

FIND YOUR VOICE FOR TRANCE WORK

The hypnotic voice

The master of conversational hypnotherapy Milton Erickson was famous for the stories he told to his patients and students. In 1991 Sydney Rosen brought out a fascinating little book of some of these tales, called "My Voice will Go With You". It begins with a quote from Erickson:

And I want you to choose some time in the past when you were a very, very little girl. And my voice will go with you. And my voice will change into that of your parents, your neighbors, your friends, your schoolmates, your playmates, your teachers. And I want you to find yourself sitting on the school room, a little girl feeling happy about something, something that happened a long time ago, that you forgot a long time ago. "

"And my voice will go with you... And my voice will change ..." The voice is a crucial element in trance work. The psychotherapist Stephen Gilligan, a long time student of Erickson, says that successful hypnotism is 90% non-verbal - that is, tone of voice, gesture, posture and state. Erickson used his voice with amazing skill and much of what follows takes him as a model.

Information on voice technique in trance work is surprisingly limited. If you look up hypnosis or hypnosis training on the internet you will struggle to find much detail on the voice at all. Yet the kind of subtle therapy that Erickson performed demanded considerable flexibility in the voice.

In what ways does hypnotherapy use voice techniques?

Relaxation

First, to relax the client. Relaxing music is usually smooth, slow, not too high in pitch and free of sudden contrasts; similar qualities in your spoken voice will induce relaxation - note though, smooth but not *monotonous*, slow but not *boring*. The word "en-trance" gives us a clue. When someone is "entranced" by chanting, story telling, singing, music, drumming or mantras the reference is never to boredom, but more the sense of being led into a world where change is an option. The hypnotist relaxes to open to possibility rather than to lull to sleep, and this requires a voice that while soothing is alive and vibrating, not dead and constricted.

Distinction between trance and non-trance voice

If you want to have control over hypnosis you need to know when your voice is sending people into trance and when it is encouraging conscious brain thinking. The distinction is not absolute but you do need different tones for each.

Hypnotic suggestion

One of the key behavioural patterns of Milton Erickson noticed by the early NLP modellers was his ability to mark out information especially for unconscious consideration - mainly by his use of his voice. Embedded commands and truisms require certain words to stand out without disturbing the flow. For example: "*And you may or may not find yourself **feel drowsy** and gently **fall asleep***" or "*You may find it useful to **read this page very carefully** as you decide what will work best for you to **learn well.***"

To make certain important words stand out you may also want to be able to express their meaning in the way you say them. This too requires vocal flexibility. Think for instance how you might say the word "comfort" to express its meaning with a feeling of comfort in your own body. You might lengthen the first vowel and linger on the "m" and lighten the ending; very different from the way you might want to express the strength of a word like "Kung Fu" for instance, with a strong "K", ringing "ng" and sharp "F" and "u". Try each expression in turn in different ways, concentrating on the meaning you want to convey. Erickson encouraged playfulness as a good learning state and bear this in mind as you practise!

As the client becomes used to the hypnotist's voice, they learn to connect certain sounds to particular ideas and suggestions. Milton Erickson was famous for the breathy lengthened phrase "*that's right*" he used with clients to encourage certain presenting behaviours, give reassurance and deepen the trance. The hypnotist can use distinctive tones for imprinting learning, relaxing, telling stories, arousing curiosity and so on. The tone triggers the wanted state.

Compound suggestions and implication

Some of the compound suggestions and implications a hypnotist offers result in long sentences which work well if they are spoken in a single breath. For example,

"Now as you uncross your legs and place your hands comfortably on your lap then you will be ready to enter a trance."

Commands and Questions

Indirect commands are often introduced in sentences that are questions; post hypnotic suggestions are often straight forward commands. You need to have control of the rising pitch for a question and falling pitch for a command and be able to mix them up purposefully.

Levitation

A lighter voice will facilitate levitation, a heavier one will deepen relaxation. The hypnotherapist Tad James talks about speaking on the in-breath to induce arm levitation and the out-breath to deepen relaxation. Using both induces the trance state. It's also useful here to be able to graduate your voice from full-toned sound to a whisper and back to stronger tones again.

Rapport

You want to match the client's voice from the outset sufficiently to build the connection. In trance the voice is the chief means of connection. You maintain rapport, even when your client is silent with eyes closed, by cross-matching your voice in terms of energy and state.

Connection with the unconscious mind

As you lead the client deeper, away from conscious thinking (head stuff) into other ways of understanding/feeling (in the body), it helps to resonate your own voice from deep in your body.

Something more

It's important to mention that the quality of the hypnotic voice does not stem *just* from technical ability. What students noticed in Milton Erickson was his creation of a trance space and connection - and his voice emerged from that space. He didn't *put expression* into his voice; his voice *expressed him*: the sound came from his state. How he achieved this is central to any discussion of voice and hypnosis, but that is for the next article. For now, let's explore a little the vocal techniques that contribute to success.

Vocal techniques for trance

Breathing

When we are born our breathing is natural and instinctive: babies breathe, yell and scream with optimum effect because they use their lungs without conscious thought. As we grow older some people lose that breath connection with the body and rush from thoughts to words using only the upper part of the lungs, taking a shallow breath instead of a normal one. To breathe for trance you need to connect with your body. Try this:

Gentle full breath

Sit upright and comfortably with your feet planted on the floor and take two or three deep breaths to relax. Each time you breathe out relax a bit more and continue with this relaxation throughout the exercise.

Half cover your bottom lip lightly with your teeth as if you are going to say the consonant "f" and continue to breathe in and out of your mouth letting the air pass in and out with an "ffffff" sound. As you continue to feel gentle relaxation, become aware of the breath moving your belly in and out in and the sensation of the breath in different parts of your lower body.

The hypnotic voice starts here with the breath connecting with your own being. Enjoy the sensation of being in touch with your breathing self. The "f" sound encourages you to slow the breath; once you know how this feels you can also breathe through the nose with a similar feeling.

You use your gentle breathing to encourage your client to relax and deepen their trance, first of all by matching their pattern and then by leading them to breathe deeper. Voice and breath lead the client away from conscious thinking into fuller somatic awareness and connection with the subconscious.

Breathing into sound – how to breathe life into your voice

The next stage is to explore the sounds that emerge from the full body breath.

Connected sounds

Simply turn your breathing into sounds. Don't think of words; just express feelings and sensations. As you breathe out express full relaxation with an "aaaaah". How relaxed can you feel?.

Breathe in through your nose and imagine a beautiful smell. As you breathe out, express the sense of pleasure with an "mmm" sound. Play with it. How pleasurable can that sound be? Repeat the breathing in and imagining, and this time as you breathe out express your feeling in a few words.

Imagine a beautiful peaceful place; breathe in with the pleasure of it, and as you breathe out speak gently about your connection with this place and your sense of its peacefulness.

The sound should emerge from the breath with a smooth onset. If you feel any glottal stop or clicking or sudden release in the throat as the sound starts, go back to expelling air audibly, and then gently move that into a voiced sound.

Tempo

The speed at which you speak depends on your breathing. If you want to be able to speak slowly and smoothly and use longer sentences sometimes you need to build up your breath control.

Slow recitation

One useful exercise is to recite poetry slowly and soulfully aiming to breathe only at the end of the line - if you can do so without strain. Shakespeare is ideal for this exercise, or you might like to take a poem with long sweeping lines - by Walt Whitman or T S Eliot for instance. Here is an example from T S Eliot.

*Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell.*

It doesn't matter if you run out of breath; just use lots of air, feel the music and enjoy stretching out the words; your capacity will increase with time.

Then try long phrases from trance inductions, such as the words,

*"as you listen to my voice you will relax more and more deeply
whilst you begin to notice sensations such as the weight of your
hand on your thigh."*

There are also occasions when it's appropriate to speak faster, for example to override your client's capacity to process your words consciously. You need good breath to speak fast just as to speak slowly. Take in a good free breath and practise speaking long phrases with the breath streaming out just as for slow speaking.

Emphasis

Erickson used different tones and varied the speed, volume and direction of the sound for specific therapeutic purposes. When you want particular words and phrases to be noticed subliminally you can emphasize them in various ways:

- by making the words louder or more resonant – without jarring
- by lengthening certain vowels or consonants
- by making the words softer

- by changing your tone
- by pausing before or after a word
- by altering the pitch either higher or lower

Making the words louder

The obvious way to emphasise is by making the word or phrase slightly louder than its context. To do it smoothly you may like to think of the air travelling out faster for the emphasised phrase rather than of putting an extra weight on it.

Lengthening vowels and/or consonants

One way of emphasis that retains the smooth flow of a sentence is by stretching out those consonants that can be lengthened, for example ff, hh, ll, mm, nn, rr, ss, vv, ww, yy, zz, sh and th. Many vowels can be lengthened too. Try this:

Long vowels and consonants

Take a sentence - from a trance induction for instance - and lengthen vowels and consonants to emphasise certain words. For instance,

**"Ffee---- ll your muscles lloo---- sseen as you go dee-----p inssi----
de, nno-----w ... Tha-----t's rri-----ght.."**

Now practise long vowels and consonants in this short poem. It will help your breathing too if you breathe once for each line:

*Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you.
Moon and stars Pour their healing light on you
Deep peace to you. (adapted from - ancient Gaelic runes)*

Feel the flow.

Making the words quieter

You can also emphasise a word or phrase by making it *quieter* than the surrounding words. Erickson used this often, for example during induction for the words, "close your eyes". You need just as much air as for speaking loudly. You can also whisper - using just air without engaging your vocal cords at all.

Pausing

You can also mark out a word or phrase by pausing before or afterwards or both. Try this:

Pregnant Pause

When you pause *before* the important phrase you do not need to give any extra emphasis to it when it arrives; it will stand out anyway. For example,

"And as you take the time to go ... inward ... you can experience how easy it is..."

You can have fun practising this technique in everyday situations: *"And what would you like for supper kids? Would you like potatoes or beans or ... salad?"* See if they choose salad without noticing what you have done!

A pause *after* a phrase allows the listener time to absorb what you have said in the silence. Pause after a word or phrase you want to go deep into the subconscious: *"This will allow you to find deep learning" ... pause ...*

Changing tone

You can also change the tone of your voice. Most of us can change our tone by sensing a different energy in ourselves: for example, if you genuinely feel passionate your voice sounds passionate; if you feel determined your voice tends to resonate in your chest with clear sounds; if you feel calm and quiet your voice corresponds. Erickson sometimes changed the tone by making it more breathy like a half-whisper.

Changing pitch

Finally, you can make words stand out by changing the pitch either higher or lower. To practise this skill try this:

Pitch Practice

See how high you can take your voice. Make a sound that rapidly goes higher and louder: "Whe^{ee}**eeeh!** Now made a long sound that goes deeper and darker gradually changing from "Ah" to "O":
Aaa**ooh!**

Play "as if". Pretend you are telling a bedtime story: "Here is the little fairy who says lightly ... now here comes the giant who says in a booming voice ... "

Now speak some trance phrases emphasising certain words by pitching them higher or lower: for instance, "And now you feel your hand become lighter can you not?" and "And you can allow yourself safely to enter **deep** trance."

You need to be careful with the lower pitch that you allow the sounds to come from your body just by feeling the vibration there, rather than pushing the sound down physically as that sounds forced and can strain your voice – not what you need in trance!

Speak as you sing

Emphasised words in trance work can often sound quite musical and it is good practice to sing a phrase and then to speak it in a similar way. If you want to listen to a speaking voice that sings, find an audio recording of Martin Luther King's original "I have a dream" speech.

Singing speech Practice

Make up the notes and sing the phrase, "I have a dream", then repeat the phrase with similar rhythms and pitch but this time speak it. Now try the same process with "Go to sleep" or any other phrase. You will find that the spoken words feel all stretched out and that you feel connected to your delivery.

Upward and downward inflections

We have already considered pitch in terms of emphasis; let's now look at the end of sentences.

Upward inflection: this turns a phrase into a question. This is useful when you want a series of yes responses from the client, or to soften resistance to statements, as when you add "can you not?" or "is it not?"

Downward inflection: this turns your words into a command. It can cement everything in place with a clear instruction.

These variations in pitch at the end of phrases and sentences can be mixed up to give double messages or to disorientate for therapeutic effect. Some interesting things can happen. If you ask a question with unexpected falling pitch at the end, is it a command or a question, both or neither?

Voice and connection

Your technique should always remain a tool and never lead the process. Stephen Gilligan describes how the voice stems from the hypnotist's sense of *resonance* – a simultaneous connection with self and partner. The hypnotist becomes a “vibrating tuned instrument” that is “touched” in some way by the client and responds to their living pulse. Erickson reports something similar. There was a connection from the deep part of his psyche to the deep part of the client's psyche which was expressed naturally in his voice. The voice had an inward feel emanating from deep in the body. The voice teacher Kristin Linklater calls this voice transparent – “revealing, not describing, inner impulses of emotion and thought, directly and spontaneously. The person is heard, not the person's voice.” The connection felt in the body resonates in the voice, and you can hear an infinite variety of subtle tones in the sound.

I have written about how to achieve this at much greater length in my book “Voice of Influence” (Crown House Autumn 2009) and in articles on my website.

What next?

Richard Bandler said everybody should get a voice coach and that's probably helpful advice! Voice technique is an important part of hypnosis particularly if your normal voice has little variety in it. There are also certain vocal problems such as stiff body patterns, glottal delivery, strain on the vocal cords and so on that definitely need professional advice. But deeper learning is crucial. A shift in your own state of consciousness is a key part of conversational hypnosis. You will find that as you learn to change your state - let go for instance of performance anxiety, self consciousness and conscious problem-solving, as you trust the process and sense the connection - your voice will emerge much easier from a place within you that resonates with your client's unconscious and facilitates the transformation that will delight you both.

If you have any questions or comments arising from this article, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

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P.S. We run open courses and coaching on voice and influence. You can contact me at Judy@voiceofinfluence.co.uk. You'll find more information and free e-courses at www.voiceofinfluence.co.uk.