Title: Impact of work and economic stress on musician mental health burden in the ‘Live Music Capitol of the World’

Presenters: Lloyd Berg, PhD  
Email: LBerg@seton.org  
Ben King, MPH  
Email: btking@seton.org

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Background

Being a popular (i.e., non-classical) musician is a known occupational risk factor for depression, anxiety, alcohol misuse and suicide. In one survey of 972 nonclassical musicians, 24% of respondents endorsed depressive symptoms affecting their performance in the previous year, compared to a 9.5% depression rate in general US adult population. Between 4-20% of popular musicians endorse stage fright that negatively impacted their performance in the previous year, versus an annual US prevalence rate of 8.7% for specific phobias. Popular musicians have shortened life expectancies compared to the general population, with significantly higher incidences of liver-related disease and suicide observed in country, metal, and rock musicians. In a review of US census data from 1990, the suicide rate in musicians was estimated to be 42.6 per 100,000, or 3.4 times higher than the general population.

A prevailing clinical theory of creative artist mental health morbidity suggests artists suffer from a greater prevalence of bipolar disorder than the general population, associated both with enhanced creativity and the above-mentioned mental health disorders. Research investigating the link between creativity and bipolar disorder, however, has been equivocal. Less attention has been paid to other, possibly more salient and modifiable, psychosocial predictors of emotional distress such as occupational and financial stress.

Work and financial stress are consistently identified by Americans as their primary sources of stress, which are associated with increased risk of developing mental disorders. Popular musicians struggle with many occupational stresses that are underappreciated by the general public. Wills and Cooper found lack of mental well-being in musicians was predicted by performance-related anxieties such as musical ability not being appreciated and maintaining self-imposed standards of musicianship, poor physical working conditions, performance anxiety, work overload related to traveling, and the impact of the job on social and family life. A study by the Austin Creative Alliance in 2013 found musician earnings in Austin average $23,371 annually, far below the city’s median. These findings suggest that specific
occupational and financial sources of stress may be contributing factors to the development of mental disorders in performing popular musicians.

Research Aim

The aim of this presentation is to describe and provide context for a recent study of the associations between musician-specific occupational and financial stress with mental health distress burden in a cohort of low-income music industry professionals accessing a range of mental health services through the SIMS Foundation (SIMS). SIMS a non-profit mental health organization in Austin, Texas that since 1995 has provided low-cost mental health services, including counseling, psychiatric medication management and addiction recovery services, to thousands of musicians and their family members in the ‘Live Music Capital of the World.’

Methods

This IRB-approved study reports on the results of an online cross-sectional resurvey that was sent to a sample of clients that were current musicians who were enrolled in mental health services within the previous two years and with a working email address or phone contact (n=655). This was preceded by a pilot phase of testing former clients in order to test the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, including internal consistency and exploratory factor analysis (n=40; item-item correlation coefficients, Chronbach’s alpha) and test-retest reliability (n=19 subjects, 2 surveys, 6 weeks apart; kappa statistics). Consent for all surveys was obtained at the beginning of the survey and screening questions confirmed that subjects were still actively working as musicians. The survey primarily used well-validated tools to represent the key constructs, asking about stress related to work as a musician (52 items) and financial stress (8 items) before collecting information about mental health symptoms through the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) and alcohol misuse through the AUDIT-C tool. The survey ends by asking additional questions about social and economic circumstances, type of musical work in which the subjects participate (instruments, touring frequency) and basic demographics.

An exploratory factor analysis of the pilot phase was done to examine the groupings of variance patterns within the musician stress section of the survey (52 questions) and then confirmatory factor analysis was performed using the full sample of current participants. Testing using multiple univariate and multivariate regression models was performed to see how the various construct scores interacted in this population, within and across subject characteristics and service levels. Summary tables and all analysis were performed using STATA version 13.1 (College Station, TX).
Results

317 musicians fully responded to the survey, for a response rate of 47.7%. The pilot surveys demonstrated good stability of responses and good test-retest reliability. The musician stress scale (overall $\kappa = 0.8612$), for example, showed good reliability in pilot testing and very high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.9385$), particularly given the size of the survey.

45.4% of respondents reported finding their musical career stressful and only 25% reported satisfaction with their career. 68.2% rated their financial stress between 'High' and 'Overwhelming' and 83.7% of them reported dissatisfaction with their present financial situation. Over 36% of respondents reported moderate or severe depression levels using the PHQ9 and a third (33.5%) reported levels of moderate or severe levels of anxiety using the GAD7 scale - which are highly predictive for diagnostic levels of major depressive and generalized anxiety disorders, respectively. Nearly two-thirds (65.4%) of respondents reported problematic use of alcohol use on the AUDIT-C.

Univariate analyses revealed robust relationships between mean occupational stress scores and both depression and anxiety symptom severity (Depression OR = 3.48; 95% CI: 2.2-5.4; Anxiety OR = 2.79; 95% CI: 1.8-4.2). Average financial stress scores also were significantly associated with depression (OR = 2.00; 95% CI: 1.63-2.46) and anxiety (OR = 1.86; 95% CI: 1.5-2.3) symptom severity. Alcohol misuse was not directly associated with either occupational or financial stress, independent of mediation influences from anxiety or depression levels.

Conclusion

The results of this study lend support to the hypothesis that occupational and financial stress are independent risk factors for depression and anxiety in popular musicians. The findings from this unique sample of treatment-seeking musicians could have significant ramifications for understanding and addressing emotional distress that is widespread in this high-risk population. Delineating specific precipitants of musician stress, for example, can lead to targeted therapeutic interventions to promote proactive coping strategies and emotional resiliency. Heightened awareness of the degree to which occupational and financial stress impact popular musicians in Austin can also lead to innovative, community-based solutions to ameliorate these modifiable conditions that contribute to emotional distress in this psychologically vulnerable and highly valued population in the ‘Live Music Capital of the World.’

References


