



ASK THE VOICE COACH

Q: Hi Poll, I have recently been diagnosed with benign vocal cord lesions caused by excessive and incorrect use of the voice. I am a Swimming Instructor and an avid supporter of my local soccer team. Unfortunately (it seemed fortunate at the time!) the team I coach and the team I support did very well in their respective competitions, and over a period of time my voice collapsed. Can you advise as to the best way forward. I have been told to completely rest my voice and not speak for two weeks, and I want to make sure I am never in this crisis situation again.

Genie, Newsletter Subscriber from Fullerton, California, United States

A: Hi Genie, first and foremost I want to acknowledge your decision to get medical assessment and advice from a health professional. For something as serious as this it is essential that advice is sought from an Otolaryngologist (ENT Specialist).

When our voice is absolutely essential for our job, we must ensure that we know how to warm up, strengthen and protect our voice so that damage does not occur from the outset. I'm sorry to say that many career training institutions do not provide this kind of training and it is often up to the individual to learn how to manage our voice safely and effectively. (Our very popular **Vocal Fitness For Life** course is an ideal way to learn how to get the very best from your voice.)

When you are recovering from any vocal issue the most important consideration must be that you do not repeat the vocal behaviour that created the problem in the first place. Here's a few factors to bear in mind:

1 Check you shoulder neck / head alignment. Are you sticking your chin out when giving guidance / coaching in the swimming pool or cheering on your soccer team? This is very common, particularly when talking to people who may be smaller than you - e.g. children - or if you are in stadium seating and the pitch is below you. (Also very common for people who work facing computer screens and lean in with their chin.) This type of misalignment puts pressure on both the cervical vertebrae and on the larynx (voice box), and can cause major issues over the long term.

2 Is your breath supporting your voice when you speak loudly? Generally when you breathe out to speak, your belly button should be moving inwards towards your back, and the muscles in your lower ribs contracting so that you are encouraging the air upwards through your lungs passing through the larynx and out via the mouth. This gives you plenty of support and avoids 'screaming' / 'screeching' which can be painful and will very quickly cause damage to the vocal folds. A session with a Speech & Language Therapist or Voice Coach will show you how to easily support your voice, and also how to use the musculature around the lungs to give short and loud instructions over a noisy pool and maintain your full vocal health.

3 Are you drinking small quantities of room temperature water regularly to lubricate the vocal tract while you are coaching? Much body moisture is lost while breathing air in low humidity climates, i.e. air conditioned or heated rooms, offices, hotels, gyms, cars and buses. Unless you maintain good hydration you will find that it doesn't take long for your voice to feel dry and raspy.

4 When your voice is sore, scratchy and failing – STOP! Pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong. Make sure that you allow quiet times in day so that your voice gets rest. Maybe cheering your soccer team is not a great idea after a long day coaching at the pool. Bring a whistle, drum or vuvuzela and make some noise without using your voice!

Thanks for your question Genie. I hope that you can take time to allow your voice to recover properly. Start initiating good vocal practises to keep your voice strong, happy and healthy, I will email you directly the extensive list of Voice Care Warnings and Advice that we give to participants on all our courses.

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Below is a selection of previously answered questions

Q: Hi Poll, although English is not my first language, I speak it fluently – but with an accent. I am a Senior Manager and make many presentations in English to international audiences. Do you have any tips to help make it easier for others to understand me better?

Virginie, Newsletter Subscriber from Grenoble, France

A: Hi Virginie, thanks for your question. This is a issue for many of my Senior Management clients in Europe who speak English very well, but often their audience struggles to catch specific words or important details. The first thing I would say is that even people who speak English as their ONLY language have accents and other vocal characteristics that makes their speech difficult to understand!

Our accents place where we come from, and it often comes down to speed and accurate pronunciation that determine whether others understand what we are saying.

Many people will try to speak fast to show that they have mastered a language, but all this does is confuse others. Slowing down allows the listener's ear to adjust to your voice more quickly, and tune in to what you are saying. It also allows your articulators (tongue, lips, teeth, palate) more time to connect together and make the correct sound clearly.

Children can live in other countries and learn more than one additional language without an accent. They can do this, because they are normally immersed in the language, and their brains are more open to change. It is very rare for an adult to completely remove all trace of their heritage from their voice, and in any case, well spoken English with an accent can appear charming to some. Quite often when someone's range of vocabulary is poor in their second, third, fourth language, but their pace and articulation is perfect, we are very quick to admire their efforts and we can very easily tune into the passion, enthusiasm and energy of the speaker which fills in the comprehension gaps of poor grammar. And of course passion, enthusiasm and energy are far more persuasively powerful than grammatically correct structures spoken too fast with poor diction.

Also important to take into consideration is the language abilities of your audience. Are they all native English speakers, or are they listening in their second, third or fourth languages? Knowing the make up of your audience will mean that you not only have to keep an eye on pace and clarity, but now you may have to be careful about the words you use. Avoid jargon, colloquialisms and words that may have multiple meanings. For example, the phrase "I couldn't agree more" can be confusing to a non native speaker. They hear 'couldn't agree' and wonder why you are smiling and nodding whilst not agreeing with them!

I never recommend that anyone should eradicate their accent – instead put the focus on creating the consonants and vowels in a way that becomes universally understandable. If you really feel that you must sound exactly like a native English speaker, the best way is to record a same-sex voice that you admire, play it back, and mimic the vowel, consonant and stresses that appear in the recorded voice. It's a long process, and you will probably need several one-to-one sessions with a Voice Coach. This is what many Actors do to make the role they are playing more authentic. But even this results in varying degrees of success!

Our "Vocal Fitness For Life" course has helped many native and non native English speakers become more clear, confident and charismatic in how they deliver their messages successfully. Click [HERE](#) for more details.

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Q: Poll, I believe that my voice is very monotonous. Am I stuck with this, or is there anything I can try to get more energy into my voice? I have been in Middle Management for over 8 years, and even though I am not overly competitive or ambitious, I feel that my voice is holding me back from progressing in my career.

Mike, Newsletter Subscriber from Manchester, England

A: Thanks for your question Mike. Firstly, absolutely not! You are not stuck with this voice. You certainly didn't start off with this voice, and I'd be very surprised if as a 5 year old child you spoke with little or no energy! There is lots you can do to re-ignite vitality back into your voice.

I'm not a great fan of the word monotonous, because although we all know what it means (lifeless, boring, and repetitive), it doesn't really help us to accurately pinpoint the way in which you are speaking. As adults, all of us

can immediately speak faster and slower, or higher pitched and lower pitched, or quieter and louder if we were asked to, but yet many of us fail to use this natural ability when we speak. A vocal pattern can often become habitual, and sound dull. To change this pattern you will have to change your habits. "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

Ask yourself the following: Do I speak at the same speed a lot of the time? Do I use mostly the top (or lower) part of my range? Do I normally talk so quietly that people often can't hear me, or am I continuously booming at people? Listen to others, and notice if they are speaking faster or slower than you, higher pitched or lower pitched than you, or quieter or louder than you. You will quickly work out that the most attractive and endearing voices are those that have changes in rhythms, and that naturally reflect how people are feeling.

There is no doubt, that the higher up the Management ladder you go, the more importance your words will have for others. Communication skills are a vital part of Leadership. In our Executive Voice course, which helps Middle and Senior Managers take control of their Personal Communication skills, we specifically help clients to come out from behind the complexity of facts, figures, technology and processes and deliver messages in a natural, easy to understand and persuasive way.

I'll bet that when you are enjoying yourself with friends and family over the Christmas season your voice is active and energetic, and definitely not monotonous. Often when we get back into work and are dealing once again with those facts, figures and processes, our voice loses it's vibrancy, shuts down and the dull, 'monotonous' pattern is back.

The way to directly change this pattern is to deliberately practise using your voice in a more energetic and meaningful purpose. If you have children, nephews or nieces offer to read to them, and practise changing your pace, pitch and volume to make the storyline and characters come alive. The more you practise this, the more your brain, body and voice becomes familiar with the many vocal options you have, and it will be easier to apply these options in your day to day conversations and work related meetings.

Try it. It's a certainty to keep an audience – young or old – listening to your every word.

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Q: Hi Poll, I have a quick question about breathing. I am a School Teacher (of 7-8 year olds), and I am active, generally healthy and I attend Yoga classes at least once a week. Even though I am aware of, and practise deep breathing Yoga techniques, I find myself running out of breath and my breathing getting shallower when I am tired when teaching, or in social situations (going on dates / meeting new people...etc). This makes my voice go a bit crackly and sound like I am very hesitant (which I'm not), and this in turn makes me feel even more uncomfortable, the intensity doubles and I feel twice as bad! Why is my breathing from running, swimming and yoga not helping me breathe more effectively in work and social situations?

Aoife, Newsletter Subscriber from Co. Carlow, Ireland

A: Thanks for your question Aoife, and I believe the answer is to do with practise and integration. All three activities that you mentioned (Running, Swimming and Yoga) require good breathing to get the best enjoyment and benefit from doing them. However are you applying your breathing techniques in your day to day life?

Our breath is vital for good vocal support, and a poorly supported voice can very quickly become jaded and misfiring.

The more you integrate relaxing and natural breathing techniques into 'normal' situations, the more likely it will be for your body to respond to the situations when you are feeling under pressure. Why? Because your body will have had the experience of deliberately practising, and the breathing technique will become a natural response. We all breathe anyway, so no one will know that you are 'practising'! What's changed is your purpose and intention, but that alone is what allows us to learn and improve our performance in all aspects of life.

So, consciously start to practise your breathing techniques when you are in an elevator, going shopping, waiting for a bus, meeting friends, talking on the phone... etc, and very soon you will notice that the pattern is integrated and your body will be able to help you through those tiring or important moments.

Best wishes,
Poll

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Q: Poll, I know that with voice care techniques and regular exercises I can keep my voice in good shape, but what do you advise when my throat gets sore or tired from a particularly heavy speaking day?

Carine, Newsletter subscriber from Stockholm, Sweden.

A: Hi Carine, great to hear from you. Firstly let me acknowledge the first part of your question. Regular small amounts of work on your voice brings great rewards - a more vibrant, stronger, healthier sound that you and others will love to hear. However there will be times when you will push your voice more than you had planned or expected, resulting in a tired, raspy, sore throat.

We have to remember that the vocal mechanism is dependent on a series of muscles working together to produce a supported and authentic voice. Like any other muscle in the body, if it is not exercised it becomes less effective and can not respond to the additional demands that we make. There have been many times when I have sat next to an Actor or Recording Artist to watch a football match when a favourite team was playing, and been amazed at their discipline of NOT screaming or shouting at goals scored or poor refereeing decisions! I guess it depends on the experience of understanding the consequences. If you use your voice excessively without preparing for that excessive use, you will damage it. An Actor or Singer can not take that chance - their livelihood depends on them having a finely tuned and responsive voice. Even a fit 400 metre runner would have to do some additional training to run the 26.2 miles of a marathon. It's all about training for the job in hand, and minimising the risk of damage.

So, if you find that you've had a particularly heavy speaking day (or enjoyed supporting your favourite team) and your voice is tired, sore and sounding a little bit ragged round the edges, there is really only one cure - and this is one that some people will not like - you have to Zip It, Shut Up and say not another word! If you pulled a hamstring muscle running, would you keep

running - absolutely not. Pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong. Ignoring pain and carrying on regardless leads to a longer period of pain and possible damage. I can not tell you how many Teachers I have met who have mis-used their voice, become hoarse and kept going (because they don't want to let their school or students down) and ended up with vocal nodules or polyps which have permanently effected and destroyed any hope of regaining the full range in their voice again. If your throat is sore from excessive use, STOP using it - it must be allowed to recover.

Our hugely popular 'Vocal Fitness For Life' course gives you the skills and techniques to manage, care for and build up the strength in your voice and reduce the possibility of a vocal collapse. Participants learn over 30 exercises - many that can be done whilst doing other things (in other words busy people do not have to find additional time to warm up their voice - e.g. we have exercises you can do in the shower, walking / driving / cycling to work...etc). Your voice is valuable, you need it to socialise, work and develop relationships throughout all aspects of your life. A little bit of work a few days a week is a small price to pay to keep it happy and healthy, and a little bit of silence is an even smaller price to pay to make sure it recovers perfectly. If nothing else you will become a better listener, and we know how important that is for superb communication....but that's for another day! Thanks for your question Carine.

Best wishes, Poll

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Q: Poll, there seem to be so many 'experts' in communication skills around at the moment, what would your advice be to find the right one?

Mark, Newsletter subscriber from Dublin, Ireland.

A: Hi Mark, in the last four or five years, and particularly over the last twelve months, there seems to have been an explosion in self proclaimed 'gurus' who apparently know everything about

everything! Of course this is impossible, but there is a trend of people offering a little of this and a little of that, and many are left feeling a little of nothing! And when you consider the ease in which we have been converted to the Tesco / Woodies DIY / Harvey Norman mentality of convenience, we often are happy to go with the most generic and less specific product that is put in front of us. Don't get me wrong, there are great benefits to having so much under one roof, but if you are looking for something specific and want some expert advice from someone who has the experience and knowledge to give, it's better to go to a proven specialist.

My neighbour yesterday was doing some work on his garden with wood that he had bought in the local wood suppliers. It not only cost a fraction of the price compared to the nearest DIY superstore (he didn't need his wood to be pre-cut, labelled and shrink wrapped!), but he also received expert advice on the type of wood to use (they knew that a certain wood was more appropriate for the job), some really great tips on how to save time (have you ever tried to find someone to help you in a DIY superstore? And if you have, did they do more than read the signs and instructions that are there for anyone to read?), and how to care for the wood to make it last for decades (a happy customer is a repeat customer!). My neighbour is not the best craftsman on the planet, but he knows that with good products and good advice he can produce something long lasting and worthy of his efforts.

When I'm working in Ireland and beyond, I ask clients what training they've taken in the past, and often they will say that they have done communication skills courses or been to a presentation bootcamp, and still don't feel they have the confidence or tools to deliver a message in a way that makes a positive impact. There could be a number of reasons for this: the information given was unfounded and theoretical, the person giving the information does not have the background 'performance' experience to truly pass on the insights and knowledge, or the client is not putting in the work and applying the skills and techniques being taught. In all cases (even with the lazy student!) it all comes back to the quality and abilities of your expert coach. In all cases their success is based your success!

In the first instance, when stepping up to improve your ability to deliver an important message, you need to be clear about the goals you have, and how - and in what circumstances - you would like to improve your communication skills. In other words how will you sound, look and think when you are a confident and skilled communicator? Secondly, do your research and check out a few different coaches. Read testimonials, check out their practical experience, talk to them, meet with them and be happy that the standard of their work is at an international level. You don't want to waste your time and money having to start over because you chose the cheapest, easiest option available from a generic provider.

In my opinion a good Voice Coach / Communications Expert will have at least ALL of the following:

1) A proven background in Theatre, Film or Television - ideally all three.

"But I don't want to be an Actor" I hear you say. A good coach will not try to turn you into an Actor, but they will know from coaching Actors and / or TV Presenter what you must do to hold attention and deliver your message when it matters most. Would you prefer to learn vocal techniques from someone who reads and reviews books, goes to the Theatre and watches TV, or would you like training from someone who coaches award winning Actors and live TV Presenters to deliver each and every time?

2) A proven record in your particular area.

If you are a Teacher looking to improve the quality and strength of your voice, make sure your Coach has expertise working with Teachers in this way, and is recognised by your Union. We all only have one unique, wonderful voice and as a Teacher this is your most valuable resource. If you are a CEO looking to take control of your leadership messages through successful vocal and physical excellence, make sure that your Coach has experience in this area. You may only get one chance to make that motivational and inspiring speech that will determine the future of your company in these extraordinary times. In both cases, I cannot overstate the importance of point 1 above.

3) A proven level of honesty.

Seven years ago I was asked by an senior Manager in a high profile company to help her improve her voice, body language and message structure. She was a competent, no nonsense, hard working high achiever. In our second meeting, I noticed a particular habit and gave her feedback that she wasn't expecting. I challenged her to change this behavioural pattern as I felt it would no longer be useful as she climbed up the corporate ladder and outlined a method to achieve this. She didn't agree with me, and cancelled our sessions. Ten months ago, I received a phone call from her asking me to work with her again. In a review, her new boss had told her that her inability to adapt was holding her back, and she now realised that what I had told her seven years ago was a key indicator as to her flawed delivery style, and would I please work with her again. Find a Coach who will not just tell you what you want to hear, but instead will give you honest and insightful feedback based on the successes of other 'performance' professionals they have worked with. (Again take note of point 1 above.) By the way I did work with her again over a six week period, and she has recently been promoted to the company's most Senior role within her area of expertise! She is still hard working and great at her job, but now SHE controls how others perceive her.

4) A proven ability to not take themselves too seriously, and to be willing to continually learn.

I do not know any world class Coaches who do not attend world class training courses to acquire new skills and expertise. For me, some of the best weeks in every year are when I become a student again and revel in being challenged to strengthening my weaknesses and enjoy falling flat on my face so that I can do better the next time. When I watch my children learn new skills (walking, eating, talking, going down slides, swimming, spelling...etc) I see how they go from desire to failing to success to bruises to mastery! They do it from trying things out again and again and again, AND having fun. That's how it has been since time began - let's not pretend that it can be any other way. If you do not enjoy the process of getting results when you work with your Coach - even when you are being challenged - then find a new Coach. Becoming the very best version of yourself should be something that you look back on with pride, and a smile!

Mark, I hope this (longer than usual) response has answered your question. I am happy to talk with you privately on the phone or by email. This applies to all Newsletter subscribers, if you want to chat, get advice or ask about anything at all that relates to better communication, please let me know.

Best wishes, Poll

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Q: Poll, I heard you speak at a conference recently and in response to a question from the audience you mentioned how certain medical sprays and lozenges are not advisable when speaking. Could you elaborate, and also recommend an alternative?

Erin, Newsletter subscriber from Florida, United States.

A: Hi Erin, unfortunately on both sides of the Atlantic people are very quick to take medicated products without considering how the medication works, or how it may affect our vocal mechanism. Many 'sore throat'

products either anaesthetise the throat to numb the pain, and some anti-bacterials or anti-histamines will dry out the throat to kill the bacteria or reduce inflammation and thus deprive our body of much needed natural lubrication.

Numbing the pain sensors does not make your throat better; it just gives you some temporary relief, which is great IF you are NOT continuing to talk. If you continue to talk, yell or scream (say at a football match) you may be doing considerable harm and because of the numbing qualities of the lozenge / spray you will not know about the additional damage until later when the pain could be twice as bad! Anything that dries out your vocal mechanism (this also includes menthol products) is seriously diminishing the effectiveness of your voice, and if you continue to talk while taking these products, it creates more strain in the voice and could cause further complications.

So what do you do?

Please don't get me wrong I have no issue with these medications so long as you STOP using your voice for at least an hour or two after you have taken the anaesthetic medication (watching a movie or bed time for example), and / or are lubricating your voice often (preferably with small quantities of room temperature water), when taking the products that will dehydrate your body or dry out the throat.

Remember, pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong. You wouldn't continue playing football if you pulled a muscle and your leg was sore, so don't risk damaging your voice further, by continuing to talk through pain. A visit to a medical practitioner is always advisable in the first instance, but do ask how the medication will impact on your voice, and then take the appropriate precautions.

I hope this clarifies, and in next month's newsletter I will share some wonderful natural recipes to soothe your throat, some which can offer immediate relief.

Best wishes, Poll

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Q: Poll, since I have been promoted in work I have to speak quite often at meetings and events. Although I feel confident about my subject matter I find myself getting incredibly nervous and my hands, legs and voice shake uncontrollably. Do you have any advice?

Jennifer, Newsletter Subscriber from UK

A: Hi Jennifer, good to hear from you again, and congratulations on your promotion! (Jennifer in one of our earlier newsletters asked for some vocal communication tips when going for an interview. Needless to say she got the job!) Your question is one that I am asked regularly from Executives who attend my 'Secrets of Confident & Effective Speakers' course. The good news is that with a few short and regular exercises this can be resolved very quickly and permanently!

Nerves are your body's way of telling you that something is important. How these nerves manifest themselves can range from the shakiness that you described to a dry throat, clammy hands and repeated irrelevant gestures (touching nose, ear, hair). It is not uncommon to see Actors, Singers, and Athletes warming up before they are due to 'perform'. What they are doing is heating up the muscles and reminding their body that these are the muscular movements that they will be requiring very shortly.

If you know that it is your hands, legs and voice that may start shaking from nervous energy, it would be a great idea to release this nervous energy before you enter the meeting or event. Shaking out for about 15-20 seconds on each limb, combined with a few continuous open vowel sounds normally does the trick. It allows your body to relax and to fully join your brain and voice to give your audience the 'total communication' of your message without the distracting physicality.

Professional Actors, Singers and Athletes know that their success depends on them getting it right when it counts. We should not ignore what they know works! Try a regular shake out, you'll be surprised at how effective it is.

Best wishes, Poll

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