

Creating a Mindful Independent Voice Studio

By Denise Ritter Bernardini and Toni Crowder

Have you ever met someone who had a negative or painful experience in a voice lesson? Anyone who has taught private lessons has undoubtedly heard plenty of horror stories of abusive teacher-student relationships. Likewise, many voice teachers can share negative experiences from their training. Unfortunately, some traumatic teaching styles get handed down from one teacher to another. Unless the teacher brings awareness to their teaching style, they may inadvertently pass on negative experiences to their students. A mindfulness practice for the teacher and the student can make a tremendous difference in breaking this cycle.



Toni Crowder and Denise Ritter Bernardini

There are many excellent reasons to stop and analyze if you create a mindful studio. However, first, let us address why mindfulness in the studio is more important than ever. Between COVID and social media, today's singers face the perfect storm for becoming more anxious, highly sensitive, and often fragile students.

In 2020, a survey of 1,000 parents around the country was facilitated by the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. Out of those participants, 71% of parents reported that the pandemic had affected their child's mental health; 69% said the pandemic was the worst thing to happen to their child. In addition, a national survey of 3,300 high schoolers conducted in the spring of 2020 found that nearly a third of students felt unhappy and depressed much more than usual.

According to the American Centers for Disease Control, an estimated one in three children experience some form of anxiety disorder. The causes of anxiety in children and adolescents are varied and may include environmental factors, genetics, and life events. ADHD, anxiety issues, behavior problems, and depression

are children's most diagnosed mental disorders. Estimates for diagnosis among children aged 3–17 in 2016–19 are below:

- ADHD 9.8% (approximately 6 million)
- Anxiety 9.4% (approximately 5.8 million)
- Behavior problems 8.9% (approximately 5.5 million)
- Depression 4.4% (approximately 2.7 million)

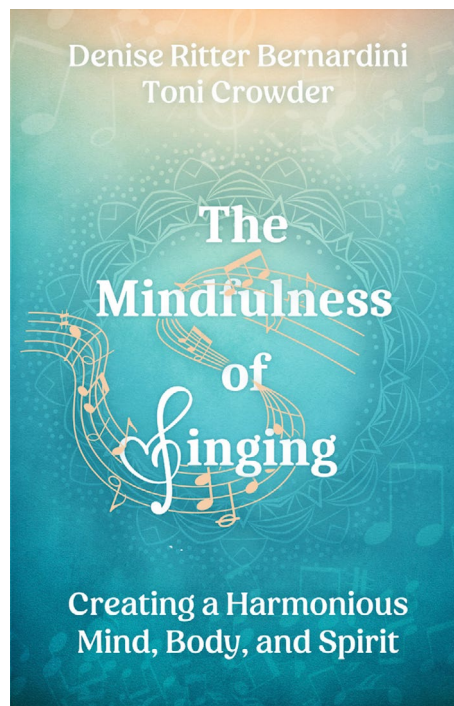
Voice teachers see this phenomenon every day in their studios. They know the toll COVID has placed on their students. They do not need to see the statistics, but the data confirms what has already been suspected; Children and adolescents

are struggling. For many in this age group, music, particularly singing, may be the only outlet that makes them feel joy.

According to Useable Knowledge, a Harvard Graduate School of Education publication, social media has been linked to increased anxiety in young people. They are often inundated with negative news and the pressure to compete and compare themselves to others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and a need to strive for perfection. These pressures to get constant

positive feedback and approval have affected the voice studio. This can create a fear of failure and a need to present oneself perfectly and flawlessly to avoid criticism.

Additionally, Penn Medicine News reports that social media can increase the need for perfectionism by creating a culture of comparison, social validation, filtered and curated content, and public scrutiny. With increased anxiety from the pandemic and a curated idea of perfection from social media, our students now must face the world of music, where criticism and striving for excellence are essential parts of the process. Therefore, it is crucial to help young musicians become even more aware of self-acceptance and self-care over perfectionism.



It seems daunting, so how can the studio teacher address these anxieties and manage their lesson time where singing should be the focus? Before addressing how to incorporate mindfulness, let us review the concept and explore some excellent research on how mindfulness can address the abovementioned issues.

“With increased anxiety from the pandemic and a curated idea of perfection from social media, our students now must face the world of music, where criticism and striving for excellence are essential parts of the process.”

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It involves being aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations in a non-reactive way. Mindfulness aims to increase awareness and acceptance of the present moment rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This can lead to greater calm, clarity, and well-being.

There are different paths to mindful practice, such as meditation, breathing exercises, and other techniques that help to focus attention on the present moment. These modalities reduce stress, anxiety, and depression and improve mental and physical health. Many studies prove that young people can benefit from practicing these modalities and that it is helping them navigate a world of distractions.

In the study, “Learning to BREATHE,” the authors conducted a pilot school-based mindfulness program with ethnically diverse at-risk adolescents. Twenty-seven students were randomly assigned to a mindfulness or substance abuse control class that occurred for 50 minutes once a week over one school semester. Reductions in depression were seen for students in the mindfulness class compared to controls. Initially, students’ perceived credibility of the mindfulness class was lower than that of the substance abuse class. Over the semester, the perceived credibility of the mindfulness class increased while that of the substance abuse class decreased. Qualitative acceptability measures revealed that the mindfulness class helped to relieve stress and that students favored continuing the class. (Bluth, K., Campo, R. A., Pruteanu-Malinici, S., Reams, A., Mullarkey, M., & Broderick, P. C. 2015)

Another study from the same “Learning to BREATHE” program involved the health curriculum of an entire class of 120 seniors

at a private girls’ school. The program’s primary goal was to support the development of emotion regulation skills through mindfulness practice. Relative to controls, participants reported decreased negative affect and increased feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance. In addition, improvements in emotion regulation and decreases in tiredness and aches and pains were significant in the treatment group after the program (Broderick, P. C., & Metz, S., 2009).

The research and statistics on mindfulness are plentiful and excellent, but how can a voice teacher implement these practices and still teach voice? It is a fair question. Additionally, what if the parents are opposed to such a practice? The great thing about mindfulness is that we have been practicing it as musicians for millennia. We use breath and breathing exercises to increase our vocal stamina, we think about how things feel in our bodies, we think about our sounds and many other things we do that keep us present during a lesson. However, helping students create skills outside of the lesson is also valuable. Skill building is what teaching and learning singing is all about.

“The research and statistics on mindfulness are plentiful and excellent, but how can a voice teacher implement these practices and still teach voice?”

A parent’s most effective way of teaching their children desired habits or values is by modeling those traits. How can a teacher model mindfulness? Guiding the student in a co-creative process will naturally cause the student to bring more awareness to their lessons. How is this achieved? Questions are one of the best tools. Instead of telling the student what needs to be accomplished or how something sounded, put the student in the driver’s seat. For example, what do you believe needs to be addressed? How did you feel during that section? What feels good right now? What worked well for you?

Students are reasonably capable of telling the teacher what is not working. Encouraging them to begin with what went well can help them start looking for positive experiences. When the teacher gives encouraging comments first, it is another way of modeling desired behaviors. If every comment comes from a place of lack, the student will model that same response. Do the teacher’s words promote an opportunity for growth? “Try” is a word that implies the possibility of failure. Using the word “try” can give some students the impression that there is a probability they cannot do whatever is asked of them. However,

the word “explore” is an invitation that does not promote the possibility of failure. It simply opens the door to investigate without the implied anticipation of failure.

“‘Try’ is a word that implies the possibility of failure ... However, the word ‘explore’ is an invitation that does not promote the possibility of failure.”

You may want to place a sticky note near the piano with some words that could model mindfulness and exploration for your students. Here are a few examples: “experiment,” “notice,” “observe,” “create space or possibility,” etc. How about “receive the breath in” versus “take the breath?” Receiving the breath can imply a passive simple, straightforward task, whereas taking the breath can imply effort. We know that teaching is complex, and we do not expect you to become word police. However, we encourage you to practice mindfulness of your words to improve the lesson and model good choices for your students.

In addition to modeling mindfulness for your students, here are some additional ideas to enrich your lesson time:

1. Begin with breathing exercises: Start the lesson with a few breathwork exercises to help calm the mind and focus attention on the present moment.
2. Encourage body awareness: Encourage your student to become aware of their body posture, breath, and physical sensations during warm-ups and exercises. This helps to create a mind-body connection and promotes mindfulness.
3. Focus on the sound: Encourage your student to focus on the sound of their voice and the sensations in their throat and body as they sing. This can help them stay present and engaged in the moment.
4. Set intentions: Encourage your student to set intentions for each lesson, such as focusing on a particular aspect of their technique or exploring a new musical style. This helps create a sense of purpose and focus, promoting mindfulness.
5. Practice gratitude: At the end of each lesson, encourage your student to reflect on what they learned and express gratitude for the opportunity to practice and improve. This helps to promote a positive mindset and encourages mindfulness.

Overall, creating mindfulness in a voice lesson involves bringing awareness to the present moment, focusing on the task, and creating a sense of purpose and gratitude for the experience.

By implementing these ideas, your studio can become a place of even more joy, wonder, and creative expression to counter all the challenges facing today’s students. In addition, all those positive experiences will create beautiful free singing! Please contact us and let us know your success in implementing these practices or how we can assist further.

References

- <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>
- Bluth, K., Campo, R. A., Pruteanu-Malinici, S., Reams, A., Mullarkey, M., & Broderick, P. C. (2015). A school-based mindfulness pilot study for ethnically diverse at-risk adolescents. *Mindfulness*. Advanced online publication. doi: 10.1007/s12671-014-0376-1
- Broderick, P. C., & Metz, S. (2009). Learning to BREATHE: A pilot trial of a mindfulness curriculum for adolescents. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 2(1), 35–46.
- <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/12/social-media-and-teen-anxiety>
- <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2019/november/dis-like-how-social-media-feeds-into-perfectionism>

Dr. Denise Ritter Bernardini, co-author of “*The Mindfulness of Singing*,” is a sought-after clinician, teacher, presenter. She has presented at The Voice Symposium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the International Congress of Voice Teachers in Stockholm, Sweden; and several National Association of Teachers of Singing regional and state-level clinics. Ritter Bernardini taught voice and opera at the university level for more than 20 years and has performed internationally and throughout the U.S. with orchestra and symphonic organizations as well as opera festivals and companies. Ritter Bernardini has completed more than 40 graduate hours in mental health with an emphasis on mindfulness and performance anxiety pathologies and is a presenter on the mindfulness of singing for educators and singers. Learn more at mindfulnessofsinging.com.

Ms. Toni Crowder, co-author of “*The Mindfulness of Singing*” has extensive background and training as a music educator, music therapist, CYVT (certified YogaVoice® practitioner) and RYT-200 (Yoga Alliance Registered 200-hour yoga teacher) that has helped her create an award-winning independent vocal studio. Recently, as a result of her own mindfulness of singing journey, Crowder has been creating original compositions, singing light jazz, and accompanying herself on the piano for live music venues. Crowder’s most notable role is her original one-woman show as the bright-nosed, goofy-stockinged, song-slinging opera clown “Tessitura.” Crowder has sung a wide variety of operatic roles and guest solo engagements. She previously taught on the voice faculty at Randolph-Macon College, and she is a frequent guest clinician. Learn more at mindfulnessofsinging.com.