

VOICE – FIT!

To work in the fitness industry you need a body which will enable you to do your job successfully day after day without incurring injury. To do this you exercise and take care of the muscles which help you earn your daily bread. For the majority, the voice will also be an integral part of the delivery of your message as a teacher or coach but how many of you will have given any thought to the care of this delicate instrument?

The voice is dependant on several things: appropriate breath support, head and chest resonance and the ability to form the words in the mouth with firm articulation. In everyday life we function on “automatic pilot” without having to think about delivery because the mechanism is perfectly capable of producing a voice which is suitable for normal conversation without any effort being made. However, if you look at the environments in which many sports professionals work you will find that many problems are created.

- a) Background noise – in large open spaces outside, swimming pools, echoey halls, classrooms, where music is used.
- b) Dust and chalk – in classrooms.
- c) Hot, dry atmospheres – in some sports facilities.
- d) Hot, humid atmospheres – swimming pools.

All the above cause major problems for the voice and care needs to be taken when working in them.

It would be helpful here to give a brief outline of the vocal mechanism. Voice is stimulated by the intention to speak coming from the brain. It is produced by the flow of air (breath) and vibration. It is therefore important that the lungs are used fully. Breath comes though the mouth and nose, passes down the windpipe and enters the lungs. As we breathe out the ribcage expands and the diaphragm descends increasing capacity. The inhaled breath supplies oxygen for the body and as it is exhaled it meets the vocal cords or folds in the larynx. The breath causes them to vibrate at anything between 100 and 1,000 times a second depending on the pitch of the note. This sound is immediately modified by the spaces it passes through – the chest, throat, nose and mouth and a “balance” is required to produce a pleasing tone and aid carrying power (projection).

Men will find that in general their larger chest capacity and deeper pitch will allow the voice to carry quite well in noisy environments and across distances. However, from men with a smaller frame or women many problems can be caused for the voice by forcing the mechanism or shouting.

The vocal cords are not solid objects but made up of dozens of layers of cartilage and mucous. They have to be kept moist to function well and it is therefore essential to drink lots of water (at room temperature) when working. Be aware of the following if you want to keep the voice healthy.

Watch Out!

- a) Dehydration – a dry throat sounds strained and lacking in resonance.
- b) Allergies – can cause swollen membranes.
- c) Medication – some drugs affect the voice.
- d) Food – hot, spicy food affects the delicate lining of the vocal tract.
- e) Tobacco and other drugs – have a profound effect on the vocal tract, drying and irritating the mucosa.
- f) Caffeine and alcohol – drying agents – spirits are most damaging.
- g) Stress – you need to be aware that this will tighten the voice and strain the delivery
- h) Throat clearing – the vocal cords are brought together forcefully with a risk of damage.
- i) Tiredness – vocal strain and dry throat may occur.
- j) Hormones – the vocal cords can swell causing the pitch to lower and a tendency to huskiness.
- k) Sore throats – conserve the voice, rest.

If you ignore all of these signs you may damage your voice permanently. There may be a loss of some pitch range or individual note groups (which is indicative of nodule growths on the cords requiring operative intervention). In severe cases the voice may cease to work entirely and need lengthy rest and recuperation before recovery.

Remember that knowledge is everything. You all have the means of protecting your voices so that they will work for you throughout your working life without requiring attention. The following is a short list of techniques to be mastered.

Help Yourself

- a) Relaxation techniques – to reduce the stress and tension.
- b) Alignment and body posture – to help the voice work at optimum level.
- c) Breathing – if working in a large space where you need to project, a professional can teach you a special breathing method to power the voice without strain.
- d) Control pitch and volume – learn how you can alter these to suit the situation.
- e) Resonance – make sure all cavities are fully used through exercise.
- f) Muscular flexibility of jaw, lips, tongue and soft palate – to convey your message.
- g) Vocal warm-up – an essential part of each working day. As you would warm up your body you must warm up your vocal mechanism before using it.

These basic techniques can be learnt in a three hour workshop and with practice you can ensure that your voice is protected for life.

Remember that without your voice you can't work – LOOK AFTER IT!

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