Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education

Episode 9: Mental Health Transcript

[Intro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Hello! You're listening to 'Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education', a Music Mark podcast where we discuss inspiring projects, hot topics, and key challenges circulating around music-based work with young people. And if you're enjoying the intro, outro and transition music for this episode, make a note that it's from Able Orchestra, a youth ensemble and musical project allowing music-making on equal terms, specifically supporting those who are neurodivergent and people with disabilities.

Emma Cragg: Welcome to episode nine of Make Your Mark, Notes on Music Education. Today we're joined by Rachael from Soundcastle and Alex, who's currently studying for a PhD at the Royal College of Music to discuss all things music and mental health.

Aimee Christodoulou: We discussed why it's such an important conversation to have, the challenges for both young people and music educators, and how we can use music to support everyone's mental health. Please be aware that this discussion contains references to serious mental health conditions and suicide, so listen with care.

Emma Cragg: Hello everybody, it's great to have you here with us today. So before we dive in, first let's hear a little introduction from our guests. So Alex, please could I come to you first?

Alex Theophilus: I'm Alex Theophilus. I'm a third year PhD candidate at the Royal College of Music in London, based in the Centre for Performance Science there. My research is funded by London Arts and Humanities Partnership. And I'm here today to talk about the research that I've done and also my personal opinions on the topic.

Emma Cragg: Lovely, thank you so much, it's great to have you with us. And Rachael?

Rachael Perrin: Hi everyone, lovely to be here. So I'm Rachael, I am a co-founder and creative director at Soundcastle and we're a community music and creative health charity based in Hastings and we work with people in really challenging moments in their life to use music as a way to connect, to recover, to heal, build confidence, to enhance wellbeing and to generally make life better for a lot of people.

Aimee Christodoulou: Brilliant, thank you so much. We're really looking forward to hearing more about both of your work. Before we dive into that, we just want to start with why it's important to talk about mental health. So could each of you tell us your opinions on why you think it's important to talk about mental health? I'm going to pass it straight back to you, Rachael.

Rachael Perrin: I think it's important to talk about because we don't talk about it. We don't see the warning signs and a lot of the work that Soundcastle does is about part of its recovery, but a lot of it is prevention. So, if we don't see the warning signs, then we're not able to support people before they get to a crisis moment. So, I think there's been so much work on breaking down taboos around mental health. And I think younger people particularly are more open and understanding, particularly around things like anxiety and depression.

But there are really specific areas around suicide, self harm, eating disorder, psychosis. There's still a lot of shame and stigma around we find in our work. So it's only through educating ourselves and developing empathy that we can help people to understand that it's a normal thing. Mental health is a normal thing. It's out there in society. One in four of us will have a diagnosed mental health condition each year and no one is immune to that. So I think that's why we have to talk about it.

The really hard line of it is that people are still losing their lives because we're not talking about it, because we're scared to talk about it. And I'm happy to say more about that as we go, not to start us on a real low. I mean, that's a really bleak beginning to a lovely podcast, but that is why we need to talk about it because it can save lives.

Aimee Christodoulou: Absolutely, it's, I don't think it's bleak if it's saving lives. It's such an important thing to talk about and we should just be more able to talk about it. We all have mental health.

Rachael Perrin: Yeah.

Aimee Christodoulou: So, it's something that should just be in the in popular discourse everywhere. Alex, can I come to you next please?

Alex Theophilus: Well, what can I say? Absolutely 100% agree with what Rachael said. We need to talk about it more. We don't talk about it. We are beginning to talk about it in a way in terms of within the discourse because for years it was seen as something that was very stigmatised, very much in the background. And it didn't really have, in my opinion, the sort of equal footing with physical health that it should have had.

For example, in my research, I'm looking at how young men engage with music for their own mental wellbeing. And every single person I've spoken to has something to say. And we are working within an art form music that is so well akin with talking about mental wellbeing because it's something that people engage with, perhaps not in the forefront of their mind, but definitely in terms of they'll be engaging with that for better mental well-being. So I think it's so important to have this conversation today, basically.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, thank you, Alex. I completely agree with everything that everyone has said so far. And actually, Alex, what you were just saying there, I think leads really nicely into the next question. I wanted to ask about some of the different ways that music can relate to mental health. What are some of the ways that people are sort of involving the two? How can it support people? You started to touch on some of those things, Alex, could I come back to you on that?

Alex Theophilus: So for me, music is one of the things that a lot of people do in their free time. And it helps alleviate stress, it helps alleviate signs of anxiety and depression. You know, if you think about the idea that if you're feeling a bit low, putting on some music or playing some music will help lift your mood, particularly certain types of genres of song.

It's also just something that I feel like within the scope of particularly younger people, music is kind of like a currency that is, they're surrounded by, but also they're living through that music. And I think it's important for sometimes when we talk about the arts, we talk about the arts in relation to, you know, somebody will get a better job, or they'll be able to engage in another subject, you know, English or science or something like that. But actually, there's a music is important because it is something that even if somebody doesn't get something physically from it in terms of, you know, a job or a contract or something like that, it's actually what it does to you inside and how it helps you feel better and more, you know, more engaged with the world, really. And we talk about this word engagement, but I think for a lot of young people, you know, having that engagement with the world is, is so important and something that we need to be talking more about.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, absolutely. And Rachael, was there anything else that you'd like to add?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, I just think in the context of young people, this is so critical. We know that more than 500 children per day are being referred to mental health services. We're in a real crisis moment, and that's for anxiety, which is more than double the rate from before the pandemic. So this is so timely. We look at a lot of the, we run mental health first aid training and we run a youth course within that, looking at youth mental health first aid. And one of the stats we share there is there's a survey with 11 to 18 year olds, it revealed that four in 10 schoolchildren feel they have no one to discuss their mental health with and nearly half are apprehensive about seeking help. So this idea that Alex shared of like music as currency, it's a way to connect. It's a way to bond. It breaks down a barrier between people. I think that's, that's huge. It's, it's completely vital that we have it there.

And then to build on what Alex said about the, we talk about music in terms of biology, like humming and singing stimulate the vagus nerve, there's science, you know, there's science behind this. It isn't lovely people doing a nice thing to have a nice time. This is scientific research-based practice. Humming and singing stimulate the vagus nerve, that vibration in your throat and your chest, that triggers your parasympathetic nervous system and that promotes relaxation and calm and that's very hard to access. I mean, that's a very easy way to access it through humming, but it's a hard thing to do without music or without that kind of release.

So, that can have huge impacts. And Alex mentioned earlier, like physical health, we've spoken about a lot more over time. We know that that kind of stimulation can lower your heart rate, your blood pressure, but it can also reduce stress and anxiety, and those things are so incredibly interrelated. And if you can move your parasympathetic nervous system into this kind of rest and digest mode, then you get out of fight or flight. And that's the state we, that often we see with young people or people generally, but specifically thinking here about young people, the kind of panic response. Music can get past that to just open a fragment of conversation, which is essential. And obviously so much more on the psychological side. It reduces stress, it improves our moods, it increases self-expression, it boosts dopamine. I mean, there's so much statistically there that we can dive into the research a little bit more when it's helpful. But yes, there are a thousand reasons why it's vital. Music and mental health are completely intertwined.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, wow, it's really interesting, some of those more scientific facts and things. I think it will be perhaps interesting to go into those a bit more in a bit. You mentioned there some of the challenges, statistics around the number of young people that are being diagnosed with mental health conditions and really struggling. Alex, I was wondering, actually, if there was

anything you'd like to add, thinking about the research that you're doing, what kind of challenges that you've seen?

Alex Theophilus: So, as Rachael was saying there, there's a range of challenges that young people are facing. I think from my own research and also the experiences that I've had through doing this, I think COVID seems to be something that, COVID in effect sort of opened the door. It was significant, not just because of the lockdowns that we had, but I think something changed in the way we talk about mental health from that point on. And I think some of the things that we talk about, for example, social media use, you know, sort of not really knowing what children and young people are doing, so this disconnect between adults and their children and adults and the children that they are engaging with, for example, in school or in music education more generally, started to just sort of seep out into the sort of the patchwork.

The mental wellbeing aspect of it, you know, a lot of children and young people are going through a lot of different and quite complicated, inter-complicated stuff. For example, being carers for parents or other family members, suffering with anxiety, depression, panic attacks, the full range of, you know, sort of poor mental health and wellbeing stuff. I think one of the things that is also then coming out is other things with wider social debates, for example, around masculinity, around political instability. They're seeing some things played out in real time in a way that previous generations haven't, you know, for example, TVs have been around for a while, but now the TVs irrelevant, everything is happening in real time. And then how that affects them is another part of that puzzle, because, you know, debates around, for example, masculinity, what does it mean to be a male? What does it mean to be a female? What does it mean to be sort of a young person growing up within the UK today? It's different to how previous generations have experienced it. How do they use social media? You know, the influences of people in the public sphere from people like Andrew Tate to Taylor Swift, you know, how does this impact them? I think a lot of the stuff is probably similar to what previous generations experienced, but I think the level has changed. And I think that has sort of impacted mental wellbeing in a way that previous generations probably were not so exposed to.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, completely. I mean, there's a whole new level of news happening, isn't it? Like you said, everything is happening in real time. There's no time to process things. And I imagine, Rachael, that it leads into what you were saying about the nervous system. It's being, you know, people are working off of seven second videos flicking each one, it probably is an absolute nightmare for all of our brains.

Rachael Perrin: Exactly. We're living in this kind of, like we said, the fight or flight crisis, crisis mode. And that's really heartbreaking. I mean, you mentioned COVID and the shift, and I think there has been a shift in language and understanding of mental health, but yeah, to bring it back to the stats for a minute, like before COVID in like 2019/20, the total number of young people diagnosed with anxiety, like new patients into the system with anxiety was just under a hundred thousand. And last year it was over 200,000. And that's, you know, that’s not long and it shouldn't have doubled the number of young people. It's good that the awareness is there and the conversation is there, but I don't think that is just because we're speaking about it more. There really is a huge issue for young people. And it's interesting we're speaking about, with your research Alex, looking at men and music and mental health. I mean, suicide is still the leading cause of death for men under 50. It's still the leading cause of death for all UK adults under the age of 35. So music, if we can find a way to reach people, young people, we're here, we're here speaking about music education and this sector specifically, but it is such a way to reach people and build those connections. So anything we can do to push against those kind of, like

you say, Emma, the seven second realities, music you can immerse in, you can sit within, you can create it, you can hear it, you can become a part of it. Hopefully it can be greater than all of that feed of quick-fire information, something that reaches you on a deeper level.

Aimee Christodoulou: I'm glad you've started touching on that because, you know, to our listeners, it might seem really dire right now. And of course, it is a crisis, and we need to talk about it. But perhaps we can think about some of the tangible ways now that we can use music to support people's mental health. So it's not so overwhelming, you know, some things that people can go away and start thinking about already to support the young people that they work with or even just their peers.

[Transition music]

So, obviously you've already touched on Rachael some lovely examples, things like humming and how that relates to the nerves. But I was wondering if you had any more examples, I'm sure you have plenty, working with Soundcastle of the kind of ways that you use music to support people's mental health.

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, of course. I mean, it's everything we do in our creative practice is about creating music. So at Soundcastle, I mean, there's so many ways that people can use music to support their mental health, from listening to writing to improvisation. At Soundcastle, our work is really about creating new music. So, we focus on supporting people often who have never made music before or wouldn't identify as musicians to create their own music of high quality that represents themselves or their voices. So it really is about tapping into people's core identity. Having said that, there's huge value in singing, you know, singing musical theatre or whatever it is that reaches you. It's just for Soundcastle's practice, we've really gone down this route of co-creation and composition and existing within a sound world that you create as a group, and that's quite a particular practice.

And I also think it is good to think about where music is helpful and supportive, but also it does need to be held in a certain way for music to be helpful. We have a lot of people that come onto our programmes that will say, I can't sing, I was told I was no good at music. And actually that can then impact negatively on someone's mental health. So finding these ways to come together like this in this community and have the conversations around actual practice, I think is really important. Yeah, there's so, I mean, there's so many wonderful creative ways. Group improvisation, sound baths, singing, sound making, anything we can do that really taps into our bodies as well as our minds. I think that sort of brings us into a state of oneness even for a few minutes.

Aimee Christodoulou: I'm interested as well - what impacts have you seen from those projects you've worked on? And obviously you've mentioned lots of things there but perhaps the sort of co-creation, the composition side of things, what impacts have you seen on the young people that you're working with from that?

Rachael Perrin: It's really game changing. It's so inspiring. We've got kind of three key outcomes in our theory of change, which are about increasing confidence, reducing isolation and enhancing wellbeing. And consistently we evaluate across those and all, like every single programme is coming up trumps every time because we're seeing people start to understand their community, start to connect more with their families. We work with all different ages. We do a lot in the early years, but often a lot of that work is around supporting young parents. So we're seeing like inter-family connection as well as wider community connections.

We're a small organisation really, but we do a lot of signposting to other groups and other musical opportunities. So seeing people build the confidence in our very safe held mental health aware spaces to then access other groups in the community. And for some of our older young people being able to enter education or employment when they haven't done that before or volunteering. So many friendships are made, you see people starting to really feel seen and valued and respected. Yeah, I think the outcomes are infinite and very, very special. If it's held in the right way and people are supported and know that music's a safe space and it's made a safe, I mean, there is no definition of a safe space that sits universally, but if we can co-create with a group something that feels safe for them, then I think it's hugely impactful.

Aimee Christodoulou: That's fantastic, thank you. Yeah, it's so lovely to hear about music creating that sense of community for people, helping people feel less isolated and alone. And Alex, I'm sure within your research, you've probably come across others, young people, men who are feeling that isolation, and I'm wondering what ways you've seen that music can help support their mental health?

Alex Theophilus: It's quite, it's a variety of ways. First, to just pick up on what Rachael was saying, when I was listening to that, I wrote down here, perfectionism in everyday music. For a lot of young people, they suffer greatly with perfectionism because social media, particularly certain sites like Instagram, I would imagine, present a world that's perfect and through doing music every day you realise that perfectionism isn't achievable. The reality is to enjoy those imperfections and music helps that I think through, you know, enjoying those imperfections that music, when you play it has, you know, not everything is recorded in the recording studio with about 10 or 12 takes on it.

Within the research that I'm doing, a number of the young men that I've spoken to within my interviews, they shared their experience, a lot of them shared being bullied, for example, within education, and how music, either through listening to it or particularly making it, but also through listening with it, helped overcome that. You know, rather than being known as the kid who was bullied, it gave them something to connect with other young people through, you know, this interest within a band or an artist or a style of music or even through just generally being interested in music.

And then coming in to the music-making spaces that I focused on, I focused on two during my interview study, that was really good because everybody felt in the same space, everyone felt that they had been rejected by others. They felt that they had all these problems, but actually, the music helped them rise above that and connect on the level of, we're all interested in music. We're all young people, but we're also all interested in music. And I saw it as a real harmoniser, sort of ,to everything else that young people were dealing with. And, you know, some of the young men that I had interviewed, but also saw the other young people in this, these spaces, they had a lot on their plates. They had a lot on their plates and music just helped them focus on something other than everyday life. Because it, music can't solve all your problems, but it can help give you a better outlook to the world and also see the world in a bit of a better light than seeing all the negatives.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, absolutely, I think that's a really, a really key message and I think one that probably all of us here as musicians really understand and you know, in both of your works, you've obviously really seen that being true and really helping people.

So as well as talking about how music can support mental health of young people, we also wanted to talk about how music can support music educators themselves, people working in music education because, you know, to be able to support these young people, it's important that the workforce itself is feeling supported and there can be a lot of challenges facing the music education sector as a whole. So, I wanted to come and ask what we can do to make sure we are supporting music educators. Rachael, could I come to you first and see what you think on that?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, of course. I think Music Mark do so much already for our sector. I think we're very fortunate to have that. I think there is a real pressure currently on music teachers and music leaders, music educators, because previously, or maybe, I don't know, it's so hard to track, isn't it? But I feel like there's been a, over time, they've always been seen as kind of creative guides and a support network. But right now it really feels, we talk to a lot of music teachers who feel like they're becoming real emotional anchors, like really the person that people go to and speak to. And I think we've seen within our team, their resilience tested more in the last few years than it ever has been previously. And that's actually why we developed our own version of the mental health first aid qualification that we delivered together because some of us trained up and then we realised it wasn't enough to have a mental health first aider. Like every single person, every music educator in, as part of Soundcastle, we thought needed to be qualified. And so now every staff member on the programmes and behind the scenes is a qualified mental health first aider. And that's been really vital to offer that, just some kind of framework of support.

I think as a, as a sector, music education community music is based on compassion more than, more than anything. So the majority of musicians who work in community practice or education do so because they care about people and want to make a difference. It isn't purely about the music making, it's about the people and the young people around them. So, there's a real risk there that if you're in that space, you're vulnerable and then people take on more than they're necessarily able to or qualified to do. And that can lead to blurred professional boundaries and ultimately burnout, which is what we're kind of trying to prevent by supporting people, really compassionate, brilliant musicians to understand that, that boundaries are everything in this work.

Emma Cragg: So would you say that that's one of the key reasons why more people working in music education, more teachers should consider getting mental health first aid trained?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, exactly. It's not enough to have one person in your organisation. You know, it often gets compared to physical first aid. I mean, ideally everyone would have that too, but often in a project or in a school, a certain number of people need that. If someone hurts themselves, you go to the right person. It's so different to mental health first aid. What we do is a practice. It's a way of thinking about yourself, your own needs. It's a way of thinking about your colleagues, your family, your friends, your teammates, the young people. It's a whole way of communicating and understanding and being able to speak about challenges. So I do think it's really vital that people have that training and then they have access to clear and structured support as part of that.

And it's why we felt so passionate about creating our version of that qualification because we understand it. We know there's kind of unique dynamics of community music making and education. I think it used to be people said, I work in mental health settings. And now there's more of an understanding that every single person is existing in a mental health space. And

particularly for educators that are working with people that are going to come to them, whether that's colleagues or, know, peripatetic music teachers can become very isolated, or whether it's young people. We're being looked to, people are come, people are needing to have more, more practice in how to hold those conversations and a lot of the work that we do in the mental health first aid course and in our consultancy is about supporting organisations and individuals to understand how to have the conversations. It's not about becoming a mental health professional, it's just giving people confidence in the role that they have and supporting signposting and understanding that if you're making a really trusting creative space, that's a brilliant thing and an asset. It's not about boundaries that stop young people from sharing, it's about creating really healthy, boundaried spaces feel really safe and that you and your team feel safe in as well.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, amazing. Thank you. And Alex, I was wondering if there's anything that maybe you've seen through the research you've been doing, perhaps the projects that you have been looking into and the people working there, if you've seen how that is affecting their mental health and how those people are being supported?

Alex Theophilus: Yeah, so I've sort of got the other side of the spectrum in terms of the project, particularly the one that I spent the most time in was working more as a youth club with a huge focus on music. Well, its primary focus was on music, it had other activities associated with it. But within that space, there were lessons offered, you know, sort of more structured lessons that they offered, but then also a heavy emphasis on more informal learning while you go type approaches as well. But my opinion is that they all sort of have their place within the scope of young people's mental wellbeing.

I think it was quite interesting what Rachael was saying that people are being asked for more mental wellbeing support than they ever have. I think from my opinion that I think that's something that I think is kind of quite significant. And before this I, before starting the PhD I spent a few years in public policy and I think I think there's, there should be a better link there between, you know, the promotion of wellbeing centrally to all different parts of society rather than just, you know, because obviously music is a creative form. People are going to, you know, be touched on when they are doing music, they're going to feel, ah, this hits a nerve for me, this song reminds me of this, but those type of, those types of linkages.

I would say that, you know, keep going to all music educators because actually this is so important what you're doing. And, I think, hearing from young people I've interviewed, because I'm obviously interviewing people who are between 16 and 25, they do remember the teachers they had. They do remember the support they had. When people get a little bit older, they reflect and they realise, you know, these people helped me when I was younger. And I think that's so important.

Aimee Christodoulou: Thank you. And before we move on, I'm curious to know, as two people who work in the mental health space, you know, you're having to hold that space for a lot of people, whether you're delivering mental health first aid training, whether you're chatting to people about their own experiences with mental health, how do you look after yourselves, your own mental health in those scenarios?

Alex Theophilus: I think that's a really interesting question because I think for myself, I try and do a range of different things. Doing this PhD, that was one of the questions that during I think the first week my supervisor touched on was, you do realise you need to look after your own

mental well-being as well, particularly during the times when you're actually going to, when I was going to these spaces and interviewing these young men. Coming away from that was often late at night, when I say late, you know, 9 o'clock in the night. And I just, I think for me, the things I've always beared in mind is, you know, obviously using music was key for me. I play the piano, so that was one. Also exercise, I love walking. I love doing other things, trying new stuff out. So for me, those type of things help take my mind off it.

And also realising that you can't solve everybody's problems, you can't solve the world's problems, what you can do is just try and do your bit towards making the world a better place. But not to take everything personally, and to try and have a little detachment from, you know, look after you first because I think when you go on an aeroplane they always say, even to people with very small children, put your own life jacket on before anybody else's and I think the same, you need to think the same in terms of your own mental health and physical health. I think you need to look after yours before you can do anything else. And if you're running low, you know, perhaps have a time out, perhaps go for a walk around the block, perhaps put on a record or play the piano, do something just to take yourself away from that situation for even, if it is only for 10 minutes.

Aimee Christodoulou: Thank you. And Rachael, do you want to jump in there too?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, it's one of the hardest questions and it's one of the hardest parts of this whole, all of this work. I think I'm good at holding the space for other people. I think there's a lot of skill in that and good practice. But it's really difficult and I think we work with a lot of leaders and practitioners that feel the same way, that they can hold beautiful sessions and lovely training, but actually really taking that on is, it's tough. So, we have things in place.

At Soundcastle, have wellbeing focused line management. So as a director, I have that with a member of our board. We also have reflective supervision, so that's with a clinical supervisor. So, they can support in a confidential space, whatever's going on there professionally. I also access personal therapy, which I find incredibly helpful at helping me just work through what's happening both in Soundcastle and also in life outside. Because outside of this work, I'm a foster carer, so I'm sort of living with a young person with very complex trauma anyway. So the practice is very integrated in my personal life and my professional life. So finding ways to ground is really vital. There's a lot of discussion around this in the foster care sector, as well as in music education around foster carers looking after themselves and needing to find ways to navigate the days without it becoming overwhelming.

I look to my colleague Hannah, who I know that runs a lot of our training for Music Mark. She's an amazing ally and friend in this work. I think it's good to have people that really understand the practice and can be there to hold you. And in our training, a lot of it is about supporting yourself. I think sometimes people come on mental health first aid training and think they're going to learn a lot of techniques for working with others, which is true, but it really does anchor you into yourself and your own practice. I obviously trained twice, I've trained multiple times in mental health first aid, but I renewed it this summer again. And it's amazing every time you do the training as a participant, just to take that back on board. Looking at how you sustain your practice long-term, because I think there's such a high risk, and we see it with people dropping out the sector and it's really sad. I meet quite a lot of people that say, I used to play, I used to teach, but it was too much. So yeah, anything that tops up, I think Alex is right, like grounding, exercising.

I do forget sometimes that music is something that can be good for my mental health, which sounds ridiculous because it's everything that I talk about all of the time! But actually, putting on the right album or digging into the instrument box and playing with the kids and being playful and creative, it puts me back on the right path every time. But it's not easy at all.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, I mean, it's really interesting you saying that. And I don't think it sounds ridiculous at all to say that it could be hard to remember that music is something that can be there as an escape because, I suppose when your job is doing music and you know, you can be so, you've both already spoken so much about how music can really be there to help young people and support their mental health. But actually when it's also your own job, then it possibly isn't always as easy. Sometimes it probably will be there as a tool for you to support your own mental health, but I think it's really interesting hearing you both talk about some of those external ways, other options that are out there for people who are working with music, but it might not always feel like the most obvious choice to turn to personally.

Aimee Christodoulou: It's super interesting. I think it's really going to resonate with a lot of our listeners, you know, music as leisure, not just as work. But I also just want to take a second to say that I can absolutely vouch for the mental health first aid training. I did it myself as part of the Music Mark team. I did the Soundcastle training earlier this year and it was just fantastic. And I would, I think everyone should do it, not just music educators, anyone who's interacting with other people in their day-to-day life should absolutely do that training. I am not being paid to say this. It was genuinely that fantastic! But if you are listening and you would like to get involved and take that first step, I believe we have a Level One qualification in awareness of first aid for mental health coming up with Soundcastle towards the end of November. Can't remember the exact date off the top of my head, but check it out because it's such a really, really good starting point and really invaluable training.

[Transition music]

So obviously that's one thing that's about to answer my next question, this mental health first aid training. But what resources or organisations would each of you recommend for people wanting to learn more about music and mental health? So I'm going to pass that on to you, Alex.

Alex Theophilus: So I think, the work of Music Mark is really important within that. Obviously for myself, I've read a lot about this, a lot of quite heavy academic papers, but there are also organisations such as Youth Music, which do really, really important work within that space. There are other stuff like, for example, from government organisations also do tap into this as well. I think from my own opinion is to just look into it, you know, go on Google, go on through some of the stuff that's available and see what sort of resonates with you because obviously there's a lot of resources out there. I think, you know, obviously be selective, but you know organisations such as Music Mark and Youth Music I think are probably some of the best ones to start. And then also charities as well, you know, even if they're not music focused, a lot of the times they will include arts as a sort of a focus of some of their work. Even stuff like the Samaritans, Childline, stuff like that. These are also very important, I think, for including the mix.

Aimee Christodoulou: Great, there's loads of good options for places to start there, but yeah of course, it must seem overwhelming just googling mental health support and all the different options that come up so thank you for those places to start. Rachael, do you want to add something there?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, I definitely agree with Alex's suggestions. I think if you're in a union, the unions often have good mental health support. Also Sound Sense, I think some of your members may cross over. Sound Sense, I know that they do have a real focus on wellbeing and supporting practitioners, and the next online edition of their magazine is around duty of care and looking at how we look after one another. So I definitely recommend them and their support as well.

Myself and Hannah are regional champions for the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance. And they're an amazing organisation, probably slightly more on the academic side than kind of in the room practice, but really helpful to look at what's happening in creative health and how music and mental health connect, and understanding some of, the kind of research and the thinking that's going on at the moment behind that. But yeah, Youth Music are a great place to look for actual programmes. You know, we run a programme funded by Youth Music called Sparking Change, which is for 18 to 25 year olds that have faced barriers to accessing training in community arts. And we include mental health first aid training as part of that.

I think once you start getting into it and talking to other organisations, both nationally and locally, once you're in the mental health conversation, it comes up more and more and more. I do think get on the ground in your own community as well, because like you said, the Google can be a little bit overwhelming of who's who, but actually being in your own space, and I think most music educators and community musicians would feel that the value of being able to go somewhere and understand something and talk to somebody locally, just see what else is happening in your area. Ask to sit in on a session and just start to really build up your own thinking and awareness around how music and mental health can complement one another.

Emma Cragg: Thank you. That's a really useful list, I'm sure. And just to remind our listeners as well that we will include links to all of those organisations that you've mentioned in the show notes. So if anyone would like to go and find out about any of these places in any more detail, the links will be on the show notes on the Music Mark website.

So obviously we've talked about quite a few challenges, quite challenging conversations and topics and our listeners could be going through so many different things right now. So we wanted to ask what was one thing that each of you might suggest that people could take away with them today to go and do to help support their mental health? So Rachael, maybe I can come back to you on that first?

Rachael Perrin: Yeah, of course. I guess there's two pathways in it. I know you said one, but very quickly there's two. If a listener feels like you're in crisis and that your mental health is actually impacting on your ability to cope with your day-to-day life, then that really is about seeking professional help. Like that isn't okay to feel like that and to continue feeling like that. So if it is a crisis situation, it's definitely GP first or going to mental health charities like Mind or Papyrus, and we'll talk through signposting and being okay with the idea that you might need to take some time off work and get professional support. Like that is all okay. We've definitely normalised a culture of business and burnout, but it's okay to recognise when it's getting too much.

On the other side of it, if you're feeling overwhelmed and like there's a lot going on, but it's not actually a crisis moment, then it's about resilience building. And one of the things that we do at Soundcastle is create lists of things you can control and can't control that are going on. We find it really, really helpful. And then out of your, the list of things that you can control, work through

that and think what can be postponed, cancelled and delegated to give you a little bit of breathing space in the moment. And then once you've made the breathing space, it's about taking care to look after yourself, not filling that with other things, but whether that's like walking, being out in nature, listening to music, being with family, just taking the time. And that can be really free or it can be structured, like speaking to your manager about a workload that just really isn't manageable. It's really about being proactive in spotting warning signs. So yeah, the lists, I recommend the lists.

Emma Cragg: Thank you, that sounds like a very useful thing actually to keep in mind. And Alex, I'll come to you next.

Alex Theophilus: So what Rachael said is really, you know, I can't, I can't disagree with any of that. I think for your listeners, as I sort of said earlier, focus on yourself. Think have I got a glass full at the moment? Is my glass half empty? Am I running on a quarter and quad, quarter full? And then just to make, you know, the necessary changes, you know. If you are suffering with, like Rachael said, something that's a real emergency that is a different route. If you are dealing with just feeling just general burnout, you know, there's lots of resources out there. There's lots of good support from other sort of, as I said earlier charities. Also family, friends, reach out to them, you know, start the conversation rolling, say how you feel. I think we're so used to not, and as a culture, I think we don't actually say a lot about what we really feel. Sometimes we need to just say that, we need to say, actually, I'm not coping at the moment, I need to have some space. I need to go, go out. I need to just take half a day off, whatever it is. And I think to bring that, to give you some space and to feel better about yourself inside. But also remember that, you know, this is perfectly natural. People go through this. You are a wonderful human being and always remember that. This is you doing something for yourself.

Aimee Christodoulou: I'm feeling so inspired from this conversation! (Laughs). When we log off, I'm going to go and take a lovely walk and look after myself. But thank you so much for everything you've contributed to today's discussion. It's been such an interesting chat. I just want to give you both the opportunity. I just wanted to ask, is there anything else you want to add before we finish up?

Alex Theophilus: Yeah, I just wanted to say that this is a really important conversation. And, as I think I've sort of said, throughout, I did, through two music making spaces, eight interviews with young men, and I'm in the middle of doing another survey now. But so, but just sharing, you know, for example, what Rachael said, but also other people who working in this space, this is such a really important conversation and I just know that from the research I've done music really does help and I know that, you know, sometimes when music educators are probably doing their jobs every day they think what am I doing this for? What use is this? But as I think the result is something that is really good and something that isn't just about whether or not someone gets a really good job at the end of it or if somebody, you know, earns such amount of money in their life. It's actually about themselves, their identity, their sense of being. I think that's so much more important than anything else. So just to say thank you to everybody who is actually doing that every day, it’s so important if you're working in as a music educator in a structured space or an unstructured space or whatever it is, so important what you're doing.

Emma Cragg: Thank you Alex and just to check, Rachael is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Rachael Perrin: I guess just on a personal note, just to remind people to be proactive in spotting early warning signs. I think I do really, we talk to so many people about this and people that push just a little bit too far because they care about the young people they work with so much. They want to keep going and people are in a process, or there's concerts to work towards and grades to work towards, but I do think it's about early warning signs and making sure that you're making the changes for yourself that you need to make.

And then on a kind of macro level, Soundcastle are on a complete mission to try and get the world qualified as mental health first aiders, or at least to start the conversation. Aimee, as you know, it's not the end of the conversation. Like doing that training is just one little part of the chats, but we really do want to fly the flag for this and be the leading provider within our sector. So anything, if anyone that's listening would like to know more about that or talk about it, we're really open. All of our facilitators that deliver it, our musicians, artists have lived experience of working in the mental health world. So I think it's a really, it's a good conversation to be in and I'm really, feel very honoured to be here with you both, well, with all of you, it's just very, yeah, it's very inspiring.

Aimee Christodoulou: Brilliant, thank you so much. As Emma mentioned earlier, all of that will be in the show notes, so head straight there, and you'll also be able to find Soundcastle and more about Alex's work if you're wanting to find out about each of those as well. So thank you both so much for joining us today. I wish we could chat for longer. It's been a brilliant discussion. But as you say, Rachael, only the start of the conversation! So thank you so much. We'll see you next time.

[Outro music]

Aimee Christodoulou: Thanks again to Rachael and Alex for sharing their wisdom and knowledge with us today. We have walked away feeling inspired and better equipped to look after our own mental health, and we hope you feel the same.

Emma Cragg: If you're personally affected by the topics discussed today, please seek support. There are lots of fantastic charities out there, and if you need somewhere to start, try mind.org.uk, samaritans.org, or giveusashout.org. A further list of charities and resources are available in the show notes.