact with students, including insinuations that could be construed as sexual advances, even when a student may encourage or *request* such interaction."¹² When focusing on "appropriate boundaries" and using this code of ethics, it is the responsibility of the voice teacher to establish the parameters. Subsequently, it is up to each student to follow those boundaries.

One means of establishing a professional relationship is through a syllabus or studio policy. Including language on mental health support in a syllabus/policy can help students and establish a tone of empathy. Providing information about course timeline, goals, required repertoire, and expectations can be a tool for student learning and provide clear guidelines. Teachers can use the studio policy to signal their commitment to student well-being, normalize the occurrence of mental health challenges, and introduce students to the range of support services in their community or campus, including the health clinic and counselor office. It is a place where guidelines are documented, goals are clearly expressed, and boundaries are acknowledged. Having materials ready to hand out is essential. For example, distributing a card or flyer with the university's counseling center's information, a community resource, or any other expert in the area is proactive. Take time to search the community for resources, print them, and be ready to hand out this information.

Having a place on the studio policy that explains a professional relationship with an expert voice teacher is helpful. For example, use the following language under the heading, "Professional Relationships with a Voice Teacher."

Our relationship is important to me, and it is a professional relationship. I care about you, and I am here to help you learn about singing. While I deeply care about

you, I am *not* your therapist. Singing music can be a meaningful way to express yourself, and sometimes emotional reactions occur that are intrusive and overwhelming. However, there may come a time when I remind you of the counseling center, their professional services, and redirect the conversation back to the music and your lesson. This does not mean I am angry or disappointed in your behavior. It is a sign that I care about your well-being. If issues are occurring in your life and you need support, I want you to have the best help possible from the counseling center. Their number is: And they are located at: [Here provide location and contact information].

If you have a similar language in your studio policy, then reviewing this with each student will be necessary. If each voice teacher within an academic setting has similar verbiage, then there will be strength in numbers and consistent care.

Recognizing the Position of Power

Educators are in a *position of power*.¹³ The old-school teacher who wants to break down a person's voice or psyche to rebuild often does more damage than good. Instructors, especially voice teachers, hold a good deal of power in shaping student experiences. The job alone places the educator in a position of elitism. Voice teachers evaluate work, advise students, write letters of recommendation, and model professional behavior.¹⁴ The NATS Code of Ethics states, "Members should offer their best instruction and career advice to every student under their supervision, and should treat each student in a respectful and impartial manner while taking into account individual differences in ability, learning styles and motivation."¹⁵ Treating students respectfully and impartially is difficult. Doing so requires voice teachers to acknowledge unconscious bias and preferences.¹⁶ DiMaio and Engen urge music therapy professors to include the following points when addressing ethical dilemmas:

- assess positions of power;
- explore your adaptability;
- assess possible infringement of rights;
- consider cultural bias in your responses.¹⁷

These same considerations can be followed by voice teachers and align with the aforementioned NATS code of ethics.

FERPA

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) passed into law in 1974 and is complex. Generally, this law protects the rights and privacy of college students. Under the law, students have the right to request and inspect their records of education.¹⁸ Any educational record kept on the student, including applied lessons, is allowed to be reviewed.

Any issue related to health and safety threats must be documented. For example, if a student makes a threat toward themselves or others, the voice teacher must not only act on the comment to keep the student and others safe, but must also document the incident. No permission from the student is needed to disclose personal identifiable information in these incidents.¹⁹ When personal identifiable information is disclosed to non-school officials, such as police or health care workers, the faculty must follow the school's policy. Knowing the school's policy on these matters ahead of time will help faculty not only follow the policy correctly but also how to help faculty document each event.

Raising questions of mental health issues with students or other institutional departments must include considerations with FERPA. Legally, parents and guardians do not have an automatic right to know a student's personal issues when they are not a minor.²⁰ In some cases, the mental health anguish is tied directly to the family; therefore, informing the parents of the student's behaviors could cause additional harm. As the voice teacher is not a family therapist, it is best practice to leave any communication or family involvement to a licensed therapist. If a family member calls and states concern over a student, the voice teacher cannot disclose any information without the student's consent. Be honest and reply with, "Sharing any information with you regarding [insert student's name] would be a FERPA violation. I am sorry, but I cannot disclose anything." However, there is a process the student can complete that would allow their parent's access to their education information and communication. This process is usually found on the university's FERPA policy page.

Teaching in an independent voice studio with minors is different, as FERPA does not protect students who are minors. In such cases, it is necessary to notify parents of any significant concerns regarding the student's

emotional or mental health. Tell student and parent at the beginning of the relationship that there is no confidentiality; private voice teachers are accountable to the parents. Educate the parent and student of the policies related to mental health. Let them know it is customary to give information about mental health professionals in their community.

CODE OF ETHICS

Many professions have a code of ethics. Music therapists have an aspirational code of ethics that states, "Kindness, Social Responsibility, Dignity and Respect, Equality, Accountability, Excellence, Integrity, and Courage to be Core Values. These values reflect five ethical principles, which include (1) respecting the dignity and rights of all, (2) acting with compassion, (3) being accountable, (4) demonstrating integrity and veracity, and (5) striving for excellence."²¹ The NATS Code of Ethics preamble states, "These ethical guidelines are established by the Association to outline Members' ethical duties and obligations to students, colleagues and the general public, and to promote professional cooperation and productive relationships among its Members."²² While NATS addresses boundary issues and the importance of maintaining a professional scope of practice, it does not help the voice teacher process ethical dilemmas. DiMaio and Engen inserted their points for consideration for educators into a well established ethical thinking model from Dileo.

1. Identify the problem, issues, and practices involved.
2. Assess the obligations owed and to whom.
— **Assess your position of power**
3. Assess your personal/emotional response.
4. Consult core ethical principles, ethical standards and codes, relevant laws, and institutional policies.
— **Assess possible infringement of rights**
5. Consider the context and setting.
— **Consider cultural bias in your responses**
6. Identify your own beliefs and values and their role in this situation, as well as those of the client.
7. Consult with colleagues, supervisors and all possible resources.
8. Consider how the ideal, virtuous therapist might respond.
9. Generate possible solutions, utilizing the input of the client when feasible.
— **Explore your adaptability, ensure solutions include possible changes from you.**

10. Evaluate each proposed solution in terms of possible consequences and make a decision.
11. Implement the decision.
12. Evaluate the decision.²³

Taking time to follow each step will increase the likelihood of a legal, ethical, and compassionate resolution for the dilemma being faced.

CREATING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Having occasional conversations about self-care and wellness throughout the learning process normalizes this behavior. Instructors can highlight the benefits of self-care strategies. Discussing strategies for adequate sleep, proper diet, regular exercise, and mindfulness practices allows students to talk to the teacher about their experiences while creating a positive studio culture.

Rituals can help transition from the stressors of academic life into the work of a voice studio. For example, it may help the student and teacher take three deep, cleansing breaths together before beginning the instruction time. This breathing technique also can occur at the end of the studio time as the student prepares to face the stressors of life once again. Another example is when the voice teacher asks the student to incorporate a positive word or positive phrase of their choosing to use during warm-ups.

Relaxation techniques and singing can be closely related. Both can focus on the singer's body and breathing. Mindfulness techniques may be another way to help center a student that has trouble focusing. For example, taking three minutes at the beginning of each lesson to address how the student breathes in and when the student breathes out may help the student create a positive mindfulness practice. In this mediation technique, the student would internally (or externally) state, "I am breathing in" when breathing in and "I am breathing out" when breathing out. The student would not change their breathing or make any judgments. Simply notice how each breath feels, the space between each breath, what parts of the body move when breathing in and out while controlling their mind so that thoughts do not wander from the task of breathing. Or using a breath technique such as the 4-7-8 breath (inhale, 4 beats; hold, 7 beats; exhale, 8 beats) may demonstrate the importance of self-care,

while also addressing breath control. Both examples can be a helpful ritual within the studio environment.

Normalize and Validate

While the vocal teacher is not the therapist, it is crucial to normalize academic struggles and promote a growth mindset. It is possible students' past experiences in music may not have been very challenging before coming to college. Thus, they may see the difficulties of their current situation as not normal, and instead, that there is something wrong with them.

Creating a culture where failure is viewed as a growth experience can be helpful. Feeling challenged musically and encountering "failure" on songs or vocal techniques may be new and unsettling. Other students may feel less prepared than their peers, and the rigors of voice lessons, theory, and ear training may be extremely stressful to them. Normalizing their efforts and exploring practice habits and techniques may help students develop a more realistic understanding of the learning and growth process. Instructional choices that emphasize a growth mindset can offset the impulses to be perfect and promote behaviors that are characteristic of hard work and integrity. Intentionally employing instructional practices that strengthen resilience is essential. Small achievements are important in learning vocal skills.

Communicating with Students During a Mental Health Challenge.

If a student discloses thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation, the voice teacher must act. Faculty at universities and other schools are mandatory reporters. If a student states, "I want to die," or "It doesn't matter if I live," then the voice teacher must not be silent. The teacher must respond with statements like, "What you just said is serious, and I will not ignore it. I will call the counseling center and give them a heads up that we are coming. I am going to walk you over and sit with you until they see you. You are important to me." Having the counseling center number handy is important for the students, but also for the teacher. Most counseling center services have a policy for such emergencies. Don't wait until the first time this emergency happens. Visit the counseling center, meet the staff, and ask them about their policy if a student discloses self-harming.

In the case of a minor, a voice teacher may say, "I am going to speak with your parent and let them know that you have expressed thoughts of suicide to me. Keeping you safe is the priority right now." For independent voice teachers, know the resources in your community. There might be a crisis center or an in-patient unit for acute mental health issues at the hospital. If not, find a local licensed therapist and build a relationship with that person. That therapist should know the resources in the area and help you come up with a plan if self-harm is disclosed in a lesson.

ROLE FOR TECHNOLOGY

The technology industry has many applications (apps) that help students navigate their world and help teachers maintain a professional scope of practice. This article is not suggesting an app can solve all of a student's issues, nor does it indicate that the list covers all of the disorders experienced by students; instead, it is a suggestion for new ways to help a student navigate a fast paced, ever changing world. Medical and mental health professionals have vetted these applications. Explore these apps personally, know what it is like to use them. The authors of this article compiled the following list and acknowledge that not all students will have a smartphone or unlimited data to use them. However, sharing this list with students may be helpful.

Apps for ADHD

Due includes alerts for important deadlines and reminders such as taking medication. When a reminder goes off, it continues to ping you in set intervals (say, every 10 minutes) until you mark the task as done.

Don't Forget The Milk can remind you of upcoming due dates with your choice of mobile notifications, emails, or texts. The app's map feature is a game changer for running errands, too—it plots your tasks so you can plan the most efficient route for checking items off your list.

Reuse Timer helps navigate the time and productivity drain that being on the phone can cause. Mobile notifications alert you when you're approaching or have exceeded your designated limits, and the "Productivity Pulse" is a daily score that makes it easy to compare and measure improvement in your productivity across time.

Brain Focus is a time management app that uses the Pomodoro method of setting time on task and time off task, otherwise known as a break. Use it when you need to focus, and the app will count down your selected time while locking you out of the apps you've chosen as distracting. This app is excellent for practicing too!

Apps for Eating Disorders

Rise up and Recover is based on self-monitoring homework, a key aspect of cognitive-behavioral therapy.

RealifeChange works like a life coach. Use the app to track feelings, emotions, and experiences by type, intensity, and location. Each experience tracked gives you meaningful insights about yourself.

Apps for Students with Anxiety

Headspace is a guided meditation app and so much more, with targeted meditations led by a former monk on sleep, happiness, productivity, mindful use of technology, and dozens of other topics.

Rootd helps work on improving your panic and anxious mood while supporting a female-led app. In addition to mindfulness exercises and step by step guides to tactics such as deep breathing, the app features an emergency contact button that makes it simple to call a loved one or hotline when you're in distress.

What's Up? offers different therapy methods to help manage stress, anxiety, depression, and other conditions. Learn simple techniques for overcoming negative thinking patterns, use the diary to track your thoughts and feelings.

Apps for Depression

Moodpath asks you in-the-moment questions over a series of 14 days to weigh your emotional well-being. The app is geared toward facilitating conversations with a professional, but you can also find more than 150 exercises and tools to work on your mental health within the app.

Talklife offers connection and community support, similar to group therapy. A caring community of thousands of people is waiting to talk, listen, and help you feel a little less lonely. If you're concerned about privacy, anonymous sharing is an option too.

Youpper utilizes AI that becomes your assistant. Chat back and forth with your assistant, who asks prompts that encourage you to think about your thought patterns and behaviors. The app walks you through techniques you may need in the moment based on your responses.

Depression CBT is based on the tenets of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Through informational articles, diary-like mood tracking, and built-in motivational features, the app will help you modify your thought patterns for a better mood.

Happify offers games and games make everything a bit more fun. When feeling depressed, fun may be precisely what is needed. With an eye toward improving your mood for now and building resilience for later, Happify's evidence-based games and activities borrow from positive psychology, CBT, and mindfulness.

General Health Apps

Acupressure: Heal Yourself is an illustrated guide to locating the pressure points that can help relieve many symptoms of anxiety, such as muscle tension, headache, and indigestion.

Sleeptime is an app that allows placing your phone on your bed to track sleep time and cycles. When used consistently, the app's automated analysis charts make it easy to notice trends in when you get the most restful sleep and what tends to keep you up.

Relax and Rest Meditation walks you through meditations that focus on the breath, the body, and deep relaxation. Depending on your practice, you can choose from a 5-, 13-, or 24-minute session.

Stop, Breathe and Think. Select your mood when you open the app, and it will suggest the meditations, yoga sequences, or acupressure that could serve you best at that moment, from deep breathing exercises to body scans to visualizations.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is to encourage a dialogue around the mental health needs for voice students and to bring awareness of the pervasiveness of mental health issues in the voice studio. Voice teachers are an important part of students' singing experience and thus have many responsibilities. Addressing mental health issues

requires the voice teacher to be anchored in the role as a voice expert, to be familiar with a code of ethics, to think through how to prevent ethical dilemmas, and to learn how to address these ethical issues through a process with integrity. It is important to clearly communicate and foster a caring yet professional relationship with students. Voice students will certainly face similar issues on their own; therefore it is imperative that they have a professional and positive experience when they are at the center of one themselves.

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Dr. Denise Ritter Bernardini teaches Voice, Opera, and Voice Anatomy for the Speech Language and Pathology department at Radford University. She has taught on the University level for over 20 years. Places she has taught include Oklahoma City University, University of Oklahoma, Indiana Purdue University, Manchester University, University of Toledo, and Grace College. She has been a performer Internationally and throughout the US with extensive oratorio and stage experience. As a performer, she has enjoyed performing with orchestra and symphonic organizations throughout the United States as well as opera festivals and companies.

Denise has been a soloist in prestigious venues such as Carnegie Hall and has been a recitalist in London, England, Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, and at the Certosa di Garegnano in Milan, Italy. She has also performed her one-woman classical cabaret in Leibnitz, Austria, where she performed for the International University of Global Theater to an audience representing 32 different countries.

Denise, an avid social justice advocate, is currently involved in a project focused on bringing awareness to human trafficking. A THOUSAND HANDS A MILLION STARS is an all-female artist collaboration and includes poetry, music, dance, and art. This unique one of a kind performance has been presented at the annual Conference for Human Trafficking in Toledo, Ohio, and at the city's premier arts showcase, MOMENTUM. The project was recently performed at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, Chapman University in Orange, California, Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, and Reinhardt University in Waleska, Georgia.

Dr. Bernardini is also a sought-after clinician, teacher, presenter, and author and has presented at The Voice Symposium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the International Congress of Voice Teachers in Stockholm, Sweden, the Great Lakes Regional Conference of College Music Society, and Indiana Music Educators Convention, as well as several National

Association of Teachers of Singing regional and state level clinics. She also enjoys creating a weekly podcast entitled "The Mindfulness of Singing" with her co-host Ms. Toni Crowder.

Dr. Lauren DiMaio, MT-BC is an Assistant Music Therapy Professor at Texas Woman's University. Dr. DiMaio completed her degrees in music therapy from Berklee College of Music and Temple University. Academically, she has published and presented prolifically on her areas of expertise: end of life music therapy, bereavement music therapy, and most currently ethical thinking in music therapy education. Lauren is presently the President-Elect of the Southwestern Region of the American Music Therapy Association.

Dr. DiMaio was a music therapy internship director at a hospice for 12 years. She is Co-chair of the American Internship Approval Committee for the American Music Therapy Association. Additionally, she was active on the Task Force Committee for licensure in the states of North Carolina and Virginia.

Lauren's successful career in music therapy has its roots in private music lessons. Without her private voice teachers, and other music teachers, she would not have the same meaningful life.

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