

DISABILITY IS NOT A BARRIER TO CREATIVITY. IN MUSIC, IT'S THE HEART  
AND SOUL THAT RESONATE, NOT THE LIMITATIONS OF THE BODY.



*Tuning Your Resilience*

# A MUSICIAN'S DISABILITY GUIDE

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# Introduction

"Disability is part of being human. Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life. An estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability. This number is increasing due in part to population ageing and an increase in the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases."

- World Health Organization

## What is a Disability?

The CDC defines a disability as "any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them."<sup>1</sup> Disability affects about 26 percent of adults in the United States and affects each individual differently. Disabilities may or may not be visible, and they can appear at any point in one's life. Some disabilities are present at birth, while others can develop or manifest later in life, for example, following an injury or the onset of a chronic illness. Disabilities may be temporary and have the ability to heal or improve over time, or they may permanently affect several aspects of one's life. Many disabilities do not have a "cure" and require varying degrees of adjustment in one's day-to-day life. Disabilities and the people they impact are diverse, and it is crucial to consider that disability can happen to anyone and everyone.

## Musicians and Disability

Music is a field that is physically and mentally demanding. It involves practice sessions, rehearsals, and performances that can require a great degree of physical effort and engagement. In addition to this, there is a tendency for musicians to experience high levels of stress associated with their careers, which can stem from a variety of factors.<sup>2</sup> Due to the physical and mental requirements of musicianship, any disability can significantly impact a musician's ability to practice and perform. Disability could require musicians to make adjustments either for a period of time or permanently in order to continue their craft, and at times requires individuals to take time away from practice and performance. For these reasons, disability can present musicians with significant challenges related to their occupation. This guide is a resource designed to guide musicians through the process of navigating a disability that results in being unable to practice and perform for a period of time. The following guide deals primarily with temporary disabilities, but many of its principles can be applied to long-term or permanent disabilities. While this guide is intended to be broad, it is not all-encompassing, as each individual who encounters disability experiences it differently. This guide was created to supplement medical advice; it is not intended to be used as a substitute or replacement for professional medical advice. For questions or concerns relating to your specific condition, it is best to consult with a medical professional.

*Disability does not define talent. Many musicians continue to inspire through resilience and adaptation.*



# KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

If you are affected by a disability, there are legal protections in place that allow for accommodation in your workplace.

The ADA and FMLA are two commonly invoked pieces of legislation that provide guidelines for employers and employees. These acts are important to understand and reference for disabled musicians in cases where taking a leave of absence or requesting accommodations to be able to work.

## **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

The Americans with Disabilities Act is a civil rights law passed to prevent discrimination on the basis of disability. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act introduces several workplace protections that are in place. Employers covered by this act must have 15 or more employees on each working day for at least 20 weeks of the calendar year. Individuals who are covered are anyone who "with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the employment position that the individual holds or desires."<sup>3</sup>

Reasonable accommodations could include improved accessibility of a rehearsal facility, reassignment to a part-time position, adjustment to scheduled working hours, and assistive technology or equipment.<sup>4</sup> Any accommodation that does not pose "significant difficulty or expense" is considered reasonable.<sup>5</sup> Musicians should communicate with their employers to establish all appropriate accommodations. The ADA also allows for disability leave to be taken at the discretion of a disabled individual and their employer, though disability leave can be deferred to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). ADA leave can be a paid leave of absence.

## **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)**

The FMLA allows for 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to be taken by certain employees. The coverage of the FMLA is not as broad as the coverage of the ADA. Covered employers under the FMLA are public agencies, all public and private K-12 schools, and companies with at least 50 employees. Employees are only allowed to take this leave if they have worked with their employer for 1,250 hours over the past 12 months, have worked with their employer for at least 12 months, and work at a location where the employer has 50 employees within 75 miles.

The FMLA allows for 12-week consecutive leave or intermittent leave when "medically necessary."<sup>6</sup> Intermittent leave could allow for smaller periods of time adding up to 12 weeks to be taken off, or it could allow for reduced working hours or fewer days scheduled.

### **Application of the ADA and FMLA**

Following time off taken under the ADA and/or the FMLA, an employee or their representative must communicate with their employer to determine all necessary accommodations. The provisions of the ADA provide guidance for suitable accommodations, but each individual's situation can differ. If you suspect an accommodation may or will be useful, be sure to suggest it! You may request accommodation without medical documentation, however, it is possible that your employer will request medical verification of your need for an accommodation. Employers are not, however, allowed to ask questions that are invasive in nature and do not pertain to the requirements of a particular job. In addition to the FMLA, some states have individual laws regarding family and medical leave. Be sure to reference these, because they may provide additional, more specified protections. The Department of Labor provides certification forms as an addendum to the FMLA that employers may use to verify medical necessity for taking leave.

There are many resources available that explain provisions of both the ADA and FMLA and answer frequently asked questions. Links to several of these resources can be found in the "Resources" section of this booklet. If an employer violates the provisions of either the ADA or FMLA by discrimination, a claim can be filed against them.

For students, the process of acquiring accommodation can look different. Schools may require more extensive medical documentation to verify a leave or the necessity for accommodation. For K-12 students, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans are the most common forms of academic accommodation. American colleges have disability services offices that a student must work with to acquire accommodations. For medical conditions requiring leave, students may request to take a leave of absence, which typically goes through administration (i.e. Deans of Students, advisors, disability support personnel).

### **Further Options**

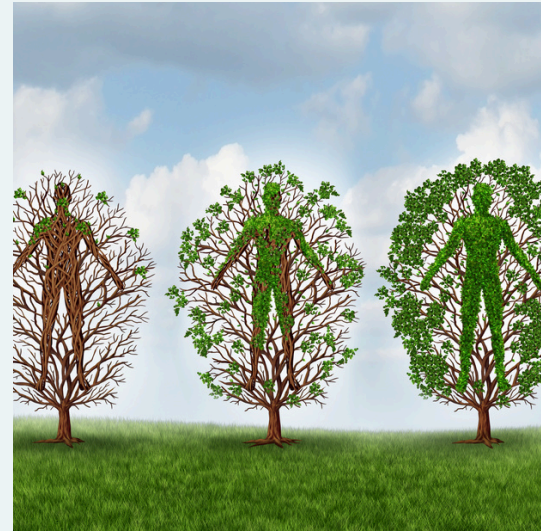
If you find that the ADA and/or FMLA do not supply enough coverage for your situation, there are other options to pursue while you are away from work. You may be able to apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), though this may be a difficult process. Donation accounts, such as GoFundMe, can be helpful resources to raise funds for a short period of time or for expenses such as medical procedures.

# While You're AWAY

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## During Recovery

It's difficult to be away from something that you are passionate about! The time spent away from music, no matter how long, can be a challenging part of recovery or adjustment because musicians tend to be deeply passionate about their craft. Time away from music can feel isolating, and the process of reconnecting to the musical world can feel daunting at times, but it does not need to be. This section will contain guidance on steps you can take when away from your instrument to feel connected to the realm of music, support your physical and mental health during recovery, and develop healthy coping strategies for the stress you experience.



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## Staying In Tune With your Instrument

One of the challenges of experiencing injury, illness, or disability as a musician is experiencing a sense of disconnect from the realm of music. You will likely interact with music in a way that is different than ever before and may find that you need to take a step back from it for a period of time because this can be a challenging adjustment to make. It is okay to take a break from music before reconnecting with it to focus on your physical and mental health. When you feel ready to reconnect, you have several options. Begin with recalling the aspects of music that inspire you and bring you joy, and keep those in mind as you explore ways to connect to the world of music. Some ideas include the following:

- Listen to music you enjoy and attend performances if you are able to.
- Experiment with composing or writing music.
- Discover new music or try listening to things you haven't before.
- If there is an instrument you can learn or play that will not exacerbate your physical condition, try spending time on it!



*Stay connected to music through listening, attending performances, and exploring new sounds while you recover.*

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## The Path to Adjustment

Adjusting to a newly acquired injury, illness, or disability can be difficult. This process often involves a significant amount of uncertainty and frustration. During the adjustment process, you will likely encounter a great deal of trial-and-error situations while finding things that work for you and your body. Whether your disability is temporary, chronic, or lifelong, it will have a profound impact on your life and your relationship with music.

The path to recovery is rarely straightforward, and no matter how prepared you may be, you will encounter obstacles. Some obstacles may be more substantial than others; some may feel impossible to overcome as you encounter them. It is commonly said that some days are harder than others, and having to experience those hard days can be difficult. It may feel as though you are taking two steps forward and one step backward. This is a common experience, and is not indicative of any sort of failure. Most obstacles that you encounter will likely be out of your control, but there are choices you can make in responding to these obstacles and recognizing the control that you do have in your own life.

During the adjustment period, here are some things to focus on:

1. Take everything one step at a time. Break time down into smaller chunks: days, hours, or even minutes.
2. Celebrate your accomplishments, even if you believe them to be small. Look at these accomplishments with the perspective of small chunks of time. Find something that you do each day, including making it through the day, to be proud of!
3. Allow time for things that bring you joy. While you are unable to participate in things that you might normally do, you may feel as though you have lost your sense of purpose. Many musicians feel that their purpose is to make music, so being unable to do so takes a toll on a musician's well-being. Being unable to play for a period of time certainly creates feelings of disappointment and grief that can detract from the joy you typically experience. Be sure to seek out and save time for the other sources of joy in your life, and make an effort to connect as much as you can with these things.
4. Take care of yourself. Eating as well as you can, staying hydrated, and resting are all very important to your physical health and will help you to adjust as best as you can. Make your health your top priority!

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## Mental Health

All the different areas of our well-being are connected. This means that if one area, such as our physical well-being, suffers, other areas are likely to be impacted. Injuries, illnesses, and disabilities all require adjustments in your lifestyle, and often these adjustments can be significant and frustrating. You will likely experience grief after the onset of any one of these things because you are living differently than you used to. Feelings of grief, frustration, and anger are completely normal, and it is important that you allow yourself the time and space to process these things.<sup>7</sup> Do not try to stop yourself from experiencing grief; acknowledging its existence is the first step towards healing through it.

Grief and all of the emotions that can accompany it may become overwhelming at a certain point. Prioritize your mental health just as much as your physical health and ensure that you have all of the support you need to navigate the psychological challenges of disability. The psychological impact of injury, illness, and disability is often significant, and it is important that this is addressed along with the physical impacts of these things. Major life changes can amplify pre existing mental health conditions and also have the potential to introduce new mental health conditions. Mental health professionals, such as therapists, are good resources for navigating mental health conditions and developing a plan of care that works best for your situation.

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## Coping with Stress

Stress is a common response to acquiring a disability for many individuals. While it is perfectly normal to feel stress, it is important to understand how to address and respond to it, because prolonged stress can take a toll on your physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of managing stress, it may be helpful to put stressors into two different categories: sudden stressors and long term stressors. These types of stress can be easier to manage if they are treated differently. Sudden stressors may cause symptoms associated with a sudden release of adrenaline and cortisol, such as rapid breathing and heart rate, muscular tension, and an increase in energy.<sup>9</sup> Experiencing acute symptoms of stress for a short time as a response to isolated events is not in itself unhealthy, but experiencing chronic stress can lead to long-term health issues. Chronic stress may manifest through physical symptoms such as headaches, heart palpitations, insomnia, and digestive issues, and can also be the cause of poor concentration or “brain fog”, irritability, and a sense of dread.<sup>10</sup>

Once you identify symptoms of stress, the next step towards managing it is learning how to reduce and respond to stress and developing healthy coping strategies for sudden and long-term stressors. Much like with grief, it is important to accept that you will feel stress related to your disability. It is important that you do not ignore or attempt to deny stress, instead focusing on the ways in which you can respond to and redirect stress. Generally, good ways to cope with stress include making time for things you love, building healthy habits, participating in meaningful activities, and doing physically relaxing things.<sup>11</sup>

Sudden stressors may respond well to relaxation techniques that help decrease acute physical symptoms of stress. These techniques can also be used regularly to increase your awareness of the physical, mental, and emotional presence of stress.<sup>12</sup> Be open to different techniques to find one that may work for you, and remember that these take practice! Practicing these techniques regularly can make them more helpful when you are responding to sudden stressors. Relaxation techniques can include the following:

- Visualization
- Autogenic relaxation
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Meditation

Mayo Clinic expands on these techniques in more detail and lists some other techniques you may find helpful. These techniques work best for acute, rather than chronic, stress. In cases of chronic stress, more action may need to be taken to address the root of your stress. If you find that your stress is consistently overwhelming, causing the development of unhealthy coping mechanisms, or is not managed well despite your best efforts, seeking additional advice from a mental health provider may be helpful.

*Recovery isn't linear. Take it one step at a time, celebrate small wins, find joy in new activities, and prioritize your health.*



# Returning to PLAY

## 1

### The Gradual Approach

When you first return to practicing your instrument, try playing for a small amount of time (5-10 minutes) and check in with how you feel. If you are not experiencing negative symptoms after playing, take a break prior to additional playing time. Though you might feel well after the first short increment of playing, it is especially important to avoid strain and overuse during a recovery period, so it is best to approach playing with caution at first. When you feel ready, slowly increase the amount of time you are practicing in 5-10 minute increments while continuing to check in with yourself. Below is an example of different “levels” of practice time created by Dr. Richard Norris with breaks inserted between practice sessions.

RETURN TO PLAY - A PRESENTATION BY DR. RICHARD N. NORRIS, MD									
LEVELS	Play	Rest	Play	Rest	Play	Rest	Play	Rest	Play
1	5	60	5						
2	10	50	10						
3	15	40	15	60	5				
4	20	30	20	50	10				
5	30	20	25	40	15	45	5		
6	35	15	35	30	20	35	10		
7	40	10	40	20	25	25	15	50	10
8	50	10	45	15	30	15	25	40	15
9	50	10	50	10	40	10	35	30	20

As you resume practicing, you might notice that you tire more quickly than usual or experience some discomfort while playing. It's normal to feel fatigue and minor discomfort after a long break from your instrument, which can be concerning or frustrating. While it may not be possible to completely avoid these issues, practicing in small increments and taking regular breaks can help manage them. As you gradually recover and get back into the routine, these challenges will likely diminish. Incorporating mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing and body awareness, can also support your practice.

# THE GRADUAL APPROACH

Remember that while some discomfort may be expected with playing, you should not feel pain. If you do experience pain, stop immediately to identify its source and prevent further injury. A self-assessment can help determine your next steps. Consider asking yourself the following questions:

- Have I felt this type of pain before, or is it new?
- What was I doing when the pain started?
- Does the pain lessen when I stop playing?
- Did the pain begin during practice, or was it present beforehand?
- Have I made any recent lifestyle changes that might be related to the pain?
- Does the pain seem to be worsening my condition?

While perceptions of pain and the answers to these questions will vary, it's generally advisable to seek medical advice if you're concerned, especially if the pain is prolonged, severe, or unfamiliar. Chronic pain can be a symptom of various conditions, so it's crucial to rule out injury and discuss pain management with a healthcare professional.

As you begin practicing again, be patient with yourself. You might need to relearn certain skills, and you will face unexpected challenges. Progress is rarely linear, and sometimes moving forward requires taking a few steps back at first. Every step in your recovery journey is important, no matter how small. Celebrate your wins in light of your challenges, and practice self-compassion through it all.

## 2

## Practice Tips

Returning to practice is an important step in the process of adjusting to life after the onset of a disability, and it is important to adjust to practice in the same way you have been adjusting to life: one step at a time and with great patience. During the adjustment stage, the way you feel each day will likely fluctuate more than usual, so cultivating healthy habits becomes especially important. The way you practice can either help you or hurt you in the long run. Practice with your physical and mental health in mind; do not obsess over hours spent practicing or how “fast” you progress. It’s natural to want to get back up to speed as soon as possible, but it is important to take the time to get back up to speed in the right way. At first, that might mean small amounts of practice time! Focus on the quality and intention of your practice over the duration. Here are a few tools to help you do so:

- Practice parameters

There are different parameters to progress along for the sake of returning to practice: time, tempo, and difficulty. Focus on one of these at a time.<sup>9</sup> For example, if you have just increased the amount of time you plan to practice for, choose something that is not overly strenuous to play, and start by practicing it slowly. Later on, you might speed up the tempo, then you might try playing something more difficult.

- Putting down your instrument

There is a possibility that you will physically be unable to play your instrument for as much time as you would like to. This can be disappointing, but there is a way to take advantage of the time you are separated from your instrument. The time you take “away” from playing can be incredibly important in enhancing the time you spend practicing. Listen to other musicians and take inspiration from them. Study your music and set flexible goals. Reflect on your practice— recording or journaling can help you be involved with music in your downtime and can be used as guides for setting goals. How is it feeling to practice? What has been going well? What challenges are you facing, and how will you conquer them?

- Journaling

Keeping a practice notebook or journal can be helpful in keeping track of progress towards your goals, as well as challenges and accomplishments!

- Recording

Record practice sessions and listen to them during your downtime. This is a great way to make observations about what you practice and can help you set effective goals for future practice sessions.

# PRACTICE TIPS

- Accomplishments

Pay attention to the things that you are doing well and celebrate them! It is easy to become caught up in thinking about the things that do not go well, especially during periods where your progress might seem inconsistent or unpredictable. Remember that these things are a natural part of the learning process, and allow your accomplishments to inspire and motivate you to overcome the challenges you face.

- Performances

The first few times you perform for an audience after a long period away can feel daunting. You may find that you experience higher levels of anxiety leading up to a performance than you have in the past or that you are more concerned about the opinions of your audience than usual. Be aware of when you may be putting excess pressure on yourself, and try to view performance as an opportunity to share your work and dedication towards your art, rather than as a place where you must “prove yourself.”





## Establish Healthy Goal-Setting Strategies

Goal-setting is a good habit for musicians to develop in general, but it is especially important during the process of returning to play. Focus on setting and achieving goals in a way that is both healthy and sustainable. While your goals should push you a bit, it is important to avoid overworking yourself or putting undue stress on yourself to reach your goals. Progress by nature is not linear- you may feel at some points that you are taking a few steps forward and one step back, or even vice versa. You will encounter some obstacles in trying to reach your goals, but these obstacles do not indicate failure. The key is to be persistent, consistent, and flexible, and to work with, rather than against, the obstacles you face.

When setting practice goals, try to focus on the short-term, mid-term, and long-term areas for growth. It can be incredibly helpful to set specific daily goals for your practicing, especially if you can only practice for a short amount of time. It is possible to achieve more than you may think in a 15 or 20 minute practice session as long as you have a specific goal set. Ensure that your goals are both flexible and achievable to avoid overworking yourself. Your first goal might be more vague: "I will pick up my instrument and see how it feels to play." As you get used to playing, you will have more specific ideas of things you want to work on. Try to have specific goals in mind for each practice session, and remember that goals start small and grow over time!



# 4

## Facing Obstacles and Building Your Toolkit

Every person who experiences an injury, illness, or disability has a unique journey ahead of them. Not everyone will find the same advice to be helpful, and not everyone will have the same “toolkit.” Your toolkit will equip you to respond to various challenges and will expand with experience, becoming more reliable over time. You will eventually be equipped with different tools for most aspects of your recovery and daily life.

### Getting Back into the Workforce

Upon return to the workplace, it is helpful to learn whether your workplace has a disability office, organizational ombuds, or an anonymous resource you can consult for support. These resources are helpful in easing the transition back into work and helping you reintegrate into the workforce. Be sure to obtain supportive medical documentation from doctors and/or mental health counselors to determine the most appropriate method of transitioning back to work. If you are returning from disability leave, be sure to understand the procedures necessary to take that action. This can vary state to state and in different organizations; consult the “Know Your Rights” section to learn more about ADA and FMLA leave.

### Surrounding yourself with Positivity

You will likely encounter sources of negativity, whether they be internal (self-driven) or external. Experiencing negativity can be both discouraging and hurtful. While it is not always possible to avoid negativity altogether, there are actions you can take to respond to it and to ensure that it does not become consuming. As much as you can, surround yourself with people who build you up and seek out positivity in all aspects of your life. Strive to be the best supporter of yourself that you can possibly be, no matter what you encounter.

### Setbacks

When you encounter setbacks, be sure to give yourself grace. Setbacks are a part of life, and will happen more often when you are adjusting to new ways of life. They are frustrating to experience and challenging to navigate, especially when they are unfamiliar, but they do not indicate failure. Setbacks are temporary, and experiencing them will allow you to develop strategies to overcome them.

# Support & ADVOCACY

When advocating for disability awareness and accommodating practices, the first thing to do is to be a good listener! Support begins with checking in, amplifying voices, and advocating for accessible environments—for yourself and others. Amplify these voices and advocate for yourself and any issues or challenges you encounter in your own environment.

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## Advocates for Artists with Disabilities

- @slayleebays
- @adisableicon
- @robinhahnsopran
- @themarionettepianist
- @pauuzzo
- @operamariposa
- @musicianswellness



Robin Hahn, opera vocalist and accessibility advocate, radiates strength and elegance as she embraces her cane with grace. Her presence in the music industry highlights the importance of inclusivity for all performers.

*Disability can be isolating, so support begins by checking in, amplifying voices, and standing up for accessible environments—for yourself and others.*

## Resources and Further Reading

- <https://www.ada.gov>
    - Read the Americans with Disabilities Act
  - <https://adata.org/>
    - Provides additional guidance to the ADA and answers frequently asked questions
  - <https://www.usa.gov/disability-rights>
    - Specific information on the coverage of the ADA
  - [www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)
    - Information, fact sheets, and FAQ's for both the ADA and FMLA
  - <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>
    - Information for post-secondary students requesting accommodations
  - <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html>
    - Information for students requesting auxiliary aids, including sample accommodations
  - <https://mtfusa.org/>
    - funds surgical and non-surgical treatment for arm/hand injuries in under and uninsured musicians
  - <https://www.artsably.com/>
    - Promotes accessibility in the arts
-



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