

## Voice training exercises

### Balancing the Body

It is very important to be evenly balanced and to regain our natural posture, rather than our regular one, as the effect of many habits is to constrict sounds and our voice. There are several places where we can block this natural posture:

- **Shoulders** - The shoulders are the most important part. These should be relaxed in an open position and hang freely, but many of us pull them up or backwards
- **Sternum** (breastbone) - again this should be open and balanced, not pulled up or collapsed
- **Stomach and abdomen** – many people were told to pull these muscles in
- **Knees** – ensure that these are not locked
- **Feet** – often people shuffle, or stand with the weight more on one leg. Feet should be firmly placed on the ground. Feel your connection to the floor. Your feet should be under your hips and slightly parallel
- **Posture** – many women slump forward. A collapsed spine will mean that the voice is reduced. Many men pull up the chest and constrict the voice in a different way.

**Remember:** to get centred, always start from the bottom and work upwards. So, start with placing your feet, unlocking the knees, release the hips, and so on.

When you are centred, you feel free, relaxed and powerful.

**KEY POINT: in voice work, nothing is done through effort.**

### Exercises for Balancing the Body

People hold the nervous stress and tension in different parts of their body. It is good to demonstrate the specific tension areas and explain that these exercises will help to release tension and so free the voice.

**Find your centre** – start with stretching your arms – sideways and up. Roll your shoulders around in small circles – backwards and forwards.

**Shoulders** – Do not place the shoulders, just let them find their own place and hang free. Swing your arms backwards, one at the time, keep breathing and just

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gently make circles. After a few just let the shoulder drop. Repeat with the other arm. Ensure that you drop your shoulders several times a day.

**Head** – drop it on your chest, swing gently from one to the other shoulder. Remember a human head weighs about 15 – 18 lbs. Then close your eyes and gently move the head up and only open your eyes when you feel your head is right above your spine.

**Back of the neck** – you can massage this gently while your head is forward.

**Release your jaw**, teeth should not be clenched. Clenched teeth (urban tension) will block the back of the throat. Very gently massage the jaw hinges. Unclamp the teeth, chew around. NB The jaw is a very delicate mechanism, so be careful to keep these moves circular. Do not swing the jaw side to side. Release the jaw through a big smile, open your mouth wide and release.

**Face** – bunch your face up and relax and release.

**'Ragdoll'** – flop right over, swing a bit and come right up through the base of the spine. Come up very slowly – you will find you breathe better. This is a basic centring exercise.

**Spine** – many people have a collapsed spine. Exercise: sit down on the floor, cross legged. Rock around a little. Lift up from your belly button. Count 1, 2, 3.

Do not pull right up. Do not do this exercise for too long, as it is a very tiring.

**Back of ribcage** - hug yourself, flop over and let arms drop. Come up very slowly, as you may feel a little dizzy. A good sign – you are taking in more oxygen.

**Stomach** – Release stomach, go down through your knees and place your hands on your ribcage. This is an exercise from the Japanese Kabuki theatre. Hold the hand just above your groin, breathe in and count 1 – 2 - 3. Then breathe in and on your out-breath say the letter 'S'. Now do the same with the letter 'Z'.

**'Prayer position'** – sit on your knees, flop over, arms released, arms back, back will open up. This is a very relaxing, releasing exercise. Come up gently, breathe in and count 1 – 2 - 3. If possible, extend the count as far as you can comfortably.

**Test:** try rocking – if you are centred, you will come back.

NB: do these exercises daily, as these muscles are very lazy.

## Supporting the Voice

**Key Point: Never speak without support.**

### Exercise 1:

**Place the hand just above the groin.** Breathe in and count, build up, so, breathe in count 1, breathe in, count 1 - 2, breathe in, count 1 – 2 - 3, etc. Count until you lose the breath. (This exercise can be done sitting as well as standing). Support the sound that you make with these muscles.

### Exercise 2:

**Push your hands against another person.** Breathe in and count 1 – 2 - 3. Now let go and, remembering what it felt like to have the support, do this again: Breathe in, count 1 – 2 - 3 – notice the difference.

### Exercise 3:

**Lie on the floor with your legs on a dining/office chair for support.** Breathe very deeply. Do this for 10 – 15 minutes; come up very gently, by rolling on your side. You may feel a little spaced out.

### Breathing

This is what provides the power of the voice. Keep the shoulders free and breathe in, this opens up the ribcage. You also need to open up the back of the ribcage.

Release abdominal areas, the muscles move in to support the voice.

**Key Point: Breathe in and speak out.**

## Projection

This is something all actors are taught to do.

**Exercise:** Put your hand up, about a foot away. Look at your hand, breathe to the hand, put your hand down and look across the room, breathe in and speak, then look across the whole room. Breathe the space. Think the space.

**Key Point: When you breathe the space, you own the space.**

## Warming up the Voice

If you run or work out in the gym, the first thing you do is warm up, but it's unlikely you warm up your voice before you deliver a key speech or presentation.

Many people hold and contain their voice. Blockages are created in either the jaw or throat. For example:

- Pushing voice down into the chest, so the voice gets held in the throat
- Pushing the voice out and getting red in the face
- Voice at half-power – the 'caring', comforting voice – 'de-voicing'
- Hesitant voice – words are pulled in
- Running out of drive, the voice falls away
- Monotone – held in the throat, never gets into the face
- Attacking with the voice – guttural sound. This is quite dangerous as it can damage the vocal chords.

### Exercises:

- Chew around the jaw
- Yawn – best and quickest way to open the throat. Think of a yawn. Breathe in; count 1 – 2 - 3
- Breathe in, release on a silent 'H'. Do not rasp
- Soft palate. Open jaw, 'Ku', 'Cu', 'Ung'
- Breathe in very gently. Hum. Open jaw into 'Ah'. Keep head still. Sit or stand in this exercise.

## Speaking

The muscles we use for producing speech form a complex set. They need to be worked regularly. You will notice this if, for some reason, you do not speak for a day. After a few drinks it is also the voice that goes and the person starts slurring their speech. The aim is to speak with efficiency and economy in order to create harmony. You can think of the consonants as being linked with the intellect and the vowels as being linked to emotion.

**Key points: Keep connected. Think the voice forward.**

### Exercises

- Push the lips, bare teeth. Repeat a few times
- Loosen the jaw, produce the 'two-finger drop' – put in two fingers, take the fingers out, but keep the space. Now stick out the tongue, pull it in, now move it sideways into one cheek, then the other cheek. Repeat a few times
- Work the soft palate, by saying any word ending in 'ing' for example: laughing, singing, walking, talking

Now work the vowel muscles in the lower half of your face. Repeat each part of the exercise a few times. Produce the following sounds:

- O-A-U, starting with the mouth open, really feel these muscles as you say the vowel and then close the mouth
- Sounds ending in 'd' – word, bird, curd
- Sound ending in th - breath, heath
- Sounds ending in b – scrub, rub
- Words with 'l' – love, live
- Say 'many men'
- Say 'lily' x 3
- Say 'red lorry, yellow lorry'.

Finally, a very important exercise: mouthing this text:

- 'Roll on, thou deep dark ocean, roll.'

### **Keep Your Voice Healthy**

Ideally, to keep your voice healthy, reduce the amount of tea, coffee, alcohol and dairy produce you take in and stop smoking. Even if you are not aiming to become a professional singer or actor, you will want to ensure that your voice is in optimum condition when you are about to deliver a key presentation to a large audience.

The best advice is to keep the voice hydrated, so drink water – two litres a day and you can also take a hot shower to relax the voice.

**Remember 'If you do not use it, you will lose it'.**