

## **Common Speech Problems in North America or Why Breathing Is Awesome**

by Jamie Henigman

The way that we speak is learned from our parents, community, teachers, friends & even television. Our speech is also shaped by how we think of ourselves throughout our life & what roles we wish to play. Some people may speak in a harsh, throaty voice to a close friend, & very softly & high pitched to a boss or client. The different ways of using the voice is based on wanting to be perceived a certain way. How we intent to speak informs our breath of how to take the next one, & the breath also informs the following sounds. So how we speak informs us how we will breath & how we breath informs us of how we speak. How we speak not only allows us to be perceived differently, it can also benefit or hinder our health.

Here you will see two common problems found in speech therapy in North America, Mouth breathing & Vocal Fry – how they can harm a patient & some things you can do to alleviate them. The use of the breath throughout the body is used to treat each, & it will become apparent at how interconnected to breath, voice, mind & body really are.

Common breathing problems that lead to an unhealthy voice:

### **^ Mouth Breathing**

People who often have plugged noses due to colds, allergies, smoking or other irritants, will find themselves breathing only through their mouths out of habit. This habitual forcing open of the mouth while having the nosed closed will begin tensing muscles around the eyes, nose & jaw (TMJ is a chronic tensing of muscles around the jaw which can usually cause one to grind ones teeth at night). Having tense muscles around the eyes & nose will begin to shut down the flow of blood & lymphatic drainage in the area, this can cause a permanently closed nose over time.

On an energetic level, closing the nose will block a huge amount of energy in & out of your system. According to Ayurvedic Breathing practices our chi runs in & out of our systems through or noses. The left nostril brings in our Yin energies (for rest & relaxation) & our right nostril brings in our Yang energies (for drive & movement). If one nostril is permanently blocked then the corresponding energies will be blocked. Such as a client of mine who has a deviated septum in his left nostril: he is constantly in movement & initially came to me in order to learn how to relax.

Ayurvedic Breathing teaches that “he who controls the breath, controls his destiny”, so it goes to reason that “he who does not control his breath, does not control his destiny”. For someone who is a chronic Mouth Breather, they are unable to control how much yin or yang goes in or out of their systems. If they breath heavily their throat will get dry, their neck is always tight from bearing the extra work of breathing through an unnatural shape.

On a biological level, those who always keep their noses closed cannot smell what is around them. Though smell is not a sense we usually talk about apart from food, smell is a key sense for our intuitive brain. A good sense of smell can tell you a lot about the room your in, & the people you're close to, even if you're not always consciously aware of these things.

### **How can you tell if someone chronically breaths through their mouth?**

If you notice someone breathing through their mouth, possibly sniffing, they may have a cold. If they don't have a cold, or say that they have had this cold for a long time, they may be chronically breathing only through their mouth. Here are some signs that someone is chronically breathing through their mouth:

- ^ the most obvious thing is that they will often have their mouth slightly open
- ^ their nostrils are very motionless, as no air will be moving through them
- ^ usually their voice sounds somewhat to very-much is the chest
- ^ they complain of colds often, or of a sore throat
- ^ they will have difficulty hitting higher notes, if they were asked to do a vocal sweep from low to high they would likely cut off before hitting any light, higher frequencies
- ^ Overtone singing will be “way over their head”

### **Ways to help someone with chronic mouth breathing**

The most important thing to do is to open up the nose first then get air moving through it. Once those two things are established they can begin to resonate their nose with sound. Until then it's up to the tuning forks &/or sound healer to resonate the nostrils, & the facial muscles. Here are some suggestions, in order of treatment, for helping a chronic mouth breather:

- ⤴ Resonate, massage, & move the nostrils & face. Facial massages from the base of the nose along the jaw line are good. Massage the sinus cavities.
- ⤴ Once the nose is open, have them breath through their noses, I like
  - ⤴ The heart breath – Breathing in using the beginning of a yawn, opening your mouth, nose, neck & chest (heart) & expanding them all, this usually causes a natural 'a' sighing sound on the exhalation. or;
  - ⤴ The fire breath – Where you breath in & out of only the nose, only pulsing your diaphragm on the exhalation, relaxing for the inhalation.
- ⤴ Have them use sounds like 'ee' or diphthongs like “we” or “ee-a-o-u-eh-ee” to get into their higher, nasal resonances. This will wake up their nose & face.
- ⤴ Have them practice speaking or singing in different ranges of their voice, get them laughing too.

Many problems related to mouth breathing can be easily remedied by awareness of the body, the breath & the emotions related to it. With physical tension comes stuck emotions as well. Inside the nose of someone who may have spent a lifetime breathing through their mouth are memories of weakness & fatigue, sickness, endless struggle, possibly forgotten tears. During the process of opening ones nose one may be faced with challenges, but with the opening of the nose also comes an opening to a new possible world of connection to the body, mind & spirit.

### **Vocal Fry**

According to researchers in speech therapy, Vocal Fry is becoming wide spread in North America. It is not directly related to Mouth Breathing, someone may have both problems, one, or neither. Chronic use of Vocal Fry causes chronic neck tension & tongue tension, which may in turn cause facial tension and nasal tension & finally closed nasal passages causing mouth breathing. In many cases chronic Vocal Fry can also cause a very nasal sound in the voice (a very nasal sound can also have a blocked nose).

Our American/Canadian english accents have often been blamed for the ever continuing spreading of vocal fry in North America. One example of vocal fry in media would be Britney Spears. Vocal Fry may be described as the “Valley girl voice”. Though the term implies women as the example, are men just as likely to have vocal fry as women? While women with vocal fry may be heard as valley girls, men with vocal fry may be heard as having the “smokers voice”, or the “tough guy voice”.

### **How to tell if someone has Vocal Fry?**

- ⤴ The most prominent characteristic of Vocal Fry is that the voice creates more of a 'noise' then a 'sound', meaning that the sound becomes inharmonic while the speaker is using vocal fry. You should not be able to discern any one frequency from their voice.
- ⤴ It's a very low, almost rhythmic noise made by the voice when the vocal cords are forced together while air is pushed through them. This sound is similar to Tuvan throat singers, however their technique is completely different, which allows them to create this sound easily & with longevity.
- ⤴ If you were to do a frequency analysis of someones voice with vocal fry, the point at which they were speaking with vocal fry would show up as an abnormally low note for they range (maybe even as low as 30 Hz). This frequency is not part of their natural range & is caused by vocal fry.
- ⤴ People who practice vocal fry often will also have a harsh onset when they speak or sing.

### **Ways to help someone with Vocal Fry**

Vocal Fry is related to lack of breath while someone speaks or breaths. Vocal Fry can also occur when someone is tired & having to still use their voice, since they're less likely to engage their breath enough to speak to any volume. So to compensate they must use their neck muscles to pull the extra weight, this bares great stress on the vocal cords, & helps to tighten the tongue, jaw, & facial muscles. So the more important aspects here are appropriate breath & energy while they speak.

Here are some suggestions to help someone with Vocal Fry:

- ^ Practice low breathing – breathing very low into the pelvis as well as Heart Breath & Fire Breath
- ^ Have them stretch & massage their neck & shoulders
- ^ Have them practice the “h” sound to get enough breath supporting their voice, 'Ham' would be perfect here
- ^ Have them practice 'mm' sounds & have them resonate their whole body
- ^ Using different sounds (likely lower sounds) have them try to find where the sound resonates their chest (they may need to put their hands over their chest to feel it.)
- ^ Have them practice toning, or chanting in which every out breath is a tone, this is to encourage them to keep the breath going not only at the beginning of their sound, but right until the end.

Along with the physical therapies to help someone with Vocal Fry one should keep in mind that Vocal Fry is somewhat cultural and so friends or relatives may be giving the speaker powerful signals to speak like them, with vocal fry. Again, awareness of the problem & how to solve it through the breath is key. In changing someone's speaking habits they will also change how they view themselves, keep this shift in mind while allowing someone to improve themselves.

These common vocal problems are simply an example of the different changes we as sound healers may come across in our patients. The most consistent thing to listen for is purity of tone, easy range of tone & range of volume in the voice. Voices that come across as inharmonic (not a tone) generally bear some sign of stress of the vocal tract. Voices that seem to always be shouting or always almost whispering may indicate that the speaker does not have full control over their voice.

Not having the full control over one's voice can be life crippling. Many people choose to isolate themselves from their community if they cannot be understood. Since so many problems with the voice extend from breathing problems, or a closed nose, it's worth considering these problems when meeting with a new patient. If these issues are addressed early the possibilities are endless, but if they are missed a sound healer may spend years trying to encourage a patient to use sound on themselves only to have the patient give up out of frustration of never having any range.

On an energetic level the breath must be open in the heart, but powered by the solar chakra. In order for someone to take full control of their breath they must control their diaphragm. If there is tension around the solar plexus (this is very common when someone is stressed) the diaphragm will not have full mobility. If the solar plexus is too tight the Fire Breath will be practically impossible, but something to work towards. Making loud, powerful noises can help awaken the solar chakra, & will give that patient more inner strength (both physically & spiritually).

By becoming aware of the challenges that people face with their voices, I hope you have come to a better understanding of how to recognize these issues & treat them.