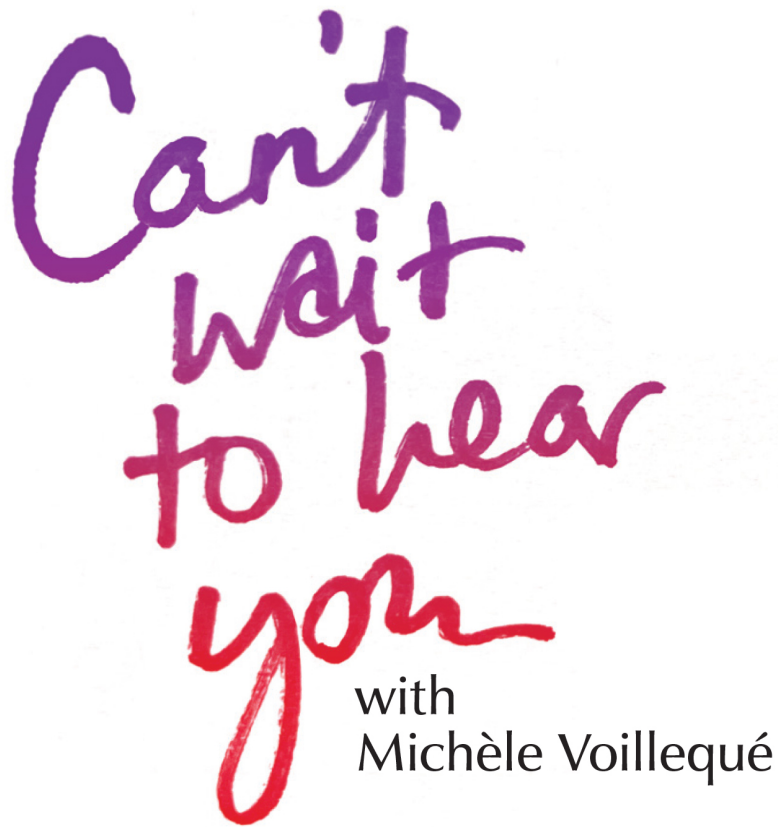


## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck



### Full Episode Transcript

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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've been talking with a lot of my students lately, it feels like, about gravelly, stuck-feeling voices, and so I just wanted to put that on the podcast in case it can be useful to other people, too, and a good review for my students.

So by a gravelly, stuck voice, what I mean is something that kind of sounds like this, and don't feel like you can be very loud and you don't like what it sounds like and you're not sure how to get out of this position, right? There doesn't seem to be any hope.

So the stuck feeling, maybe it sounds stuck, but I think when I'm saying “stuck,” it's more like the person who's making that sound feels stuck.

There are I think three possible things that are going on, and they may all be going on at the same time, or it may be more of one than the other two, or more of two than the third one. You'll have to judge for yourself.

But the first thing I wanna say about it is that gravelly, stuck kind of a feeling often happens when we are pitching our speaking voice too low.

We're trying to speak with a lower pitch and we're, this is me speaking with a lower pitch where I have some space around it so it doesn't sound entirely like me, but it doesn't feel stuck to me.

And it, I don't think it sounds stuck to you. I think it just might sound strange, like, that's not “normal Michèle.” That's me trying to speak with a deeper voice.

# Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

There are lots of reasons to want to speak with a lower voice.

The first one is patriarchy. The voice of authority in at least American culture is that of a man. And if you are an estrogen-based being, or you are just striving for authority – you could be a testosterone-based being, too – a lot of us pitch our voices lower so that we can be taken seriously.

And, just as an example, I mean, it's very easy for me to speak up here. I'm, as you all know, I'm a soprano and I'm able to sing higher notes, and it's very easy for me to speak at this pitch.

And I know that if I continue, I'm not going to be taken seriously at all. That's just not, a voice that's going to command much authority in this culture. And so I speak at a significantly lower pitch than would be comfortable for me, all other things being equal.

So we can get gravelly and stuck when we have just started speaking at a lower pitch and just, like, imagining that, like, this is the home pitch of our voice and we can just get stuck there.

Things like this with the voice, because the voice is so connected to our identity and how we put ourselves out into the world, they can be, very easily become self-reinforcing.

You sound this way for a while, and then after a while, this is the only way you know how to sound. It does kind of happen that way.

So the first thing that's going on, if you're feeling like your voice is too gravelly and it's stuck and you don't like it, try raising the pitch of your voice.

Try something like, “Hi.” Even if you feel ridiculous, try something like, “Hi,” with a great Big H at the beginning. That gets the air moving. “Hi, how are you?” And just seeing how that feels, seeing if that feels any less stuck.

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

It's important, that Big H at the beginning, to get the air moving and to also have a sense that you're creating space around that sound. You're imagining that your throat is very wide, very deep.

“Hi, how are you?” And you can hear that I have some phlegm in my voice that is coming and going. Sorry about that. I'm doing all I can over here to keep drinking and helping it move along.

So that's sort of step one is, try to pitch your voice a little bit higher in an experimental way. Not in a stressful, like, “I'm trying to make somebody else understand me!” kind of way. I mean like private, on your own, in your room, door closed, reading a book out loud, “Hi, how are you?”

Or just saying simple sentences. “What a beautiful day in the neighborhood.” “How are you today?” “My name is,” and just seeing if that doesn't increase your sense of ease and sense of spaciousness.

Again, imagining that your throat, the inside of your throat, is wide and deep is really gonna help with that.

Another component of gravelly and stuck is something called vocal fry, which lights up the internet every once in a while. Lots of people have opinions about it and it sounds like this.

Vocal fry is when you let a very gentle stream of air go past your vocal folds and just barely set them into vibration.

So I was just asking you to imagine pitching your voice at a higher pitch. To investigate vocal fry, you wanna imagine the lowest pitch possible for you, the easiest amount of effort in your body.

And you can start with just an AH sound, AH, and feel how an easy vocal fry feels loose. It doesn't really feel like anything. There's no

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

tension, there's no stuckness in it. It's just the smallest amount of air required to make the vocal folds make some kind of noise.

And it's really common in American speech to hear that quality at the ends of our sentences because a declarative sentence in English goes down at the end.

Unless you're winging it where all of your sentences sound like questions. And, this is also a feature of American speech and we are often encouraged not to do this because it makes us sound like we don't have any authority and we don't know what we're talking about.

So it's unusual to hear somebody winging it like that and to have vocal fry at the end. It's very common to hear vocal fry at the ends of sentences.

So part of that is because the intonation of a declarative sentence goes down at the end. It's also true that the sentence is ending and so our body's energy is dropping off.

And when the body energy drops off before the sentence is totally complete, then you're gonna get something that's gravelly and vocal fry sounding.

If this is sounding familiar, if this can you keep your torso engaged? It doesn't have to be your torso, but certainly dropping your body's energy before you finished saying what you mean to say is going to increase the amount of vocal fry and gravelly-sounding stuckness in your voice.

So one thing to look at is, can you keep your body energy up until the sentence is over? As I'm demonstrating that right now, that to me feels like feeling broad across my chest and engaged with my belly, providing supportive air for the sounds that I'm making rather than conking out halfway through and everything falling down.

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

That kind of leads into the third thing which is true about gravelly and stuck-sounding voices is that the problem with gravelly and stuck is that you're not using enough air.

You might be feeling like you're running out of air all the time, or like there is no air available. But I tell you that's because you're not using your air.

It's really counterintuitive? Is that what I mean? The more air you use, the more air you have. So I wanna show you an exercise to show you how much air you have, always hoping that this will help.

So we're gonna make a sound that's really rude and you would probably never on your own make a sound like this, and that's okay. This is vocalizing, this is practice. This is not in public, okay?

So the sound is a really big, shh.

But we're gonna make it by pulling the belly button to the spine quickly and expelling all of our air as quickly as we can. And it sounds like SH! Right? You would never shush somebody like that. It's very loud, very big, very rude. I want you to do it anyway.

So, pulling your belly button to your spine, SH!

We're gonna do four in a row. After each one – so, you pull your belly button to your spine, you shush out very quickly a lot of air – I just want you to relax your belly and do it again.

It sounds like this SH! SH! SH! SH!

So, you've just pulled your belly button to your spine and then you've just released your belly, and then you've done it again. Pulled the belly button to the spine, released the belly, and you've exhaled a ton of air.

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

Way more air than you use when you talk. But I just wanna show you what your capacity is. You can expel that much air really quickly.

What you also just did when you were releasing your belly, you were allowing air into your lungs without any effort.

You shushed out, you emptied your lungs, sh, and then you relaxed your belly and air came into your lungs. Notice, as I was doing it, there wasn't a great [audible inhalation] in between. There wasn't a gasping inhalation. My inhalation was silent and it was just done with physics.

I push all the air out and then I create relaxation in my belly, allows my diaphragm to contract, allows the lungs to fill with air, because nature abhors a vacuum. I emptied my lungs and then I release, and then they fill back up and you can't even hear the air come back into my body.

I'll do it again.

SH! SH! SH!

If you're doing this right, you should feel like you could do this forever. Like I just did four. You should feel like eight would be no problem. Even, like, 20 might not even be any problem because all you're doing is pulling your belly button to your spine, releasing your belly. Air's going out of your lungs and back into your lungs.

You're pushing air out of your lungs and back into your lungs, and together with trying to speak at a higher pitch, that can help you find more air for your speaking voice.

And having more air, together with being attentive to the pitch and attentive to the body – not speaking from a place of collapse, but speaking from a place of like you're sitting or standing up straight, you feel with the cross your chest and length in your torso, that will help get you out of gravelly and stuck.

# Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

At least, that's what was working for my students this week.

So just to recap, gravelly and stuck is about not using enough air, and it's about not making enough space, often in your torso, but also in your throat. And it's often about trying to speak at a pitch that is too low.

Over time, gravelly and stuck can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more gravelly and stuck you sound, the more gravelly and stuck you will sound, and so it's really helpful to do something to reset your system.

Like, sh, remind yourself how much air you can use, or,

Ooh, pretend you're a ghost.

It's, um, the first day of autumn in America today when I'm recording this, and so Halloween is around the corner. And practicing those spooky noises can get you out of sounding gravelly. Trying to sound like a ghost.

Do you hear how much air I'm using there? And lots of space.

Again, this is stuff you wanna practice maybe in your room with the door closed. I know that trying this on with friends and colleagues might not get you the results that you want or the relationships that you want, but if you can spend some time on your own experimenting and seeing what works for you, what feels like it's true, you can undo this pattern and make progress with it.

Another thing to practice that will help you is, even when you're not doing the shh exercise, to acquaint yourself with that feeling of releasing your belly. That when you take a breath, that you're taking a breath that's releasing your belly.



## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

This is something that you can do when you're in a meeting and somebody else is talking and you know, you're just noticing yourself breathing, if you can notice yourself breathing.

See if you can release your belly when you take a breath. If you're on a walk, tap into your belly. How's your belly behaving when you're taking a breath?

If you're just sitting and watching television, or there's an ad or a break, right, and you can notice your body, can you release your belly when you inhale?

Cultivating that habit of releasing your belly when you inhale air will over time make it harder for you to sound gravelly and stuck, because every breath you do that, you're releasing tension from your system.

And this gravelly and stuck is a tension pattern. It's really difficult to speak with an under-supported or gravelly and stuck voice when you've released your belly before you said something.

If you release your belly, you've already created more space and ease in the system to make a good, healthy sound. If your belly is held tightly, which lots of ours are, because there's a lot in the world that makes us crazy and we put all of that tension in our stomach, if you're not releasing your belly when you're taking a breath, it's really easy to get gravelly and stuck and forced and feel like this is just never gonna work for me.

I was intentionally gripping my belly as I said those words, and you can hear the effect in my voice. That's the thing that you can practice, that's really worth practicing in public.

First of all, nobody can tell if you take a breath, you know, if you're releasing your belly as you're taking a breath, that's not gonna be really obvious to other people. And it allows you to practice in real life

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

something useful in real life, just to see what it's like. And that builds on itself over time.

I know we all, well, maybe not “we all,” I know I, and many of the people I know, wish that a fairy godmother would just show up and bonk us on the head, and then our voice would always be the way we want it to be, and, amazing and lovely all the time, and we don't have any, you know, we don't have to do any of this anymore.

And that's unfortunately not the human life that we have.

The great thing about the human life that we have is that what we need to sing and speak better is to learn to notice more, to notice faster, to notice with less and less judgment. Just to notice.

The better we get at noticing and being present to what's going on around us, inside of us, in our relationships, the more grounded and effective we become as singers and speakers and people in the world.

So this thing that feels like a problem right now is actually a fantastic opportunity to become a stronger person. It really is a gift to spend time figuring it out.

And if you need help with figuring it out, I'm here for you.

You can schedule a free 20-minute consultation, there's a link to that in the show notes. I'm happy to talk to you about this or anything else about your voice that may be bothering or thrilling you. I'd really love to know whether this is helpful, and what you make of it.

Happy Autumn to you, or Happy Spring if you're in the Southern Hemisphere.

Thank you so much for listening.

## Ep #60: Gravelly and Stuck

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