AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL BREATH® FOR ANXIETY MANAGEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL VOICE USERS: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wheble, Philippa C R[1], Clark, Terry[2], and Chapman, Carol[3]

[1.]MSc Performing Arts Medicine, University College London, UK
[2.]Centre for Performance Science, Royal College of Music, UK
[3.]Performing Arts Medicine, British Association of Performing Arts Medicine & University College London, UK
* Correspondence: [pip_wheble@hotmail.com]

Background

Social anxiety disorders are common with a lifetime prevalence of 12.1% in the general population. Music performance anxiety is categorised as a social anxiety disorder and affects 59% of musicians, often co-existing with depression, generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Pharmacological management of anxiety can affect important aspects of performance and is not favoured within the performing arts community where anxiety is generally considered to be 'part of the job'. Although well managed anxiety can enhance performance, severe anxiety and panic attacks can be potentially career threatening.

Skilled vocal performance requires control of the respiratory system. In the pre-performance setting a correlation has been shown between music performance anxiety and hyperventilation. Whether it is fear of negative evaluation or hyperventilation itself that triggers the anxiety cascade, the discipline required to overcome anxiety during a vocal performance can create tension and affect vocal quality. Negative self-evaluation of the altered voice can further exacerbate anxiety problems.

Transformational Breath® is a breathing technique that can be used in a regular practice to explore and manage anxiety symptoms. It incorporates conscious-connected breathing, mindfulness, body mapping, sound and movement. It teaches an awareness and relaxation of the breathing that could be used in the pre-performance setting to identify and directly manage anxiety symptoms.

Aims

This empirical research explores the efficacy of Transformational Breath® for the management of anxiety in professional voice users. The existing literature for breathing interventions in anxiety management is discussed and a methodology for the application of this conscious-connected breathing technique in a research setting is established.

Method

Professional voice users with social anxiety disorder were randomly allocated to intervention (n=12) or waiting-list control (n=12) groups. Both groups attended on three occasions to complete psychological outcome measures. Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD-7), depression (PHQ-9), social anxiety disorder (SPIN), music performance anxiety (K-MPAI) and wellbeing (WEMWBS) were recorded. Physiological measurement of blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, oxygen saturations and peak expiratory flow rate was also undertaken. Participants in the intervention group practiced Transformational Breath® at each attendance and repeated the outcome measures following each intervention.

Results

A single Transformational Breath® session caused significant (p<0.001) reductions in GAD-7, PHQ-9, SPIN, K-MPAI and heart rate and a significant increase in WEMWBS. A course of three Transformational Breath® sessions caused a significant (p<0.001) reduction in systolic blood pressure and heart rate when compared with controls.

Conclusions

This study provides preliminary evidence for the clinical efficacy of Transformational Breath® to improve generalised anxiety, social anxiety, music performance anxiety, depression and wellbeing and to reduce physiological measures of anxiety in professional voice users. The breathing technique can be taught in three individual sessions with a facilitator and is intended for independent use in the long-term. This represents a non-pharmacological self-management approach to anxiety conditioning which could benefit musicians long-term in performance, physical and mental health.

Keywords

Anxiety; Breathing; Performance; Depression; Wellbeing

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