

Preventing and Resolving Piano Injury



Elizabeth “Beth” Mueller Grace spent thousands of dollars seeking the help of specialists in resolving her piano injury. Grace, a highly-trained pianist and teacher, is determined to pass on what she finally learned about healthy technique to others with similar problems.

Grace first experienced extreme hand pain after playing the Brahms Quintet at a summer music festival. She tried dismissing it until she found it difficult to practice, let alone perform.

More than a dozen tests led to anti-inflammatories, braces, and cortisone shots that temporarily relieved the pain. But the pain never fully subsided. Grace was determined to avoid surgery, knowing that scar tissue could create new problems. Rather than give up on her passion, she made it her life’s mission to figure out what it was about her playing that caused her injury.

Fast forward and Beth Grace is now a Certified Instructor of the Taubman Approach through the Golandsky Institute. She credits this work with saving her piano career, allowing her to continue her highly successful studio in Kansas City and New York City, as well as serve on the artist faculty at the [University of Denver Lamont School of Music](#) Summer Academy at the University of Denver. Since solving her own problem, she’s been an active clinician, collaborative artist, and directed and taught on the faculty of Rocky Ridge Music Center in Estes Park, Colorado.

Playing with Pain and Tension

“If I’d stopped playing when I was first injured and gotten help in the right way, I wouldn’t have had such a lengthy recovery period,” Grace says. She attributes her various diagnoses (tendonitis of the thumb, frozen shoulder, repetitive strain injury) to the way she learned to use her hands as a pianist. She now looks back on all she went through as a positive experience: “If I can help one person from being injured or help one person not have to go through all I went through, then it will have been worth the journey.”

Watch the video: <http://youtu.be/O8QvyJQLfLU>

Causes of injury

Through the Taubman Approach, Grace was able to address underlying alignment and movement issues. She also discovered fingering issues that lead to tension and then pain. For instance, she would strive to use the fingering as written on the music but this would often cause her to stretch her hands in unnatural and damaging ways that led to pain. She has since recognized that fingerings suggested by editors may not necessarily work well for those who perform the music.

The Taubman Approach makes it unnecessary to stretch the fingers or twist the hand to reach notes. According to Grace, “Twisting involves changing the alignment of the forearm and the hand to turn [the fingers] to the side. And when you turn [your fingers] to the side and play down with force, it’s not a good combination. It doesn’t feel good but people think this is the only way to master the passage and remain true to the score. The Taubman Approach allows the pianist all of the creative and musical freedom without the discomfort.”

Watch the video: <http://youtu.be/WYO1lmowva4>

Listening to Your Body

“If people are playing with pain and tension, it must be stopped immediately,” Grace says. “You cannot keep playing through the pain. The ‘no pain, no gain’ philosophy doesn’t work. Your body is screaming at you when you have pain, that it does not like what you’re doing.” If you keep doing the same activity despite the pain, i.e., the stretching, twisting, grabbing motions as well as a combination of those, the pain will continue and most likely worsen.

Pain also leads to compensation. The injured part of the body may be protected when another part takes over, but this can often lead to a secondary injury. Grace now knows that had she stopped playing and gotten the kind of help she finally found through the Taubman Approach, she could have avoided a long recovery.

Watch the video: <http://youtu.be/7Q9JJJv2RA8>

Case Study: An Injured Student

“In my experience, pianists are talked to less about how their bodies work and how their instruments work than other instrumentalists,” claims Beth Grace. “That’s because it is thought that almost anyone can play (or make a sound at) the piano., i.e., anything striking a key will make a sound. As a result, most piano students are not taught correct positions and motions.” They end up using techniques that Grace refers to as “hand busters,” i.e., the motions that are likely to lead to injury.

In her work with clients, Grace looks closely at the onset of pain in conjunction with the repertoire. She also observes their previous technical habits. Muscle memory is so strong that a comprehensive re-education process is sometimes required in order to remedy the root problem.

Watch the video: <http://youtu.be/6faL7974iY4>

The Taubman Approach

The Taubman Approach is not limited to pianists, although most of the research done by founder Dorothy Taubman is focused on piano-based injuries. According to the Golandsky Institute, where Taubman instructors are trained and certified, anyone who uses their hands repetitively for any activity can benefit (such as musicians, especially pianists, organists, string players, and percussionists; dentists; surgeons; computer users; golfers; knitters; gardeners).

In addition to resolving injury, the Golandsky Institute states that the Taubman Approach can assist “Musicians who are seeking more freedom in their playing: from greater speed, security, reliable leaps whether legato or staccato, and / or to solve passages in the repertoire that have always seen insurmountable, to name but a few benefits.”

Source: <http://majoringinmusic.com/preventing-resolving-piano-injury/>