



SfP Pointers

#4: Vocal Health and Preventing Voice Loss

As professional voice users - singers, teachers, conductors, public speakers or actors - we use our voices like athletes use their bodies, so we are acutely sensitive to changes or vocal health issues that others may not even notice.

When we lose our voice or suffer from vocal fatigue, for whatever reason, the number one piece of advice we are given is to rest. In my experience, this is rarely possible as certainly for the self-employed, we can't just take a day off whenever we want to. There are too many things to think about: financial implications, the chance of losing future bookings by letting people down, rarely there are other people who can take over specialist work at short notice, the feeling of guilt, the list goes on...

Sometimes, vocal health problems are simply unavoidable and some people are more prone to voice loss than others. It's bad luck if you are one of these people! Here's a brief guide to preventing voice loss, followed by what to do if you are in the unfortunate position of losing your voice without being able to rest it.

Preventative measures

- ❑ **Steam and keep the throat warm.** This is the number one way to protect your voice. It kills the bugs that can cause a cold/tonsillitis/laryngitis and a bunch of other nasties. Steaming regularly also keeps the vocal cords lubricated and warm, which is vital if you want them to work properly. Wearing scarves can stop the cold from getting onto the throat - however a side effect of this is that it can also make you look like a stereotypical singer!
- ❑ **Warm up properly.** Every day – this might sound excessive if you're not performing, but you are in the same category as athletes who daily use their bodies in extreme ways. A professional runner wouldn't dream of running a race without warming up first and rarely misses a day of training.
- ❑ **Think of your vocal cords like an elastic band;** if you stretch them too far before they are ready, you could damage them. Start in the middle of the voice and gently work outwards to the higher and lower ranges. Sirening is one of the best ways to do this. It requires self-discipline to remember but you can warm up in the shower, at breakfast or even in the car on the way to work.
- ❑ **Rest.** Whenever you can – you may not be able to take time off but there are still many ways to rest the voice throughout the day. Don't speak when you don't have to. Follow the Sing for Pleasure methodology and only sing when demonstrating / teaching a song and certainly NOT when people are repeating it back to you.

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- ❑ **Don't raise your voice.** Remember, shouting or raising your voice rarely gets people to listen, they just talk louder. Use classroom management techniques wherever possible to get people to listen to you without having to raise your voice. There are many teachers and conductors who manage to silence auditoriums of people by just talking quietly. Simple things like making sure you're not in a noisy environment when you make a phone call can make a big difference to your vocal stamina.
- ❑ **Don't eat too late.** If you are unfortunate enough to suffer from acid reflux then avoid eating late and certainly steer clear of spicy foods if you don't have time to digest them properly before you go to bed. Lying horizontally with all that acid sitting on your vocal cords is not going to help. Some people use antacids like Gaviscon™ to help with this.

Treatments

If you lose your voice and can't take time off then try as many of the following combative treatments as possible. Because you can't always diagnose what the absolute cause of voice loss is (fatigue, a virus, dehydration, something more serious), some of the following may not be as effective as others, but they will all certainly help.

- ❑ **Steam. AS MUCH AS YOU CAN!** The minimum amount of time you should steam in one session is ten minutes. Any less than that and experts believe it is pointless. Don't put anything extra in the water like Olbas Oil as this can dry you out even more. Just use good old-fashioned H₂O. If you're feeling fancy then invest in a Dr Nelson's Inhaler™ (these are available online and cost between £20-40). Otherwise, just a bowl of boiling water and a big towel over your head (with your favourite podcast on in the background) should do the trick. Hydrate. Keep the fluids coming. You need to rehydrate your vocal cords and get them moving again. Avoid acidic, alcoholic and carbonated drinks, even carbonated water as even this is slightly acidic. If you get really bored then try hot squash. Remember, it takes up to two hours for any water you drink to absorb fully into the bloodstream so hydrate well before you are due to sing.
- ❑ **Brew yourself a remedy.** There are all sorts of weird and wonderful concoctions you can try but the basic recurring recommended ingredients are: ginger, honey, lemon and garlic with boiling water. The latest trend is to boil up freshly grated ginger in a pan and, if possible and safe, inhale the steam as it boils (10 mins). You can then use the boiled, ginger-infused water adding honey and lemon to it to make a drink. Drink as many of these hot drinks as you (and your bladder) can manage!
- ❑ **Avoid throat sweets with anesthetic or menthol.** These may help you to breathe better and stop the pain but will also dry you out, so are not a good idea if you are having to use your voice on them. Think of it as the same as taking painkillers, then going for a run on a sprained ankle.

Each person you seek advice from will have their own tried and tested methods and cures for voice problems, but these nine protective and preventative methods will undoubtedly help you get your voice back on track ASAP.

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