

By Jaime Babbitt

Let's face it; many choristers don't take voice lessons. They may not have time, or money, or the inclination to devote that much of their precious free time – and that's understandable. However, other singers spend hours each week studying vocal technique and put it to good use at rehearsals, concerts, and competitions. Here's the thing: whether or not a singer studies is not the issue; many choir members can still feel strained, hoarse, or slow to recover after a full day or evening of singing. Why? The answer(s) might be right under their noses. Literally.

Choral directors and choiristas alike may not have thought of this, but how you speak can have a direct effect on your singing voice. Here are some tips to keeping everything in perfect "Working With Your Voice" order (shameless book plug!)

Use Your Singing Chops While Speaking

Run with me on this: try speaking and using all the great techniques you may already know (and if you don't know them, a few lessons might do you a world of good): proper breathing utilizing all the muscles in your torso, placement, tone, having a relaxed jaw and body, minimizing super-hard glottal attacks (like in the word "Uh-oh"...there are two of them!), etc. It might feel odd at first to adapt, but you might discover that you have lots of tension when you talk. Or the opposite: that you get lazy...which leads me to...

Lose The Vocal Fry When You Speak

Millenials (especially the ladies): I'm looking at you. You know the fry; it's perfectly acceptable (and helpful) to have it upon awakening, but somehow it's become an acceptable sonic quality in men's and women's voices everywhere. However, it can occur all the time or on just the final few words in a sentence. No one knows why it's so popular. Kardashian mimicry? Trying to sound more chill, or sexy...or bossy? Just stop. It's not working. You sound like you just walked across the Sahara. And vocal frying, while a very useful warm-up technique, can be very bad for your voice if you keep it up!

Be Prudent About Using Your Voice When You're Sick

It's a bad idea to chat or sing for hours while you're not feeling with anything upper-respiratory in nature. You're probably not even thinking about supporting your voice properly, too. Do yourself a favor and adhere to my three S's when you're sick:

- *Steam
- *Sleep
- *Shut up

If you have a performance, warm up your voice beforehand and afterward, cool down with lip trills, humming, or anything voice-teacher approved. Do not go to a super-noisy bar or restaurant afterward, either; meet friends and relatives at a less noisy place. Or, better yet, go home, sleep and get together for lunch the next day!



Bye-Bye To Whispering

When your voice is sick, tired or sore, it feels so much better to whisper, right? Maybe, but *wrong*. Whispering can actually force your vocal cords to come together right at the spot your throat is most inflamed.

Best alternative: rest your voice. Next best alternative: talk quietly. I use super-duper diaphragm support in conjunction with what I call my "Marilyn Monroe" voice; it's light and high in my register...and the guys love it!

Bye-Bye To Yelling, Throat Clearing and Coughing a Ton

These behaviors can really inflame an overworked voice. Do not yell. Period. Learn to whistle if you go to a ball game. I'll teach you. If you must clear your throat, try the silent kind: close your mouth, make the sound for the letter "h" like "high" and swallow. If you're coughing a lot, try to breathe more into the belly and relax your throat, and, as my mom would say, "Go get a *lozenge*" (I so love that word.) And the one tip that's a given: *hydrate, hydrate, hydrate...* with room temperature beverages or tea. No lemon. It's drying.

Notice How Your Job Affects Your Voice

Are you making customer service phone calls for eight hours? Serving or bartending in a noisy restaurant? Teaching or nanny-ing? Landscaping and inhaling pollen and mold spores? Jobs such as these also require a lot of vocal TLC, rest time and even voice instruction whenever possible. If you have a performance the night after a workday, be mindful during the day. Do whatever you can to make it easier on yourself: leave early, wear a mask...you get the drill.

If You're Angry or Sad, Get It Out

I saved this tip for last because it's not talked about all that often. I've lost my voice only a few times in my life; once, I lost it because I was furious about something and keeping it inside; hello, mind/body connection! I "lost" my voice, get it? I didn't "find" a way to stand up for myself!

That's why I will go to my grave believing it's crucial to be aware of how you feel and to allow those feelings to flow and not bottle-neck. In my humble opinion, anger, frustration, and sadness can trigger voice troubles just as a virus can. So speak your truth...that way you'll easily sing your truth, too!

Jaime Babbitt coached voice/performance for Disney and wrote Working with Your Voice: The Career Guide to Becoming a Professional Singer (Alfred Publishing). As a session singer, she's "jingled" for Coke, Pillsbury, Chevrolet and hundreds more. She's sung thousands of gigs and toured with Leon Russell and Sam Moore. Jaime sang background vocals with George Strait, Courtney Love, Barbra Streisand, Willie Nelson, Jimmy Webb, Miley & Billy Ray Cyrus, and Johnny Mathis. For info, please visit workingwithyourvoice.com