Vocal Dysphoria & Staying Motivated

From the Vocal Congruence Project - vocalcongruence.org/#dysphoria

What is Vocal Dysphoria?

Gender dysphoria generally refers to distress and discomfort due to a mismatch, or incongruence between gender and sex assigned at birth. Dysphoria may also relate to the ways one's gender iss perceived by others, and how they are treated as a result. Vocal dysphoria is a term used to describe experiences of voice- or speech-related gender dysphoria. We can view this as two related concepts:

Intrinsic/Personal Voice Dysphoria: Hearing one's voice causes feelings of discord and upset
Extrinsic/Relational Voice Dysphoria: Others hearing one's voice gets them misgendered, which causes feelings of discord and upset.

In this latter definition, this encompasses experiences beyond explicit misgendering, including the thought or risk of being misgendered, or facing any other social consequence. Like nearly all things relating to vocal congruence, that can extend beyond gender. Consider, for example, an individual with an accent who does not mind their own speech but experiences discrimination because of it.

Regardless of your experience with vocal dysphoria, it is important to acknowledge how difficult it can make practicing a new target voice. While there is no simple fix, there are some strategies that may allow you to progress toward your voice goals.

Practicing While Dysphoric

Dysphoria can be incredibly demotivating and can make you want to do absolutely nothing with your voice. This means it is easy to lose momentum, and even a brief stall can turn into a backslide. Therefore, practicing while dysphoric can help us maintain momentum, and even process dysphoria and related emotions.

Suggestions below range from reflection to speaking tasks. Pick and choose whichever feels relevant, useful, and doable.

Breath Work

No matter how dysphoric we might be, we still have to breathe. Modifying the breath can be a productive task to support your voice, without ever having to use your voice or even think about its sound.

Regardless of your goals, to support modifications to your voice, we need strong breath support. Try taking full breaths that fill your abdomen. This indicates your diaphragm is working as it should. Practice a slow, long breath through your nose, and a slow, long exhale through pursed lips.

Whisper Resonance

Resonance is the way sound is affected by the size and shape of the vocal tract (learn more in our resource, Voice Fundamentals & Effects of Hormone Replacement Therapy). While we often practice modifying the sound of the voice, we can also adjust the resonant qualities of just a whisper or a breath.

For example, try panting, aiming to sound like a big dog. Notice how the movement of air sounds. Then, pant again, aiming to sound like a small dog. Listen for the difference. You've likely achieved the difference between a larger space (perceived more masculine) and a smaller space (perceived more feminine). If you're feeling up to it, you can turn this into full sound. If not, you can continue to practice this with just your breath. Many resonance exercises can be practiced in this manner.

Listening Exercises & Goal Reflection

Listening to the voices of others can help us tune our ears to gendered aspects of the voice, clarify concepts, and develop our goals. Pay a bit of extra attention to those around you. This can be people in your life, strangers out and about, characters or celebrities, etc.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What do I notice about that voice? Is it notable in any specific way (e.g., that person's voice is particularly high)
- What do you like about it? Any aspects you might enjoy if they were present in your own voice?
- How does the voice change and flow throughout a sentence or conversation?
- What personality features does it convey?

Learn more in our resource, "Exploring Your Voice Goals"

Isolating Features

Isolating features means picking just one narrow aspect of the voice to focus on. When we evaluate our voice progress, we commonly reach for the question, “does that sound (feminine/masculine/etc).” In this exercise, we change that question to be more neutral (“am I making the change I am aiming for?”)

Let’s use pitch as an example. If someone aiming for a feminine voice listens back to a recording, they might think “that voice wasn’t feminine at all.” This can easily lead to dysphoria and self doubt. However, by focusing on pitch as an isolated feature, our analysis shifts to “I wasn’t changing my pitch as much as I was aiming for.”

This is neutral and actionable: I *can* raise my pitch on my next attempt.

Auditory Masking

Auditory masking refers to speaking while wearing headphones with masking noise (e.g., white noise). This prevents you from hearing your own voice. You can rely on the feedback of a practice partner, or record your voice for review at a later (and ideally less dysphoric) time. Or, you can just use auditory masking to get used to the physical sensations of voice production, with no pressure on how you sound. This strategy also helps us build and maintain habits, even when hearing the voice is the last thing we want to do.

Affirming Facilitators

Buffer practice with things that make you feel confident and affirmed. For example, wear a favorite outfit, a new outfit, or makeup that helps you feel confident. This may also be a process of exploration. Try new things (outfits, accessories, etc) and see if they help you access a little more freedom and exploration in your communication. Whether it is a suit or a ballgown, you may find a new outfit shifts the way you hold your body, and that voice and speech patterns follow accordingly. Can’t step into a new outfit? Some people find that imagining themselves wearing certain outfits is just as useful as the real deal.

You can also speak to supportive friends or family, or plan to independently practice prior to a therapy session, so that you can debrief your feelings. Think about your overall sources of support and gender euphoria. How might you layer your voice practice into those things?

Positive Headspace

The right headspace can make practice more manageable and productive. Set an intention to not bully yourself, and to be open to learning everything that your vocal instrument can do.

Prepare yourself for the possibility that some sounds might come out of your mouth that you find unnatural or unattractive, and that you will try to accept your voice in all its forms.

Working on Vocal Dysphoria Itself

Many individuals seek gender-affirming voice and communication training because they experience vocal dysphoria. Their logic is that if they change the way they talk, the vocal dysphoria will disappear. While that is certainly true for some, it is not true for everyone.

Some individuals make amazing strides with their voice and still have strong vocal dysphoria, whereas others cannot even engage in basic practice tasks because their vocal dysphoria serves as a debilitating barrier. In some cases, even the best attempts to modify voice and speech can contribute to dangerously high levels of vocal dysphoria.

There are no specific tools or resources designed just for addressing vocal dysphoria, however, from our work with countless clients, we are confident that it is possible to move from a difficult or distressing relationship with the voice to one that is compassionate and accepting, regardless of whether a “target voice” has been achieved.

Below are some methods that explore your relationship with your voice and voice progress, without centering a change in the sound directly.

Reflections

If you find that your vocal dysphoria serves as a stick in your own wheel, consider reflecting on your relationship with your voice. This can be done with or without the support of an affirming mental health provider, but try your best to bring your most compassionate self to the table. Consider the following:

- Imagine that your voice is another person or entity. If you were having a conversation with your Voice, how would it go? What would you say to it? How would it respond?
- Reflect on how much you ask of your voice versus how much support you give to it. Are you kind to yourself with regard to voice and communication? If not, are you willing to try to be?
- Imagine a two-sided scale. Consider how much weight you are putting on the final outcome (e.g., “I want to have a perfect voice”) versus how much weight you are putting on developing a process for regular practice toward that outcome. If the scale is tipped strongly toward the final outcome, it might be worth identifying some ways you can round out your practice.

Redefining “Progress”

It can be easy to get into the mindset that progress means “my voice sounds different.” While an important goal, it’s not the only one! Progress comes in many different forms.

- **Increased comfort with exploration** - “I feel less embarrassed about the sounds that will come out of my mouth as I try new things.”
- **Increased knowledge of the voice** - “I know how my voice works, and how the changes I am seeking are made.”
- **Increased familiarity with your voice** - “I know the bounds of my voice and what it can do.”
- **Increased confidence using a new voice** - “I feel up for trying to make this change with a new person, or in a new setting”
- **Improved relationship with the voice** - “Thinking about my voice no longer causes feelings of hopelessness or failure.”
- **Increased understanding of goals** - “I realized I want my voice to convey X, Y, & Z features in order for it to sound like *me*.”
- **Increased understanding of identity** - “Exploring my voice helped me realize that I’m seeking a more androgynous expression that I previously realized.”
- **Increased routine or focus on voice practice** - “I am practicing every single day.”

Just as you don’t expect physical change immediately after any given workout session, be patient with yourself and trust the process of committed practice. We’d like to share two important metaphors that will set you up for success.

The Purpose of Practice

Practicing your voice is like learning an instrument, not going to the gym.

“Going to the gym” here refers to the idea that if we do a voice task enough times, we will build the strength to do it better/easier/etc. This is *partially* true for the voice. However, when modifying the voice, we are less concerned with the actual strength of the muscles, and are more focused on their coordination. Thus, we prefer to think of the voice as an instrument.

Practice makes perfect, but that practice must include 1) awareness of “on target” and “off target” performance, 2) the knowledge of how to improve each try, and 3) the motivation to try again.

Without this self-analysis and calibration, you can do countless reps of any voice exercise and still not see notable benefit, which can lead to losing motivation. So, think about voice training not just as a collection of exercises, but as a means of exploring what your voice is capable of.

The Stages of Practice

The early stages of voice practice are like flying a plane, while the later stages are like driving a car.

Imagine you’re in the cockpit of a plane. In it, you see countless dials, buttons, switches, and knobs. You don’t know what any of them do, but you know that in the hands of a skilled pilot,

this plane can get off the ground. *(Importantly, we are assuming you are not a pilot for the purposes of this metaphor).*

When you first start voice training, you'll learn brand new concepts (pitch, resonance, weight, intonation, and so many more). It can feel overwhelming, but with time and experience, you'll get a sense for what these concepts mean and how they work together. If you're working with a provider, you can think about them as your co-pilot, there to provide the help you need.

Eventually, you're able to get the plane off the ground (ie, find a voice that you like the sound of). When we reach this stage, voice training becomes more like driving a car.

Imagine you're in the driver's seat of a car. You'll see a *few* controls—the wheels, pedals, etc—, and compared to the plane, they're a bit more manageable. You turn the key, and you're ready to go. It's not entirely automatic. You're (hopefully) using your turn signal, checking your mirrors, etc. However, this is a much more passive process than the initial skill building you just went through.

When you're at this stage of voice training, the focus is on taking the voice you've developed and making it easier to access and easier to maintain.

Having mismatched expectations with your stage of practice is a recipe for losing your motivation. If we expect all the pieces to click before we even have the pieces, it's easy to be discouraged. Think about where you're at with your practice (it's okay if it doesn't map onto the metaphor exactly - voice training is rarely a perfectly linear process). What are reasonable expectations for yourself? Mastery of a specific skill vs pulling pieces together? High mental effort vs low mental effort?

Tools for Staying Motivated

Developing a Vocal Practice Hierarchy

A vocal practice hierarchy is a list of situations–ordered from the easiest to the most difficult–that you encounter in your life and that require use of your voice. This can help guide practice, explore your emotions around using a new voice, and help make the leap from practicing in private to using a congruent voice publicly. A hierarchy can include as many situations as you can think of. It's important for your practice hierarchy to include situations that are specifically relevant to you and your life. A short example, ordered from easiest to most difficult, looks like this:

Easiest to use my target voice

Practicing privately at home
Talking to pets and plants
Spending time at a friend's house



Ordering a coffee
Having a low-stakes conversation (e.g., customer service at Wal-Mart)
Giving a presentation to a client at work
Going on a first date

Hardest to use my target voice

To put situations in order, think about people, place, priority, and preparation.

People	Who is the conversation with? A stranger, a friend, a boss, a partner?
Place	Where is this conversation happening? In private? In public?
Priority	What are the stakes of the conversation? Additionally, is a cis-assumed voice necessary for safety in this situation?
Preparation	What opportunities will you have to prepare? Can you practice exactly what you'll be saying in your target voice?

- **Practicing privately at home** - speaking with no audience in a private place is the easiest situation to speak in.
- **Spending time at a friend's house** - speaking with supportive people in a private environment results in relative ease.
- **Ordering a coffee** - speaking with a new person (cashier) in a public environment increases the difficulty.
- **Having a low-stakes conversation** - even if a conversation is low-stakes, it can be a challenging balancing act to simultaneously think about what you're saying and how you're saying it
- **Giving a presentation to a client at work** - speaking with new people you'd like to impress makes this difficult, however, you had the opportunity to prepare your script beforehand.
- **Going on a first date** - speaking with a new person you'd like to impress in a public setting makes this very difficult, and spontaneous conversation means direct preparation is not possible.

These features focus on your mental experience with voice training, however, you might also notice some features impactful to your physical experience with your voice.

Duration	How long will you be speaking?
Volume / Noise	Are you speaking loud, or to be heard over

	loud noises?
Activity	Are you doing anything else while speaking? For example, exerting yourself, or eating?
Environment	If you have allergies or sensitivities, it may be relevant if you are speaking outdoors or indoors, the time of year, pollen count, etc.

Once you've established an order, pick your starting point. This is a situation you feel you can use your target voice in today. It can be as high or low on the hierarchy as you feel comfortable with, but will likely be near the easy end to start. This week, set an intention or goal for the number of times you want to intentionally use your target voice in that situation.

Before you engage in this task, take a moment to get your mind right; think through the situation and–if you have the time–find your target voice.

- What thoughts and emotions arise as you anticipate how this might go?
- What can you practice in advance to help you feel more confident in another moment? (For example, rehearsing your coffee order in your target voice.)
- What stories are most active in your mind about how this might go? What are your fears? Consider writing them down. On the flip side, what good could come of this interaction, starting with you checking "practice my target voice" off your list?
- Notice whether and how your body is anticipating this situation. What can you do to get grounded in a way that serves your immediate goal? Or, could a little healthy dissociation help you move into and through this practice?
- Anything else that you can do to feel more comfortable? (For example, recruiting a friend to accompany you.)

Afterwards, think through the situation again.

- Did it go the way you predicted? Why or why not?
- Were there any cognitive distortions present in your thinking? (For example, did you catastrophize and see only the worst possible outcome?)
- Did your voice feel authentic and good to use?
- What changes might you make for next time?
- Take a moment to honor yourself for engaging in this practice. Remind yourself that regardless of how it went, the whole interaction was in service to you committing to a process of change that will, in time, get you to your best voice possible. Give yourself a compassionate congratulations for showing up and doing the hard thing.

The next week, move up your hierarchy to a slightly more difficult situation. Small, regular steps up the hierarchy promote meaningful and measurable progress toward confident use of a congruent voice in all situations. If you find a situation too difficult, that's okay! Return to the question of what is needed to feel confident in that situation. If it feels like too big of a leap, think about a middle ground option between it and the prior level on your hierarchy. Success does not always mean perfection. Instead, success can mean better understanding yourself and your

needs, clarifying your goals or next steps based on feedback, or simply committing to and following through on a goal.

If this is too structured for you or you're just ready to mix things up, check out our Two Month Vocal Exploration Challenge, which gives you ideas for practice with just a roll of a die!

Decision Balance Exercise

Without regular practice, it is unlikely that you will make significant progress toward finding a congruent voice. Much of voice practice entails working *through*, not around, the difficult parts of vocal dysphoria, though you are almost certain to find shortcuts and new tools as you proceed.

Every time you open your mouth to talk is an opportunity to practice. However, voice can't always be a priority. Practicing voice change may get in the way of other goals, like maintaining safety and privacy or simply being fully present mentally for an important conversation. If you truly are unable to find opportunities to practice, it may not be the right time to work on your voice. You can always return to your voice goals in the future.

You can consider your options using a decisional balance sheet that looks like this:

	Advantages	**Disadvantages**
No Change		
Change		

Your decisional balance sheet should be based on your individual goals and life context. A hypothetical example might look like this:

	Advantages	**Disadvantages**
No Change	• No added time commitment • No effort to modify and monitor my voice	• Continued vocal dysphoria • Not cis-assumed in public, decreasing feelings of safety • Misgendered frequently on the phone
Change	• Vocal dysphoria reduced in the long term • Possibility of experiencing vocal euphoria • No longer misgendered on the phone • Contributes to being cis-assumed in public, increasing safety and reducing misgendering	• Time commitment of practice • I find practicing embarrassing • Self-monitoring and use of voice in public can increase my feelings of dysphoria in the short term • Financial costs of working with a provider

In Conclusion

There's no specific or universal remedy for vocal dysphoria. However, we have a range of tools for maintaining practice habits and making progress while dysphoric, for adjusting our thinking and relationship with vocal dysphoria to make it more manageable, and for maintaining motivation.

We are always interested in hearing the experiences of people who deal with vocal dysphoria. If you have tools that work for you, or advice you'd like to share with others, please be in touch!