

# Heal the Voice—Heal the Person: A Pilot Study on the Effects of Voice Training

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## Voice and Vocal Tone

The voice sends a message. It tells us something about the person—who they are, and what is happening in their life. The study of what voice and vocal tone can tell us about a person, and can do for a person, has become prominent in various academic circles. We know that excellent voices and wonderful speaking techniques can impact careers significantly. Authors refer constantly to the voices of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, and the influence they had upon international radio audiences. During the early 1950s, the voice of the Lone Ranger brought excitement and adventure to the lives of countless radio listeners. Today, we can only speculate where the Canadian Alliance Party would be if Preston Manning had been given the voice of James Earl Jones.

Vocal tone tells us a great deal about the person. A journal article by Sarah A. Collins (2000) titled “Men’s Voices and Women’s Choices” investigates the relationship between male and human vocal characteristics and female judgments about the speaker. The results suggest that women prefer males with certain vocal characteristics such as deeper voices. Medical doctors and psychologists listen carefully to the voices of patients and clients for vital clues about the problem for which the patients are seeking help. Singing teachers can often tell if a serious problem or difficulty has entered the life of a student: almost immediately we hear if all is well, or if a loved one is ill, or if there are problems with a boyfriend or a girlfriend. A student’s voice can reflect a poor mark on a music theory assignment, a term paper that is not coming together, or several threatening deadlines.

Depression changes the voice from energetic and colourful, to dull, quiet, slow, and monotonous. As singers, many of us have experienced temporary vocal loss when a parent or loved one has died, and as teachers we have helped others regain their voices following an experience of grief or depression.

These are the ideas and observations that inspired this study. Since the voice tells us so much about the person, and about the circumstances wherein people find themselves, we became curious to see what could result if singing teachers and voice therapists were to help people find their voices, or heal their voices, or develop their voices. Would a better vocal technique, a healthier singing and speaking voice result in changes in a person’s well-being?

## The Pilot Study: Process and Purpose

The project was advertised in order to attract participants, and twelve individuals responded to the question “Interested in Finding Your Voice?” Participants were scheduled for individual voice training, participated in post voice training interviews, and completed questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the study. Stress was chosen as the identifiable condition and the effects of voice training upon stress became the focus of our study. All twelve participants lived with high levels of stress. As well, all participants were aware of stress reducing techniques such as physical exercise, yoga, and relaxation methods, and appeared to practice these regularly.

No musical experience was necessary. Everyone had a voice. Breathing tended to be shallow and conservative, but not much different from what we would expect among beginning voice students. Pitch accuracy was a problem for some, as well as a lack of confidence in singing ability.

### Vocal Training Methodology

Participants were scheduled for two individual half-hour sessions per week for fourteen weeks. Scheduling became a problem for two people, and we met them for one longer weekly session rather than the two half-hour sessions. Two people started late and did not fill out the questionnaires. Attendance was generally quite good, with some cancellations because of illness and time conflicts. One person missed too many sessions, and their input was therefore not included in the final questionnaire or interview.

At the first session, each voice was recorded singing the Christmas carol *Silent Night* and reading the poem *Ozymandias* by Shelley. The ensuing voice training sessions focused on principles of vocal use that could be applied to singing and speaking. "Speaking and singing are two ways we coordinate our one voice to express ourselves. There is more similarity in the two coordinations than differences" (Thurman & Welch, 2000). The program was designed to help develop a free voice, a natural voice—a true voice with flow and resonance. Exercises were held to develop posture, engage the body, release excess muscular tension, and develop resonant tone positioned high and forward, tone that was anchored by breath support and felt low and free. The objective was to help voices find a wider range of dynamic and colour, and greater ease in vocal production, resulting in greater endurance.

At the final individual session, each singer was recorded singing *Silent Night* and the project was completed with a recital and a reception. Seven singers sang pieces that had been coached during the sessions, two would have sung but could not be at the final event, and three participants decided that they were not yet comfortable singing in public.

### Data Analysis

The major analysis method of this study was qualitative analyses of the interview data. Each participant was interviewed for one-hour following the voice training and recital. The interviews were audio and videotaped and conducted over a two-week period. This data was reviewed until all essential experiential components had been considered, allowing not only for thoroughness, but also for imaginative and contemplative sources of knowledge and insight in synthesizing the experience of vocal training.

In addition, scores from the stress questionnaires were quantitatively examined using a pre-post assessment design for correlated samples. The statistical analysis (T-test) assessed the significance of the differences between pre and post averages for correlated samples. This was considered a minor part of the pilot study.

### Results

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaires indicated that the participants experienced a significant reduction of stress as a result of the voice training. This included stress reduction in areas such as physical health (such as less fatigue and fewer migraines), cognitive stress, and future expectations about many possible stress inducing events.

This result was also found in the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Several of the participants reported immediate short-term effects including stress and tension reduction, increased energy and productivity, relaxation, more positive affect/mood, and/or increased self-confidence. To question whether voice training would produce long-term effects, the answers varied. Three said "yes," one said "I hope so," one said "I don't know" and one said, "the effects were short-term." Two felt that more time would be required for voice training in order for this activity to have a longer effect.

A few participants noted physical changes from the voice training. For example, one individual noted that it helped to alleviate muscular problems. Another student claimed that the singing promoted physical relaxation. In addition, a participant disclosed that singing made him/her feel relaxed, inspired, and uplifted. At the end of a session one felt at ease, relaxed, and with a stronger voice.

The interviews with the participants revealed several other results that were unanticipated. After analysis of the interviews it became clear that significant themes were emerging as to the impact that the voice lessons had apart from the reduction of stress or physical symptoms like pain or headaches. Each of these themes was named to reflect the core value associated within each. These theme titles included: a) paradigm shift, b) finding your voice, and c) generalized positive effects. These will be discussed below, including quotes from the participants that will best serve to express and describe the nature of each theme.

### Paradigm Shift

One individual described the effects of singing in terms of a cognitive shift, moving from one cognitive place to a new, more feeling realm. One had to stop thinking (cognitive) and just experience. This shift permitted the experience of a different paradigm—a different way of viewing the world that was welcomed—not stressful. In this sense, singing was a process of actually doing something with stress.

During this time I was very busy. There was a lot going on intellectually for me. About ten minutes into the lesson I would come out of a cognitive place and into a new place which was more of a feeling realm. In the academic world we discourage feelings. We are trained to turn them off. I experienced a different paradigm (during these sessions—a different way of viewing the world.) This was welcomed—not stressful.

I had to stop thinking and just experience. That was a good paradigm shift.

Participants stated that singing works on the emotional level, instilling joy and creative expression and thereby spiritually bringing oneself to a more in-tuned level, with a greater balance between physical, body and emotions. There is a deeper, more meaningful expression of emotion if the physical skills improve.

### Finding Your Voice

In the final interviews, the term “finding your voice” came up quite frequently. During the 14 weeks that participants met, singing and speaking voices became stronger, more resonant and capable of wider dynamic and colour ranges. However, the term finding your voice was used in a much broader sense than to describe the development of strength and tone in speech and song. It became a term for finding oneself and developing confidence to articulate ones ideas and questions. Terms such as, trust, self-identity and self-esteem were used.

As a child I was quite, reserved around people. I didn't speak a lot. Finding my voice was a process that helped me to open up—even the quality of my voice has changed—everything opens up. During voice training exercises I had to sing out, project, find that (voice) somewhere from within and learn to express it. It was wholistic. The development of vocal skills helped in this regard.

Voice is an expression of myself, an expression of me. It is an opportunity to express myself. My experience with other activities (dancing, skiing) is that it's not the same type of self-expression. When singing, even on vowels I am expressing something, telling a story, telling a joke. It's different than running, swimming, etc.

Furthermore, an improved voice gave one a stronger self-identity and built confidence. The singing process was strengthening, an alternative to screaming—a controlled scream. It gave one a voice—a nice voice—a controlled outlet which went beyond venting by increasing self confidence, self esteem, willingness to risk, and confidence and freedom in one's voice and what they have to say.

Voice training became a metaphor of self-discovery. The voice training required the participants to engage in a search within themselves, to connect on many different levels. This experience in the short term was stress relieving, but in the long term there was an increased experience of self-discovery and consequently self-identity.

Voice training is symbolic of “your voice,” and symbolic of what it means to find your voice. In writing we use the term “finding your voice,” your idiom, your style from within you. A search within for who we are—experiencing and expressing this in an unrestricted genuine manner and connecting all different levels of our experience: physical, emotional. Once you began that process of self-expression in music, then singing became another way of doing that—different from journaling or writing.

### Increased Generalized Ability of the Skill to Other Areas

Participants were asked if voice training exercises generalized to other aspects of their life and in doing so improved the quality of their life? In attempting to answer this question it became obvious that the relationship that developed between teacher and students had become a significant factor. Voice training was compared to a therapeutic exercise where the courage needed to develop a trusting working relationship was the basis from which many of the positive effects emanated. Developing trust deepened the experience. Reports of increased levels of self-esteem and willingness to take risks often lead to improved communication abilities.

It has enabled me to become more of a risk taker. Because I have more confidence in myself, I am more willing to take a risk and do something. My performance at the final recital helped me a great deal.

I found the singing process to be strengthening. It gave me a voice—a nice voice—and a controlled outlet. It went beyond venting: [my] self-confidence improved as skills improved, increased self-esteem, and a willingness to risk. Singing is freeing over time. I feel more confidence in my voice, in what I have to say, not only my singing voice. There seems to be a connection.

It is definitely a part of who I am. [My] voice represents my current state of well-being. I feel more secure about the quality of my voice and more confident in expressing my questions and thoughts.

### Summary and Conclusions

This study explored the value of voice training as a mechanism for reducing stress. A guiding theoretical framework was not used. Both quantitative and qualitative forms of analysis were utilized, although the researchers were far more interested in the qualitative data because it would describe the personal engagement and experience of the participants. The quantitative data analysis clearly pointed to the fact that there were at least short-term benefits in stress reduction by engaging in voice training. The qualitative analysis suggested very specific positive shifts in how the participants viewed themselves and the world. Participants viewed the voice training as more than a cathartic experience, more than a relationship with a mentor and more than simply a process that would distract them temporarily from their stress. Voice training also seemed to affect the participant's way of looking at themselves and the world; a kind of cognitive and emotional restructuring. Perhaps the best way to conclude is with the following quote from a participant:

Voice training made a difference on my life's journey. I'm grateful for this. I approached this as a therapeutic exercise, as opposed to becoming a singer. I knew something would happen and for me it did.

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