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Why I play in a brass band

Consultant neonatologist Chris Dewhurst tells **Adrian O'Dowd** about how playing in a brass band helps him switch off from work stress and keeps a childhood hobby alive

Adrian O'Dowd

"When you're playing in the brass band, the only thing you think about is the music and playing your part right and getting it right for your mates," says Chris Dewhurst, consultant neonatologist and deputy medical director at the Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust.

Dewhurst, who has been a consultant for 11 years, is an unashamed fan of music and clearly values his time playing in the local 28 player strong Allerton Brass Band.

His enthusiasm stems from childhood, as he explains, "I played in a lot of brass bands as a child to a reasonably good standard. I played in regional bands, did some touring around Europe, and played in national finals.

"But when I went to university, there weren't the opportunities to play and I didn't have the transport to get around so, at the age of about 18 or 19, this thing that had been a massive part of my childhood, just stopped.

"I thought I'd never really play again. As a junior doctor, I went to one band rehearsal but could never commit the time because I was on call or life was just too busy, particularly if rehearsals were in the evening."

After becoming a consultant, however, he got talking to a colleague who had also played in bands as a child. Their shared interest led them to pick up their instruments again and join a local brass band.

"I was pretty rubbish at first," Dewhurst admits. "But I enjoyed it, and it was something not related to work or home life. For two hours, twice a week, I could totally concentrate on something else." A couple of years later, he joined the Allerton Brass Band and now plays a B flat bass, which is the biggest instrument in the band, but essentially a tuba.

"It's relaxing and something totally different," he says. "Work has been stressful of late. Through the pandemic we had high sickness rates among our neonatal intensive care staff.

"Making the time to go and play with the brass band has been worth it. The conductor would say to me, 'You don't need to come because I know you're really busy,' but I liked to go, I needed two hours concentrating on something else, not talking about or thinking about work. It is a way to destress."

Dewhurst rehearses twice a week, and more if there is a competition coming up. The band gives 15 to 20 performances at events each year, including two big concerts. He finds playing is a good way to meet people from all walks of life, "I sit next to a guy who is a professor of biochemistry and on the other side of me is an 80 year old retired caretaker," he says. "There are also students, warehouse workers, retirees—so it's all sorts of people."

Dewhurst says the music can fit around his work schedule, thanks to the band being flexible. "There have been times when I've been on call and I've had to leave the rehearsal to go into the hospital, but they are very accommodating.

"I would say to people who had a hobby that they enjoyed as a child—take it back up. Even if you're no good at it, it doesn't matter. Enjoy it."

How to make the change

- Visit the Brass Band England website (www.bbe.org.uk)—it finds your local band and puts you in touch with bands for people of all abilities
- Try to find a band that accepts your work patterns if that might involve night shifts
- Remember that brass bands can be popular at specific times, particularly around Christmas, so may need your talent