Broadcaster Stress: A Chronic Problem

by Ann S. Utterback, Ph.D.

My path to becoming a Broadcast Voice Specialist began twenty-seven years ago as a university instructor and was based on Hilda Fisher's classic text.

I thought to improve voice, students had to learn every cartilage in the larynx and all the muscles involved in vocal production. This was helpful (and it certainly made composing multiple choice test questions easier!) but as I read Lessac and Linklater, I began to see there was more to improving voice than memorizing body parts.

When I left teaching after sixteen years to become a Broadcast Voice Specialist, I was amazed to learn that most broadcasters have almost no knowledge of vocal production. This first became apparent in 1988 when I was asked to give a lecture at the Radio-Television News Directors International Conference in Las Vegas. They assured me I would have a group of around thirty news directors in attendance. To my amazement, over three hundred people poured into my lecture.

As I explained the basics of vocal production, many stood during the entire two-hours, and they all took copious notes.

This experience motivated me to write my first text for broadcasters, Broadcast Voice Handbook. In this book I limited my naming of body parts, but I held onto my traditional approach to voice. When I began working with broadcasters, I still had the misconception that voice work was mechanical. It was as if I could take someone's larynx out like a carburetor in a car and fix it and then put it back into their body, and things would run smoothly. What I found repeatedly, however, was that I could teach clients everything I knew about voice and load them down with vocal exercises, but if stress was a factor, the problems they were experiencing would return.

And stress is a chronic problem with broadcasters. There is no profession more demanding than being on-air. Even a brain surgeon can take a break during surgery and actors can force an exit if they absolutely must. On live television, there's no option to walk off the set or ask for a time out.

I began to see that fixing vocal problems alone was not the answer. The only way improvement lasted was when I also investigated stress and lifestyle issues that might be impeding vocal improvement. To continue the car analogy, stress is like dirty gasoline. If you put a clean carburetor in a car with dirty gasoline, it will malfunction again. All the benefits of your work will be lost, and you'll have to continue to clean the carburetor over and over.

In my practice now, I've found that well over half of my clients do not suffer from what I used to consider vocal problems. They suffer from stress problems that sabotage their vocal production. This realization, supported by the work of other professionals like Patsy Rodenberg, prompted me to change the direction of my work. Stress reduction is now an integral part of my consultations, and my newest book, Broadcaster's Survival Guide: Staying Alive in the Business, focuses on these issues completely.

Since I have realized the magnitude of stress-related problems, I am observing them more often. I have many clients who suffer from panic attacks which I have found are the best kept secret in the news business.

One television anchor had worked with me for months because she wanted to improve her breathing. When she lost her breathing rhythm she told me she would get hot all over and feel like she was going to faint. I had instructed her in proper breathing techniques to use when reading from the TelePrompTer, but the problem persisted. This made no sense to me until she happened to mention that her problem began about the time she and her husband separated. She said because of the stress of work and the divorce she had barely been sleeping four hours a night. She was eating only a few rushed bites of food a day and using caffeine to keep herself going. The additional layer of stress of the divorce had been more than she could handle, and she had begun some stress-inducing practices that exacerbated her breathing problems and could have led to panic attacks. Had I known about the divorce, I would have suggested some lifestyle changes to help her take better care of herself during this stressful time like exercise, proper nutrition, and relaxation breaks.

We all know that a tense body will produce a tense voice. Stress problems and vocal problems are inseparable, and I have learned that any voice work with broadcasters should begin with a thorough evaluation of lifestyle and stress issues.

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Broadcast Voice Handbook
Professional broadcasters aren't born with great voices. They work at it. This classic manual helps students and professionals find their best broadcast voices.  

Broadcaster's Survival Guide: Staying Alive in the Business
No profession is more stressful than broadcasting. Broadcaster's Survival Guide describes survival techniques to help everyone in broadcasting recognize stresses and deal with them in healthy ways.  

Two texts by broadcast voice specialist:
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