VOCAL DAMAGE by Sheri Gould

Ever wonder if you have vocal damage? When I was studying to be a voice teacher all those years ago, the last thing I ever thought was that I would become an "expert" of sorts with regard to this topic. Sadly however, all the new contemporary singing, with its inherent lack of proper training, has led to just that—I have become pretty "expert" at diagnosing and helping to deal with all kinds of vocal damage.

What is vocal damage?

Your vocal cords are designed to last you a lifetime and they will do just that if they are taken care of properly. Unfortunately, without a full understanding of how the vocal mechanism works (or is damaged) many people find themselves with the unhappy predicament of wondering whether or not they have done any serious , long term damage to their vocal cords. Try to keep this in mind: damage is usually caused by overuse, misuse or abuse. Let's have a look at these three things and how they might play out in your world.

Overuse

This is the easiest one to define. You can overuse you voice in any number of ways. Perhaps you have a job that's requires you to talk all day long. The wear and tear involved in simply phonating for hours and hours can be exhausting to the vocal cords. Many times we'll have a long, busy day of talking and then head off to rehearsal where we then go on to sing for another hour or two. The voice that was already tired is now pushed beyond its physical endurance and so you might start to feel the effects of soreness, hoarseness or loss of range and flexibility. So overuse is just simply that-using your voice too much.

Misuse

Misuse can come in a variety of ways as well. With a lack of training or correct technique we can end up easily misusing our vocal cords. For example, many people speak in a way that is harsh or harmful to the vocal cords. Instead of using the breathing muscles to support the speaking tone—just like proper singing—many people strain from the throat. Additionally, many people talk at volume levels that can be harmful to the cords if sustained over long periods of time. So people can misuse their voice by simply talking incorrectly. Also, because many people sing without any formal training, and therefore a lack of understanding of proper breath support, they may end up employing harmful techniques as they sing. These techniques over an extended period of time can take a serious toll on the health and vitality of the vocal cords. Tack on then, for example, the scenario above where we've overused the voice and you can see how easy it might be to incur some serious damage.

Abuse

Many things can fall under the 'abuse' category. Shouting all night in the cold air at a football game, talking all night over a very loud band, shouting, coughing and constantly clearing your throat, screaming while singing, improper "belt" singing, adding air to your tone while singing…these are all examples of ways to abuse your vocal cords.

How do I know if I have vocal damage?

If you suspect you may have vocal damage, I hate to say this but, you probably do. However, the degree of damage is very important in terms of what action to take. Some things you can look for are:

Consistent soreness in the throat.

Pain in the muscles surrounding the larynx when talking or singing.
Chronic hoarseness or raspy voice.
Continually needing to clear the throat.
Any pain when talking or singing—even within a short period of time.
Decrease in range, or difficulty in hitting notes you once could.
An area or space in your voice that 'just won't come out'.

Having one or more of these symptoms may indicate that you have some damage to the vocal cords. The damage may be minor however and easily fixed with rest. For example, let's say you and a friend went to a wedding and talked and laughed over the band all night. You wake up the next day and your throat is sore, your voice is hoarse and you cannot reach your normal singing range. You have done damage but all you need is to rest and hydrate your vocals and they should repair themselves quickly.

On the other hand, if you are misusing (or abusing) your voice frequently and finding yourself experiencing these symptoms often or constantly, you may have some more serious damage to contend with. This is the time to get to a doctor. The type of doctor you need to see is an ENT (ear, nose and throat). This type of doctor is expert on issues involving the voice. A typical exam will include a video scope of your vocal cords (most insurance companies cover these services) giving the doctor a close-up look at the condition of your vocal cords.

Common findings are swollen cords, bleeding cords, vocal nodules, polyps, and even pulled muscles in the throat. Although there are varying degrees of these maladies as well as various causes, most of the time treatment for them is the same. REST and more rest! Nodules can be likened to tiny little calluses that have formed as a result of overuse or habitual misuse/abuse. The vocal cords produce pitch by vibrating against one another and if they are slammed into each with too much force too frequently, they can form nodules in response. Nodules are not always removed surgically anymore. In fact with proper rest, training and re-training of speech patterns through speech therapy, they can be eliminated safely without surgery. But it does require diligence and commitment.

If damage is found, it is likely that your doctor will first and foremost send you to a speech therapist to insure that you gain a proper understanding of correct speech. After all, you speak a lot more than you sing—no matter who you are! Then he will send you on to the more arduous task of learning how to SING correctly. Both of these skills are necessary before you can safely move forward without risking more, and perhaps permanent, vocal damage.

Scary

Getting to the place where you finally admit that you may have vocal damage and need some help is a big and often scary step. I understand and appreciate this. But I implore you—take the step to find out. Simply ignoring the problem will not make it go away and it will just get worse most likely unless you make some serious changes. I want you to be able to serve the Lord and His kingdom for a lifetime. I do not want you robbed because of fear. You may well find out that things aren't as bad as you might have thought. You'll be given tools to permanently solve your vocal issues and with that will come freedom. If you've been just 'living with' your vocal problems hoping they'll going away, please know this—they won't. Take the necessary steps to solve the problem. God bless you and happy singing!