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Vocal Cord Injuries and Identity Development in the Young Singer: The Role of a Mentor

by Katie Becker

In September of my senior year of high school, singing – once one of my greatest passions – became the source of the most intense identity crisis I experienced as a teenager. I was diagnosed with a vocal cord pseudo-cyst that effectively halted my once-zealous participation in voice lessons, choirs, and competitions for the rest of my time in high school and the beginning of college. I suddenly found the already difficult questions and challenges of adolescence – Who am I? What is my place in the world? – amplified as my former framework for understanding myself was altered.

Eventually, through surgery, long periods of voice rest, and speech therapy, I was able to resume singing, though with somewhat less fervor than before my injury. While I must still be cognizant of my limitations, I am now a proud mezzo-soprano member of the Duke University Chorale, a source of joy that I had sincerely missed. As I reflect on this incident and its relationship my identity development more broadly, I cannot overstate the importance of my adult mentors – my voice teacher, my high school choir director, and my parents – who supported me the whole way. Although I’m sure that the average voice teacher knows far more about vocal cord problems and anatomy than I ever will, knowing how to support a student dealing with this can be challenging nonetheless. While I don’t claim to have all of the answers, I can offer a few tidbits of wisdom that may help teachers and their young students:

Guard against expressing your own disappointment or frustration...

If you’re a voice teacher or choir director, it’s safe to assume that you’ve invested time, effort, and maybe even your professional reputation into this student. Disappointment and frustration are understandable reactions, but be careful where and when

you express these. Your singer is likely already disappointed or frustrated. Contrary to popular images of teenagers, most adolescents are actually terrified of letting down the adults in their lives. If you choose to express your own feelings, make sure that it’s clear that you’re expressing your disappointment in the unfortunate situation, not in the student. Sure, no voice teacher wants to go from teaching Italian arias to a student to helping



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them re-learn basic vowel shapes. That’s understandable, and you’re allowed to feel that way. But the best way to move through that is to show your student unconditional appreciation and to keep a positive attitude. Don’t forget to let students know that you value them for more than just their talent – their resilience, graciousness, and determination are traits that are equally worthy of praise.

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...But do hold the student accountable for following the plan of treatment.

After my surgery, I was certain that my ordeal would be over. Imagine my chagrin, then, when my throat was infected several times before beginning to truly heal. I grew more and more frustrated, convinced that nothing would work. Despite being the meticulous, conscientious person that I am, I found sticking to my treatment plan extraordinarily difficult. Voice rest after surgery was a mess. I had exhausted so much of my self-control throughout the process, that I made more and more allowances for myself. Sticking to restricted voice use is already hard – to make matters worse, I was dealing with it during my senior prom and graduation. When I started college in the fall, any remaining dedication to my treatment flew out the window, lost in a sea of new conversations and social events.

The voice teacher and other adult mentors play a critical role in empowering the student to follow a plan of treatment, even when it doesn't seem to be paying off. While eagerness to return to singing as before can be a fabulous motivator to follow treatment, when the return isn't as rapid as the singer would like, frustration is a natural consequence. The voice teacher can help the student channel that frustration into dedication rather than dejection. A loss of self-efficacy is a natural consequence of an injury, which may lead singers to believe that treatment is pointless, as they will never succeed the same way they once did. An adult mentor can help the student see the importance of their treatment in the long-term.

Be sensitive to what might trigger the student.

My vocal cord injury had a huge impact on multiple facets of my life, in ways that I couldn't necessarily foresee. I was surprised by what made me upset. For example, while I expected that I would love to see my jazz choir – a group of dear friends – win first place in a festival, I instead found that experience very painful. Not only was it hard to see their joy without truly being able to share it, it also caused me to wonder whether I had ever actually been an asset to the team. Maybe they never needed me, I thought, because they are clearly doing well without me!

The effects extended beyond just music-related facets of life. I had always enjoyed public speaking, but the first time I was called on to speak publicly after my surgery, I almost had a panic attack, feeling that I had lost control over my voice. Furthermore, much to my surprise, I also found myself faced with a religious crisis. Once an avid churchgoer, I almost completely stopped attending church because of the associations it had with singing in my mind. A voice teacher can express care by trying to empathize with the student as much as possible, understanding that the effects of the injury are not limited just to what happens in the studio.

Help the student make meaning of the injury, as he or she is ready.

Anger, sadness, despair are all normal reactions to an injury that may drastically alter an avid singer's way of life. The eventual goal, however, is that the singer will find a way to come to terms with the injury, whether that's through recovery, lifestyle changes, finding a new passion, or some combination of the three. You can play a role in this by helping the student to see him or herself as more than just talent, achievement, and appreciation. Help the student shift from achievement-based self-esteem to unconditional self-acceptance by stressing identity and humanity as separate from achievements and skills. In doing so, you will not only help the student come to terms with the illness, but you will also foster a generally more healthy view of the self. Focus on the positive skills and lessons that the singer has gained from the experience – for example, resilience, compassion, or an appreciation for others' talents. While you should never suggest that an injury was meant-to-be or necessary to teach a lesson, you can help the student understand an unfortunate and regrettable event as something from which valuable lessons can be extrapolated.

A vocal cord injury, however unfortunate, is an opportunity for you, the voice teacher, to help a student develop critical life skills. Through accountability, sensitivity, and appreciation, you can be a source of support in a trying time. Looking back, I don't know how I would have made it through my own injury without the support of my own voice teacher. I credit her and my other adult mentors with helping me emerge from this experience a more resilient and confident young woman.

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