



HM Prison &
Probation Service



Learning
Together

Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #9

Finding Your Voice



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This resource is designed to introduce users to singing, exploring how the voice works, preparing the body for singing, and learning a song.

“But I can’t sing!”

We meet people in our work all the time who say that they can’t sing, or they are tone deaf, or that we wouldn’t want to hear them try. Singing is very personal. For many people, singing is scary. We only ever hear world famous singers on our radios, the best of the best. If we don’t sound like that, it’s easy to think we ‘can’t sing’.

The truth is, everyone can sing. Singing is really good for us. Research has found that singing improves posture, breathing and is an effective way to relieve pain. It’s great for wellbeing - people on average feel happier after singing than after listening to a concert or a CD - and singing is found in cultures across the world, from ancient to modern times. People have always sung as individuals and groups. It’s the most natural way humans can make music. Singing feels good, especially if you feel isolated, worried or stressed. It connects you to your body and your mind, and whether you can see others or not, it connects you to each other too by hearing one another. When we can’t be physically near others, hearing someone sing or singing yourself is a valuable shared experience.

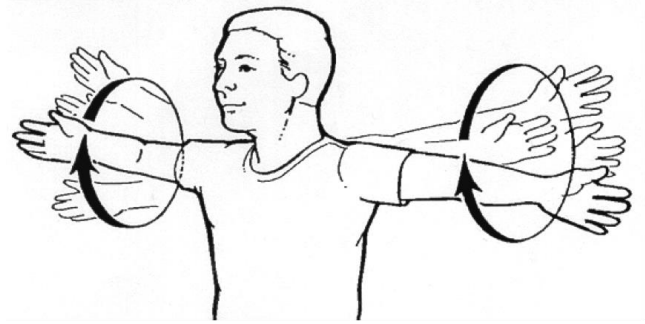
Firstly - think of a song you already know well, even if you haven’t sung for years, or you can’t remember all the words, or only know the chorus. Jot it down somewhere. We will come back to it later.

Warming up the body

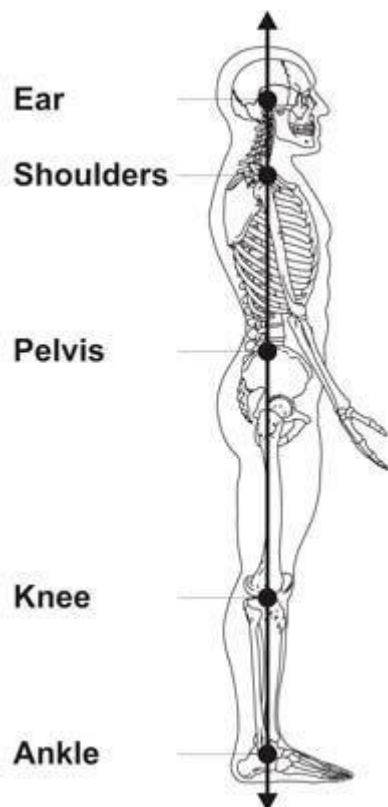
Singing uses the whole body. Our feet and legs and spine need to hold us up, so air can fill our lungs. Our neck and shoulders need to support the head, so that air can flow from our lungs and out through our mouth, and make sound. To make a healthy sound, all you really need to do is **get rid of tension** - which is why we start with some stretches and gentle movements. Singing shouldn’t feel painful or strained, but natural - after all, it’s only breathing in and out.

- Use the ends of your fingers to rub your face and your scalp. Gently pat your arms, legs and torso to wake up the rest of your body. Roll your shoulders 5 times backwards, then 5 times forwards
- Stretch your arms above your head and reach up as high as you can. Then breathe out slowly while you bring your arms down.
- Flop over so you are touching the floor with your fingertips but still standing with bent knees. Let your head hang down freely and feel your back relaxing. Then very slowly roll back up again, letting your head be the last thing to straighten up.

- Stretch your arms out to either side and draw small circles with them. Make sure your shoulders aren't lifting up while you do this. Gradually increase the size of the circles - first the size of golf balls, then tennis balls, then foot balls, then car wheels, then tractor wheels. Then decrease the size of the circles until you come back to the tiny golf ball circles.
(The picture shows the movement we mean).



Standing and breathing to sing



Standing properly aligns our body so that we can breathe well, and prepare our bodies to sing well. This helps air flow in and out freely, and stop the tension we just stretched away coming back.

Stand up with your ankles under your knees, your knees under your hips, and your hips under your shoulders. You can see what we mean in the picture.

Lock your knees back, then bend them - and now find a nice midpoint where they're a tiny bit bent. Shrug your shoulders up tight, then release them down.

Now we're going to start working on our singing breath. This means taking deep breaths that help us engage our lower abdomen (tummy) and back, rather than shallow breaths that hunch our shoulders up. We know our breath doesn't really go all the way down to our feet - but imagining this can be a good way of making sure we aren't taking weak or shallow breaths.

- Take a breath in. Do your shoulders hunch up? Try taking another breath that you feel coming into your tummy and all the way through your legs down to your feet. Does that stop your shoulders from rising?
- Now put one hand on your hip/waist, about level with your belly button. Make a gentle coughing sound. Can you feel the muscles in the side of your abdomen giving a small kick as you cough? These are some of the muscles that help us produce a strong and comfortable singing sound.
- Keep one hand on your waist and bring your other hand up to the level of your mouth with your palm facing you. Imagine that each of your fingers is a candle, and blow the candles out one at a time with short, sharp breaths. Can you still feel the muscles engaging under your other hand as you blow the air out? Can you feel the muscles relaxing between each blow?
- Repeat the candle exercise, but using a quick 'sss' sound to blow out the candles. Can you still feel the muscles engaging? Now try with 'fff' and 'shhh' sounds.

Now we are going to try the same exercise with 'voiced consonants'. This means that you will be making a pitched sound as well as the air coming out, and technically it means that your vocal chords are vibrating together to make a sound. Repeat the candle exercise, but this time use a 'zzz' sound to blow out the candles. Can you still feel the muscles engaging? Now try with 'vvv'.

If we can keep these muscles engaged for longer, they can support us singing a whole phrase. We can extend the candle exercise to help us get used to keeping up this level of muscle engagement.

Keep your hand on your waist to feel the muscles working. Take a deep breath in (remembering to think all the way down to your feet) and make a loud 'sss' sound, but this time keep it going for as long as you can. As soon as you have no breath left, release your tummy so air can flow quickly back in. Now try the same exercise on a voiced 'vvv' sound, and see if you can keep your muscles working right until the end of your breath.

Starting to sing

Even if you don't think you make a nice sound when singing, the act of breathing in properly and humming quietly on any note, even just to yourself, releases tension and can help us get used to the feeling of singing. You might want to work on your breathing for a few days, and you might not want to sing at all - stretching and breathing are great for now. But if you want to try making some noise, this short exercise might help:

- Make an 'mmm' sound, like something is tasty. Practise making this sound very high, and very low and slide around in between.
- Slide towards the bottom of your range and then stop sliding but keep humming! It might not feel like it but this is a note. Breathe when you need to, and practise stopping and starting this note.
- Try and sing the word 'one' on that note. Get used to what that feels like - opening your mouth, and singing a word. Staying on the same note, now practise changing the word. We suggest using different numbers: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1.
- Now we are going to practise singing new notes to each of the numbers. With each number sing one step higher than the previous one. Sing the word 'one' on the note you have been practising. Then, sing the word 'two' on a note **one step higher** and so on until you get to 5.
- If you don't know what we mean by one step higher, think about the EastEnders theme tune (if you know it). The first five notes outline the steps of a scale from 1 to 5.
- Now start with the top note on 5, and sing each of the notes back down to 1. Now practice going up and down a few times: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1.
- Finally, go back to the song you wrote down at the beginning of this ThinkLet, before warming up. Take a moment to remember how it goes. Hum the first line quietly a few times, and then try introducing the words. Practice this line a few times, slowly, giving yourself time to breathe properly. If it feels good, tap your feet in time, or click your fingers. Feel grounded by the rhythm of the song, your breathing, and how you are standing.

*Sing Inside have produced an audio CD to accompany this ThinkLet, as well as further in-cell resources and audio content. Please apply for a CD and further musical learning packs via your Learning and Skills Manager (or whoever distributes and manages resources), who can contact Sing Inside so we can get them to you. Alternatively, you can contact us directly by writing to **Sing Inside, PO Box 75137, SW9 1EJ**.*