

Vocal Aerobics

It is amazing how we take for granted many of the things we do in life and assume that our body will always deliver, whatever pressures we put on it. For sports professionals, this may include problems with key muscle groups, tendons and ligaments and most people working in the business will be well aware of taking care of these areas of the body.

Why then do coaches assume that their voice will keep going in extreme situations when it is also constructed of muscles, sinews and tendons which need care and attention to work at their best?

I have been working with actors, teachers and business people for over 35 years to develop and take care of the voice. Many people are dependant on their voice to make a living and therefore it is essential that you understand how it works and how you can look after it.

Since 1997 I have been the National Voice Consultant to the Amateur Swimming Association and have developed a CPD course in Voice Protection and Projection which has been delivered over 100 times nationwide. When these courses have been run by local authorities and opened up to all comers I have frequently found aerobics teachers amongst the takers. Here are some of the problems I have encountered:

- 1) A teacher aged 20 who had been working for 6 months with a voice that is already showing damage.
- 2) Teachers who have no voices by the end of each week.
- 3) Teachers forced to work with no microphones.

So let's look at the specific nature of aerobics work in relation to the voice.

The aerobics teacher has a very specific challenge, namely to be heard above the music. So how can you do this safely?

NEVER WORK WITHOUT A MICROPHONE

The voice is not designed to be heard above loud music, and it can't be! You may force it and shout but this will result in a harsh tone where words cannot be understood or you might resort to using a higher pitch (again, a barrier to understanding) and, more importantly, cause progressive damage to the vocal cords.

SO HOW DOES THE VOICE WORK?

Speech is dependant on breath support so the 1st thing you need is plenty of air in the lungs. If you are jumping about this may prove difficult so:

TAKE TIME TO BREATHE

You don't need to talk all the time so once the routine is understood:

ONLY SPEAK WHEN YOU HAVE TO

When you are using a microphone the equipment will amplify what you give it so:

DON'T SHOUT - USE A NATURAL VOICE

This will stop the voice from getting tired and help the class understand you.

Your vocal cords need moisture to work at their optimum level so:

DRINK LOTS OF WATER (ROOM TEMPERATURE)

If you think about it, this is just common sense. You will warm up your body before a class and as your voice is constructed of muscles, warming this up too can really make a difference.

Here is a simple warm-up framework that could be done in the car on the way to work:

VOCAL WARM UP

- 1) Breathe deeply in and out several times
- 2) Hum until the lips tingle. Sense the vibration in the cheeks and nose caused by the power of the breath. The natural resonators will amplify the voice without straining.
- 3) Release the hum to an open sound i.e.
Hum - AH

- 4) Exercise your range by placing the tongue in the NG position (NG is produced by positioning your tongue as if at the end of going i.e. on the nnn sound and holding it there which will send the breath down your nose) and trying to lift your voice from the bottom note and down again in one continuous glide.
- 5) Warm up the tongue and lips by practicing any tongue-twisters you can think of or try these:
 - a) Liver Liver Liver
Lill Lill Lill
 - b) Betty Botter Bought some Butter
 - c) She sells sea shells on the sea shore
 - d) River River River
Rill Rill Rill

When using a microphone test it out using the equipment which plays the music. Find out how much power you need to be heard. Remember you should never force your voice, so consider whether the music could be a little lower (often it is over-amplified to the point where class members leave with ringing ears!)

What about if you have a voice weakened by a cold or infection? Ideally don't work but if you have to:

DRINK HOT WATER WITH HONEY & LEMON

Don't bother with throat sweets – they will not help but only mask the problem and allow you to force the voice further:

REST THE VOICE WHEN NOT WORKING

Don't be the life and soul of the party or arrange any activity that involves speaking. The voice will recover quickly if it is rested. Signs of damage are very easy to spot. Look out for:

- a sore throat
- a tired voice
- missing vocal notes
- loss of a pitch band
- croakiness
- a gravelly tone

Damage to the voice is progressive and can take some time, but once tears occur in the vocal cords or growths called nodules appear it is very difficult to return the voice to its original quality. It is vital, therefore, that anyone who puts their voice under strain on a regular basis understands that they must take care of it. You need your voice for your job. Treat it as a carpenter would his tools. Look after it well and it will not let you down.

Good luck!

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&
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