

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

Can't
wait
to hear
you
with
Michèle Voillequé

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.

A lot of my students struggle with finding time to practice, making time to practice, and so do I. And that's a conversation that we have a lot in the studio – that there isn't time to practice as much time as they would like, or the house isn't ever empty enough. The judgmental spouse and the judgmental children are always around and I don't have any privacy.

Or, I'm sure that I have time to practice, but when I've been, like for example, working at home and being really focused on my work, it is so hard to climb out of that mental context and think about singing, even though there's some extra time hanging around.

I don't know how to make the shift from writing coherent reports – I don't know, being engaged with my brain in a very different way and then, you know, stepping out of that and, oh, well now I'll just go be artistic. Like that, that transition is hard for people.

Sometimes it's hard to practice because when we first go to practice, it just doesn't sound very good and we are perfectionistic and we get easily frustrated with ourselves and so we stop.

Because why should I bother? Because I'm never gonna get any better and this is worthless and da, da, da. And then we just go down that rabbit hole of black-and-white thinking and it's just not good.

So there are lots of things going on with “practicing” and I know that I've talked about it on the podcast before and I will link up – there's at least one episode – I'll look for those links to the, to that episode and

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

others, if I find them in the show notes, because I know I've talked about this before.

But I recently heard something from BJ Fogg. He's a professor at Stanford who has studied human behavior and written a book called *Tiny Habits*, which is about how we can change our lives by making small, subtle shifts that compound over time.

I'm on his email list and he sent out an email that just gave me a whole new idea about how to talk to you about practicing, so that we can maybe frame this even more productively for ourselves.

So, first of all, what's a habit?

A behavior qualifies as a habit when it's become automatic. It's something that we do so often, with such regularity, that we no longer think about doing it. And we might not even remember if we've done it.

For example, I drink a lot of tea, and I regularly dump out the teabag into the compost before I make another cup of tea. And just this morning, I had poured myself another, I had already gone all the way to pouring myself another cup of tea before I realized, wait, did I dump out the old teabag?

And I couldn't see into my Yeti tumbler that I drink out of. It's tall and it's dark down there. I'm drinking black tea. I couldn't see if the, my old teabag was still in the tumbler. I actually had to go to the compost pile, compost container and lift it up and look and see, oh yeah, there's my teabag. This had happened so automatically I had no memory that I had done that.

You might have had this experience driving your car somewhere and realizing you've arrived at your destination and you have no idea how

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

you got to your destination, because you were thinking about other things. And we say, the car knows its way home, right?

Or, going to pick the kids up from school at the beginning of a school year and finding that I'm on my way to the wrong school 'cause they've moved on, right? I don't need to go to the middle school. I need to go to the high school now.

But my being on autopilot, right, automaticity, autopilot, I headed in the wrong direction. And, you know, I found them. They've grown up, they're safe now. Nothing bad happened.

Anyway, that's what a habit is. It's something that just happens automatically. And this is what makes bad habits so hard to break because we've got this automatic behavior, this automatic loop, this autopilot set up in our brains.

And in order to break the bad habit, we really need to slow things down, notice the chain of events that are leading to the behavior that we are not wanting to do anymore, and figure out how to do an end run around that very durable neural pathway that we've built.

So adding positive habits presents a similar challenge, right? There's, it takes a certain amount of time, a certain amount of repetitions, a certain amount of buy-in from the system for a behavior to become automatic, for a behavior really to become a habit.

And while it would be great if our practicing was habitual, for most of us it's not. And when we think about developing a better practice habit, I wonder if we're holding ourselves to a standard that is a little self-defeating.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

So this email that I got from Dr. Fogg was talking about the difference between behaviors that are cyclical and behaviors that are decisions.

So his example: every day, let's say, he has a habit of going to the gym. That's happening with regularity, it's a cycle. Everyday he goes to the gym, but once he gets to the gym, he decides which exercises he's gonna do. He doesn't do the same thing at the gym every time. The habit is getting to the gym, and then there's a decision made.

And he contrasts this with having a conversation with your loved one about where to go for dinner and you decide on the restaurant, but once you're at the restaurant, if it's a restaurant you go to relatively frequently, maybe you always order the same thing. And that's the place where the cycle is, where the habit is. There's a decision first, and then there's a habit, or as he was saying, a reliable behavior.

He has the reliable behavior of going to the gym, and then making a decision about which exercises to do. And he also has the reliable behavior of his favorite cocktail, his favorite meal at the restaurant that he goes to occasionally.

I think this has a lot for us as people working to improve our voices.

It may be that there is a time block on your calendar when the house is empty, things are quiet, you've got some free time, and you can use it for singing.

And that can be your cycle, your habit, that thing that happens, that ,your reliable behavior. That between 2 and 2:30 in the afternoon, or between 2 and 2:15 in the afternoon, those are 15 minutes that are just for you and you can use them for singing.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

And then within that you can choose something to do. Whether that's singing along to a song on the radio, listening to a private lesson that you've recorded, or working on one of the exercises you learned this week, or humming something, anything at all, starting to write your own song, any number of things you can do with that 15 minutes, but that 15 minutes is sacred.

That's your time, that's your singing time, and what happens in that time can change every day. That counts as a reliable behavior. That counts as practice even – so I think a lot of us get the idea maybe from having taken instrumental lessons as children, like piano lessons or violin lessons...

I remember this particularly with piano, that the first thing that I was supposed to do when I sat down to the piano was to play my scales. And then I needed to play my arpeggios, and then I needed to play some chords usually, like some chord progressions.

And only after I had done those things could I take out the music that I was trying to learn and practice that. This was how my teacher presented it to me.

Is this the only way to practice the piano? No. Is this the best way to practice the piano? No. It, was my teacher wrong. No, she wasn't wrong. This is just, it's how she was taught. It was how she found it was effective. And so that's what she taught me.

What happened to me is that that gave me the idea that it didn't count as practice unless I had played my scales and played my arpeggios and practiced my chord progressions before I worked on something else.

And that just isn't true.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

There are all kinds of ways to get better at an instrument. You needn't always approach it from the same direction. And so if you are the kind of person that has time available in your schedule, but you're not sure what to do with it, that's okay. Block off the time. This is singing time, and we can work on what to fill it with.

I've already made some suggestions, like singing along to a song on the radio, listening to a new piece of music that you'd like to learn, singing a song that just makes you feel good, making some, just making some sounds, some siren-y, lip trill-y kinds of things. All of that counts as "singing time."

And I guess the thing to, for you to notice in there is what makes you the happiest? When do you feel the most centered in your body in that time? Like, what really honestly feels like the best use of the time for you in terms of your overall wellbeing? And I would let that, guide your practice.

Now, if you have a voice teacher who's telling you exactly what to do and when to do it, then I would follow their plan, because you're in a relationship with them. But if you don't have that, start with what helps me feel the best – calm, centered, grounded, and open in my body, capable of taking a deep breath and what feels fun to sing or to work on?

Okay, now the other example, Dr. Fogg's example of going to the restaurant and then choosing the favorite meal – instead of having a reliable 15 minutes, half an hour in your weeks, in your days, that you can set aside time for singing and then choose what you wanna do, you might instead know that what really works for you is a particular order of operations.

So for me it starts with a lip trill, and then it starts with me singing a song that's really simple, that just always feels good to sing. That song

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

changes. That song could be different every day or every time I go to do this. But I know, when I have a moment to practice, I want to do a lip first, and that I want to sing a simple song, and then I want to remind myself how to sing low notes and how to sing high notes, and I have a particular way that I do that for myself.

But it's important for me not to just dive in to singing repertoire. That is, I'm a soprano, so the notes are, you know, are high, not to just, you know, dive in and do that. I need to spend some time on my lower middle and chest voice to really feel grounded in my body. And that always helps the, the higher notes, uh, work out better for me.

So that's a simple order of operations. That's like the meal that Dr. Fog orders whenever he goes to that restaurant, right? There's a way of doing things that helps me and my body feel really good, and when I have the opportunity to sing, to do that, I do it in that order, or I make sure that I do these specific things.

Obviously these two approaches can compliment one another. You can have a time set aside in your week and you can have a specific order of exercises that you do.

But I hope you can see that having an order of exercises is not more valuable than having just a smorgasbord to choose from. Just a list of, not, maybe not even a list, but just, you know, just even turning on the radio and singing whatever's on the radio.

Take your choice out of it. There's no free will. You just decide, I'm just gonna sing along with whatever's on the radio and that's gonna be my singing break.

We need both.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

We need an idea of all of the things we could do in a singing kind of way that would make our bodies and our minds and our souls feel happy and healthy and alive.

And over time we develop a procedure, a way that we warm up that really works for us.

A lot of the students I have and the people I've known don't develop a way to warm up that really works for them for quite a long time, or until they have to, because they are, they're singing really casually, or their voices are young and they don't have to work very hard to warm up.

Or they're singing in, church choir, community chorus, temple choir, they're going to rehearsals every week and they're being warmed up by somebody else and that vocal warmup is enough for them. It works for them, and so they do that.

And so I've worked with many students on developing warmups specifically for them. That's become necessary because they're singing in a group where the warmup that's presented really doesn't work for them.

The conductor either starts too high or starts too low, or spends too much time on the high part and not enough time on the low part, or vice versa, and it just doesn't work for them.

So we've worked together, the student and I to find an order of operations that does their body good, that they can do before they go to rehearsal, before they go into a singing situation, so they're not starting from zero when they get there.

Because even if a warmup doesn't work for you exactly, if you're not completely cold going into it, the warmup can still be useful.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

So I hope this is helpful. I really want you to know that although there is a gold standard of having a habit of practicing, we don't need to meet that gold standard in order to make durable progress with our voices.

What we need to do is cultivate reliable behaviors. We need to either make time every day, several times a week, and honor that time, and then use that time well when we have it however you want to use it, and we need to figure out what are those singing activities that really help us feel good.

And really help our voices open up and work well. And then whatever time you have available, you can make good use of it and you can feel good about the time that you've spent, even if it wasn't exactly the same as the last time.

There's no reason for us to waste any more effort and energy beating ourselves up because we are not practicing in some kind of mythically perfect way, the same every time, whatever it is for you, however, perfectionism may be making your life difficult right now.

We don't need to do that. We don't need to do that. We can just know these are the things that help me feel good. These are the things that help my voice work well, and I'm going to do them as often as I can in all the ways that I can because I want to sound better. I want to feel better. And I want to know that I'm doing the best I can to become the best person I'm capable of being.

Your voice is so important, not just to you. It's important to the people you love, the people around you, the world around you. I want you to use it. I want it to be well-honed. I want it to be easy.

I really hope this has been helpful, and thank you so much for listening.

Ep #63: Practicing as a Reliable Behavior

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