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A bit of music can dispel the blues!

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There is a wide body of research that points to the benefits of structured music education. This column, which will be published every alternate month, will expand on various aspects of this research with a focus on topics related to STEAM education, social emotional learning, and the role that the arts play in developing a new generation of global citizens.

Exam season is stressful enough without adding in the ongoing anxiety and exhaustion of living through a global pandemic. We are now entering our third year of uncertainty – going in and out of lockdown, and working with a hybrid learning system that keeps changing depending on the situation. As educators, it is our responsibility to make this turbulence easier on the students; not just so that they perform well, but also so that they preserve their mental and emotional wellbeing intact as they try to build a path on stormy waters.

Around the world, music has been proven to be a powerful mood-booster across the many waves of the pandemic. People of all ages have turned to music as a source of nostalgia, to change their mood or to focus better while working from home.

As musicians and music educators, we have turned to the arts to make things easier on children from our partner schools. Since the pandemic hit, we've placed a special emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) using music as a gateway and it has given our team of

teachers some powerful takeaways. If you work with students in any capacity, here are some ways in which you can bring a little music into your students' day while they prepare for the end-of-year exams.

Set the mood with music

Start each session (online or in-person) with a one-minute song or activity that everybody does together. A little suggestion: don't restrict this to the younger learners. In my experience, children, teens and adults all appreciate a chance to expend some energy and recharge with music.

Sitting at the computer without a break can lead to bad posture, back and neck aches and eye strain. All these make it harder to focus, especially during exam season. Conduct short but frequent sessions which involve students standing up and moving. It helps them focus, while also relieving stress and eye strain.



Use music as a tool of social emotional learning

The five pillars of social emotional learning – self awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making – can all be developed with music.

Some activities I suggest:

- Simple songwriting sessions: Contrary to what a lot of people believe, you don't have to be a chart-topping international performer to appreciate or learn songwriting. It is a powerful exercise that helps you get in touch with your feelings and express them better. One of the most important components in songwriting, the daily object writing exercise, gives students a one-word prompt and asks them to write about it using all the senses (including how they feel about the object) for at least 10 minutes. While songwriting has been well-received and effective among children of all ages, it has had especially great mental health benefits in pre-teen and teenage students.
- Conduct team musical activities that encourage students to interact with a larger group. You can also suggest that they continue motivating their team members and checking in with them while they prepare for the exams.

Set routines with music

One of the hardest things about online schooling is the inevitable lack of structure. Encourage students to create a routine that works for them and ask them to reinforce it with music. If they are setting aside 30 minutes to meditate, they can turn on their spiritual playlists. When they're relaxing, they can play their favourite songs. When they're spending a big chunk of time working or studying, a soothing instrumental playlist can be useful. With time, the brain will associate different types of music with different activities, and will start gearing up for those activities accordingly. Most streaming platforms come with curated playlists, so that could be a great place to begin if students aren't sure what they're looking for.

Encourage them to share playlists

There is no "right" kind of music to listen to, but there are some broader suggestions to keep in mind. Research has shown that if you listen to your favourite music while studying, it will be distracting because you tend to follow along with the music and get into "active" listening mode, where you focus on the music itself. To focus, what you need is "passive listening," where the music gives you a background

that drowns out other distracting noises. Instrumental music works best here, since there are no lyrics to distract the brain.

With this in mind, ask students to share playlists of what works for them. What is their go-to work playlist? What do they unwind with? These reflective sessions help them bond with the rest of the class – whether or not they have a chance to meet in person regularly.

At the end of the day, managing exam season (particularly at this time) boils down to a few basic pointers. Whenever possible, keep reminding your students that:

- Taking breaks is important.
- It is useful to set small, achievable goals that you can measure and review at the end of each day.
- Simple day-to-day routines are important. Our brain thrives on structure, even if we don't always enjoy it.
- We can only focus on what we can control. There are many things that we can't predict, but what we can do is create a quiet space, find ways to recharge and try our best every day.
- This can be a stressful time. Find ways to share and vent, it's always helpful.

Our brains process and respond to stressful situations in different ways. Some people get through medical school by playing ghazals through late-night study sessions. Some others prefer beats to melodic instruments. Here's a reminder to us (and our students) to take a breath, put on a soothing playlist and power through!

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