

Experiential Wisdom of the Voice

Voice Movement Therapy and Mindful Self-Compassion.

Voice Movement Therapy (VMT), similarly to other expressive arts, invites us to engage in the present moment and the direct experience of our body and mind. In VMT the voice acts not only as the main mode of expression but also facilitates an attunement to and an awareness of our internal experiences. The practices and principles that VMT puts forth provide a creative container for the exploration and expression of our whole voice, body and mind (Brownell, 2008).

I began my involvement with Voice Movement Therapy in 2005 when I was looking for a vocal approach that includes working with the whole psyche, rather than just singing or sounding, which I studied previously. I took part in the Foundational Training in VMT in the USA organised by the Norma Canner Foundation in 2008 and I completed it in 2010 in the UK. I have been working with VMT since then in various settings and with different populations. VMT is the only expressive art where the main mode of expression is the voice. In VMT we work with the voice on several levels: physical, mental, emotional, relational, social, creative and spiritual. We view the voice as a tool for both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and expression. We employ a variety of vocal and non-vocal techniques to connect the voice to our body-mind and to open the voice so it can flexibly express all the aspects of the psyche and what is occurring in the body. We broaden the notion of the voice to include different facets of our voice: the external voice- the acoustic and expressive voice, either singing, sounding or speaking voice and the internal voice- the inner voices that 'speak' to us, the creative and imaginal voice, and the metaphorical voice of who we are in the world. The external and internal are intimately intertwined, influenced by each other, one turning into the other in close succession. The acoustic voice contacts the interiority of the body and mind whilst reaching our and others' ears and hearts. This dance between body and mind, heart and soul, internal and external, where unheard becomes heard, stillness waxes into flow, creates a dynamic balancing whole. This *whole voice* approach can touch on many aspects of one's life and can serve as an agent for personal, artistic and spiritual growth as well as a tool for a greater resilience. I will demonstrate what the whole voice can encompass, especially as we emphasize and encourage mindful and compassionate awareness in the vocal practice.

In 2015, I took part in the 5-day intensive training in Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) with Dr Chris Germer and his colleagues, a year after participating in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course and developing my regular mindfulness practice. Dr Chris Germer, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, and Dr Kristin Neff, researcher and professor, are the founders of the evidence-

based Mindful Self-Compassion resource building programme and authors of several books about MSC. I was drawn to this work because although at the time I was able to engage in my personal therapy and found it very beneficial and I was using VMT to express different aspects of my psyche through songs that I performed and recorded, I was still finding it hard to be kind to myself. I would judge myself frequently, which drained me, and it often took joy out of what I was doing. In 2013, I trained as an Integrative Arts Child and Adolescent Counsellor and began subsequently to work primarily with developmental trauma and attachment difficulties. The complexity and demands of this profession, within a not always very mindful and compassionate system, led me to begin to feel symptoms of compassion fatigue. I was working whilst trying to manage my portfolio career and hang on to my creativity and therapeutic vocal work with groups here in the UK and Czech Republic. My Mindfulness and MSC practice and later on studies of Buddhism sustained me through this period of integration and personal and professional growth and made me more resilient and accepting of myself. The practice of MSC gradually began to infiltrate into my thinking about Voice Movement Therapy. In 2019, I took the opportunity to enrol on the teacher training in MSC here in the UK.

Self-Compassion comprises 3 basic components which are: mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness (Neff and Germer, 2018). MSC focuses on fostering a friendly and warm-hearted relationship towards ourselves, especially when we are struggling. The loving presence that we learn to cultivate helps to calm our nervous system and takes us from a “doing”, fixing and achieving mode to a “being” mode, characterised by soothing and connecting (Gilbert, 2014). Within this process we can uncover all the unloved parts of ourselves that are the product of our conditioning; we encounter inner critics, shame and other difficult emotions. Mindfulness teaches us to acknowledge, pay attention and be present with what arises without getting lost in it. Common humanity reassures us that we are in this all together; we all experience insecurity, self-judgment and hardship. Self-kindness attends to what feels hard, aches or is under attack, which brings us back to a sense of safety and acceptance.

I have found that incorporating the three components, mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness into VMT gives me, my clients and group participants a means to deepen our attention on any given exploration, and a solid sense of support and tools to attend safely and with compassion to difficulties around self-expression and voice.

In this article I explore how the two disciplines - Voice Movement Therapy, and its practices and principles and Mindful Self-Compassion, and the three core elements of self-compassion-mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness, intersect and complement one another. I use

qualitative research methods that incorporate self-reflection, note taking, experimentation with working with groups and individuals across the two disciplines, as well as interviews that I undertook in 2017 with clients who I worked with between two and five times, over a weekend, a 5-day workshop or in one-on-one sessions, in the course of a decade. I pinpoint the aspects of VMT that elicit and enrich mindful awareness, facilitated by the medium of the embodied voice and movement in relation to the body and psyche. I will illustrate how MSC, its evidence-based practice and emphasis on experiential explorations of the human heart and mind, can inform VMT. The awareness and attention training that mindfulness promotes can enhance VMT and provide it with a steady foundation from which to delve into the psychological, physical, emotional, social, artistic and spiritual aspects of the human voice. Self-compassion and its practices, attitudes and theoretical underpinnings can act as a vital support in developing a healthy relationship to our whole voice, ourselves and others and give us tools to weather any storms that working with the embodied voice can unleash.

I will look at how self-compassion supports and eases our ability to recover different aspects of the voice, especially by cultivating a self-compassionate relationship to ourselves and our struggles, with the aid of the Compassionate Self¹ that we can focus on developing in our psyche. I will demonstrate how embodied self-compassion impacts on our sense of safety and of those around us. Cultivating self-compassion can give us courage to face our fears connected to self-expression. Working with resistance and curiosity, allowing and befriending our limitations and inhibitions lends us the support we need to meet our voices and ourselves as we are. The numerous benefits of inviting self-compassion into therapeutic voice work will be considered closely in the case studies from my work.

I will then attend specifically to mindfulness, examining how mindful attitudes and attention can enhance the exploration, embodiment and integration of the body and psyche through the medium of the multi-sensory approach of Voice Movement Therapy. My aim will be to investigate and make more explicit some of the elements of VMT that align themselves with mindfulness. And to discuss how we can cultivate a mindful awareness and an inner compassionate attitude in relation to the therapeutic process of discovering one's whole voice, and our ability to fully reside in our moment-to-moment experience. I will look at the quality of our presence and the role our senses play in the therapeutic voice work, based on The Wheel of Awareness developed by Dan Siegel (2007). Closer attention will be given to the sixth sense- also known as felt sense, which tunes into our inside world of sensations and breath, and the seventh sense which makes inner connections

¹ The term Self comes from Internal Family Systems (IFS). IFS works with different parts of one's ego or self. The role of the Self is to approach and investigate these parts with curiosity, connectedness, confidence, clarity, calm, compassion, creativity and courage. I will use the terms "parts" and "sub-personalities" interchangeably. "Compassionate Self" is also used by Paul Gilbert, founder of Compassion Focused Therapy.

with thoughts, feelings, images and memories. Both sixth and seventh sense are responsible for bridging of the unconscious to the conscious mind.

I will contemplate how a flexible, kind attention and vocal attunement, together with the validating and containing properties of the vocal and movement expression, lead to the regulation of our system and a more secure relationship to ourselves. Similarly to mindfulness, inclusivity and integration of all aspects of the psyche is at the core of VMT. Implementing specific VMT practices and principles, supported by the Compassionate Self, can guide us towards more personal and vocal wholeness, further integration and a wiser perspective on life. The last section of the article will focus on the attributes of vocal embodiment, especially working with tension in the body and bringing the voice into the whole body-mind, using the metaphor of the vocal tube and different aspects of the voice. Finally, I will explore the imaginal voice that arises from the intimate connection to the body and can facilitate centring on different parts of the self and create more internal coherence. The regulatory characteristics of the voice and the experiential wisdom of the whole and embodied voice will be illustrated through examples from my work and qualitative research.

Compassionate Voice

Since my training in Mindful Self-Compassion, I have been intentionally integrating self-compassion into my Voice Movement Therapy practice. Bringing together VMT and MSC can generate a powerful set of tools to strengthen different aspects and qualities of the Self and befriend parts of our ego, that we become aware of and unearth, as we begin the journey of reclaiming our voice. Research shows that self-compassion reduces stress, calms the nervous system, increases self-care which leads to more well-being and resilience (Germer, 2009). Self-compassionate approach seems to provide a safe and solid framework for connecting with our body and mind through the use of voice, movement and imagination. Mindful Self-Compassion harnesses the power of mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness. For the purpose of this article, I will concentrate first on the benefits of self-compassion on the work with the whole voice and subsequently just on mindfulness. However, as we will discover below, self-compassion and mindfulness are inextricably linked and complete each other.

Whenever I am starting a new therapeutic vocal group, I include in my introduction some of the attitudes that MSC stresses in their programme, such as a non-judgmental, curious, kind and compassionate attitude toward oneself and one's experiences, and being 'a slow learner' – giving oneself permission to progress at one's own unique pace, enjoying the adventure like nature of the

work, not rushing towards the destination, whilst listening to what we need. I talk about paying attention to and respecting our limits, noticing when we are getting too full or shutting down. In MSC we describe it as 'opening and closing' and emphasize that choosing the right level of challenge and closing to an uncomfortable experience can be the most self-compassionate thing to do, bearing in mind that learning occurs when we feel challenged but not overwhelmed. Therapeutic voice work often attracts people with some form of relational trauma that resulted in difficulty with self-expression and communication, feeling insecure and inhibited, and being prone to self-criticism and shame. Self-compassion can act as an important tool when exploring such issues in VMT. Participants at my workshops often feedback that what allowed them to go as far as they did with their delving into the vicissitudes of the human voice, was the knowing that the ethos of kindness and compassion was so high on the agenda.

Compassionate Self

In VMT we work with sub-personalities, the parts of our psyche, who if understood and expressed, can be integrated, rather than acted out in unconscious ways. The inner critic is especially active in any expressive or creative work such as VMT, busy evaluating, controlling and protecting us from whatever they think could befall us. The critic is often made up of the voices and messages we internalised in our childhood from our family and society. In my work I propose that the critic is acquainted with a compassionate, more mature part that is understanding and patient with the critic. The Compassionate Self not only attends to any distress that the work may trigger but also equips us with a healthy nurturing voice which can be reparative, especially for those who feel insecure or unconfident. The calm and curiosity of the compassionate self quietens down our nervous system from feeling under threat to feeling cared for. Furthermore, cultivating a warm-hearted presence establishes an inner welcoming environment. Consequently, when we come across a difficult emotion or a younger hurt part of ourselves, we are more likely to look at it, be willing to explore it, express it and even embrace it. However, often we are not used to being kind to ourselves and it can take time, dedicated practice and support from the group and the therapist to switch from telling ourselves off to turning towards ourselves with compassion. Our hearts and frozen parts may need to unthaw gradually before we can allow and hear the compassionate voice within us.

In one of my interviews, Petra*, an artist and a long-term participant at my workshops, reported that our work assisted her in developing an inner compassionate voice which is slowly becoming stronger than an inner critic and a fearful younger part of herself. She has also learnt to generate qualities she may need such as gentleness, evoked by the vocal component of *free air*² which is not

² In VMT *free air* is one of the 10 vocal components we use. 10 vocal components are: pitch, pitch fluctuation, loudness, vocal register, free air, glottal onset, vocal timbres (flute, clarinet, saxophone), disruption, violin and

only soothing for our vocal folds but often for our whole being (Newham, 1999). My work with parts of psyche will be also illustrated later on in the section about vocal embodiment on page 14.

Embodiment of self-compassion

The well-known psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach (2003) suggests that we need to embody compassion in order for compassion to truly touch us and others. The attunement of the felt sense connects us with an emotion on a bodily level where we can nurture it. I incorporate Brach's RAIN model (recognize, allow, investigate and nurture) in my individual work frequently. Recognizing that an emotion, a mood, a thought or a sensation is present is a first step in the right direction of approaching our experiences rather than avoiding them. Slowing down, pausing and mindful focusing helps us to recognize and subsequently to allow the experience to be there rather than resisting it, which causes more pain. These first two steps are facilitated by our inner senses making connections internally. I will expand on the role of senses below, on pages 8 and 9. Allowing can also be experienced and expressed on a bodily level; for example, by taking a deeper breath, loosening a tense spot, sighing or moving from the place where the connection was made. Investigation comes with more intentional looking at the experience, moving it, finding a vocal quality for it, expressing it in movement, conjuring up an image for it, using creative writing and drawing, enactment and indeed, processing it verbally. The last stage is nurturing where we attend to ourselves and the difficulties with self-compassion and a warm attitude; this can be in the form of a soft and quiet vocalisation, sensitive tone of voice of our therapist or partner, kind internal self-talk wishing us well, singing a lullaby to ourselves, giving ourselves *soothing touch*³ or moving in a rhythmic calming way.

Charlie*, a language teacher, came to see me because she struggled with speaking freely about things that really mattered to her. She often felt panicky and tight when communicating something personal or intimate in public. In the course of our work Charlie spoke about being often driven to be efficient, independent, to deliver, and please others which left her feeling somewhat lacking and consequently un-nourished by what she did. Charlie wanted to sing with the confidence that she felt in her 20s but seemed to have lost somewhat when she became focused on work and achieving. In one session she brought in a song she chose and started singing it without any warming up or attuning which we usually did. She just felt like singing. As she began to sing, her voice soon started to strain and she was forgetting to breathe. Charlie was bereft. With careful attending to her body she recognized a felt sense of sorrow in her chest and I encouraged her to allow it, to be there

articulation.

³ *Soothing touch* is an informal practice in MSC. It consists of simply putting hands on heart, belly, hand or any other comforting place in order to attend to ourselves kindly when we need it. Physical touch releases the hormone oxytocin which calms the nervous system.

and to investigate it further. She confessed that she wished her voice would still be there, ready to be released but it wasn't that easy, perhaps it faded away in those years when she forgot to listen to herself and her needs. More sadness and grief came up for Charlie and eventually after sounding and moving these emotions, I invited her to begin to offer a gentle sound to herself, a vocal quality that would soothe this part of her that needed attention, that wasn't heard in her childhood, the forgotten part that she tried to look after with her hard-working. She sung a lullaby to herself without words and received the much-needed nurture from her own voice and Self. Charlie also began to accept that her voice couldn't be pushed like she was pushing herself, that she needed the support of her breath rooted in her body, the slow grounding of her whole body in the present moment before expecting herself to sing a full song. She needed to afford herself the patience that her younger part, who wanted to be heard, also craved for.

Voice and compassionate attention

At one of my residential workshops which included VMT, self-compassion and daily mindfulness practice, a participant, Chloe*, struggled with releasing her voice. At the time she was in the middle of recovering from cancer, which brought forth issues of isolation, shame and vulnerability around finding voice for her experiences in her community. Warm-hearted encouragement that Chloe was guided to give to herself through the practice of soothing touch, gentle vocalisation and movement, enabled her to persevere and not get overwhelmed even when she got in touch with a high level of tension and anxiety in her body. Chloe later shared that the compassionate atmosphere and the holding of the group supported her to work through her resistance and begin to voice what was previously hidden in a paralysed silence. She was able to speak about her illness and the feelings that it had provoked. At the same time, her singing voice became more liberated and available to her and she accessed more energy and spontaneity. Eventually Chloe was able to sing solo her chosen song about a loss of control which touched us all.

Offering someone compassionate attention can be very healing. The practice of “witnessing a vocalist” that I incorporate into VMT invites us to be with our vulnerabilities around being visible whilst spontaneously sounding and moving. Witnessing a vocalist is inspired by *authentic movement* practice where one person moves and the other witnesses their experience. Some of us have not received the care and attention we needed in our childhood and adolescence, leaving us feeling disconnected, unlovable and unheard. Being witnessed when vocalizing provides an opportunity for us to face the emotions that may get stirred up, like shame, avoidance, anger, confusion, or positive feelings like joy, appreciation, excitement and playfulness. What I found is that by adding the compassionate element to this exercise, whereby the witness is instructed to

witness with an open, kind and non-judgemental attitude, the vocalist feels less exposed and more attuned to. In fact, the theory of mirror neurons confirms that thanks to our capacity to attune we indeed resonate with each other on many levels. We feel felt by the other as they perceive our body and hear our voices expressing something of our emotional and physical states.

According to the Polyvagal theory conceived by Steven Porges; in social situations we evaluate risk thanks to the subconscious system called neuroception. When we interact with others our brain assesses other people's body language, facial expressions and vocalisations continuously and decides whether we are safe or not. In this case it seems that seeing the warm expression of the witness and feeling their positive intention and engaged presence contributes towards the ability of the nervous system to inhibit our defensive reactions. When we are physiologically calmer, we can access control over our vocalisation and listening too (Porges, 2011, p. 16; Colletti 2019). Participants often report that whilst feeling some unpleasant emotions connected to this kind of exposure, they also felt validated and held by the other's attention, which for some led to a beginning of healing of the original wounding. In their bodies and nervous systems, they experienced self-compassion, the reality of a relational safety and their own capacity to regulate their fear and turn towards intimacy.

Self-compassion and fear of expression

Fear of public speaking is one of our most common fears. It is therefore not surprising that even for more confident individuals singing or speaking in public can bring up some anxiety or dread. According to Brené Brown (2015), vulnerability consists of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. She reframes how we perceive vulnerability not as weakness but as a sign of courage. Her research thus normalizes our difficulty with being seen and validates the fact that the path to free expression, honest communication and creativity is indeed risky. Bringing self-compassion and its soothing and calming qualities and practices into the exploration of the whole voice therefore gives us an invaluable resource to tap into when we get lost in nervous energy. Compassionate attitude helps us to lessen our defences against being vulnerable.

Fritz Pearls says: "Fear is excitement without the breath". Self-compassion encourages us to give ourselves unconditionally what we need and if it is the breath then we prioritize that. We learn to breathe deeply and move slowly step by step on the tightrope of life and our desire to walk it authentically. The breath anchors faithfully the inner quiver in the gut, the outer wobble in the voice and rises up in the song that embraces our whole present experience. Creating a felt sense of kindness towards ourselves before we sing or speak, calms our nervous system and slows down our

breathing.

I often invite clients to give themselves some kind of encouragement and grounding using the attention on the breath, the space around them and some soothing touch. Changing the focus of our attention allows us to shift from a “Performance Mind”, often a rigid goal orientated state, to a “Being Mind” where we are simply and kindly listening to ourselves, the words, the melody and the emotions behind them. We enter a state of absorption in our creative expression, less invested in the outcome, simply concentrating on our art, mindful and often freer of inhibition. A performance mind keeps us trapped in a mindset of wanting to please the audience and ourselves, be clever and do well. Whilst the being mind is just aware, present to ourselves and our environment, attending to our internal unfolding (Gluck, 2014). Self-consciousness is held in the wider container of compassion and diluted in the attention on our current experience. Rather than letting our mind get carried away with its negative commentary, we stay with our senses and the present moment. We move from the doing mode of achieving and perfecting to a being mode of relaxation and acceptance as touched on in the introduction (Gilbert, 2014). I often hear from the participants that the compassionate environment of the group that they started to internalise, opened up a space within them to dare to be more authentic and to perceive their voices in a new light, as beautiful, enjoyable and other perceptions that were previously far from reach. This transformation towards a less analytical, effortful and adaptive way of being with our voice will be explored further on p.14 in the section about the vocal embodiment.

When sensing my own worry connected to expression, I also find it helpful to remember my connection to others, our shared humanity, and the fact that we all suffer from vulnerability and fear. Whilst I breathe in compassion for myself, I breathe out and send some to my audience too. This attention to others together with my intention to be compassionate, steadies my mind and body and appeases the inner critic. Common humanity is woven into the fabric of any therapeutic group or relationship. Making it explicit can combat shame, create mutual support and enhance people's willingness to share their experiences. Witnessing our own and others' messy, vulnerable, courageous and beautiful contents of our hearts and minds through the authenticity of our expression and presence can remind us all that we are inherently interconnected. What we used to carefully disguise is understood and often celebrated by others, giving us more permission to be our imperfect selves which saves us a lot of energy that we may otherwise spend on hiding and figuring out how we should be in order to be accepted.

According to Chris Germer (2009), feeling connected activates our brain attachment system and the empathic resonance that the group creates makes us feel like we belong and are less alone and

separate. Through this sense of belonging to something larger than our individual stories we tap into our resilience and wisdom. I have observed again and again in my groups that the empathic resonance and the special connection that each group embodies opens deep channels of insight through which a collective wisdom speaks. “The creative space is determined by the quality of attention we give to one another”, states McNiff (2014, p.41). The right attention and a compassionate culture can enable participants to take an ultimate risk which is for many to reveal their voice and self in solo singing. In a Circle of Safety⁴ exercise where each person takes turn to sing their chosen song, the kind intention, the shared vulnerability and the supportive vocal sound held by the rest of the group combine to make this risky adventure possible and rewarding. Being able to face one's fear of exposure and all that it involves and transform it into an experience that is still hard but equally full of courage, mutual support and beauty is often very empowering and comforting for everyone. One participant felt that the very sound and space of the group's improvisation wrapped her into an acoustic envelope of holding and support. For many people who come to VMT workshops this is an opportunity to rewrite their narrative of believing their voices are not good, caused by the people in their early lives, often sadly teachers and relatives who tell us we can't sing. Many are able to sing solo without fear of humiliation and shame for the first time in their lives.

We can all sing. Yes, nice sentiment but it is not always that simple for many! Each of us is on our own particular journey with our voice. Our society is keen to evaluate human voice. Our voices are socialised as we grow up according to the social and aesthetic rules and values of our culture. This can lead to a loss of faith in our own unique expression and forgetting our natural ability to use our voices and creativity in many different ways. Yet I noticed some singing TV competitions value personal, more authentic expression as well as a 'good' singing voice. However, the pressure is high. You have to have it all- a well-developed voice, authenticity, charisma, some kind of 'image' or specific appearance. Sometimes we don't have it all which doesn't mean we should give up enjoying our voice!

Krista* suffered a brain injury in her childhood which led to dyspraxia and other impairments. Krista came to me because although she was prolific in song writing and loved music, she disliked her voice and couldn't sing in tune. We began a slow, careful and compassionate journey towards a discovery of her unique voice. It included a lot of time listening to herself, to me, to each other,

⁴ Circle of Safety exercise has several variations. The variation that I am using is to create a circle and invite everyone to quietly sound together a note or hum in order to support the soloist. The facilitator goes first to demonstrate and sings an improvised often non-verbal solo vocalisation, informed by their and the group's current state. Then with a simple tap on the shoulder the next person is invited to take their turn to sing and express their authentic sound, and so on. People can decide to not participate and pass the turn to the next person instead. Group has eyes closed or open, depending on the group's needs. At the end everyone can join together in improvisation and express their experience of this circle of safety.

deepening her breath, embodying her voice and singing simple songs together. Krista was making some progress in her singing, but her confidence was often up and down. It became clear that what was called for was acceptance. Acceptance can sound like such a final, quick stroke action but in reality, it is often slow and multi-layered. MSC proposes 5 stages of acceptance: resisting, exploring with curiosity, tolerating, allowing and befriending. Krista was battling with how she perceived her voice and our sessions invited her to be curious about its many qualities, beyond the dichotomy of good and bad, where being off pitch became not as important. Within our therapeutic relationship she allowed her voice to be just as it is. She began to relate to it as she would to a friend. Within this spacious relating to her voice she felt freer to enjoy her singing however imperfect it was.

Our relationship to our voice often mirrors how we relate to ourselves. Is it safe to be heard or will I be judged if I am not perfect? Will I appear arrogant, hurt others who are less secure in their expression with my strong voice? Mindful and self-compassionate attuning fosters an internal environment where these beliefs and patterns can be attended to, dismantled and safely expressed and contained in voice and movement, in sounding, speech, song or creative writing. Self-compassion wants our needs to be met and asks us to be our own best friend. It suggests that what we feel can heal. The multisensory approach of VMT includes confronting the unwanted emotions. The acoustic voice sonically matches the sensations and feelings experienced in the body and psyche and validates and clarifies them with its multicoloured expressions.

Research shows that self-compassion makes us more willing to explore our pain, making it a supportive ingredient to the therapeutic voice work. Self-compassion and its soothing quality balances and alleviates what gets amplified in the expressive work. The intricate journey and adventure of finding one's voice transcends the outcome. Self-compassion motivates us with kindness to pursue this journey towards the whole voice courageously.

Mindful voice

When voicing and moving we are connecting with our direct experience from the inside. This type of approach is often called the bottom up or neck-down approach because we are engaged in the experiential content of our body, felt by our senses, rather than purely analysed with our minds. The practice of Mindfulness is to keep attention on our immediate experience with curiosity and openness which is equally at the heart of VMT. Mindfulness also teaches us to accept and not to over-identify with what we encounter. It has been widely demonstrated that practicing mindfulness improves well-being, physical and mental health and brings changes to attitudes and behaviour. Moreover, research shows that during mindful 'presencing' an enzyme that enhances energetic

regulation and immune function is released (Siegel, 2015).

I outlined earlier how self-compassion teaches us about the qualities of the heart and helps us to cultivate good will and kindness towards ourselves. These benevolent qualities can play an essential role in the recovery of the lost voice and aspects of ourselves. Mindfulness introduces us to wisdom and awareness and regulates our attention. What they have in common is their aim to establish an intimate connection and a friendly relationship towards our own interiority, including emotional pain. Mindfulness (one of the components of Self-Compassion) enables us to recognize all the internal experiences and feel them and self-compassion encourages us to support ourselves wholeheartedly whilst we are in any kind of emotional or physical pain (Germer, 2007:89). VMT offers us creative, embodied and multi-sensory tools to investigate and express our interiority.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1990) 7 Attitudes of Mindfulness seem like a fine foundation to the therapeutic voice work. The *Non-judging* and just watching whatever comes up can allow us to stay open and engage with our internal world. *Patience* is paramount as we can't control how things develop. Maintaining *Beginner's Mind* will help us to be receptive to any fresh experiences and prevent us from getting stuck. *Trust* guides us to honour our own feelings, intuitions, wisdom and goodness and to live our own life. *Non-striving* helps our sometimes over-zealous, goal orientated attitude to take the back seat and relax so that we can be more and do less. *Acceptance* of what and who we are can support a greater appreciation of our voices and ourselves. *Letting go* invites us to stop trying to be in control. Rather than rejecting some experiences or clinging onto others, we let feelings, thoughts, expressions etc. be as they are.

Voice as a multi-sensory tool for attunement and expression

In VMT the ability to pay attention to, process, temper or intensify the stream of incoming information from within and without is achieved in several ways. Inspired by Siegel's metaphor for mindfulness, *The Wheel of Awareness* (2007), I will examine the function of senses in VMT in terms of sharpening our sensitivity to our internal and external reality. VMT is a multi-sensory therapy in its nature. We employ the external senses, especially hearing which bears witness to the sound that wells up from the inside and stimulates our bodies and hearts and impacts on others too when working in a group or in a therapeutic relationship. Sense of touch and sight allow us to contact and connect with ourselves and others. Both hearing and sight can be further enhanced by mindful attention and the deep listening that it engenders. Sometimes a lack of inner relaxation impacts on one's hearing. Mindfulness can help with settling the mind and releasing tension which can lead to better sensing and hearing of one's voice.

Perhaps the most important sense we call on is interoception, the sixth sense, otherwise called a felt or kinaesthetic sense. It facilitates an attunement to the passing phenomena of our body-mind and an awakening of our direct, subjective connection to ourselves. Breathing, free voicing and moving allow us to gain a clear access to noticing what is happening inside us. The careful reaching in of the felt sense anchors us in our bodily experiences and slows us down. The thoughts and emotions that we can get caught up in on a mental level are experienced in their embodied and more palpable form through sensations. Sensations move slower, enabling us to respond rather than react, turn towards what is happening and eventually feel less entangled.

Siegel proposes also the seventh and eighth sense that both figure in the process of therapeutic voice work. The seventh sense brings into focus the content of our minds - thoughts, feelings, beliefs, images, dreams, etc. This sense, which we actively engage in VMT, facilitates metacognition, allowing us to step back and witness our thoughts and feelings. Rather than getting carried away by them in our minds, we locate them in the body and express them. In VMT we also engage in active imagination where the seventh sense appears crucial because we need to pay attention to and sense the images that arise from our psyche. With the right attention and intention images spring up as we begin to breathe, move and voice. The sound and movement are sculpted by the nature of these images.

The eighth sense corresponds to our ability to relate, connect and attune to others which is an important aspect of VMT where the voice is the means of communication, and warrants our ability to develop a healthy relationship to ourselves and others. I described earlier how voicing in a group with kindly intentions makes us feel closer, with a sense of belonging, which can be very nourishing. Here we see that it is the eighth sense that is responsible for this gift of interconnection. The therapeutic relationship both in group and individual VMT sessions also plays an important part in creating a culture of compassionate and mindful presence. The therapist's quality of attunement and presence will shape the client's own responses to themselves. Being seen, heard and felt by another often increases one's own confidence, trust and ability to take in their whole voice and self.

The voice seems to be not only the mode of expression but also a mode of attention and access to our interiority. Expression emerges from the places of connection and recognition and is heard either just by the vocalist or another listener. The sonic quality of our voice communicates to us and others verbally and non-verbally what lies within the body and mind. Expression forms a link between within and without, the hidden and the revealed.

Breath, intention and flexibility

Our voices are intrinsically linked to our breath. Breath is often used in mindfulness as an anchor to the actuality of here and now, steering us away from the abstract world of our minds and phantasies. Voice is the continuation and the reflection of our breath, breathing capacity, our ability to take in the present moment and let it go. If the attention on the breath can ground us in the present moment, we could extend this potentiality to the voice too. Breath being so foundational for the development of the whole voice, in VMT we use a variety of techniques to make the breath more embodied and connected. Freeing up our breathing and making it more effortless and instinctual can thus support not just our voice but also the quality of the meditative practices we engage in.

In VMT the breath acts as a support to the whole voice, whether we are singing, speaking, imagining or creating, supplying us with vital energy. Embodied breathing often becomes a powerful catalyst for a physical and emotional loosening and release which can consequently unchain the voice and give rise to insight. In the case of the acoustic voice, our awareness starts with the breath and gradually expands to the resonance of our voice in the body and the sound of our voice around us. As the voice resonates inside us, it awakens the body, the psyche and the imagination, all in turn releasing their own responses to the vocal impetus. Our awareness then begins to take in one or several streams of our experience, including the voice and its many qualities, the breath, sensations and emotions that arise in different body parts, our posture and body movement, images, thoughts, beliefs, dreams, memories and moods.

We can decide, using our intention, how much we include in our awareness. If we bring curiosity and acceptance into this process, we can track and acquaint ourselves with these intimate occurrences and learn to ride the waves of our experience without getting too caught up in it. It is possible to get absorbed in the perceptions and emotions that enter our awareness as we tune in with our voices and feel swept away by what we uncover. Having a clear structure and putting mindful and self-compassionate attitudes and intentions in place, can give our expressive explorations more grounding and containment. Our direct experience can be acknowledged by our mindful vocal awareness for what it is, without being shaped by judgments and interpretations. For instance, when I engage in non-verbal sounding accompanied by movement, in one moment I am placing my attention on the breath, then I hone into the uprising emotion, then back to the breath which may turn into a vocal sound. In the next moment I bring focus onto sensations and then back to the voice and expression, then an image may emerge and so on. I believe that in this fluid experiential process we are developing a flexible attention, enabling us to navigate and make sense of our internal world

and to choose what to concentrate on. Siegel states: “Attunement is the process by which separate elements are brought into a resonating whole.” Embracing whatever arises, “attunement emerges as integration is created” (2007:78).

Vocal expression, self-regulation and integration

We have determined that the internal attunement of the felt sense interrupts our habitual reactions, enabling us to observe and meet our internal processes and welcome them all (Siegel, 2007). Being able to approach, rather than withdraw from our inner experiences in a positive manner often leads to a greater emotional, body and self-regulation. This is why in VMT, as we are attuning to ourselves in voice, imagination and movement, we often begin to feel a sense of home coming and harmony because of this conscious meeting. Opening ourselves to what we feel, often appeases the pain and avoids more distress and suffering. Being mindfully and kindly aware is therefore a crucial addition to just being aware.

The mindful voice, rooted in the body, has a unique ability to match and contain our experiences with its acoustic qualities, accompanied by movement. When we find a vocal expression that reflects our state or an aspect of ourselves, it can feel validating and containing. We meet ourselves, welcome our experience, echo it back to ourselves and often gain an insight. Sometimes words emerge during exploratory vocalisations, which name our present experience, and bring more clarity and often regulate our emotions. Siegel (2007) hypothesizes that the internal attunement, shaped by mindful practices, parallels the formative experiences we gain in a secure attachment. Daniel Stern (1985) writes on the infant's interpersonal world and the affect attunement and suggests that a baby whose vocalisations are responded to and expanded upon by the mother, feels seen, safe and begins to develop a healthy sense of self. Both of these findings lead me to consider the possibility of creating a secure relationship with our selves via a vocal, creative and somatic attunement that VMT practices offer.

Here are several illustrations of what vocal attunement meant to some of my clients and how it regulated them. Masha* shared that making various vocal sounds helped her to connect with emotions of anger, sadness and joy, which left her feeling more relaxed than usual. Susie* felt soothed and mothered by a vocal sound that she created. Laura* was able to meet a part of her that felt out of reach, her inner, wild and ferocious warrior, via the vocal timbre, *saxophone*⁵. This was an empowering experience for her. Helena*, who has a double nationality, connected to her two separate identities, and joined them together in sound and movement. The English part sang and

⁵ In VMT Saxophone is one of the 10 vocal components which are: pitch, pitch fluctuation, loudness, vocal register, free air, glottal onset, vocal timbres (flute, clarinet, saxophone), disruption, violin and articulation.

moved the African tunes and dances, bringing a sense of unification. The vocal and non-vocal practices and principles in VMT all act as a container for our feelings, beliefs, aspects of the psyche and narratives.

When we express some of the content of our psyche into the space around us in song, movement, free vocalisation and sound, or in writing and imagery making on a page, we gain perspective. Creating a safe distance from what arises within us enables us to observe it and to be witnessed by others. Some expression can develop a direct experience further and amplify it, making it more tangible and relatable. On the contrary soothing and calming expression alleviates what may be hurting, especially as we bring kindness and self-compassion to ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Coming back to Brach's model of RAIN- recognizing, allowing, investigating and nurturing, vocal embodied presence helps us to investigate inwardly via the seventh sense and outwardly through expression which employs multiple senses. In expressive arts we believe that this internal unearthing and changing into a creative form facilitates integration and transformation.

Towards personal and vocal wholeness

Similarly to mindfulness where the aim is to welcome all the experiences without getting caught up in them, in VMT we endeavour to uncover, greet, explore, express, transform and integrate many aspects of ourselves as they arise during the therapeutic voice work. Our *Inner Witness*, borne out of the sixth and seventh sense, lends us a hand in this process with its curiosity, kindness and non-judgmental awareness. The notion of the Inner Witness comes from mindfulness and Buddhist traditions. I tend to integrate into my work a more personified part from the Internal Family Systems, the Compassionate Self who I explored earlier. This part has many characteristics of the Inner Witness but emphasizes a creative, courageous and caring attitude which I find helpful in my approach as it creates a safe and enticing environment to explore all that arises and move us towards wholeness.

In the next section I will present three examples of clients who I worked with periodically over a decade and whom I interviewed as part of my qualitative research. I will illustrate how a mindful and compassionate whole voice approach led to their individuation and personal and professional growth.

Sandra*, a psychologist and coach, attended several of my workshops between 2010 and 2017. Sandra shared that VMT, particularly the work with vocal components, helped her to become more

whole. According to Newham, vocal components⁶ are specific vocal qualities that are found in each human voice. When explored and experienced in the body and mind, vocal components not only expand our whole voice expression but also our understanding of who we are in the world. As Sandra participated in many vocal improvisations over the years, individually or in a group, her system was slowly learning that it was safe to allow herself to be heard, as loud as she needed to be and to get it 'wrong'. Initially her internal beliefs were organised around high level of self-censorship, fear of vulnerability and perfectionism. Gradually the embodied and mindful vocal exercises allowed her to be sharp if she wanted to or gentle without feeling weak; to let herself be more “colourful rather than in a mediocre grey” and to show herself as she is, in her imperfections. She could shine and make mistakes. She no longer needed to be the best. As she harmonised with others and felt the common humanity of that experience, she became more playful too.

Helena*, a dancer and early years educator, participated in over 100 hours of VMT in groups and an individual session. The inclusiveness of many states of the whole voice approach and the mindful and compassionate presence that she learnt to generate to attend to her different parts, opened up her voice and sense of self. She told me that she began to sing songs in many different ways which enhanced her creative and professional work. In our individual session she tasted the possibility of wholeness whilst feeling quite disconnected from her feminine part. She experienced the feminine part of herself in singing and allowed herself to be more „pink and romantic“. Her conditioning and circumstances meant that Helena had to be fiercely independent, fending for herself, which left her feeling quite depleted, lonely and masculine. She gave herself permission to be soft, sensual and caring by experiencing a vocal quality we call *free air*. She befriended these once unavailable parts of her, realising their gifts and creative potential. A year on in a vocal group improvisation she surprised herself when she sang the word „love“, previously too tender for her, now it spontaneously flew out of her mouth. Her femininity started to be normalised in this process of embodiment, and integrated into her life.

Petra*, the photographer mentioned earlier in the article, also came to several VMT workshops throughout the years and had a one-to-one session in the very beginning. I conducted an interview with her the last time I saw her. She reported that since engaging with therapeutic voice work and integrating it into her life, she gained a greater sense of connection with her breath. She felt that the vocal component of *clarinet* was very healing for her and allowed her to get in touch with her chest where she felt constricted and helped her to create more expansion and heart connection there. The healing flow of the breath, unfettered due to the vocal component *saxophone*, facilitated going deeper into her body. She became more spontaneous and spoke when she needed to rather than

⁶ The 10 vocal components in VMT are: pitch, pitch fluctuation, loudness, vocal register, free air, glottal onset, vocal timbres (flute, clarinet, saxophone), disruption, violin and articulation.

holding back. She realised she had more connection to herself than before.

The mindful and compassionate qualities and attention that we bring into working therapeutically with our voices frees up a creative flow in which the internal weather of our existence is contained and expressed. In this wholeness which holds different aspects of ourselves, discharged through the body, voice and mind we may touch a sense of freedom of non-attachment as everything is subject to change. This idea comes from the concept of no fixed self, which originates in Buddhism. Our ability to be with the impermanent nature of our psyches makes us more flexible and accepting of the ups and downs of life, our vulnerable and imperfect interiority and creativity. Let us delve deeper into the immersive nature of the human voice and explore how embodiment can enhance creative and spiritual processes.

Vocal embodiment and the experiential wisdom of the voice

Embodiment is broadly defined as a process where the entire body, its sensorimotor functions, mental representations, perceptions and bodily interactions play an essential role in information processing and how we relate to the world (Körner, Topolinski and Strack, 2015). Our bodies offer dwellings for our voices. In VMT we believe that our voice resides in our whole body and is therefore influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by our physical and psychological circumstances and states. The aim of the therapeutic voice work is to carefully encourage our voice to journey back into the flesh and bones of our existence. VMT offers numerous ways to inhabit all the areas of the body. The voice is consequently anchored in the larger phenomenology of our somatic experiences, enabling deeper connection, authenticity and congruence of our expression. The embodied voice feels, imagines, senses, makes sense of and expresses. Our imagination seems to get especially freed up once we begin to pay attention to our body and move and sound. Somatic experience does not depend on ego consciousness. It has the potential to connect us to our unconscious, the body memory which can unveil to us different aspects of our selves, including our Shadow. Embodiment is independent of the thinking mind and therefore pre-conceptual in its nature, similarly to mindfulness. Entering the world of the body with a specific intention, gives us access to life force and knowledge (Ray, 2016).

Earlier we looked at the multi-sensory nature of VMT which not only promotes the possibility of developing our whole voice, but it opens a pathway to our full-bodied experience and deepens our awareness. Our senses live in the body and it therefore seems essential to include the intelligence of our body in order to gain access to our direct experience, whether we practice mindfulness, VMT or MSC. In VMT, informed by mindfulness, the whole voice acts as a channel that transports us from

mindful awareness into embodiment and expression as we engage with our internal and external experiences. Our attention is with the aliveness of our body-mind and our environment where we move and voice. I will demonstrate below how embodying our voices opens a door into the hidden parts of ourselves, body memories, and a subsequent renewed sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being. Including mindfulness and self-compassion practices guide us to locate an emotion in the body where it can be attentively listened to and looked after with compassion.

After an exploration of vocal timbres and the accompanying postures and imagery, that we embarked on in our workshop, Chloe* reported that the absorption in this investigation allowed her to let herself connect safely to her body, especially the bottom of the spine. Moving her attention deeper inside her body lessened her worry about improving her voice. As the grip of the inner critic relaxed in her, so did her body and she could sing with more ease. The bottom-up experience of the embodied vocalisation undid the controlling tendencies of the evaluating brain. She connected with her whole body despite the initial fear to let herself do that.

Working with the metaphor of *the vocal tube* often invites us into a more intimate and closer relationship with our bodies and psyche. The image of the vocal tube, that begins in the mouth and descends through the throat into the chest and diaphragm and deeper down into the abdomen and all the way into the pelvic floor is a great vehicle for this internal kinship with the body. Furthermore, the vocal tube is flexible and malleable in volume and size and can be shaped through a variety of movement, vocal and imagery-based practices. Whilst working with the vocal tube Eva*, a music teacher, was able to connect with her pelvic floor, which she had negative judgments towards, release tension and accept this part of her body more. This acceptance in turn opened up her voice to more expression and vocal range.

Olga*, a high school music teacher, was amidst an exploration of opening of her vocal tube from flute into clarinet (from narrow to wide) when she remembered an old memory of a band leader who criticized her creativity. Since then whenever she sang, she swallowed and had to clear her voice frequently which blocked her expression. Working with the vocal tube gave her hope that she can free her voice again and make it creative. Next week in our group session Olga shared that she was able to lead a choir in front of her colleagues at work. Something that would have previously caused her a lot of stress.

VMT offers us many tools to contact our present moment experience through our bodies, including any blockages or habitual patterns. Often our bodies and minds carry tension because of trauma, stress or the complexities of our lives. Tension decreases the amount of oxygen that enters our

bodies, impedes the flow of energy in our body, leaving us more fatigued, contracted or even dissociated. Vocalisation with movement can be very effective in undoing tension from within and therefore opening access to the experiential wisdom of the voice. Helena* included vocal sounds in her regular morning movement warm-up. The vibrations of the voice penetrated into her muscles and released aches and pains that her body was holding, leaving her more energised and ready for the day. Chloe* noticed that during the exploration of the vocal component *glottal onset* her very tight shoulder blades relaxed. Sandra* was taken by surprise when during a *convex*⁷ movement practice her chest, usually held in, opened up. She savoured the space that cleared and from which her voice came out with more force and freedom. This marked a beginning of her remembering that this spaciousness is available to her. Releasing bodily tension often results in more vitality, expression and creativity.

The metaphor of the vocal tube helps us to expand our sense of self and move from a narrow perception of ourselves to a wider, more encompassing one. The subjective and evolving image of the vocal tube that we each conjure up in our imagination and sense in the body allows us to mind our inner landscapes and stay with their unique anatomy. Each vocal timbre, emanating from the vocal tube and its accompanying postures anchors and roots us in our genuine story and actuality. Here are just a few examples of the treasures and breakthroughs from my clients' experiential inquiries into vocal components. Hana*, a psychotherapist working with addiction, found gentleness and a mother-like quality in the vocal timbre *flute*, allowing her to stay with the tenderness and rest. In another session the free flow of emotions in the vocal tube helped Hana to relate to her grief and subsequently feel joy. Sam*, a self-employed holistic worker, experienced *the flute* very differently. It gave her a sense of control, safety and containment that she needed in her somewhat unpredictable life. For a drama student Hugo* the slow pace that he accessed in *the clarinet* component and a 'primate' body posture became associated with feelings of giving in and giving up which he then processed further in a group sharing. Another drama student Phil* remembered the precariousness of acting in the embodiment of the vocal component *pitch fluctuation*. It reminded him of the possibility of 'fucking up' and slipping off from the imaginary tightrope that we enacted as a metaphor for a performance anxiety. The group then continued reflecting on the stage fright and was introduced to tools to increase their resilience.

Finally, to give an example related to the creative or imaginal voice, I will introduce you to Carl*. Carl was a long-term client, a psychotherapist recovering from a stroke. Our work involved looking at different parts of him and giving them voice in order to make sense of his grief and loss. We achieved this through active imagination and drawing, both informed by regular checking in with

⁷ *Convex* and *Concave* are non-vocal practices in VMT. Convex movement is achieved by bulging the front of our body forward. Concave movement comes from hollowing our front and bulging the back.

emotions and sensations in his body and places of tension and restricted breathing. Mindful non-judgmental curiosity was needed to acknowledge and stay with his emerging parts, bringing them up from the unconscious to his consciousness and realising that a particular set of emotions belong to them and not to the whole of Carl. My compassion, encouraging forming of his self-compassion, helped us to hold the struggles, predicaments and pain these sub-personalities carried, offering some comfort and safety to them. In this *transitional space* (Winnicott, 2005), Carl drew many images of his selves, gave them a name, sometimes wrote a monologue for some of the parts and read it out loud. Having the images on the paper meant that he was able to treat them as acquaintances and befriend them more. Some of the parts were enacted in chair work⁸ or we explored their location and behaviour in the room. His imaginal voice met the acoustic voice, such as when his inner child “Little Carl” dialogued with his wise adult “The King”. His internal creative voice became the vehicle for self-expression, insight, integration and transformation. My own voice and presence played an important role in this journey with Carl. Echoing his words back when appropriate as he read out something he wrote, singing with him, using a soothing tone of voice when his inner critic was activated or indeed using my own imaginal voice are just a few examples of how a therapist can use their own expressive and embodied voice to meet the client with relational depth.

There are many more examples of the potentiality of the whole voice to mindfully and compassionately connect the body, mind and heart and open the doors to a greater clarity, awareness, expanded expression and confidence.

I had the privilege to work with people of different cultures, ages and occupations. Most of the uncovered themes repeat themselves across these populations, suggesting the common humanity of our embodied lives. The prevailing experience points at the fact that our bodies harness the full potential of the human voice as a medium of self-expression and personal and spiritual growth.

Embodied voice, mindfulness and compassion – final reflections

The tools that Mindful Self-Compassion offers, together with the development of the calm, curious and creative Self, make the journey home into our bodies and voices vulnerable but meaningful. The embodiment of compassion that can be emphasized in the therapeutic voice work enables us to transform our fear, self-judgment and disconnection, and enhances our internal resilience as well as the supportive culture of a vocal group. We can access a creative mode of being that is less anxious, more accepting and authentic when we add a compassionate attention to our whole voice.

⁸ The empty chair technique is a talk therapy exercise in which we express our thoughts and feelings as if we were talking to a specific person. Even though that person is not present, we direct our words and gestures at an empty chair and imagine that person sitting in it while we talk.

The immersive and multi-sensory practices of VMT together with the awareness and tenderness training of Mindful Self-Compassion elicit an embodied, conscious and kind presence with our direct experience. The vocal awareness, attunement and expression coupled with mindful and compassionate attitudes regulate our body-mind and bring us closer to wholeness, flexibility, authenticity and sensitivity to our interiority. The common thread throughout the presented reflections and research is that expression supported by mindfulness and self-compassion links the body to the mind. In that connecting and unravelling a new perspective and insight, and a more secure relationship to one's whole voice is gained. Our psyches and their various aspects get integrated as we marry together, within the creative process of non-verbal sounding, moving, singing and imagining, the right and the left hemisphere of the brain; former sensing the body, feelings and nonverbal imagery and the latter conjuring up words, thoughts and the internal awareness. Specific vocal components, metaphors, postures, movement and imagery combined with discernment and warm-heartedness of mindfulness and self-compassion unlock the experiential wisdom of the voice that is available to us.

Both mindfulness and self-compassion enable the vocalist, the facilitator or therapist to recognize, allow and nurture the body-mind and the whole voice experience of sensing and expressing in many creative ways. Practicing and integrating Mindful Self-Compassion, and some foundations of Buddhism, from which mindfulness originates, into VMT enabled me to broaden my understanding of the human voice as a holistic tool for intra and interpersonal healing, communication, creative exploration and transformation. Both internal and external voices provide us with many opportunities to acquaint ourselves with what it is to be fully alive, live, breathe and express mindfully and with compassion. My hope is that as we evolve our culture can embrace further the experiential wisdom of the human voice and body-mind and bring it to the forefront of our current conversations about language, expressive arts and psychotherapy.

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