

# How Mindfulness Can Help Us Process Vocal Setbacks and Regain Agency in the Face of Change

By Catherine Kay Brown

## One Singer's Story

**M**y first experience with vocal fold paresis occurred after a bout of flu during my senior year of high school. I sought medical care, but the disorder went undiagnosed for nearly 10 years. I limped through my music degree and found fulfilling work doing public relations for classical music organizations. I stopped performing but couldn't fully let go of my desire to sing. Fortunately, I was in a city — Philadelphia — that offered excellent voice care, and I finally found the help I needed. The paresis in my left vocal cord had made my voice breathy and weak.

Singing had become painful, and I received a secondary diagnosis of muscle tension dysphonia (MTD), a pattern of tension that negatively affects the voice. Intensive singing voice therapy — and an 8-week mindfulness course — helped me release the physical tension and adjust to my new reality. I regained much of my lost range, and my stamina improved dramatically.

I left my public relations career to open a private voice studio specializing in musical theatre voice. I particularly enjoyed working with singers with entrenched technical challenges. I married and started a family. During my second pregnancy, I got the flu again, despite being vaccinated. My voice felt sluggish, so I returned to my laryngologist. This time the diagnosis was bilateral vocal fold paresis and sulcus vocalis (grooved scarring) on one vocal cord. I was offered surgical solutions, but decided against them, as I was busy teaching and raising two young children.

Bilateral paresis with sulcus proved much more challenging than unilateral paresis with MTD. My voice felt maddeningly unpredictable, and voice therapy was less effective than before. I decided to give up performing and began looking for other ways to invest in my own growth. I remembered how mindfulness had helped me overcome MTD, and I began to wonder if it might help others with voice disorders. I searched the scientific literature and realized that no one had studied the subject. That surprised me, as mindfulness-based interventions have been studied in many other clinical contexts including chronic pain, chronic illness, grief related to illness, and medically unexplained symptoms.<sup>1</sup> I



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enrolled in a graduate certificate program in applied mindfulness and ran my own study. The resulting article, "Effects of an 8-Week Mindfulness Course in People with Voice Disorders," is now available in press in *Journal of Voice*.

In the following pages, I would like to share some background about my study and highlight some of the many ways that mindfulness can help struggling singers and people with voice disorders.

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness, as defined Jon Kabat-Zinn, who pioneered the use of mindfulness in clinical contexts, is "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally."<sup>2</sup> Mindfulness takes many forms, including meditation and mindful movement (yoga, tai-chi, qigong). Mindfulness-based interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are structured, multi-week group mindfulness classes led by a trained instructor. Designed for people with chronic health problems, the classes include meditation, movement, and inquiry, a process in which the teacher leads participants in discussion about their experiences. Daily home practice is encouraged with the use of recordings made specifically for the class.

## The Study: Mindfulness in People with Voice Disorders

The objective of my study was to determine whether an 8-week mindfulness course based on the MBSR curriculum and delivered over Zoom could increase mindfulness and lower stress in people with voice disorders, leading to a decrease in vocal handicap.

We recruited 69 people with voice disorders. Thirty-nine participated in the mindfulness course, and 30 were assigned to a waitlist control group. Patients in voice therapy were excluded. Before and after the 8-week timeframe, participants took the Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale, Perceived Stress Scale-10, Voice Handicap Index (VHI), and — for those who self-identified as singers — the Singing Voice Handicap Index (SVHI). Follow-up interviews were conducted with select participants.

When we compared the mindfulness course participants to themselves before and after the course, all outcomes changed significantly in the direction hypothesized. This meant that mindfulness scores increased while stress, VHI, and SVHI scores decreased. The group average VHI score decreased by nearly 11 points with some participants seeing a drop as large as 30 points. (The average decrease in VHI following voice therapy is 13 points.<sup>3</sup>)

When we compared the changes in the mindfulness course participants to the changes in the waitlist control group, two outcomes changed significantly in the direction hypothesized: mindfulness scores increased and VHI scores decreased. (Changes to the stress scores and SVHI scores were not statistically significant. However, numbers were low for the SVHI scores, as only about half the participants identified as singers.)

Follow-up interviews revealed reduced stress, physical tension, and pain/discomfort; increased somatic (or interoceptive) awareness; positive speaking and singing voice changes; community with other voice disorder patients; increased acceptance of the voice disorder; and an increased sense of agency.

## How Mindfulness Can Help Singers and People with Voice Disorders

### Mindfulness can help us respond differently to stress

Singers with or without voice disorders face a variety of challenging stressors. For people with voice disorders, stress can be a causative or an exacerbating factor, potentially worsening the disorder and impeding treatment.<sup>4</sup> Mindfulness may not help us reduce the stressors in our lives, but it can help us respond to them differently. Interestingly, my study did not show a statistically significant change in stress scores among participants when compared to the waitlist control group. (In other words, people still perceived their lives as stressful.) However, follow-up interviews revealed that participants felt mindfulness gave them new ways to manage stressful situations.

**Recommended Practice:** The Sitting Meditation — This classic meditation exercise involves simply sitting and observing the breath as it enters and exits the body. As thoughts or anxieties arise, you acknowledge them without judgment and let them go. It's simple, but far from easy. Unlike in voice pedagogy or voice therapy, breathing in a mindfulness class is non-prescriptive. We notice our breath as it already is without trying to change it.

### Mindfulness can reduce tension, discomfort, and pain

Voice disorder patients frequently experience physical tension and discomfort in their throats.<sup>5</sup> Mindfulness can help them release this tension and reduce chronic pain. Practicing mindfulness in combination with voice therapy helped me recover from MTD. (I still experience some neck tension, but it no longer negatively affects my voice.) In my study, several participants who experienced dramatic drops in VHI had a diagnosis of primary or secondary MTD, though the study was too small to draw statistically significant conclusions based on diagnosis.

**Recommended Practice:** The Body Scan — This meditation encourages you to gently bring awareness to each area of the body. In the recording used in my study, we spent extra time on the neck, tongue, and jaw. Participants were encouraged to approach these areas with compassion and acceptance. (In making the recording, I created the Body Scan experience that I wanted for myself when I had MTD.)

### Mindfulness can increase somatic awareness, leading to faster vocal change

Singing lessons and voice therapy are both designed to facilitate behavioral vocal change. For voice disorder patients without prior vocal training, this process can feel daunting. Even highly trained singers may find that when something goes wrong, they need to become particularly aware of the interplay between body and voice. Mindfulness has been shown to increase somatic (or interoceptive) awareness.<sup>6</sup> This component of mindfulness may make vocal learning more efficient for anyone who has low somatic awareness or is new to voice work.

**Recommended Practice:** The Body Scan (see above) and Yoga — I recommend practicing yoga with a voice-knowledgeable yoga therapist. Examples include Sarah Whitten and YogaVoice® founder Mark Moliterno, who both work in person and online.

### Group mindfulness practice helps us feel less alone

Practicing mindfulness in a group has been shown to produce better outcomes than practicing alone. The popular press frequently touts the health benefits of mindfulness, but rarely states that those benefits are almost always gained in group settings. (In MBSR classes, the group effect is said to account for 7% of measurable positive outcomes.<sup>7</sup>)

Many voice disorder patients, particularly those with rare, chronic, or severe voice problems, do not know anyone else

with similar struggles. Singers with voice disorders often fear sharing their experiences due to stigma. The group format of a mindfulness class helps participants feel less alone. Voice disorder patients often experience a profound sense of relief when talking about their problems with people who sound like them. I suspect that vocally healthy performers would also benefit from learning mindfulness techniques in community with their peers.

**Recommended Courses:** Mindfulness for People with Voice Disorders or a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction class — Practicing mindfulness alone or with recordings is akin to practicing voice alone or with recorded exercises. Like a voice teacher, a skilled mindfulness teacher can guide the learning process and help you overcome any difficulties or misconceptions that inevitably arise. The group aspect of a mindfulness class adds additional benefits, including a sense of community and deeper growth, as participants learn from each other's experiences.

### Mindfulness can help us move through grief

In a voice disordered population, grief quickly comes to the surface as people discuss their vocal limitations. Singers may grieve the ability to sing certain repertoire or to perform at all. Patients who need to carefully ration use of their speaking voice may lose friendships and miss out on social opportunities. A mindfulness teacher can help them begin to acknowledge and move through grief. Mindfulness encourages reappraisal, a process by which we reframe the meaning of difficult events.<sup>8</sup> Singers without voice disorders can benefit from mindfulness as a tool to process difficult experiences and emotions, such as rejection, disappointment, and change.

**Recommended Practice:** The Mountain Meditation — This beautiful and descriptive meditation invites you to imagine yourself as a mountain: calm and still, despite constant change.

### Mindfulness can lead to acceptance

For anyone who struggles with self-criticism, including judging their own voice, mindfulness can provide a pathway towards acceptance. For patients whose voice disorder has drastically altered their life or career, acceptance may feel threatening. They may need to view acceptance as a long-term goal. It may help to reframe acceptance as an active, rather than passive, process. For example, acceptance doesn't mean stopping treatment or refusing to explore new clinical

options. You can accept your voice as it is while still trying to achieve specific vocal goals. But mindfulness teaches us that we naturally resist difficult experiences and that learning to accept them — to the degree that we are able — reduces suffering. Any experience of frustration, grief, or self-criticism is an opportunity to practice acceptance, which can be a powerful antidote to perfectionism.

**Recommended Practice:** The Lovingkindness Meditation — In this exercise, you are invited to practice extending lovingkindness to someone you know and love, to someone you feel neutral about, to someone you dislike, to yourself, and to the world at large. In my mindfulness classes, I invite participants to extend lovingkindness to their voice, thanking it for the ways it serves them. This can be both challenging and deeply rewarding for those who feel their voice has let them down.

### Mindfulness can increase agency

Mindfulness can restore a sense of agency to singers and voice disorder patients. Defined as “a term which encompasses self-efficacy, locus of control, and other related constructs,”<sup>9</sup> agency erodes when we have little control over or understanding of what is happening to us.

Mindfulness can increase our sense of agency by highlighting what we can and cannot control. A spasmodic dysphonia patient may not be able to control their vocal spasms, but they can change how they respond to the frustration of being misunderstood. A performer who experiences rejection cannot control the casting process, but they may be able to create their own performance opportunities. Accepting difficult things allows us to save our energy for situations where it can make a difference.

**Recommended Practice:** Expanding Awareness Meditation — Here we focus on the breath, then add awareness of the body, sound, thoughts, and emotions. Then we go into “choiceless awareness” in which we simply notice whatever arises internally or externally. This exercise often helps us notice patterns of thinking or feeling that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

### The Limits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness may not be appropriate for people who have an active addiction; are suicidal; or have untreated psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or anxiety.

In my study, some participants saw no change to their Voice Handicap Index scores but found that the course positively changed their relationship with their voice. Patients with moderate to severe VHI scores seemed to benefit most, so it is possible that milder voice disorders are less responsive to mindfulness. Three high level classical singers who were mildly disordered saw little to no vocal benefit from the course. However, they reported starting out with high levels of somatic awareness, and they had performed successfully with their voice disorders for years. (Unfortunately, the study was too small to draw statistically significant conclusions about how mindfulness may affect patients differently according to the severity of their vocal handicap.)

## Conclusions

Singers and singing teachers face many challenges that lie beyond our control. Our voices are susceptible to illness, injury, and aging. Environmental factors may take a toll, and economic and technological changes affect our work in countless ways. Mindfulness can give us tools to respond to difficult changes. It may be able to improve our singing (by increasing somatic awareness and reducing unnecessary tension) while also addressing the stressors of life as performers and pedagogues (loss, rejection, aging, isolation, anxiety).

For me, mindfulness has opened a career path that has allowed me to work closely with people whose vocal struggles are far more debilitating than mine. When we talk about acceptance in my mindfulness classes, my students frequently ask me if I have learned to accept my own voice disorders. My answer, which continues to surprise me, is a resounding “yes.” My vocal rehabilitation taught me so much about how the voice works and what kinds of problems singers encounter when something goes wrong. I learned to look for and resolve patterns of physical tension and to listen for underlying health problems that technique alone can’t fix. I would never have chosen to have a voice disorder, and I may still choose vocal surgery. But my vocal struggles have made me who I am and have increased my humility, empathy, and self-compassion: all essential skills for a teacher of voice and mindfulness.

- For upcoming mindfulness courses or to purchase the mindfulness recordings used in the study, visit [catherinekbrown.com/mindfulness](http://catherinekbrown.com/mindfulness).
- For other voice-related mindfulness resources, visit [mindfulvoicecollaborative.com/resources](http://mindfulvoicecollaborative.com/resources). I curated this

list with voice specialist speech-language pathologist Julia Gerhard, CCC-SLP, DMA.

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