

# Students, Mental Health, and Working in the Music Industry: Are University Music Business and Recording Industry Programs Doing Enough to Prepare Students for the Psychological Impact of a Career in the Music Industry?

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## Abstract

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how a person thinks, feels, and acts; as well as how they handle stress, how they relate to others, and how they make choices.

Mental illnesses are mental health disorders that affect a person's thinking, mood, and/or behavior. Many factors contribute to mental health conditions, including biological factors, life experiences, having feelings of loneliness or isolation, and a family history of mental health problems. Mental health problems can also be related to excessive stress due to a particular situation or series of events.

Mental Health America, the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness, reports that nearly one in five American adults will have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year. Further, 46 percent of Americans will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition sometime in their life.

In the 2018 annual report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Penn State (CCMH), an international practice-research network of nearly five hundred colleges and universities focused on understanding and describing college student mental health, anxiety and depression continued to be the most common concerns of students, as assessed by university clinicians. "While counseling centers treat dozens and dozens of complex mental health concerns, the data increasingly suggest that the demand created by anxiety and depression dramatically exceeds all oth-

er concerns—and is continuing to grow," said Ben Locke, senior director of Penn State Counseling and Psychological Services, and executive director of the CCMH. "Colleges and universities are currently grappling with the question of how to respond effectively and efficiently to the rather sudden and dramatic increase in demand for mental health services nationwide," said Locke.

Between Fall 2009 and Spring 2015, university counseling center utilization increased by an average of 30 to 40%, while enrollment increased by only 5%. Increase in demand is primarily characterized by a growing frequency of students with a lifetime prevalence of threat-to-self indicators.

Research from the American College Health Association (ACHA), which conducts surveys and collects data about college students' health and wellness, reported in their Fall 2018 Executive Summary that over 40% of college students said they had felt so depressed within the past twelve months that it was difficult for them to function. Over 62% reported that they felt "overwhelming anxiety" within the last twelve months, and nearly 68% felt very sad.

While the 2019 ACHA's National College Health Assessment (NCHA) surveys the general college student population, music business, recording industry, and entertainment majors are included.

At Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), data gathered from the NCHA included a custom question regarding the MTSU college the student was enrolled. At MTSU, students majoring in Recording Industry, which includes Audio Production, Commercial Songwriting, and Music Business, are part of the College of Media and Entertainment (CME), which also includes Media Arts, and the School of Journalism and Strategic Media. The data analysis of those

students, compared to the general student population at MTSU revealed the following:

- 72.5% of CME students report feeling things were hopeless at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 58.5% of the total student population
- 80.6% of CME students report feeling very lonely at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 65.1% of the total student population.
- 80.6% of CME students report feeling very sad at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 71.8% of the total student population.
- 66.3% of the CME students report feeling so depressed it was difficult to function at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 49.4% of the total student population.
- 85.6% of CME students report feeling overwhelming anxiety at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 72% of the total student population.
- 28.9% of CME students report seriously considering suicide at some point in the previous twelve months, compared to 16.9% of the total student population.

Because the competitive, and oftentimes, subjective nature of succeeding in the music industry can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, the question to be asked is should university music business and entertainment programs offer curriculum that specifically addresses the realities of working in the music industry, and its potential impact on one's mental health.

Keywords: mental health, University students, music industry education, Middle Tennessee State University

## Introduction

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Any Mental Illness (AMI) is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder, and can vary in impact, ranging from no impairment to mild, moderate, and even severe impairment. Serious Mental Illness (SMI) is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. Just as with physical health, the objective is for all people to have good mental health.

In 2021, the NIMH reported there were an estimated 57.8 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with AMI, with the prevalence of AMI higher among females than males. Young, college-aged adults aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence of AMI (33.7%) compared to adults aged 26-49 years (28.1%) and aged 50 and older

(15%).

That same year, there were an estimated 14.1 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with SMI. As with AMI, the prevalence of SMI was higher among females than males. And young, college-aged adults aged 18-25 had the highest prevalence of SMI (11.4%) compared to adults aged 26-49 (7.1%) and aged 50 and older (2.5%).

## The Music Industry

"The industry is brutally competitive and only a very few make it to a successful career," says Peter Leigh, CEO of the charity Key Changes, which provides music engagement and recovery services in hospitals and communities for young people and adults affected by depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other mental health disorders. "Some of the triggering factors of the problems we see in the music community include self-doubt and stress brought about by rejection and failure, poor decision making based on bad advice and exploitation."

I kept having doors slammed in my face. I felt like nothing was working. I had moved out on my own, and here I was thinking I'd have to go home. It was just one dead end after another. *At one point, I was like, "What would happen if I just didn't wake up?"* That's how I felt. (Nicki Minaj, *Cosmopolitan*, November 2011)

In recent years, a number of high-profile music artists and musicians have begun publicly sharing their mental health struggles and the impact they attribute to being a part of the music industry. While the media, fans, and the general public have for years made inferences about the state of some artists' mental health, many artists, including Britney Spears, Demi Lovato, Halsey, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, Selena Gomez, and others, including the aforementioned Nicki Minaj, have taken the narrative of their mental health issues into their own hands, and spoken openly about it through their social media as well as interviews with various media outlets. The most common struggles, as reported by these artists, is with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and the stress associated with constantly being in the public eye.

You get lonely, you know, when you're on the road. People see the glam and the amazing stuff, but they don't know the other side. This life can rip you apart. (Justin Bieber, *NME*, November 13, 2015)

In the article, *Musicians and Mental Health: What is Being Done to Help*, by the Musicians' Union, a United Kingdom trade union for all musicians across the U.K. working in all sectors of the music business, the author noted, "Not

only are we losing talented artists to suicide and overdoses, but the lives of many more musicians are being made miserable by anxiety, depression, addiction and other psychiatric conditions.”

In 2016, the charity Help Musicians noticed a 22% rise in the number of people seeking help for mental health crises. The charity commissioned a survey of more than 2,000 self-identified professional musicians across the United Kingdom music industry, carried out by researchers at the University of Westminster. The results showed that seven out of ten were musicians with social anxiety who had suffered panic attacks, while just over two-thirds had experienced depression—three times more than the general population.

A 2019 study by the Swedish digital platform Record Union produced similarly worrying results. The survey concluded that 73% of independent musicians struggle with mental illness. This figure climbed to 80% when researchers focused solely on the 18-25 age group.

It’s important to note that these survey results were reported and gathered prior to the 2020 global pandemic, which not only further highlighted many of the mental health challenges among college students, but whose impact made some mental health disorders worse. But to look at the mental health issues impacting young adults today only through the lens of what happened during the COVID-19 years, would mean to ignore the growing research showing the rise of mental health disorders among the 18-25 year old age group, which was being documented for years prior to the pandemic.

In a survey administered by *Morning Consult* from November 1 to 7, 2022 among working adults ages 22-28, a substantial number of young people in their early careers reported poor mental health, particularly anxiety and burnout. According to the administrators of *The Mental Health and Well-Being of Young Professionals Survey*, these results suggest that mental health issues college students have reported over the past decade, endured well into their twenties.

Another key finding from this survey was that those who participated did not perceive colleges as doing enough to prepare students emotionally for the workforce, while nearly half of the 1,005 young professionals surveyed perceived their jobs as worsening their mental health.

For college students planning a career in the music industry, being emotionally and mentally prepared to enter a non-traditional work environment may prove even more challenging, especially for those working in the live entertainment side of the industry. With many of these jobs requiring long days, late nights, being away from home for weeks, and sometimes months, at a time, along with the demand for a high level of performance, regular scrutiny,

and ongoing competition, colleges and universities offering music business and recording industry programs should consider requiring their students take courses that focus on the importance of maintaining good mental health, and offer skills on taking care of themselves emotionally, mentally, and physically while working in the music industry.

As the founding drummer of *Maroon 5*, I endured physical and psychological injuries from the relentless touring in support of our album *Songs About Jane*, and in those days, there wasn’t a whole lot I could say to prevent the problem from escalating to the disastrous point that it did.

We were in the middle of a four-year, global promotional campaign, during which we were instructed to “say yes to everything,” and any breaks in our schedule quickly evaporated as our album blew up on a massive scale. Just when it was time to enjoy the fruits of our labor, my body and mind gave out on me, and this breakdown proved devastating not only to my career but to the very fabric of my being. (Ryan Dusick, *Variety*, October 26, 2022)



**Gloria Green** is an Associate Professor in the Music Business program at Middle Tennessee State University where she teaches live entertainment and music publicity courses. Prior to teaching, Green was a music agent at the William Morris Agency (now WME) where she negotiated concert bookings for a diverse roster of faith-based artists including CeCe Winans, Jaci Velasquez, Joy Williams, Kirk Franklin, Out of Eden, Switchfoot, Take 6, and others. After leaving WMA, Green launched her own faith-based entertainment company, providing artist development and pub-

lic relations services, before transitioning into academia. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of South Carolina. While there, she interned in the University of South Carolina Sports Information Office and worked part-time as an assistant to the press secretary in the South Carolina Lieutenant Governor's office. Following graduation, and after a short stint as a writer with the South Carolina Forestry Commission, Green worked as the Public Information Officer with South Carolina State Parks for several years before moving to Nashville to work at WMA.

Green remains active in the music industry as an alumni member of the Women in Music Business Association, and as a member of the National Association of Black Female Executives in Music & Entertainment, and the International Entertainment Buyers Association, where she spent three years on the IEBA Educational Outreach Fund board. Green is also a member of the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association where she was recently re-elected to the board of directors and is a long-time member of the Gospel Music Association where she served over nine years on the GMA Foundation board of directors.



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