

THE DOMINION POST  
**You**



**Speak up!**



The voice is a beautiful, powerful instrument, but sadly underplayed. So stop mumbling! Speak out and sing your voice's praises as though your happiness and health depended on it, says an expert.

Spiders, fine. Snakes, sure. Public speaking? Eurgh, you must be kidding.

Despite being blessed with a magnificent instrument called the human voice, capable of hitting every note on the piano while simultaneously dripping with emotion, most of us would rather run a mile than use it in public. Given the chance to express ourselves with a few well-chosen words or, heaven forbid, a song, we'd modestly restrict our vocal talent to, 'Er, no thanks,' in a safe, grey monotone.

Is this appropriate use of the single most effective form of communication? Studies repeatedly show that what you say is far less important than how you say it - try that with an email or text message. The voice is direct, effective, with the potential to convey mood and hidden meaning - an incredibly powerful tool. So why are so many of us afraid to speak out?

'We live our lives today with an enormous amount of entertainment. TV, computers, musicians, everything is done for us so we don't get a lot of experience in standing up for ourselves and presenting ourselves,' says Mikal Nielsen, a voice and singing coach based in Hawke's Bay. Gone are the times of family sing-alongs around the piano, or playing games to engage each other. 'We're more likely to go into our own little world and hide behind a screen or go to a concert where it's always someone else entertaining us.'

When success depends so much on high levels of confidence

and creativity, these habits leave us short. To get where you want to be it's imperative to sell yourself well, whether you're in a job interview or want to run your own business. 'So many people in this country lack confidence when they're in front of other people, definitely in singing but also just speaking. When I teach courses, many find it a real challenge just to say who they are and where they're from,' says Nielsen, who has taught voice-exploration for six years.

As kids, we start off with full, melodic voices; this is only whittled away after years of being told 'shut up' or 'don't quit the day job' when we attempt a merry little warble. A recent study even revealed that a hearty Kiwi accent makes you sound like a thicket - just what a voice needs to send it scurrying to the back of the throat.

So how do you know if your vocal chords are on form? 'The ideal voice is healthy, open and happy, with no tension or restriction. There is total freedom and openness,' says Nielsen. Common signs of tension include tightness in the throat or a sore, ragged voice if you've been speaking a lot. If your voice is squeaky, at the wrong pitch, or just doesn't project, you will probably know it better than anyone.

#### Healthy projections

Apart from being the fastest ticket to wherever you want to go in life, a free-flow voice is also important for health.

'The voice is a natural part of our being with the capacity to sing seven or eight octaves,'

says Nielsen. 'It's there to be used. If you don't, it's like walking around with your eyes shut or earmuffs on. You'd be pretty sad and it's just not healthy.'

He speaks from experience; as you'd expect from a true convert, he believes that finding his singing voice after 30 years changed his life. 'I had health problems relating to digestion. I woke up in pain in my tummy every morning, every day of my life. I'd been in and out of hospital; they even cut me open and couldn't find anything wrong. I was going through all the alternative practitioners when I discovered singing and after a while, all my pain had totally gone.'

Singing helps on three levels. First, it teaches you to breathe properly so you constantly replenish the lungs with fresh, life-giving oxygen. Asthmatics who take Nielsen's courses often go a whole weekend without medication, just because they have started breathing properly.

Secondly, there appears to be a healing power within the vibrations caused by the voice. Ancient schools of thought in India, Tibet, Greece and Egypt all taught the power of sound - vibration was held to be the basic creative force of the universe. It has something to do with molecules of the body resonating at a 'correct' frequency. When that frequency alters, body parts vibrate out of harmony, creating disease. Realigning the balance with the correct sound frequency starts the healing process.

Nielsen says he can create a tone to set the molecules in any part of his body aquiver. If he has a pain in his knee, he can find a note, which resonates with that knee, and start the healing process.

Batty – or not? What is ultrasound therapy, after all?

Finally, the voice is fine instrument for improving mental health, self-esteem, confidence and all that jazz. Nielsen used to teach meditation as a tool for personal growth until he came across voice work. He prefers it because it's gentle and much

more fun. There's nothing like a good singsong to put you in a happy mood. 'Look at people singing and you'll see the joy that's available to them,' he says.

Plus, it's a way to the heart and the soul. 'Can you name one religion that doesn't have singing as part of it? It wouldn't be there if it didn't have a connection to our spiritual side,' he says.

Mikal Nielsen's next Wellington courses:

Learn to Sing

5-6 October, non-residential course in Lower Hutt, \$185  
Contact Margie McAlpine, 04-589 3535

Healing with your Voice  
11-13 October, two-night residential course at Saddle Creek Farm Retreat in Waikanae, \$275 includes accommodation and meals.  
Contact Kim Armstrong, 04-971 2238

Nielsen's book, *The Heart of Your Voice*, is due out next month. Contact him at [sounds.easy@clear.net.nz](mailto:sounds.easy@clear.net.nz) or call 06-870 7272 for details.

## Open your Voice Box

Try these exercises to awaken your true voice:

1. Diaphragm breathing. Stand up, put one hand on your tummy and take a big breath. Does your tummy move out or does the breath get stuck in your upper chest? Your entire rib cage should expand as the air goes right down to your diaphragm. This is the engine of your voice.
2. Sigh practice. Stand up, take a deep breath and let it out as one long groan or sigh: 'Aaaaaaaaah.' Don't be shy and breathy, add some good loud noise, and smile while you do it. It's good for opening up your voice, releasing tension and getting to know your sounds.
3. Yawn practice. Take a big breath and let it out as a shameless yawn. It opens your mouth, throat and breathing. It's very good for health, clearing your lungs of all the stale air that's been hanging around for days.
4. Jaw release. Take the middle three fingers of one hand and see if your mouth can open wide enough to fit their width. If they don't fit comfortably, you keep excess tension in your jaw. Do this regularly (in a safe place) to open up the mouth, face, throat and breathing.