



# Health matters

**Charlotte Tomlinson** is a pianist, teacher, and a specialist coach for musicians. Suffering from tendonitis while at music college, she became fascinated by the connections between the mind, emotions and body. Believing these could be of benefit to other musicians, she developed a way of working with musicians that enables them to overcome debilitating physical problems and crippling performance anxiety. Now an expert in this field, she writes here about her profession

Susanna was a talented pianist who had suffered from debilitating tendonitis for six years by the time I first saw her. During the first session we had together, I asked her when she first had signs of the condition and what else was happening in her life at the same time. She told me that her grandmother had died during those few months. Her grandmother had been her first piano teacher and her best friend. Saying this, she burst into tears.

Susanna had a strong emotional charge whenever she played the piano that was totally unconscious and this had manifested physically as tendonitis. Once she had understood this, she started making enormous progress in letting go of the tendonitis. The emotional charge dissipated, allowing her to focus on dealing with the physical side from then onwards. Physical issues without the emotional reasons fuelling them are much simpler to manage. But trying to deal with the physical symptoms without addressing the emotional side rarely works.

So many musicians come up against physical problems at some point in their career or their musical education. Some might just have irritating niggles, while for others they can be more serious, causing immense emotional and physical distress, stopping them performing for a time and even for good. All these problems are complex and are rarely just physical. Scratch the surface and you are likely to uncover all sorts of psychological and emotional issues.

If you have a physical symptom that seriously impacts your playing as a musician, you are

entering a shadowy world. It is taboo. No one wants to own up to it. There is a fear of being judged for 'not being good enough' and an immense fear of losing work or important opportunities. It is very easy to hide the problem and pretend it is not there. But what may feel like a big secret needs to be addressed and shared. Nobody wants to have a performing-related injury, but it needs to be considered acceptable, not as something shameful, to be pushed away or ignored.


Pain is a warning indicator alerting you to something that needs to be addressed. Pushing on through the pain can aggravate the symptoms and cause considerable damage. The motto 'no pain, no gain' has no place in this context. Pain needs to be seen as a wakeup call to action.

One of the most commonly-held views musicians have about getting performance-related problems, is that they come about through too much practice. In part, this is right, but not entirely. You should be able to practise for a number of hours a day, depending on your instrument and what it allows, without any physical concerns, but only if you are treating your body well. The problems come when you do long hours and are doing something that is not good for your body. It is the combination of overuse and misuse that is the issue. You can get away with misuse if you don't practise much, and you can get away with overuse if you aren't mistreating your body, but you can't get away with both.

It is also worth considering what else you are doing aside from playing your instrument.

I have seen pianists with wonderful piano technique plagued by tendonitis because of the way they use their computer. Other musicians develop problems because of the way they grip the steering wheel of the car, or carry a suitcase. The body you use to play your instrument is the same body that carries out countless unrelated, non-musical activities every day. It is important to make the connection and see what else can be a contributing factor.

Musicians are very prone to being perfectionists and can often believe that something has no value if it is not perfect. Perfection is a tall order for anyone and when you impose perfectionism on yourself and you try too hard, the flow is disrupted and tightness occurs in the body. If unchecked, this can turn into some form of physical problem.

But if 'perfection' could be replaced by 'excellence', then there is hope. My definition of excellence is that excellence asks for the same high standards as perfection, but with infinitely greater kindness and acceptance of human fallibility. Perfection demands the impossible whereas excellence asks for a personal best. Allowing yourself to make mistakes en route to your own highest standards is manageable, possible and ultimately fulfilling. Your body doesn't need to seize up if it feels you are taking care of it physically and also emotionally. And when that is the context in which you are playing your instrument, you are well on the way towards healing an injury, or more importantly, preventing it in the first place. 

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## BMI HEALTHCARE OPENS NEW LONDON MUSICIANS' CLINIC

BMI Healthcare has announced the launch of the London Musicians' Clinic, a specialist service for the treatment of injuries experienced by amateur, semi-professional and professional musicians.

The clinic was set up by consultant orthopaedic hand and upper-limb surgeon Dr John White, who before choosing to follow a career in medicine was himself a professional musician. 'Anyone who plays a musical instrument can potentially suffer musculoskeletal problems,' says Dr White. 'Having been a musician myself, I am all too aware of the mechanics and various types of playing that can aggravate existing or new problems. I also understand

how minor trauma and other ordinary orthopaedic problems, which would have minor effects on non-musicians, can have profound consequences for a musician's ability to play.'

A study carried out by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music revealed that between 40% and 76% of orchestral musicians have suffered from at least one medical problem that has affected their ability to perform. At the clinic, Dr White will work alongside a team of therapists at BMI Healthcare to treat musicians suffering from a range of injuries ranging from RSI, rheumatoid disease, severe cases of Dupuytren's contracture,

upper-limb arthroscopy, shoulder, elbow and finger joint replacements and scaphoid non-union.

Speaking at the launch of the new clinic violinist Jack Liebeck, a former patient of Dr White, said, 'This clinic will be a vital resource in ensuring the treatment they get is both sensitive and considered in light of both their amazing gifts, their passion and also their livelihood.'

*BMI Healthcare's London Musicians' Clinic is located at BMI The Garden Hospital, in Hendon, and BMI 9 Harley Street. For more information, visit [www.musicians-orthopaedics.co.uk](http://www.musicians-orthopaedics.co.uk) or call 0800 096 3068*