

THE VOICE IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE (OR LOOSE!)

by Joni Wilson author of *The 3-Dimensional Voice*

“Oh no ,” Jamie moaned. “It’s the day of my big keynote speech and I have NO VOICE... What do I do now ?”

There is a good chance that at some time in your speaking career you too will come face to face with that dreaded menace called, “*Vocal Blowout*”. Known in some circles as a “*Speakers Flat*”, this pesky problem usually shows up at the worst possible time. (Like the day before your first keynote address at the NSA Convention.) Well don’t panic, just open up you vocal tool box , take out that old red pump and start pumping the life back into your voice. Just like the tires on your car, your voice thrives on the air you pump into it so it too will go “flat” without it.

In my 16 years of training voices, (speakers, singers, teachers etc.), it doesn’t seem to matter what the profession may be I found that most vocal problems begin and end with the breath. Because the human voice is a wind instrument, it can not operate effectively with out a steady flow of air. Picture the lottery balls spinning on top of a column of air. If someone turns off the air, the balls will all fall down, right? So goes the voice! Learning how to breath like a horn player who pumps a steady stream of air up the wind pipe and out the lips is the key to good voice control and endurance This was a lesson I learned the hard way because, at the ripe old age of 22 while singing in Las Vegas, (trying to out-shout loud bands and crowd noises), I had the intimate “*Vocal Blowout*” and lost my voice completely.

Fearing that my budding singing career was over before it began, I saw doctor after doctor as the prognosis went from dismal to despair. Refusing to accept their echoing advise to; “ Just get another career dear.”, I decided to go to the medical books and find out how this voice, that was ruining my career, actually worked. The more I read, the more I realized how amazing the vocal instrument was. First of all, it wasn’t as fragile as I thought., I just had to play it correctly instead of incorrectly, and second, I needed to totally re- program my misguided beliefs about my voice. The end result of all this vocal “soul searching” was a stronger, more enduring voice for me and a wonderful gift to share with other voice users and abusers.

WHERE TO START?

The first thing you’ll need to do is to get to know your vocal mechanism intimately and become very aware of how all of the parts work together. Now don’t get nervous, it’s not that complicated. Your voice uses only three major body parts for power and sound: Your *Vocal Cords* who create the sound, your *Abdominal Diaphragm* who pumps the air, and your *Pelvic Diaphragm* who compresses that air into a strong steady stream that projects out of your mouth. Yes, there are ***two Diaphragms*** at work here not just one. The Pelvic Diaphragm (located at the base of the rectal area) compresses the air that is pumped by the Abdominal Diaphragm (located at the bottom of your rib cage), up the wind pipe through the vocal cords (located in your Larynx or “Adam’s Apple”) and out the mouth. In other words this voice operates like a piece of fine machinery that runs on compressed air and is powered by the opposite end of you body from the vocal cords. Isn’t that fascinating?

Because this vocal instrument *is* our whole body, it is subject to all of the events that go on in our life both emotional and physical. When of the riggers of constant travel, stress, environmental conditions and just plain vocal fatigue get too heavy for them, those beautiful little vocal cords just get tired and shut down. (Like Jamie’s did). The voice like a good stereo system with a built in alarm that shuts the system down before it lets it burn out, will also shut it’s self down to prevent you from doing permanent damage to the vocal cords. If you continue to force and push the voice the end result is... Wa-La... No Voice!!! As speakers, our voice *is* our career! Now here is the question... “How many of you have actually taken the time to learn how your voice works... Hmmmmmm?”

MAJOR PROBLEMS THAT AFFECT THE VOICE

Here some of the voice problems speakers face daily. How do you handle them?

- **Head Colds and Sinus Infections. (“That kid on the plane kept sneezing on me...”)**

Water magnifies sound. So when my clients have a major presentation and a head cold all at the same time, I tell them to enjoy the resonant sound. The voice is produced in the vocal cords down in the larynx/neck area. Nasal congestion is produced in the nose and sinus area. These two are not even close to each other. The major concern here is to be beware of the medication you take. If it dries up your mucous (as decongestants do), it will dry up your vocal cords because they are mucous membranes and need that mucous to lubricate them. Steaming the mucous membranes of the nose and throat with a few drops of eucalyptus oil (any health food store has it,) will work wonders. If you don't have a steamer, simply boil a pan of water on the stove, drop in a few drops of the oil, place a towel over your head and breathe in the healing steam all the way down to the bottom of the lungs. If your in a hotel room, take a hot steamy shower and with your mouth wide open, breath that steam in and out.

- **Heartburn and Stomach Acid (“Must have been that chicken surprise I ate.”)**

Stomach acid can move from the stomach up to the larynx and irritate your vocal cords. affecting your voice big time. Reflux laryngitis is common in those who have stomach problems. Do not eat before a performance or presentation, and never swallow anything with caffeine, alcohol or citric acid in it. Warm herbal teas are soothing to the tummy and the voice. (Throat Coat is my favorite tea,)

- **Chronic Throat Clearing (“If I could just clear it out...”)**

This is a very common problem for speakers. We have all sat in an audience listening to a speaker who constantly clears his/her throat. It not only irritates the audience but it is extremely irritating to the vocal cords. (This could be a nervous habit carried over from puberty.) Remember, the mucous that coats the vocal cords is there to protect them and when you continually scrape out the mucous to clear the throat, the body's defense system calls up the “Mucous Army”. The more mucous you scrap, the more mucous the cords produce to protect themselves from all that scraping When the mucous army begins to resemble *The Gulf War*, it's time to stop all that destructive clearing and try another tactic. Clearing the throat does NOT work!!! Small sips of water will put your Mucous Army “at ease.” Also dropping the jaw in a relaxed “Yawn” position will help relieve pressure in the vocal cords While in that yawn position say “Haaaaahhhh” sliding down your pitch . This is called a “yawn sigh” and it's a great tension reliever.

- **PMS Blues (“ PMS affects the voice? Your kidding me.”)**

Obviously this one only affects the ladies, but it's a real problem for women who depend on a strong voice for business. It is not an imagined problem, guys! It's so real that it's even written in the opera diva's contract that she will *not* perform while PMS-ing. It's tastefully called “Grace Days”. This vocal problem is caused by the hormones getting out of balance and changing the natural size and texture of the vocal cords. This causes a weakness in the voice and a loss of high notes. For the female speaker the symptoms are: vocal fatigue, hoarseness and some muffling of the voice. Oh, where are those “Grace Days” when you need them?

Most major voice problems can be avoided with good understanding, and a bit of loving care and always remember: No “quick fix” is a substitute for good voice technique!!