

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I was speaking to a prospective student not long ago about their vocal problems, and one of the things they said was that they struggle with their voice, especially when they're nervous, that it just doesn't work. The voice is shaky. It feels tight. And their main strategy for dealing with that has been to remind themselves to take deep breaths.

And I asked them how that was going and they said, “well, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.” And today I want to take time on the podcast to explain why breathing deeply doesn't always work.

I'm going to be talking a bit about our vocal anatomy. I'll be as clear as I can. It might help if you can follow along with your own body.

How the voice works is that air comes up from our lungs and passes by our vocal folds in our throat, and they start to vibrate and that vibration turns the air into sound.

You can feel where your vocal folds are located by putting your hand on the front of your neck, feeling with maybe four fingers as you say something, “Ah,” sing something, hum, and feeling for that piece of cartilage that's vibrating more than the rest.

You'll feel vibrations all up and down along the front of your neck, but there will be one piece of cartilage that vibrates more than the rest, and that is the front of your larynx. And it's vibrating more than the rest

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

because the vocal folds are attached on the other side of that piece of cartilage.

You'll notice as you speak that your larynx moves up and down, and that's because the breath pressure's changing. When we talk, there are lots of stops and starts – that's what we consider to be articulate speech.

And the larynx moves up and down as the breath pressure goes up when you say something, and then you stop talking and then the breath pressure is lower and the larynx comes back down again.

Now, the reason that reminding yourself to take deep breaths doesn't always work is because the larynx fundamentally functions as a valve. Singing and speaking, that's all very well and good, but the evolutionary reason for the larynx is to keep stuff that isn't air out of our lungs.

And so the larynx is very efficient at closing, at keeping food going down the esophagus rather than down our windpipe, and reminding yourself to take a deep breath when there is a fundamental tightness in the system, it's just not always enough.

That's why it doesn't always work, especially when you're really nervous because, at least the bodies I've seen, when we're very nervous, that tension manifests itself in our upper torso and in our neck and in our shoulders.

It's very difficult to have a wide open, generous posture when you're freaking out. And so those things together, we're naturally more closed than open, and then we're under stress, so we're even, it's more likely to be more closed than open.

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

It's gonna be a superhuman effort to remind yourself to help the body take a deep breath. It doesn't mean it's impossible, but what I found is simply trying to take a deep breath without addressing tension in the upper body, in the neck, in the throat, in the shoulders, it's a losing battle.

And I suppose now is a good time to talk about, what do we mean by a deep breath anyway?

If you ask a group of children to take a deep breath, you will see them pull in their stomachs and bring up, raise their shoulders, and turn into a kind of superhero posture, and they will call that a deep breath.

And I've seen many adults do that too, it's just particularly striking with children. Take a deep breath and they'll all go you'll hear the inhalation and everybody will suddenly get three inches taller. That isn't actually a deep breath. That's a shallow breath, because they're tightening the stomach.

That's only letting air into really the top part of the lungs. A deep breath is a breath that is going to expand the center of your torso. A deep breath is going to require you to open more throughout your rib cage, the front of your chest, your upper back. A deep breath is going to expand your torso, hopefully, in all directions.

So when you're thinking about taking a deep breath, maybe now just listening to the podcast, try to take a deep breath and notice which direction it goes. Is it more of an “up” thing or is it more of a “down and widening” kind of thing? The deep breath that is going to help stabilize your voice is the down and widening kind.

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

Now to facilitate that, we need the mouth and the throat to be as open and loose as possible. A way to find that kind, the kind of openness that I'm talking about, is to yawn and to notice that when you're yawning there is a lot of room that you can create, lower in your throat. You can feel your throat retract open to the sides.

I'm going to yawn now and talk while I'm yawning, and hopefully this will motivate you to yawn too, because you're an empathetic person. And what I want you to notice is that when you have a really big yawn, you might feel like you can swallow a sword. Like you can make enough space in the lower part of your throat that you could actually swallow a sword if you were asked to.

One of my students offered that image and I find it very useful. I find that most people can find “open” when I give them that example. And as you make that stretch, it's a stretch. Notice how much of a stretch it is.

It's a stretch because your throat is normally a lot more closed than that, right, again, because the main idea here is that we inhale only air, we protect the airway. That's how we've gotten as far in life as we have, because we've protected our airway.

So that's stretch to open, I'm yawning now again, it's probably really gonna feel like a thing, and that's a good thing to feel. So finding that openness in the lower part of your throat, that is what you wanna do first before you try to take a deep breath. You'll get so much more air into your lungs if that part of your throat is more open.

Now, I also mentioned your mouth. You can certainly, and I'm still yawning. I've started yawning, I might not stop. You can certainly take a deep breath in through your nose, right?

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

And that's often recommended as a calming breath right in through the nose and out through the mouth. And I'm not arguing against that, but I wanna suggest that there's another option if you're in a speaking situation.

Or a singing situation – you're in the flow of producing sound and you feel nervous, and you wanna take a deeper breath to try to calm yourself down. Another way to get there is to let your jaw hang loosely or to imagine that you're drinking just a wonderful cup of hot chocolate. You can taste the hot chocolate and let that image relax the inside of your mouth.

You don't need to let your jaw hang like you're, you're too drunk to keep your mouth closed, I don't mean that. But finding some looseness in your jaw will also help you take a deeper breath and to continue to yawn, as I seem to be doing.

So adding those two kinds of physical opening to your deep breathing attempts, I think are going to make your deep breathing a lot more successful. That feeling width low in your throat like you're trying to swallow a sword, or another image I've used with students is to imagine you have a linebacker neck, like your neck just suddenly is very wide and to also let the inside of your mouth feel looser.

One of the exercises that I recommend to many of my students to help figure out how to take a deep breath and how to make more space in the body for that breath is called “Lie on the Floor with a Book on Your Belly.” So you find a comfortable spot on the floor. Put your feet on the floor so that your knees are bent and together.

Place a book on your belly. A good book is one that's not too heavy and that's not too small, so not a paperback, but a nice hardback book that is

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

smaller than a law dictionary or any other kind of dictionary. A John Grisham novel maybe, or Stephen King, or a cookbook, would be a good size. And you place the cookbook on your belly – this is not about building muscle or building strength, this is about building awareness.

So you're lying on the floor with the book on your belly. And the first thing I want you to notice is that most of your back is in contact with the floor and that your shoulders are relaxed. They're not trying to hold you up, that you allow yourself to sink into the floor, let the earth hold you up. And then when you take a breath in, I want you to try to get the book to go up.

In order for the book to go up, you need to contract your diaphragm, and you contract your diaphragm by allowing air to enter deep into your lungs. And you think as you're taking that inhalation that your belly's getting bigger. And your belly's getting bigger and your belly can push the book up, and then you let the air out and the book comes down.

You breathe in, the book goes up, you breathe out, the book goes down.

This might take a little while to coordinate, especially if you're used to breathing [a high audible breath] like that. If you're used to a deep breath being something that lifts your whole torso, this will take a little bit of time to coordinate. But the nice thing about being on the floor is that gravity is helping you figure it out.

Because when you're lying on the floor and you take a deep breath, and if you try to do it with your shoulders, it will feel really effortful. You'll feel how much your back leaves the floor. You'll feel how your shoulders lift and it won't feel very comfortable.

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

But when you can take a breath in and the book goes up, it may feel weird, it may feel awkward, but it's going to feel a lot easier mechanically than the raising-your-shoulders way of breathing.

Also while you're on the floor, you can feel into how wide you can be across the front of your chest. How broad can your back feel against the floor? And just allow yourself to rest there, to breathe there, to get used to what that feels like.

And after, I don't know, 3, 5, 10 minutes, however long you have, however long you can stand, if, lying still is not something that comes easily to you, get up slowly so you don't get dizzy, and try to feel that from a seated position.

Try to take a deep breath, feeling your belly get big, and letting your torso and your back be broad.

That kind of breath is what will sustain you for long periods of speaking or singing and will calm you down when when you're a bit freaked out. That's the kind of deep breath that you wanna practice.

And I think I've said elsewhere on the podcast, but it bears repeating: the time to practice taking a deep breath is before you need it, right? This feeling of expansion and generosity and capability and strength and easy breathing, you wanna cultivate that every day if you can, in the easiest possible way, so that when you need it, when you're stressed out, it's there for you.

Now there's an elephant in the room here, which is your emotional life. Because while it's true that we can do physical things to help calm ourselves down, if we don't actually address why we are nervous,

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

anxious, upset in the first place, no amount of deep breathing is going to solve that problem.

So one of the things to consider is making a list or doing a debrief with a friend, having a conversation after a particularly nerve wracking event or in advance of a nerve wracking event where you're afraid that your voice is gonna fail.

And either in the conversation or just making the list, search your brain for all of the ways, all of the reasons why this might be stressful. What are all of the stressful thoughts that are bothering you? And get them out on paper or get them out into the air so that you can look at them, you can see what's going on inside your head, and then you can work with it.

If you're making the list, if you're writing it down, which I prefer. I do have good conversations with friends and loved ones who support me, and that's a good thing to do, too. And I find that a good first attempt for me is best on my own with a pen and a piece of paper, just to do a brain dump, get it all out.

So that then I can go back and read it and look at it and see, what of these things can I actually do something about? Or, what might actually be true? Or, what of this list of concerns, what can I prepare for in advance?

And that helps me get some perspective on whatever's going on in my mind that's making me stressed out about this thing that's coming up or that made me stressed out about the thing that happened.

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

And going along with the elephant in the room being your internal emotional life, your thoughts and feelings about the thing that you are trying to do, there's another piece, which is that we're always practicing.

Perfectionism isn't kind and it isn't realistic. I found that it's most useful to relate to life as a grand experiment, that when we can make a practice of noticing what's going on and not judging ourselves immediately, but learning really to notice ourselves and notice the vocal instrument, notice what's happening with it, we are in a much better place to make corrections or to even analyze our performance.

We need to get out of all or nothing, black and white thinking: it was good, it was terrible. I won, I lost.

Human communication rarely is that black and white. And when you're talking about using your body as an instrument, which is what you're doing when you're singing or speaking, you need to learn how to notice yourself so that you can analyze what's happening so that you can then change it.

This might feel like a really tall order and like, very advanced work, especially if you are in the position of just really wanting to survive the presentation that you have to give or the difficult conversation that you need to have, or you're really excited about singing this song at an open mic, but you also are afraid you might die of nerves before you even make it to the stage.

So you can practice noticing. Again, practice noticing when it's easier. Practice noticing what's going on in your living room when you're rehearsing. Practice noticing what's going on when you're standing in line at the grocery store, even if it's not related to your voice, just

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

learning to ask yourself the question, what do I notice about my body right now? What's my posture like right now?

Not because you're gonna judge yourself for being schlumpy, but just to notice what it is.

It's just so important to allow yourself that grace, because that's really the only way that we can change how you're using your body is if you notice it first.

There's one other idea I wanna put out here about why breathing deeply doesn't always work and it's related to this emotional component.

Just breathing deeply doesn't always work when we have forgotten that we are connected to other people.

At the moment when your voice is failing and you're really nervous and anxious or whatever, you might feel like a tiny speck of dust in a huge universe, and you're not connected to anybody and nobody can protect you, nobody can save you, and this is just a horrible, single, solitary moment in a single solitary life.

I get it can really feel that way, but the truth of the matter is that you have a people. You have a community, you have friends, you have colleagues, you have people who love and care about you, and they might not be physically with you at that moment, but you can cultivate an awareness of them in your imagination.

In my imagination, it looks like reminding myself that I'm one of a bunch of paper dolls in a long string. I don't know if that was one of the things you did on rainy days when you were younger, but one of the

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

things I remember doing is cutting strings of paper dolls, and when I can see myself as part of that long string of paper dolls all holding hands, I feel less alone.

That image alone calms my nervous system.

And that image might not work for you, but I know that you have one. If you sit with yourself, if you mine your heart, you'll find an image of connection and community and safety that you can call on in those moments when you feel the most vulnerable, and remind yourself that you are in fact connected to a community, to a family.

It might be a family of choice. It might not be your original family, but you have a people and that will help you in those situations when you're trying to say the hard thing and you're feeling a little shaky, you can imagine somebody holding your hand, because indeed they are.

I honestly believe that. None of us is entirely alone in this world.

So that's what I have for you today about breathing deeply and learning to open. I really hope it's helpful and as always, thank you so much for listening.

If you enjoyed today's episode, please rate and review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Every positive review helps new people find the show. Subscribing ensures you'll learn about new episodes as soon as they come out. If you have a question about singing or speaking or being, please send me an email at letters@mvmusik.com.

That's letters at M as in Mary, V as in Victor, M U S I K.com.

Ep #52: Why Taking a Deep Breath Doesn't Always Work

Transcripts and show notes are available on my website. You can subscribe to my newsletter there, too. *Can't Wait to Hear You* is produced in conjunction with Particulate Media. I'm your host, Michèle Voillequé. I can't wait to hear you.