

# Musician's Block in Contemporary Music Artists: Coping Mechanisms in the Contemporary Era

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## Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of musician's block in contemporary music artists, focusing on the coping mechanisms they employ in response to creative blocks during the music-making process. Using a phenomenological approach, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the lived experiences of new artists facing musician's block. The primary objectives were to identify the coping strategies employed, assess their perceived impact on creative output and mental well-being, and examine the challenges artists face in implementing these methods. Key themes emerged, including an awareness of musician's block, music-making anxiety, the intricacies of the creative process, various coping mechanisms, and the role of performance. Findings indicate that while many artists develop individualized strategies to overcome creative obstacles, barriers such as self-doubt and external pressures complicate these efforts. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique pressures faced by contemporary musicians and offers insights into potential support structures to foster resilience within the music-making community.

**Keywords:** Musician's Block, Coping Mechanisms, Music-Making Process

## 1. Introduction

When we hear someone sing, play an instrument or perform a musical piece on a stage, we often view them as musically gifted and having no stage fright to perform in front of the audience. Stage fright is among the most common fears people have. Many musicians undergo performance anxiety at some level every day. There are different ways in which performers perceive their energy while performing. First one is, inwardly - musicians who feel the thrill and the exhilaration of performing their music by owning the stage and performing for themselves first. Many music artists can be seen owning the stage and engulfing their surroundings with their energy.

Second one is, outwardly – artists that seek or retrieve energy from the audience or other external motivators, such as the sound system or even the platform/stage decoration. One can find artists who create really good music but might not be comfortable to perform live because they prefer to stay in the backends and continuously work on their music than giving into the pressure of performing live. Contemporary music artists refer to musicians that aim to create musical renditions and performances that

thrive in the present era, typically encompassing a spectrum of styles and genres that have emerged from the late 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like a creative block or a writer's block, Musician's block also prevails, as a state of creative stagnation which leads to affect musicians' ability to compose, perform, or produce new work. This seems to be particularly challenging for new music artists who are relying on music as their professional careers. This study aims to explore the coping mechanisms discovered by these emerging artists to overcome such blocks.

This study also intends to bring awareness to the common phenomenon of feeling stagnant in the creative process that affects the mental health of any practicing/performing music artist who may not seek active mental health treatment, leading them to be at potential risk of developing poor mental health. Understanding these strategies can provide insights into the broader creative process and offer support for new musicians.

Musical writer's block, often a frustrating impediment to creativity, can be alleviated through various techniques. Research by Kenny and Osborne (2006) highlights the potential of cognitive-behavioral techniques to reframe negative thought patterns, which may contribute to creative stagnation.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 A Qualitative Interview Study**

Coping Mechanisms used among Musicians is a widely studied topic, however the effectiveness of the strategies is slightly complex and subjective in nature. Polkinghorne (2005, p. 138) argues that the primary purpose of qualitative research is to “describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness.” A qualitative study allows the researcher to investigate and interpret the world of research participants by learning about the sense they make of their social and tangible circumstances, as well as their perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Using a Qualitative design to study the nature, popularity and effectiveness of the coping strategies used by musicians facilitated in retaining the subjective experiences and maintaining the uniqueness of each participant.

### **2.2 Research Design**

This study follows a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach aimed at understanding the lived experiences of emerging music artists who have encountered musician's block. A phenomenological design was chosen to gain insights into the subjective experiences of contemporary music artists, specifically focusing on the challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceived impact of their experiences. The thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the data and identify recurring themes and patterns across the participants' responses.

### **2.3 Research Objectives**

The primary objectives of this study were:

1. Identify and describe the coping mechanisms used by new music artists to overcome musician's block.
2. Explore the efficacy and perceived impact of these coping strategies on the artists' creative output and mental well-being.
3. Understand the challenges and barriers faced by new music artists in implementing these coping mechanisms.

### **2.4 Research Questions**

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What coping mechanisms do contemporary music artists use when experiencing musician's block?

2. How do contemporary music artists perceive the efficacy of these coping strategies in overcoming blocks?
3. What are the main challenges or barriers contemporary music artists face in implementing these coping mechanisms?

## **2.5 Sampling**

### **2.5.1 Participant Selection**

The study employed a purposive sampling method to select participants who had experienced musician's block and were actively engaged in music production or performance. The sample consisted of seven participants, five male and two female, aged between 25 and 44 years. Participants were selected based on the following.

### **2.5.2 Inclusion criteria**

- Emerging artists with less than five years of professional music experience.
- Individuals who have experienced a period of musician's block lasting a minimum of one month or more.
- Participants who had conscious realization of their experience with musician's block, enabling them to reflect on and describe their coping strategies.
- Participants aged 17 years and above.

### **2.5.3 Exclusion Criteria**

The following participants were excluded from the study:

- Those who do not engage in active songwriting or composition of original musical works.
- Those whose work consists primarily of cover songs or adaptations of music created by other artists.

## **2.6 Sampling Technique**

The data collection process continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new information or themes emerged from the interviews. This ensures that the study captures a comprehensive range of experiences and perspectives related to the phenomenon under investigation.

## **2.7 Data Collection**

### **2.7.1 In-Depth Interviews**

Data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews, which provided flexibility for the participants to share their experiences and insights in their own words. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions to explore responses in greater depth while maintaining a focus on the research questions. The interviews were designed to explore the participants' experiences with musician's block, the coping mechanisms they employed, and the challenges they faced in overcoming the block. Additionally, the interviews sought to capture participants' perceptions of how these coping mechanisms impacted their creative output and mental well-being. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to facilitate trust and openness, encouraging participants to reflect on and articulate their experiences in detail. Each interview lasted between 30-40 minutes, depending on the participant's level of engagement and the depth of discussion.

## 2.8 Data Analysis

### 2.8.1 Thematic Analysis & Coding

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data. The process of thematic analysis was conducted in six stages, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

**Familiarization with the data.** The researcher transcribed the interview recordings and read through the transcripts multiple times to immerse themselves in the data and identify initial ideas.

**Generating initial codes.** The researcher systematically coded the data by identifying interesting features and patterns within the data that relate to the research questions. This involved highlighting passages of text and assigning labels (codes) that represent the underlying themes.

**Searching for themes.** The researcher organized the codes into broader themes and sub-themes. This phase involved clustering related codes and looking for patterns that linked the data to the research objectives.

**Reviewing themes.** The researcher reviewed and refined the identified themes by checking them against the data set to ensure they accurately represented the participants' experiences and responses.

**Defining and naming themes.** The researcher refined the themes further, defining each one and assigning names that accurately captured the essence of the data. Some initial themes were merged or discarded based on the refinement process.

**Writing the report.** Finally, the researcher wrote up the results, detailing the identified themes, their meanings, and the relationships between them. The report also included direct quotations from participants to illustrate and support the analysis.

### 2.8.2 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the researcher followed a transparent and systematic approach to data analysis. Triangulation was also considered by comparing findings from different participants and across themes to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking (sharing the findings with participants for validation) was also utilized as a means to enhance credibility and confirm that the participants' perspectives were accurately captured.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Participant Description

A total of 7 participants were interviewed for the study, and further interview process was terminated as data reached saturation. Out of the total 7 participants, there were 3 female and 4 male participants in the study. Each of the participants have a diverse career, however the experiences shared are common across various tangents, which helped in organising the information using the following technique. The interviews were conducted with the following interview questions as attached in Appendix A.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis

To analyse the interview data, both inductive as well as deductive methods were used. The initial codes were formed deductively using repeated reading of participant responses and modified accordingly based on various emerging and repeating themes.

Braun and Clark (2006, p. 79) state that qualitative approaches are highly diverse and distinct, thematic analysis (TA), however, should be seen as foundational to any qualitative inquiry. Thematic analysis refers to "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79), according to

Braun and Clark. Thematic Analysis can be applied within a wide array of theoretical frameworks which makes it suitable for vast range of research topics, hence making it theoretically flexible. A “theme” in this sense refers to an “element (motif, formula or device)” which appears frequently in a transcribed text (Van Manen, 1996, p. 78). For the present study, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework has been referred to, providing a better clarity and structured framework. It is presented as follows:

### 3.2.1 Familiarising with the Data

The first step of TA is to become familiar with the data to the extent that the content is learnt in depth and breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was transcribed into a typed form. The process was rather time-consuming and mundane, however, this helped in getting through the data slowly and carefully. The recorded interviews were transcribed and names were replaced by participant numbers. Identifying information such as confidential or sensitive information was removed from the transcripts. After transcribing the data, it was thoroughly reviewed the material multiple times to identify relevant patterns. The material was read through the entire data set several times before beginning the initial coding process. During this phase, notes and highlighted key ideas informed by the literature review, were taken down for revision in later stages of my analysis.

### 3.2.2 Generating Initial Codes

This phase started after we became familiar with the complete data set. The initial ideas and notes from the earlier review provided a strong foundation for the coding process. According to Saldaña (2015, p. 3) a code in qualitative work is often “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute of language-based or visual data”. The data was organised in chart-form in order to visualise patterns and to expand or deduct codes if needed.

### 3.2.3 Defining and Naming Themes

This phase involved the refinement of the themes compiled in the previous sections. Some of the potential themes were dropped as there was not enough data to support them empirically while others collapsed into each other. There was a need to refine the coding process until the thematic map produced was a full representation of the given data.

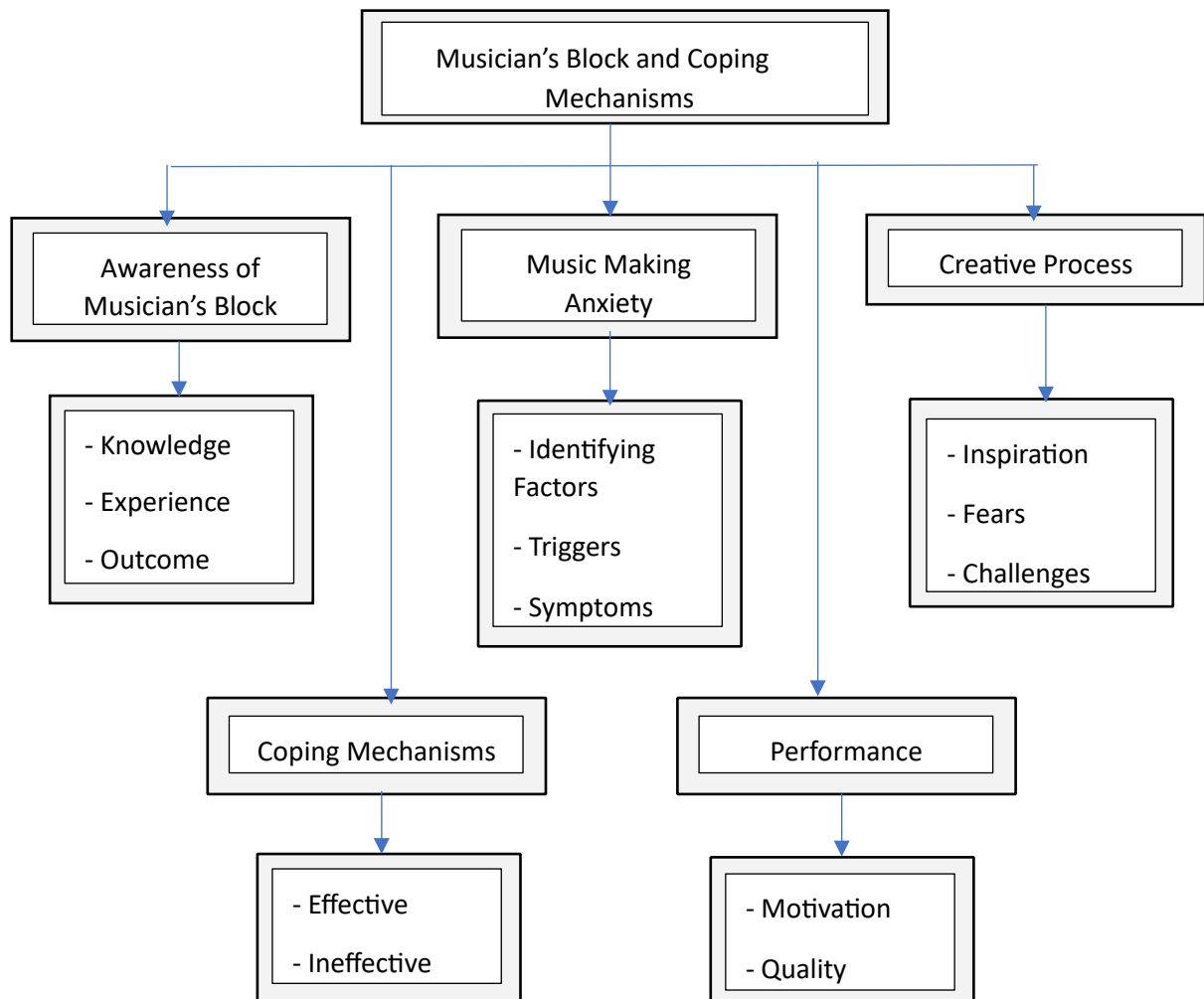
Following is the table from the initial coding phase:

**Table 1: Themes and sub-themes for Musician’s Block: Coping Mechanisms**

Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
<b>1. Awareness on Musician’s Block</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowledge</li> <li>- Experience</li> <li>- Outlook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All 7 participants gave brief descriptions of "Musician’s Block".</li> <li>- All participants had at least one unproductive/stuck experience; 2 felt strongly disappointed in themselves.</li> <li>- 3 participants reported a changed outlook towards music-making after overcoming the block.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Music Making Anxiety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying Factors</li> <li>- Triggers</li> <li>- Symptoms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All participants identified anxiety-inducing situations, mainly pressure and fear of judgment.</li> <li>- Triggers included imposter syndrome, comparison, and unrealistic self-expectations.</li> <li>- Symptoms: physiological (increased heart rate, sweating); emotional (self-doubt, loneliness).</li> </ul>

<b>3. Creative Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inspiration</li> <li>- Fear of Judgement/Failure</li> <li>- Challenges</li> <li>- Relationship with Music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 3 participants lost inspiration during block; 1 sought sound-rich environments for inspiration.</li> <li>- All feared failure or judgment; 2 still struggle, others have coping techniques.</li> <li>- Challenges include maintaining quality and avoiding overthinking.</li> <li>- 5 of 7 have a more positive music relationship now.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Coping Mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effective Strategies</li> <li>- Ineffective Strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effective: Physical exercise, journaling, mindfulness, connecting with others (noted by 2 participants).</li> <li>- Ineffective: Forcing creativity, meditation, and positive affirmations.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivation</li> <li>- Quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 5 participants felt new motivation and less self-critical after overcoming the block.</li> <li>- Quality of performance improved with better anxiety and fear management.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Thematic Map: Showing the main themes and sub themes.**





#### 4 Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to explore the phenomenon of musician's block, examining its impact on the music-making process and the coping strategies employed by musicians to manage the associated challenges. The study revealed that awareness of musician's block is a common experience among musicians, with participants demonstrating varying levels of understanding about its occurrence and significance in their careers. The data indicated that most participants had encountered periods of creative stagnation, leading to feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and emotional distress, but had also developed a more nuanced and accepting outlook on the experience as a natural part of their creative journey. Music-making anxiety was found to be a prominent issue that exacerbates the experience of musician's block. The pressure to perform and meet external expectations, coupled with triggers such as imposter syndrome and self-comparison, was frequently mentioned as factors contributing to anxiety. Participants exhibited a range of emotional and physiological symptoms, such as negative self-talk, physical tension, and feelings of loneliness, which impacted their creative output and overall well-being. In examining the creative process, it was clear that periods of musician's block often resulted in a temporary loss of inspiration and heightened fear of failure.

However, overcoming the block resulted in positive shifts in participants' relationships with their music, with many reporting greater resilience and a more positive outlook toward future creativity.

The study also highlighted the significance of coping mechanisms, noting that physical exercise, journaling, and mindfulness practices were among the most effective strategies for managing anxiety and fostering creativity.

Conversely, strategies such as forcing creativity, meditation, and positive affirmations were less successful for many participants.

The theme of performance revealed that overcoming musician's block had a profound impact on participants' motivation and the quality of their live performances. Several participants expressed that, having navigated creative stagnation, they felt more motivated and less critical of their own work, which translated into more confident and authentic performances.

#### 5. Implications

This study highlights the need for greater awareness of the psychological challenges faced by musicians, particularly emerging artists, as they navigate their careers. The findings suggest that musician's block, while a common phenomenon, is often misunderstood or stigmatized in the music industry. The recognition of musician's block as a natural, cyclical occurrence in the creative process could help destigmatize the experience and reduce the feelings of shame or failure that many musicians face when encountering such blocks.

The identification of specific triggers of music-making anxiety (e.g., imposter syndrome, self-comparison, and external pressures) points to the need for targeted mental health support and resources within the music industry. Musicians, especially those who are early in their careers, would benefit from better access to counselling services, mentorship programs, and peer networks that can provide emotional support and guidance. Encouraging open discussions about mental health and creative challenges within the industry could help to normalize these experiences and reduce the stigma around seeking help. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of developing personalized coping strategies for musicians, as different individuals respond to creative blocks in varied ways. While physical exercise, journaling, and mindfulness proved effective for many participants, it is clear that coping strategies should be tailored to

each musician's preferences and career context. Music education and support networks can play a crucial role in teaching emerging artists to recognize the early signs of anxiety and blockages, and to implement proactive strategies that maintain their creative wellbeing. The positive impact of overcoming musician's block on performance quality and motivation offers valuable insights for both musicians and music educators. Developing resilience in the face of creative challenges not only helps improve the overall quality of an artist's work but also enhances their confidence in performing. In practice, educators, mentors, and industry professionals should foster environments where musicians can develop these coping mechanisms, ensuring that overcoming creative blocks becomes an integral part of their professional growth. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need for greater psychological and emotional support systems within the music industry. By acknowledging the effects of musician's block and anxiety, and by promoting strategies for managing these challenges, the industry can help musicians maintain long-term creativity, emotional well-being, and professional success.

### **Future Interventions**

**Mental Health Support Programs in the Music Industry:** A key intervention based on the findings of this study would be the development of mental health support programs specifically designed for musicians. These programs could offer counseling, peer support, and stress management workshops tailored to the unique pressures of the music industry. Such initiatives could be made available at music academies, industry events, and through digital platforms. Partnering with mental health professionals who specialize in creative industries could provide musicians with tools to manage anxiety and overcome creative block.

**Creating Safe Spaces for Emotional Expression and Peer Support:** As the study indicated that many musicians experience feelings of isolation and loneliness during times of block, creating safe spaces for emotional expression and peer support networks could be highly beneficial. This could take the form of support groups or musicians to discuss their struggles, share coping strategies, and provide mutual encouragement. Peer-led groups or mentorship programs could offer a sense of solidarity, especially for emerging artists who may feel overwhelmed by the pressures of their careers.

**Workshops on Coping Strategies and Stress Management:** Based on the participants' experiences, physical exercise, journaling, and mindfulness were effective coping strategies for many. Workshops that focus on coping strategies like mindfulness meditation, breathing exercises, journaling, and time management skills could be integrated into formal music education programs or offered as extracurricular activities. These workshops could be conducted both in person and online, making them accessible to a wide range of musicians. Educators and mentors could encourage the incorporation of these practices into daily routines to help manage anxiety and maintain creative flow.

**Education on Recognizing and Managing Musician's Block:** Raising awareness of musician's block as a natural part of the creative process is crucial. Future interventions could include educational programs or information campaigns that focus on helping musicians identify the early signs of creative stagnation and anxiety. Music schools, conservatories, and online platforms could introduce workshops or courses that discuss the psychological and emotional aspects of music-making, how to recognize when a block is occurring, and how to manage it effectively. These programs could also offer practical exercises that build emotional resilience and promote a healthier relationship with creativity.

**Incorporation of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in Music Education:** The findings suggest that coping with creative blocks is not just about managing stress but also about improving one's emotional intelligence. Integrating emotional intelligence (EI) training into formal music education could help



students and young artists build self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. This would not only support them in handling the emotional challenges of their careers but also help them navigate interpersonal relationships within the industry.

**Promoting the Normalization of Mental Health Conversations:** The stigma surrounding mental health in the music industry emerged as a significant barrier to seeking help. Future interventions could focus on destigmatizing mental health through public campaigns, industry-wide discussions, and media coverage. These efforts could encourage musicians to speak openly about their struggles, reducing shame and creating a culture where seeking help for anxiety, depression, or creative blocks is normalized. High-profile musicians could serve as role models in this respect by publicly sharing their experiences and coping strategies.

**Integration of Holistic Practices in Musician's Daily Routine:** As several participants reported finding relief through physical exercise, mindfulness, and journaling, interventions could be developed to promote holistic health practices as part of a musician's daily routine. This could involve collaborations with wellness experts who can design fitness and mental health routines tailored specifically to the needs of musicians. For instance, guided mindfulness apps and fitness programs could be developed specifically for musicians, addressing both physical well-being and mental clarity.

## 7. Limitations

In the following study, researcher's bias might be prevalent in choice of participants for the study. While the population was not limited in terms of age, gender, and geographical locations, however the scope of expansion was limited due to time constraints. A quantitative study can be further implemented to explore a greater population at a wider range.

## 8. Ethical Considerations

The following study was conducted under appropriate guidance and approval, with a detailed outline for the interview process and analysis plan. Participation for this study was voluntary and the participants could withdraw at any moment they felt. Consent was communicated through a digital platform, further consent to record the interview was recorded by each of the participants. All recordings, transcriptions or any other digital files are not presented in the paper, thus ensuring confidentiality. Participant names have been converted to numbers. Any personal information or information requested to be withheld will be protected strictly under the code of confidentiality.

**Informed Consent:** All participants willingly provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study.

**Confidentiality:** Participants' identities were kept strictly kept confidential, and data is kept anonymous.

**Right to Withdraw:** Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Recording:** Before recording the voices or images of participants, appropriate permission was obtained prior.

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