

Episode 9 (SUSTAINABLE WORK/MENTAL HEALTH) Start

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership.

Stephen: It's another episode of *Create. Inspire. Lead.* We are getting ready to wrap up our minisode series with Dr. Blaire Koerner. We've got some longer form episodes coming that have been in the works for a while, so we're excited about that. But it's been really great to have these conversations with Blaire and touch on all of these different topics. So, I think I've mentioned that I brainstormed a lot of these questions with real, live, actual students - Frances Inzehofer, who just graduated with her bachelor's, and Emma Gierszal who is now in her second year of her DMA program. And after we went through our list of questions about freelancing, grad school, faculty positions, unions, taxes, all that stuff, both Frances and Emma had two final thoughts, which basically boiled down to this.

Stephen (from tape): What does sustainable work look like to you?

Blaire: That's a good question, and that really depends on individuals' perspective and priorities. I can't tell you enough how many conversations I've had and I've asked people what their values are. And I don't even ask them what they want to do for their life, I want to know what their values are. Because I've also worked with students that are not musicians or came to music late or leaving music in any way. And those values play a huge role.

And I say values. I mean, think everything. Is family a big thing for you? Is finances a big thing for you? Is becoming a lifelong learner a big thing for you? Is autonomy, having control of your own space a big thing for you? Is performing at the highest level a big thing for you? Is educating others, connecting to your community? As you can see, there's a lot of potential values here. Right. And picking your top five is actually a really good place to start because what you might find is that your values don't line up with the job you think is appropriate for you, and you're going to struggle with that for a very long time.

Stephen: Ok. So, what exactly does Blaire mean by that.

Blaire: If your value is you want to be a family person, awesome. You better not get a touring gig because you're going to be gone for most of that time. Now, there are plenty of people who actually take their babies with them on tour and other things, especially if they're like a soloist or have their own chamber group and can manage that. And they kind of put their family on tour and especially when they're toddlers and not going to school, that might be a really

interesting thing for you, but eventually that child is going to need someplace to settle down and go to school unless you're also going to plan on homeschooling...

Stephen: We actually have a podcast episode that sort of deals with that - it's episode 3: "The Family Show." And this is becoming a bit of a common thing, and there are more organizations who are making accommodations for children and families as part of their offer. But, even if you can take your kids with you, you might not always be able to, or want to. So there's a bit of a push and pull, and there are some things you need to ask yourself.

Blaire: Are you OK with being away from a family for a few months at a time if family is such a big thing for you? What would you do in order to make that up? So is it like three months on, three months completely off? So people sometimes have to think about that. And that might mean that touring comes before family, right? Because your values can change as you grow and as your life changes. So if your family is important for you down the road, but you have flexibility now, fine, great. But now you know that's going to be something that's important to you down the road.

Stephen: And it can be the same thing with financial stability.

Blaire: So if that's one of those things, like there's a difference between just financially stable, you know, where you feel comfortable, you can pay everything, you are well-fed, you can buy clothes when you need to, etc. and being wealthy where you have extra money for an extra house or vacation or boat or big expensive trips. And people value that in different ways.

Stephen: You might be fine having an occasional stay-cation or staying local, or you might be someone who wants to spend two weeks in the Carribean at a resort.

Blaire: So sustainability in that field, in the finance field, that just boils down to what is comfortable for you. And if you don't want just comfortable, if you want more... than thinking about what that means.

So those values are the first things that I always ask because some jobs in our field, one hundred percent will support those values and some jobs will challenge those values and depending on what you choose.

Stephen: So, let's say you want a nine to five job because you want something stable and consistent.

Blaire:...that's not going to be very active in a performance venue. Right. Because what are you? You're the entertainment. You're the thing that people go to see on Friday, Saturdays and Sundays. So you don't have much of a weekend. You might have a lot more flexibility during the week. And a lot of people don't realize that, that most of their friends outside music can't hang out with them most of the time because they have conflicting schedules. They have exact opposite schedules.

Stephen: If you're ok with managing that sort of schedule, then that sort of lifestyle might work out for you, but for others, it's a really big deal. I know for me and my wife - that's sort of the schedule we have. I work a 9 to 5 job, but I still gig on the weekends and in the evenings. And my wife is getting her DMA, but she's also a music director at a local church and does some freelancing herself, so I mean...I can't remember the last time either of us got to sleep in on a Sunday, or didn't have a rehearsal or evening service on Saturday. And we have two kids - which is still crazy to say out loud. But for us, even though it sometimes feels like we're all gas, no brakes, it works to balance our need for that stability and the desire to fulfill some of our artistic goals. But, we also have friends who have had the kind of schedule we had and absolutely hated it. Now, they freelance, teach, audition, whatever they want. So sometimes they have lots of time off and just a three hour rehearsal at night, sometimes they might be touring so they're in and out of hotels and performances. And that works for them. But whatever you choose, it's about figuring out your values first.

Blaire: So that's the thing for me that I would like to emphasize first. And then from that you can figure out what "sustainable" means for you. Is sustainable, again, financial sustainability? Is it time management? Is it mental health and wellness and balancing that out? Is it able to spend time with family? Is it, you know, able to continue your own education and learning in any way and getting professional development and support? So those are the types of things I would consider first. This is not necessarily an answer, but something that I would pressure people to think about. It's very important to digest that if they really want to understand what the world is going to give them, because if they have certain expectations of what they want for life and then they try to force a job to fit that, they might be surprised that it's not a good match.

Stephen: One thing that ties into sustainability - and Blaire is sort of alluding to it in her last comments there - is learning how not to get burned out. And that means taking care of yourself - physically and mentally, which can be a hard thing to do in the music world.

Blaire: I can't stress enough how much self care is super important in the music realm. Right. We are taught from a very young age to be incredibly critical of ourselves, to assess ourselves

constantly, to spend lots of time alone in a room focused on a particular thing, you know, and there's so much you can gain from that. But it's also exhausting. Right?

Stephen: Blaire works with a lot of undergraduate students, and sometimes the exhaustion comes from being younger and transitioning from high school to conservatory life. But she's even seen burn-out in master's and doctoral students. And that's partly due to how much time it takes to be in a conservatory. I mean, there are your regular classes, your large ensembles, your chamber group, your private lessons, practice time, a student job - it's a lot.

Blaire: We are invested, we are committed and we need to be just as committed to our mental and physical health as well. Because first and foremost, you know, when it comes to physical health, your body is important for what you do. Right, because your body is part of whether you sing, whether you play, no matter what it is, it's an important part, so if your body starts hurting or having some issues, if you don't stretch, if you don't think about your posture, that's going to hurt you in the long run, not only just for your body, but potentially your career, because that's going to be one thing.

Stephen: Between competitions and auditions - gosh and even just being called on in an aural skills class to sight read something - we are often in high stress situations, and we need to be able to take a step back every once in a while and relax.

Blaire: So I can't stress enough how much self care is super, super important and we need to find that balance. And that might be hard for us because we like to say yes to a lot of things. And when you say, you know, how do you prevent burnout? It really depends on what you're doing and what makes you inspired, what makes you feel passion, what gives you energy even if you're absolutely exhausted.

Stephen: For some people, they almost prefer being really busy especially if they're doing something they're passionate about that gives them life and energy.

Blaire: So I, you know, even after working with students all day long, I am smiling from ear to ear because it gives me energy and the thoughts and their comments. But I still want to like, do a face plant in my bed and nap for a while because I'm on for so long. So like, I'm happy and mentally energized, even if I just need to have some me time afterwards. Right. So like, that for me, stops me from burning out because I just need to go, "OK," I need to have my reading time. Chill out, pet my cat, have some tea, and I'll be rejuvenated. But mentally I'm still present.

Stephen: Obviously, it can depend on the job you have.

Blaire: I have worked with orchestral people who love their day to day, but after a while they get burned out because they don't have choice or they get burnt out on having to play *The Nutcracker* over and over again, or they get burnt out because they're just around the same people and they just want a little something different.

Stephen: Now, my son, Jude, is obsessed with *The Nutcracker*. He's three. And I know that I'm not playing in the pit or anything, but even just listening to it non-stop, back to back, for months - Yes, we started back in December and we haven't stopped - I can't imagine playing *The Nutcracker* every night, sometimes twice a day all December long. And many orchestra musicians end up feeling this way too, so they've got to mix it up.

Blaire: So that's when they start doing chamber works or their own recitals or teaching over the summer just to change things up a little bit.

Stephen: But sometimes, you get burned out because you just have too much on your plate.

Blaire: You work a very large job. You work on a project in the afternoon and then you might have a rehearsal and then you do the same thing the next day. And some people feed off of being super busy like that. I'm one of those people, but I also need to put time aside to spend on me stepping away from all that and just going, "You know what, I need to go for a walk in nature!" because that's something that energizes me.

Stephen: Blaire explains that there are two ways to handle burnout.

Blaire: There's actively, proactively preventing burnout and then there's reactively understanding when you are burnt out and taking a step back. Right. So proactively is giving yourself that space, literally looking in your calendar saying no to anything else that pops up, even if it's super, super interesting or maybe going, "OK, you know, I really need to take this, but that means I need to not just delete this time to myself, but reschedule it for, like, the next day." Right. So that's proactive there.

Stephen: Proactive prevention can also mean making time to work out, eating well, making space to be with family and friends - whatever you're able to do and whatever will actually help you feel rejuvenated.

Blaire: And then there's reactive, which is even if you did proactively give yourself some space, recognize that maybe sometimes you didn't do it appropriately or maybe there's a big week

that week, or maybe some really big things just happen to you and you need to give yourself that mental break because, you know, a family crisis happened or you just did a whole bunch of auditions and you're like, "You know what I need? I just need to chill for a bit."

Stephen: Even if you've scheduled time for yourself later in the day, or week, it's ok to say that maybe you can't wait until then. You need time now. Try to be kind to yourself. And to help with sustainability and burnout, Blaire also recommended a book.

Blaire: So one of the things that I really enjoy is a book called Design Your Life. And it looks at the whole you, not just your career. So this is where the values come in, you know. What do you want out of life in general and how do you design it that way? And one of the exercises in there is it actually makes you assess all the things that you do on a daily basis, whether it be education, performing, administrative tasks, taking care of your household, whatever that might be, and you have to rate it, it's like a little odometer, and it grades you on different things. One on how much it kind of feeds you in some way might be creativity, etc. like the energy I get from working with students. Some of it is how much energy it takes. So even though it might feed me, it might take a lot of energy, so I need to then give myself space to refuel, so to speak. Right.

So it makes you assess each of these things. And when they're all in the negatives, then, you know, it's something you need to cut out of your life. And if they're all in the positives, you know that's something you want to be continuing. And then there's somewhere in the middle. That's OK as well.

Stephen: It's important to take a step back and look at these things, because sometimes you might think your burnout is caused by one thing, but actually, it's something else entirely.

Blaire: You might come back from an event and go. Holy mackerel, I'm exhausted. And then you blame that event. But you might take a step and think and look at the bigger picture. Was it because you actually just had a really long week and now you're just topping it off? Was it because it was a late night event, like a super late night event and then you had to drive? So you're just you're just exhausted the next day because you're just not used to that type of schedule? Or was it because the actual thing that you just did, that freelancing was just not worth it? Right. So, and then you have to balance that. You can't blame the freelance opportunity. If it was really I just don't like driving an hour and a half at night. So it's kind of sometimes assessing that.

Stephen: And just like with your values, you need to assess what gives you energy, what are you passionate about.

Blaire: And sometimes it's one hundred percent within work and within playing and within music, and sometimes it's 100 percent outside of it. And it can be a balance. It could be a mixture. It's up to you and what's personally how you are going to get your energy and refuel, and only you know that.

Stephen: And everyone has their own thing - and some people are really adamant that their thing is *the* thing. Need to destress? You *have* to play these pieces to unwind. You totally need to get into ultra running. This meditation app will change your life. And listen. If it works for them, great - but each person will have their own unique way to refuel and re-energize.

Blaire: So you have to know what drains you even if it energizes you. And you need to know how to refuel. And you also have to be able to break apart each of these things into smaller chunks to really understand what from that exactly completely burnt you out or got you exhausted because it might not be the entire event might be a smaller subsection, like working with one particular individual, not the job itself.

{outro music}

Stephen: Ok, so this is a big topic, and there's a lot to unpack, a lot of nuance, and of course, everyone is dealing with different levels of ability, accessibility, privilege, and so on. We are working on some bigger episodes that deal with both mental and physical health issues, but hopefully this gives you a brief overview of how you can make your work sustainable and gives some tools to help prevent burnout. But if you take nothing else from this episode, I hope that you at least recognize that you need to be kind to yourself.

Thank you so much to Dr. Blaire Koerner for agreeing to do this series. Remember, you can delve into any of the topics we discussed, or talk about totally new ones directly with Blaire by making an appointment through Handshake. The link, as always, is in the show notes. And there's also a link to the book that Blaire mentioned in case you want to check that out for yourself.

Today's show was edited by me. Questions were compiled by Frances Inzenhofer and Emma Gierszal. The intro music and incidental music was by me, and the outro music was composed by Alexa Silverman. Please be sure to follow us on SoundCloud or on the IML's Facebook page for podcast updates, and of course you can always email us with comments, questions, or ideas for future episodes.

Now, go out. Make art. Do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.

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