

Make yourself **HEARD**

Here's how to harness your voice – and confidence – whether you're presenting at work or simply trying to get your family to listen

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, the voice is its opening act. Women often take their voices for granted, and when they do, they are missing out on a huge opportunity to make an impact – and get what they want! When a big life moment arises, women spend hours planning what they're going to wear and say, but too little time working out how they're going to say it. Yet when it comes to speaking up, how you say something is often more important than what you're saying.

OUR EXPERT



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1 WARM UP YOUR VOCAL CORDS

Your voice is created largely by skeletal muscle, the same muscle you work in the gym, and for peak performance it needs to be warmed up. Semi-Occcluded Vocal Tract Exercises (SOVTE) are the way to do this. They're perfect for that froggy 'morning voice', or when you're feeling under the weather, but still need to sound clear and confident.

DO IT One of the most effective SOVTEs is humming through a straw for two to three minutes. Put one in your mouth and hum.

Try sirens (hum slowly from the bottom of your vocal range to the top and back) or hills (smaller sirens that build, like an engine revving).

2 SORT YOUR POSTURE

Posture affects the sound of your voice, and if your head is too far forward or too far back, your voice will have an abrasive quality. Sitting at a desk for too long, carrying a heavy bag or walking in heels shifts the body's centre of gravity, so it's out of alignment.

DO IT From a standing position, hang forward like a rag doll. As you inhale, roll back up slowly, exhale, then roll again. When you're standing, check your head is balanced on top of the spine, and your shoulders are down and centred under your ears, rather than rounded forward or overextended to the back.

3 USE BREATH CONTROL

Your breath can both relax your body and energise your voice. A lack of breath control can show up in the voice as a gasp for air while speaking, a lack of volume and increased anxiety.

DO IT The key to a full breath is expansion. Every body expands differently, but the three main places of expansion are the chest, abdomen and pelvic floor. Take a few deep breaths, and think of your body 'filling up' with air rather than 'breathing in'. Notice where your body naturally expands and practise filling that space while you are speaking.

4 PRACTISE SELF-CARE

Getting seven to nine hours of sleep each night, staying hydrated and eating a balanced diet all ensure that your brain, body and voice are ready to do their best work. These basic tenets of self-care may sound simple, but they are often the first things to go out of the window when we're busy.

DO IT It takes four hours for the water you drink to hydrate your voice. A dehydrated voice sounds scratchy, feels uncomfortable and tires out more quickly. We lose up to 2lb of water while sleeping, so, if you have a morning meeting, be sure there's a glass of water ready to go when you wake up.

5 DO YOUR PREP

Prepare not for what will happen, but what might happen. You might hit traffic and be late for an important meeting. A difficult conversation might take an unexpected turn, or you might be interrupted.

DO IT To prepare, recreate these scenarios. Walk around your home quickly for five minutes (as if you are late or can't find the correct room), then deliver your talk. Practise in front of a friend and have them interrupt you to ask a question or 'answer' a phone call. When you are prepared for interruptions they're less likely to throw you off course.

'A lack of breath control can show up as a gasp for air'

6 DEVELOP YOUR FOCUS

Women tend to think of themselves as great multitaskers, but the reality is our brains are not. Trying to focus on more than one thing at a time actually inhibits the brain from performing to its potential, making each task longer and more difficult to achieve. So, be present while you're practising, just as you'll be in the moment.

DO IT A dedicated 10 or 15 minutes of present practice every day in the week leading up to your event or conversation is far better than a single marathon practice session full of interruptions.

7 HARNESS THE POWER OF POSITIVE AFFIRMATION

Your thoughts are so powerful that your brain treats thinking and doing the same way. Just thinking about an action causes the same motor neurons to fire as actually doing the action. So changing the way you think about speaking up will give you courage.

DO IT Write down a sentence highlighting your strongest fears about speaking in public, eg 'I hate speaking in public, I always look totally unprepared'. Flip that to 'I love public speaking, I always speak clearly and effectively'. Write your new sentence down three times and post it in places you see often in the home. Your bedside table is a must (sleep is KEY to creating lasting memories), plus beside the kettle or the bathroom mirror. Remember to read your sentence aloud before bed, when you wake up and any other time you see it. When negative thoughts arise, just shut them down by repeating your new, positive sentence slowly and firmly. Watch your thought patterns begin to shift. You are amazing.