

LOSING POUNDS, GAINING PROBLEMS: OVERCOMING THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WEIGHT LOSS

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The decision to lose weight can be one of the most rewarding personal choices we make in our lifetime. It is often accompanied by a myriad of positive side effects, including, but not limited to, increased energy levels, improved cardiovascular health, and enhanced self-confidence, all of which may improve trumpet playing. There can, however, also be unexpected negative effects. This should not be a deterrent to anyone considering or pursuing weight loss, but taking the time to reassess one's approach to trumpet performance can make the process easier. The information presented here was gained through personal discovery and many conversations with doctors and educators in the field, many of whom have experienced similar effects after weight loss.

Throughout our lives, we learn to navigate the physical demands of trumpet performance, practicing music and technique, searching for the right equipment, and gaining skill and confidence along the way. The essential combination of precisely trained physical movements and rehearsed mental control turns potential into ability. After years of training, what happens when the body undergoes significant change, such as dramatic weight loss?

Some changes are positive—increased breath support, greater efficiency of inhalation and exhalation, and self-confidence. But one can also encounter such negative effects as diffusion (“fuzz”) in the sound, poor articulation response in certain registers, and decreased overall range. Other repercussions are possible as well and can be hard to predict or explain. During this period of change, there are several questions that should be asked. “Is the air being utilized differently?” “Is the equipment accommodating the new physical size and shape of the relevant facial muscles?” “If there are problems, are they physical, psychological, or both?”

A brass player's most sensitive performance mechanism is the embouchure. With significant weight loss, the lips can decrease in size. Paired with increased cardiovascular ability, this causes the lip/air balance to change drastically. Inaccuracy, reduced range, response issues, and diffused sound are all possible effects of this imbalance. A change in air support can cause unintentional overblowing, which, in turn, can open the aperture too much to maintain a controlled buzz, thus producing either an airy sound or no sound at all. By compensating for this loss in tone, a player may try to force even more air through the aperture or attempt to control the sound by “gripping” the air with greater

tension, thus leading to further problems. Reassessing the output of air through different registers and finding the right level of focus in the embouchure is crucial in understanding the body's new and improved airflow.

Weight loss affects the core mechanics of performance and should be addressed by focusing on the most basic fundamentals of playing. Exercises with narrow range, but performed in all registers, can help to reestablish full range. Scales or melodies that pass through all registers allow the player to relearn the air-to-aperture balance that is needed to control the new, leaner embouchure and avoid overblowing. Rediscovering this balance must be approached with patience as the player gradually reintroduces variables (*e.g.*, dynamics and flexibility through troublesome registers). Shorter, more frequent twenty- to thirty-minute practice sessions will help establish this new approach while slowly increasing endurance and strength. In addition, as always, relaxed long tones and lip slurs are fundamental to regaining ease of playing.

Another variable that should be addressed during the weight-loss process is equipment. The embouchure's relationship with the mouthpiece has a huge impact on overall comfort; when the embouchure changes, this relationship will very likely change as well. It may be beneficial to experiment with different equipment, beginning with the mouthpiece itself. Slight variations can help find one's “new normal,” but changes in equipment should not be the sole solution to performance difficulties. Like practice, experimentation with equipment should be approached with patience.

Weight loss affects not only the body's, but also the mind's, ability to perform. A mental block can arise from any of the aforementioned issues or from a perceived lack of progress and can be even more difficult to address. Above all, it is vital to *stay positive* and avoid falling into a spiral of negativity. Talking about one's experiences with mentors or others who have been through similar issues can help rebuild confidence over time. Understanding that a player is not the first to experience a particular issue is an important step toward regaining and furthering his abilities.

Any performer gains confidence from success, but when one questions his or her abilities, they try to correct the perceived shortcomings. Without warning, skills in which they felt confident may suddenly fail, requiring the “forcing” of tasks that were once effortless. This can result in inferior results, unhealthy performance habits, or even injury. Confidence can be regained by focusing on a musical goal, a replication of a

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sound, or an expressive feeling during performance. This goal-oriented musical expression can allow the mind to transcend the physical changes that it has been struggling to overcome. These moments should be noted as key points in recovery.

Preparing for and addressing the negative side effects of the positive lifestyle change of weight loss can make it a more purely positive experience. Negative effects on trumpet playing may seem daunting at first, but if approached with patience, weight loss can ultimately be one of the most beneficial decisions a musician can make, bringing a more complete understanding of our instrument and putting us back on the lifelong track of musical growth.

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About the author: Dr. James Peyden Shelton has served on the faculties of the University of Rochester and Cornell University. In 2014, Peyden was awarded first prize in the National Trumpet Competition's Graduate Soloist Division. Shelton has performed with numerous ensembles, including the Rochester Philharmonic, New World Symphony, Syracuse Symphoria, The Eastman Wind Ensemble, and the Washington Chamber Orchestra. Peyden is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, studying under James Thompson. He also holds degrees from the University of Miami's Frost School of Music and Virginia Tech, studying with both Craig Morris and John Adler.

