

# Transgender Voice and Communication: Holistic Therapy for the Whole Client

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she/her/hers

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# Disclosures

- ▶ Disclosure: I am employed by the University of Minnesota, where I provide services to individuals working on their voice. I will be discussing the services that I provide, but I am not promoting any particular service delivery method, product, service, or business. Information is for didactic purposes only.
- ▶ I received complimentary registration for this conference because of my membership on a Board affiliated with Just Us Health.

# Learner Objectives

Participants will be able to describe 5-7 factors that affect how gender may be expressed and identified in voice and communication



Participants will be able to describe 3-4 techniques that individuals may use to modify their voices to better align with their gender identity while maintaining vocal health

# Today's Agenda

I. Background Information



II. Perception of Gender in Voice and Communication



III. Techniques

# Introduction to Speech- Language Pathology

ASHA.org

- ▶ Educational and Healthcare Settings
- ▶ Across the Lifespan (infants to elderly)
- ▶ Areas of practice:
  - ▶ Articulation
  - ▶ Stuttering
  - ▶ Swallowing and feeding
  - ▶ Language
  - ▶ Social Communication
  - ▶ Voice and resonance
  - ▶ Alternative and Augmentative Communication
  - ▶ Cognitive communication (planning, problem solving)
  - ▶ Hearing (impact of hearing on communication)
  - ▶ Professional communication (e.g., accent, public speaking)

# Introduction

- ▶ Marilyn Fairchild, MA, MA, CCC-SLP
- ▶ Clinical supervision at University of Minnesota
- ▶ Experience:
  - ▶ Difference vs. Disorder in culturally and linguistically diverse individuals
  - ▶ Pediatric and adult populations
  - ▶ Clinical supervision
  - ▶ Professional speech/voice use
  - ▶ Voice training

# Before we start:

- ▶ I am cisgender.
- ▶ I do not speak for transgender or gender non-conforming people; I am relating my own experience as a provider.
- ▶ Any stories that I share that are not my own are **shared with permission** from the individuals involved and are shared without identifying information.
- ▶ Not every transgender or gender non-conforming person wants or seeks voice services.
- ▶ Most who seek services do not have accompanying voice disorders. It's usually a matter of working on communication *difference*, not *disorder*.
- ▶ Those that do seek services do so for a variety of reasons that are their own. Reasons folks have mentioned include:
  - ▶ Gender dysphoria when voice and gender identity don't align
  - ▶ Hassles when navigating daily life

# Why people may seek these services:

"My voice has always been a problem for me, not because I had a problem with it...but because other people did."

"A lot of the time when I meet people, I can see the shock on their face and I can see how their ideas of me in their head are changing because of the voice they hear. Often they will gender me as female initially, but upon hearing my voice, they will switch over to male pronouns."

"I've considered a lot of different options, especially voice therapy as well as surgery, but it just seems really unfair."

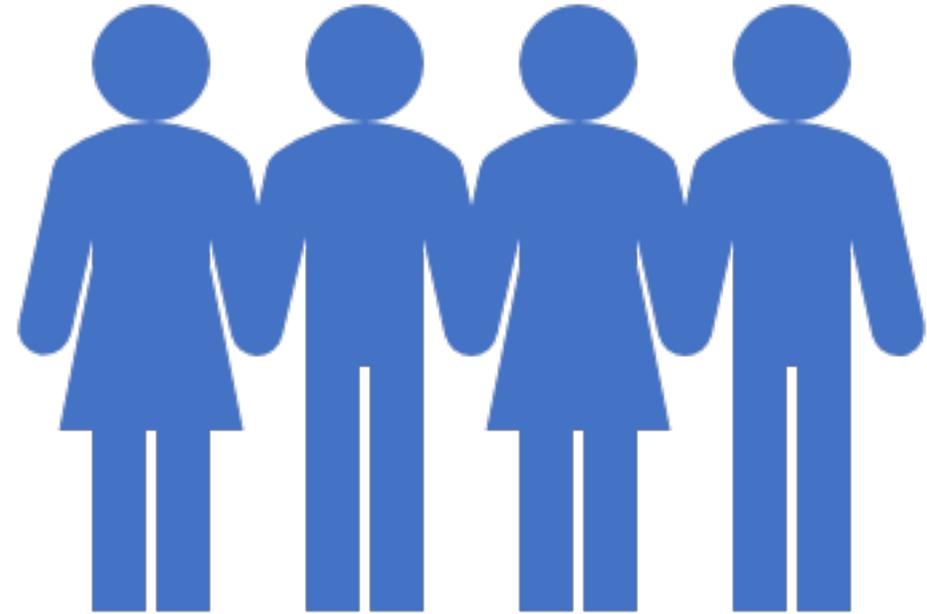
# Stereotypes

Assumptions applied to individuals based on group affiliation

Positive, negative, neutral

Sometimes true, but always incomplete

- ▶ Source and resource: UMN Office for Equity and Diversity



# Addressing Stereotypes

## My own reservations:

- Gender equity
- Gender-based stereotypes

## My client's reservations:

- Judgment: "feeding into gender stereotypes"
- Judgment: "not trying hard enough"

- ▶ “It’s a myth to think that voice training for trans people is just perpetuating stereotypes, but we are definitely dealing with cultural norms like word choice and intonation.”
- ▶ “It’s about helping people understand what the norms are and how to work around them and find the right combination of patterns that make it congruent with their identity and within the biological constraints that they have.”  
-Christie Block, New York Speech & Voice Lab

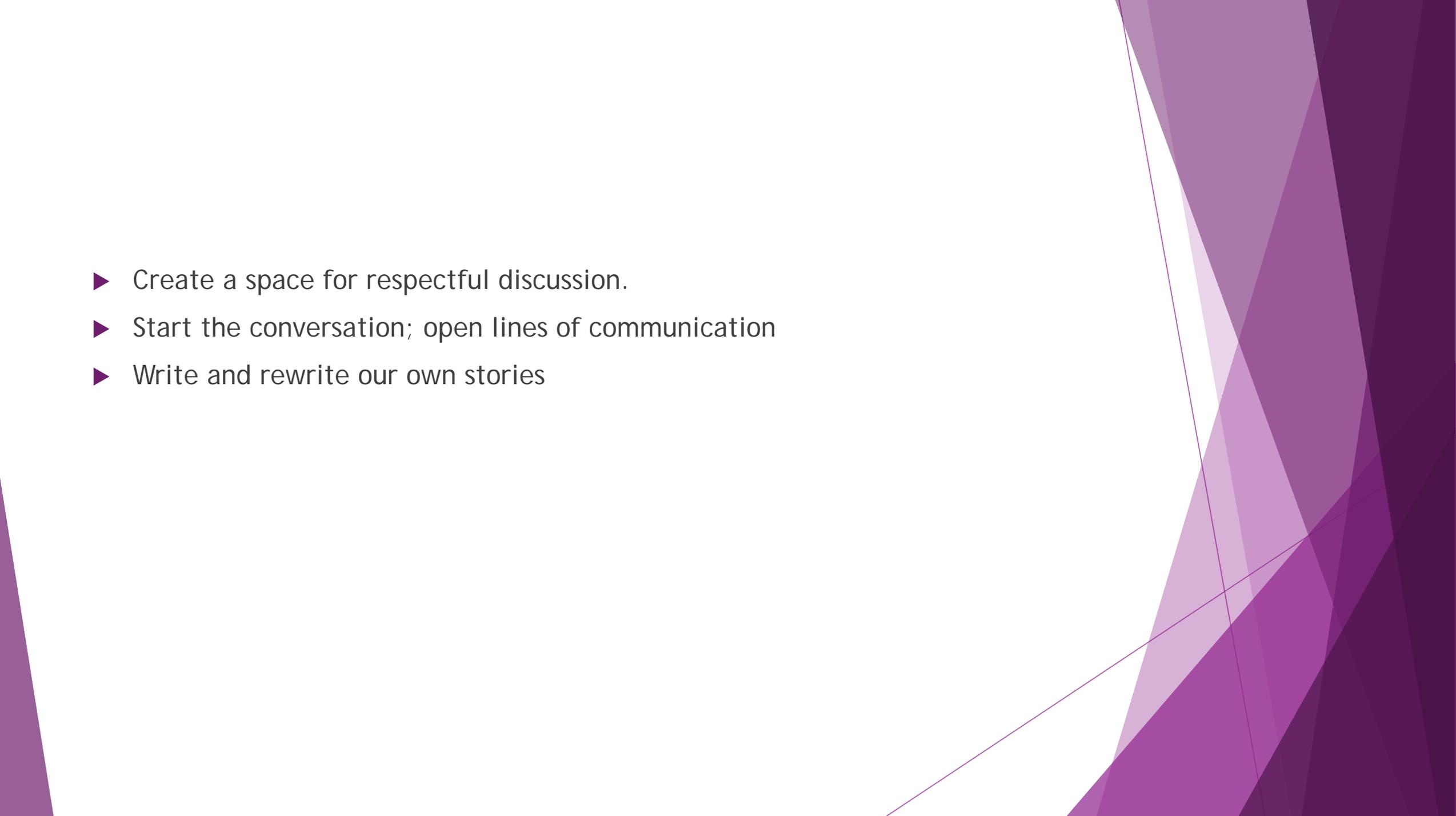
Accessed from: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-transgender-women-are-training-their-voices-sound-more-feminine-180957537/#K4yMly7DWos2Z2X4.99>

# Counteracting Stereotypes

“Stereotypes are powerful because the stories we tell about ourselves are powerful. They shape how we see the world and how the world sees us. But in the end, they are only stories, and stories...we can rewrite them.”

-Shankar Vedantam, host from Hidden Brain

Boyle, T. (Supervising Producer). (2019, January 17). Playing the Gender Card: Overlooking and Overthrowing Sexist Stereotypes [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/17/684515742/playing-the-gender-card-overlooking-and-overthrowing-sexist-stereotypes>.

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- ▶ Create a space for respectful discussion.
  - ▶ Start the conversation; open lines of communication
  - ▶ Write and rewrite our own stories

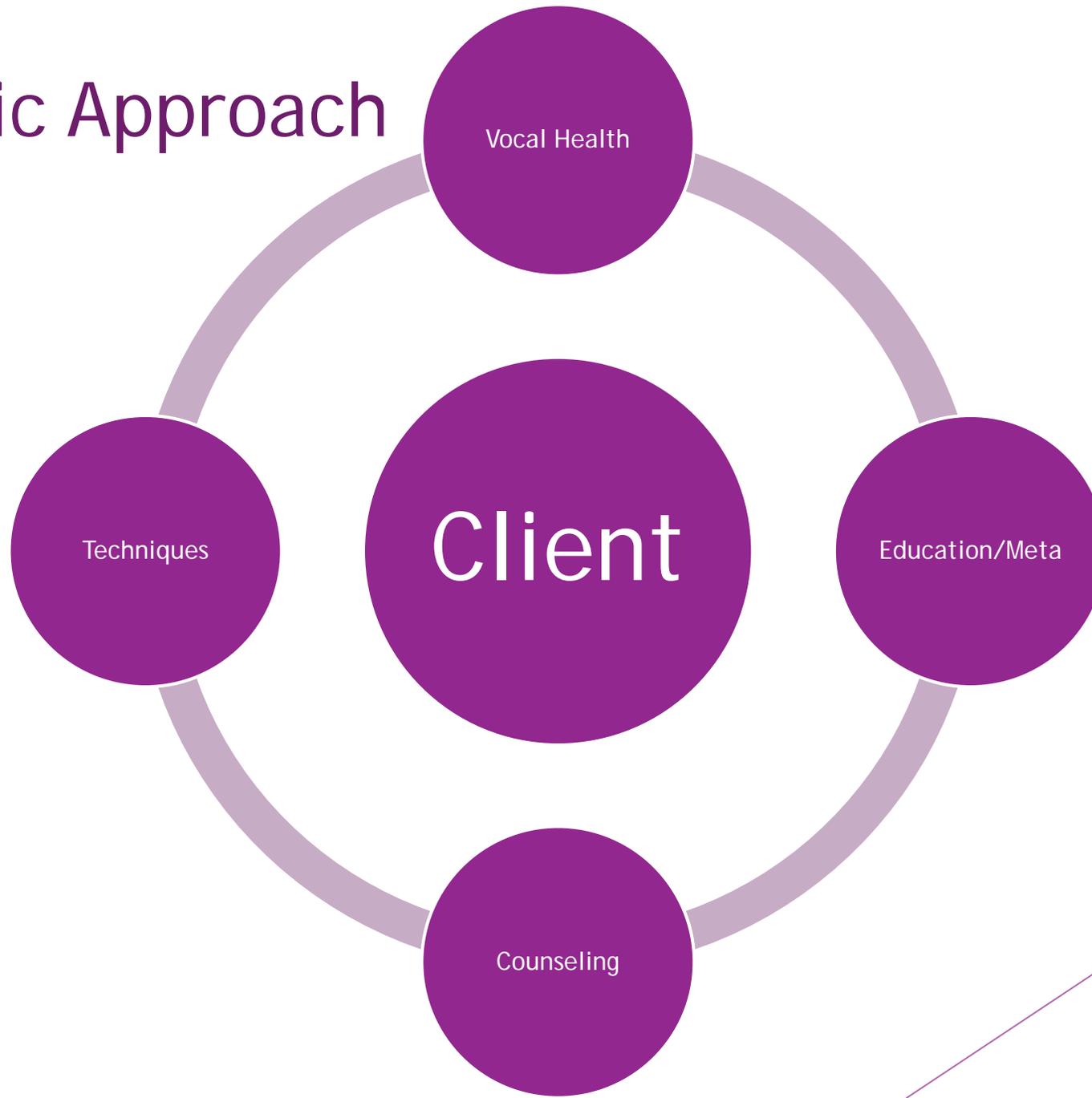
# Diversity in Gender Presentation

Acknowledgement to Adrienne Hancock and Linda Siegfriedt, George Washington University

American Gothic, Grant Wood, 1930

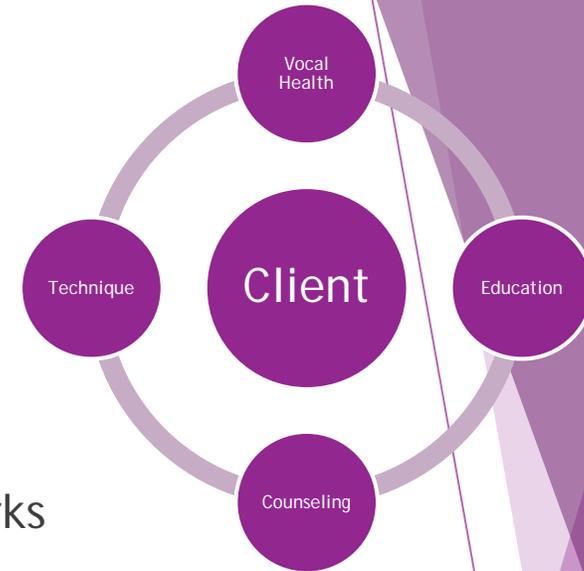
The Star, Edward Degas, 1878

# Holistic Approach



# Components of Voice and Communication Services

- ▶ 1. Health comes first; keep the voice healthy!
- ▶ 2. Education re: the vocal mechanism/how the voice works
  - ▶ Beginning of the meta awareness they will need to generalize
- ▶ 3. Counseling
  - ▶ Find out what the client wants
  - ▶ Client-directed
  - ▶ Referrals as needed
  - ▶ Putting the “whole person” in “holistic” services
- ▶ 4. Techniques



# Vocal Hygiene Tips

- ▶ Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water and avoid caffeinated beverages (e.g. pop, coffee).
- ▶ Don't smoke. Try to avoid smoky areas such as bars or restaurants.
- ▶ Maintain good overall health by eating a balanced diet and getting enough rest.
- ▶ Avoid clearing your throat. Swallow sips of water instead.
- ▶ Take special care when you have a cold. Be sure to rest, drink plenty of water, and avoid talking as much as possible. See a physician if coughing becomes chronic.
- ▶ Stand next to the person you're talking to and use appropriate loudness levels.
- ▶ Avoid speaking in loud places. For example, in the car, avoid singing with the radio.
- ▶ Avoid screaming, cheering, making odd sounds, etc.
- ▶ Use correct posture and try to breathe from your diaphragm.
- ▶ Relax the muscles of your neck, face, and shoulders.
- ▶ Avoid whispering. "Loud" or "stage" whispering can strain your vocal cords.

# Vocal Fold Function

Open for breathing

Closed/vibrating to produce sound

Primary purpose is to protect the airway (e.g., cough)

Also useful for lifting heavy objects!

Vocal folds are comprised of mucosal tissue supported by the intrinsic and extrinsic muscles of the larynx

Not a “no pain no gain” approach to “strengthening” the folds to change the voice.

# Videostroboscopy of Vocal Folds

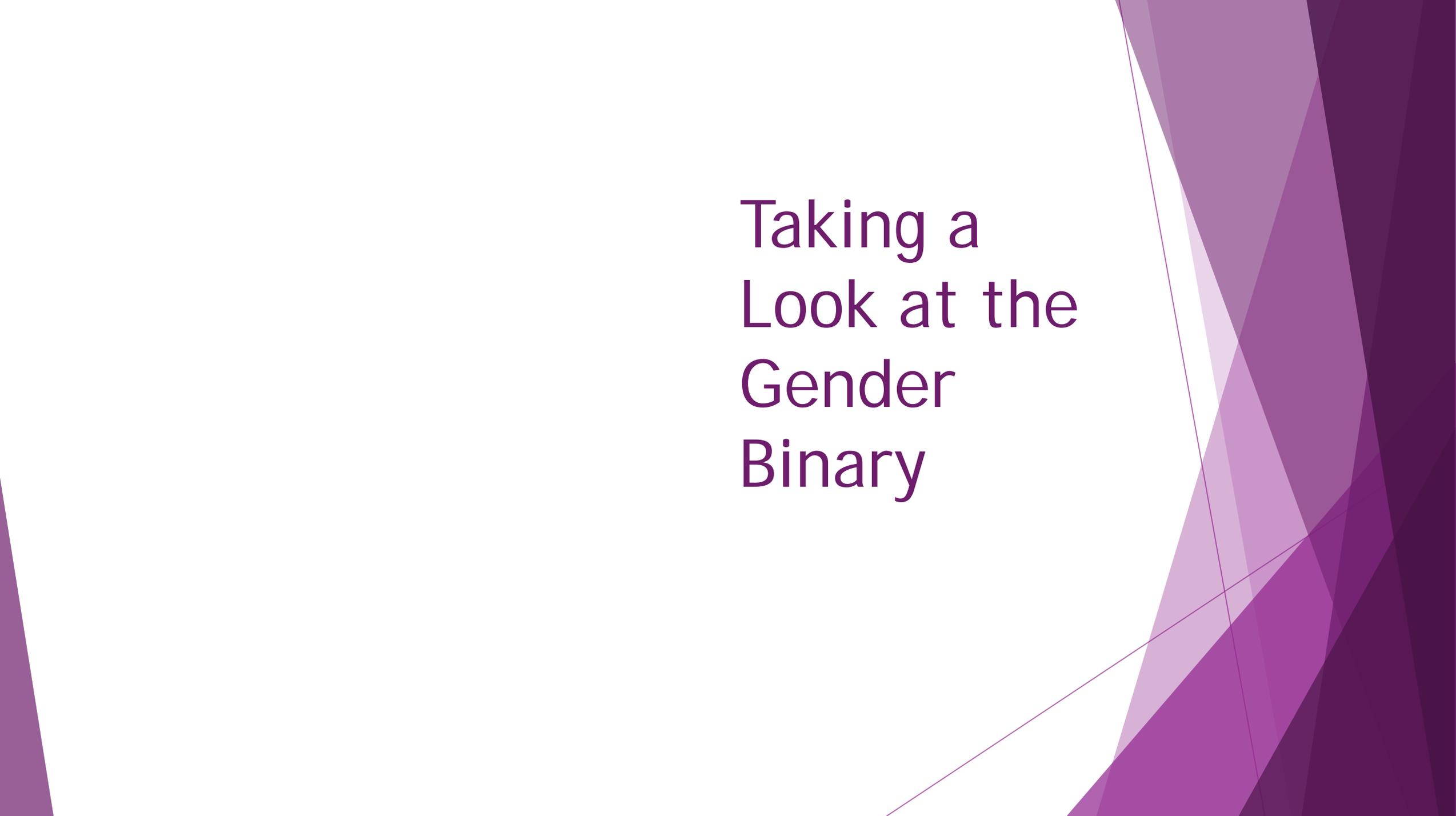


# The Effect of Hormones on Vocal Folds

- ▶ The size of the folds and the shape of the “instrument” affect the sound produced.
  - ▶ Vocal tract length
  - ▶ Resonating chamber
- ▶ Testosterone thickens the folds; this may lower the pitch
- ▶ Estrogen does not affect the size or shape of the folds

# II. Perceptions of Gender

Sweeping generalization  
alert!

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of purple, ranging from light lavender to deep, dark purple. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The text is centered in the white space on the left side of the image.

# Taking a Look at the Gender Binary

# Beyond the Binary

## Why?

- The idea of sorting the diversity of human experience into 2 categories is silly.
- The binary leaves us vulnerable to all sorts of nasty stereotypes.
- The voice is a complex instrument.
- Humans are complex creatures.
- Communication is a complex reciprocal endeavor!
- Etc.!

# Perception of Gender

Pitch (anatomical, cultural)

Resonance (anatomical, cultural)

Vocal Quality (e.g., creaky, breathy) (the dreaded glottal fry register)

Style of communication (intonation, precise articulation (/s/), vowels that are more “extreme”)

Rate of speaking

Reading of gender may also include semantics, semiotic markers, and proxemics

### III. Techniques

Pitch

Resonance

Intonation

Articulation

Semantics

Proxemics

Etc.

# Sessions begin...

- Start with relaxation of the neck, shoulders, mouth, and face

- Move into vocal warm up routines

  - Breath work

  - Trills

  - Humming

  - Singing

- Pitch Matching with a piano and pitch-monitoring applications

- Clients are encouraged to practice outside of the center. This can be tricky, but it's necessary! (Motor Learning Theory)

# Pitch

	Hz	Key Range	Starting Pitch
Masculine	87-196	F2-G3	B2
Neutral	147-220	D3-A3	D3, E3
Feminine	131-330	C3-E4	E3, F3, G3, A3

*The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People*, Mills and Stoneham, 2017

# Let's Try It Out!

- ▶ Find a partner near you.
- ▶ Take turns reading the sentence below, first in your typical pitch range, then with elevated pitch, and then with lowered pitch.
- ▶ Watch out for falsetto (very high) and glottal fry (low and creaky) registers.
- ▶ Tip: To change your pitch, you can use visualization or role playing in character. Read it as if you are a small child. Now, as if you are playing someone's grandfather in a school play.

We were away a year ago.

# Pitch vs. Resonance

- ▶ The frequency of vocal fold vibration correlates with pitch, measured in Hertz.
- ▶ Resonance comes from sympathetic vibrations of the cavities of the head and neck; intensifies timbre, volume, and richness of sound
- ▶ Feminine resonance often described as: “bright, ” “head voice, ” “forward”
- ▶ Masculine resonance often described as: “dark, ” “chest voice, ”
- ▶ You can change the pitch of your voice without changing resonance and vice versa.

# Benefits of Working on Resonance

- ▶ Increases gender cues in the voice
- ▶ Balances the voice
  - ▶ Power and control
  - ▶ Flexibility
  - ▶ Endurance
  - ▶ Decreases tension
  - ▶ Improves clarity

Siegfriedt & Hancock, Transgender Voice and Beyond: Voice and Communication Training for Gender Expression, ASHA webinar, 2018

# Pitch vs. Resonance

▶ [Link to video](#)

Source:

TransVoiceTech: Ear Training for X-Y  
Resonance vs Pitch [demonstration  
of ALL vocal sexes]

transvoicellessons@gmail.com

# Let's Try It Out!

- ▶ Find a partner near you.
- ▶ Take turns reading the sentences below, first in your typical resonance register, then altering it to be more “bright” and then to be more “dark.”
- ▶ You can experiment with leaving your pitch the same or changing it.
- ▶ Tip: For brighter resonance, visualize the sound “in front of you.” For darker resonance, picture the sound emanating from deep in the chest.
- ▶ Tip: Cartoon characters with strong resonance may be easier to imitate. --contrast aliens from toy story with Barney the Dinosaur.

1. We were away a year ago.

2. My mama makes lemon muffins.

# Intonation: The Melody of Language

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Intonation is part of a greater set of language characteristics referred to as “prosody.” -- word stress, sentence stress, intonation, tone, rhythm.

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Prosody effects a person’s intelligibility more than their pronunciation of particular sounds.

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Intonation contains the “subtitles” of what we’re saying.

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Feminine speech patterns tend to be characterized by more pitch variation/stronger intonational contrasts than masculine speech patterns.

# Let's try it out!

- ▶ Find a partner near you.
- ▶ Take turns reading the sentence below. See how many ways you can change the meaning by altering your intonation pattern
- ▶ Tips: Read it tentatively, like it's a question. Read it like it's factual information, but you don't have strong feelings about it. Read it emphatically like it's a statement that is very important to you. Try changing which word in the sentence gets the most stress.

I don't think so.

Other  
vocal/communication  
factors to consider

## Articulation

- Crisp, slightly forward articulation
- Both consonants and vowels are affected; also affects resonance

## Semantics

- Word choice, tag questions, apologies, descriptive vocabulary
- Amount of words used

## Proxemics

- How much space we take up
- Head tilting, gestures, how we hold ourselves in space

## Other Voice/Communication Requests

- ▶ Working on reflexive functions (coughing, laughing, sneezing, startle reflex)
- ▶ Working on yelling (sports, theater, self defense)
- ▶ Working on assertive communication patterns
  - ▶ *“The less I am misgendered, the more I am interrupted.”*
- ▶ Public speaking
- ▶ Job interviews
- ▶ Social conversation
- ▶ Singing voice
- ▶ Etc.

# Take Home Messages

- ▶ Voice is both literally and figuratively how we exhibit agency in our lives.
- ▶ Voice is more than just pitch.
- ▶ Communication is more than just voice.
- ▶ Everyone deserves to be empowered to own and freely use their voice.