

THE VOICE UNDER PRESSURE

by Ruth Bonetti

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Don't Freak Out – Speak Out; Public speaking with confidence

Our old bogey, tension, is a major cause of vocal problems. Constricted vocal folds rob voices of resonance and projection and can lead to vocal trauma.

The efforts required to cope with problems such as background noise, insufficient or no amplification, or unreceptive audiences (such as in classrooms and lecture theatres) can strain the voice. A solution is to use a technique called oral “twang” or “safe yelling”. To do this take a short, high breath, brace your torso, retract the false folds and make spontaneous loud sounds. Practise the happy yell of Italian mamas when they call out for the children and papa to come for dinner – “*mangiamo!*” ... let's eat. Another example of the spontaneous “yell” is the cry made by a baby moments after birth. Or a child's “Muuuum”. Can you recall a noisy party where there is usually one voice that can be heard over all the rest? You think, what a loud voice! What's more, that kind of voice quality never seems to tire. The difference is the amount of “twang” or “ringing” quality in the voice, a sound made by tightening the collar of the laryngeal tube, which creates another resonator within the vocal tract. The extra resonance in the 2 to 4 kilohertz band of the sound spectrum contributes to the perception of loudness or “ringing” tone.

To protect your voice in noisy environments you need to activate this twang quality to enable you to be heard more easily without vocal trauma.

Seminar leaders, schoolteachers and lecturers, who handle large and sometimes unruly groups, can avoid yelling by using techniques such as “room ecology” where the speaker defines his or her expectations of the audience. Actors and experienced speakers know to stand centre-stage forward for their strongest message and move to the side for a more relaxed or lighter effect. Similarly, teachers and lecturers can establish their expectation of attention by moving closer to the audience – or even amongst them. They will quieten and listen, allowing the speaker to use normal voice levels.

When speaking in the open air, use an acoustic hailer. Stand in front of a wall to enhance the sound. In outdoor work, be careful to keep warm. When shivering with cold, we tend to tense up our neck, shoulders and ribcage and tighten our joints, leading to constriction of the false vocal folds and poor vocal performance. Remember to retract. A few drops of eucalyptus oil on a tissue inside a shirt pocket or bra will help this retraction.

When contending with environmental risk factors – such as dust, smoke, chemical pollutants and a dry atmosphere – you should increase water intake to hydrate the vocal folds. Aircraft travel combines the noise and dryness issues, so keep speech to a minimum when flying. Coughs and colds can be catastrophic for anyone whose employment

requires constant voice use, whether as a speaker, actor, teacher, lecturer, singer, or media presenter. Problems are exacerbated if halls, studios and classrooms are poorly ventilated or centrally heated, with the resultant dry air affecting the vocal folds.

Solutions for vocal problems

If you strain your voice, check if it was caused by constricted false vocal folds, in which case silent laughs, sobs and making siren noises may help.

Also:

- Increase your water intake. Borrow the singer's maxim, "pee pale, speak clear".
- Re-hydrate the vocal folds with steam inhalations and a humidifier.
- Suck lozenges such as Fisherman's Friend, or those containing zinc, slippery elm, ginseng or echinacea. Avoid analgesic lozenges.
- Essential oils such as eucalyptus, lavender and frankincense may be inhaled with steam.
- Honey soothes the throat. Paul Newman says: "I drink a couple of jiggers of honey for my energy and for my throat before a stage performance".
- Drinks of warm honey and lemon soothe and heal. Gargling lemon kills germs in the throat. Increase vitamin C supplements, but ease off if diarrhoea indicates overdose.
- Humidify your bedroom or work environment, especially during winter.
- Maintain good health through exercise and adequate, balanced diet.

Laryngitis (inflammation of the larynx) responds to hydration, riboflavin, niacin and zinc supplements. It is most essential to rest if you are unwell. Keep germs to yourself; go to bed and recover as quickly as possible. Medical treatments may include aspirin, cough suppressants and decongestants (but avoid antihistamines). Gargle with warm water and salt. Naturopathic gargles, including sage, horehound or slippery elm, can help.

Natural remedies include eating garlic (a natural antibiotic) and ginseng. Gargling tea-tree oil can prevent a sore throat developing into full-scale infection. I have successfully used it internally in small doses of three drops in half a glass of water up to three times a day for one or two days. Be warned, however, that it is classified as a poison.

Don't:

- Speak if you have a cold or laryngitis, or if it hurts to swallow.
- Speak consistently too high or low.
- Overtax a voice in fragile condition or try to "speak through" flu, sore throat, hoarseness or fever. (A fatigued body is a risk to your voice.)

Beware of:

- Mucus-producing foods (dairy products, chocolate) especially before presenting. Also nuts, which could catch in the throat.
- Smoking (including passive smoking), alcohol, caffeine and drugs.

Alcohol depletes the body of B vitamins and magnesium that combat tension. The depressive effects of alcohol can be exacerbated by hot stage lights and overheated rooms so you feel more flushed and uncomfortable. Excess alcohol, especially of spirits, raises body temperature and increases blood flow to the vocal folds, causing possible damage and roughening voice timbre.

Caffeine lifts blood pressure, increases the heart rate, can constrict the blood vessels and causes increased urination and gastric secretions. It may trigger anxiety disorders. Chocolate, some analgesics, flu and sinus medications and pharmaceutical stimulants may contain caffeine.

A natural remedy for a stuffy nose is to irrigate warm salty water through the nostrils into the sinuses, inelegantly known as "sniff'n'spit". This circumvents nasal drip and throat irritations.

As well as illicit drugs such as cocaine and marijuana, beware of using beta blockers and stimulants. Beta blockers are prescription drugs which block the adrenaline reaction; they do not stop nerves, but they lessen their anxiety symptoms. They lower the heart rate, reduce sweating and tremors and alleviate a dry mouth or jitters. Potential side effects can include triggering asthma, cardiac conditions, anxiety or mental illness, dizziness, light headedness, nightmares, hallucination, lethargy, insomnia, visual disturbances, diarrhoea, loss of appetite, cold hands and feet, loss of hair.

Also be cautious of medications that dry the throat such as antihistamines, corticosteroids, anti-inflammatory drugs and anaesthetic throat sprays.

Carry throat lozenges to secrete in your cheek if you develop a ticklish cough. If your voice wavers or cracks this may be due to constricted air supply. Take time for a deep breath and a sip of water before proceeding. Tense neck muscles can be eased with massage, subtle stretches and yawns.

Seek medical advice if throat problems continue as constriction may cause nodules. Chronic hoarseness or a "lump in the throat" sensation may be a result of common reflux laryngitis (gastro-oesophageal reflux). Vocal polyps, ulcers or nodules result from voice abuses, such as prolonged constriction of the vocal folds, yelling, or projecting out of range, without that open laugh, sob or siren sensation. Rest and implementing correct usage solve most problems and the vocal muscle is quite forgiving of minor strain. However, if chronic hoarseness continues it is wise to consult an ENT specialist as sometimes an injury requires surgery.

Looking after your voice ensures you are equipped to take the stage and deliver your message with projection, poise and confidence.

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