

*From the Prescription Pad  
of BreathingRx for Singers*



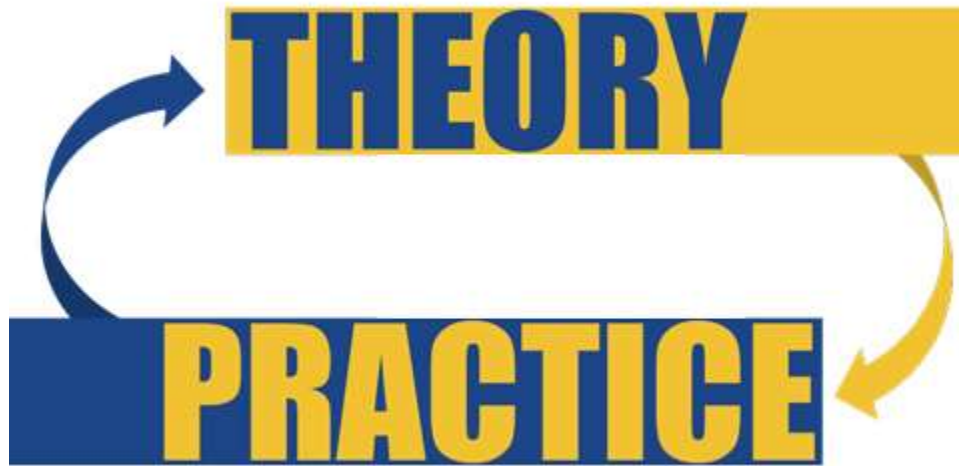
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# The Theory



# The 10 Commandments of Tension Release for Singing

When we all saw that it was good, we observed that the BEST singers were following the basic 10 commandments of tension release. These commandments were gleaned from years of practice, both good and bad, by our congregants. By following these 10 commandments, you too can improve your singing abilities.

1. In the beginning there was awareness – become aware of tension in your body.
2. Awareness informs release – use movement.
3. Separate Diaphragm Training from Vocal Chord Training.
4. Do not squeeze your abdomen to support your voice.
5. Love the feeling in your body as you sing, and do not covet others' voices.
6. Be at peace with, and cherish your own instrument.
7. Honor your voice teacher's requests and do your daily exercises.
8. Listen to your body and use that inner voice to guide you as you learn.
9. Be passive when you breathe and do not gasp your inhale.
10. Know your articulators intimately and do not betray them.

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# The Cathedral Ceiling in Our Bodies- The Diaphragm

When you walk into a Gothic style Cathedral you may notice that the ceiling is rounded. Sometimes we look up at the ceiling, and one can feel that it is divinely inspired. The arch that holds up the ceiling has strength because the weight is evenly distributed.

This divinely inspired architecture can be yours in your own body if you will envision your diaphragm as one of those arches. We know that being emptier is better. When the diaphragm is higher, its arch is higher and the higher arch supports the voice more easily and effortlessly.

When you are singing, if you let your body fill naturally, and take the breath it wants the next phrase will be easier to belt out!

So your challenge is to learn to be a little emptier on the phrase before a long phrase allows the body to take the air it needs more organically.

To sing like an angel, just make your diaphragm into a Cathedral ceiling after Sunday Services - empty.

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## Lucky Seven Things You Should Know About Your Diaphragm

- 1. Your diaphragm is a muscle.** While you don't have to go to a diaphragm gym, you still need to train your diaphragm daily if you want it to function at its full capacity.
- 2. Diaphragm training must be isolated from vocalizing exercises.** When you go to the gym you used different machines for different muscles – and the diaphragm is a different muscle than the vocal chords for example – so plan to do independent exercises to isolate the muscle groups.
- 3. The diaphragm is an involuntary muscle and is best trained when your body is passive.** Unlike other involuntary muscles (like the heart which requires activity to train) the diaphragm is best trained with the body completely passive so there are no interferences.
- 4. The diaphragm supports your body and voice in both its contraction and in its release.** The diaphragm is like a bicep --- it has several parts which work together on both the inhale and on the exhale to keep you breathing!
- 5. Training for the diaphragm will increase its dome.** When the diaphragm has a high dome, it supports a voice with significantly less effort from other muscles.
- 6. Using voluntary muscles to force air eventually weakens a diaphragm.** If you were to use a car to get around all the time and never walk, your leg muscles would get weaker. Every structure in the body works like this. Use it or lose it!
- 7. Throat and tongue tension release when the diaphragm is trained well.** When the dome of the diaphragm is higher, it releases the tension on the throat from the trachea.

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## The “Passive Aggressive” Behavior of our Diaphragms

Ever since I went to my therapist and she told me that my dear friend was behaving in a passive aggressive fashion, I started wondering if being passive aggressive could be a good thing?! The aggressive behavior of my friend really hurt!

Our diaphragms act passively, until we get aggressive. Then, we squeeze too hard with our voluntary muscles and the diaphragm can no longer go with the flow. There is a balance between the voluntary and involuntary muscle activation – and you can change that balance from effort to effortless when you train your diaphragm correctly.

When you do release exercises and train your diaphragm properly, then the diaphragm gets stronger because the rest of the body is not restricting its motion. Your voice will get stronger as a result.

When I think about how the voluntary muscles around the diaphragm can move from aggressive behavior to a more supportive role, I can then accept the aggressive behavior of my friend as I believe that my friend can move to a more supportive role as well.

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## Toddlers' Diaphragms... why we should want to be toddlers again

Ah if only we were children again. In a matter of seconds, most children will move from belly laughs to screams, to tears, to yawns and back to belly laughs. This is exactly what adult singers must mirror as the musical dynamics shift. AND, it all starts with the breath and holding tension.

How is it that toddlers can unconsciously make these shifts and not hold tension in their bodies? Toddlers release tension in their bodies as they exert themselves. As a result their diaphragms are free, strong, and rise higher in their ribcages than adults. This free diaphragm allows preschoolers to recover from stress more easily and promotes more oxygen in the bloodstream so their voices are more resonant and can pierce our calm.

As singers, we can aspire to become toddlers with our breath. Quickly releasing tension, freeing up your body and relaxing your mind, yawning and laughing with intention, and ultimately enjoying a greater resonance in voice that can create calm for others.

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## How young is too young?

Dear Keeper of the Breath for Singers,

*I am the proud mother of three children. Sammy is 10 and he thinks he will be singing on Broadway by next year, Abigail is 7 going on 15, and dear little Joey wants to be like his older brother and sister, but he is just 4 and a half years old. I want them all to learn how to breathe with intention. Gawd knows, they have great lungs when they want something! How old must a child be to learn the Diaphragm Techniques?*

*Signed: Proud Mom*

Dear Proud Mom,

Good for you mom, you want to teach your children proper techniques at a young age. This opportunity will set them up for life! The breathing muscle memory that we develop at a young age, translates into increased singing capabilities as we grow. So, one would think that even little 4 and a half year old Joey can benefit from learning diaphragm breathing techniques.

However, unless the instruction is structured correctly, it is unlikely that Joey will get it. A good structure for teaching children is to set up games that can be played in 10-15 minute increments. That way, no one gets overwhelmed or loses focus.

If you were to put Sammy, Abigail, and Joey in a room together, ironically Joey at 4.5 years would be able to embrace the techniques quickest because he has less pre-conditioned muscle memory in his body, ears, and voice. Abigail, as a MATURE 7 year old can comprehend more than Joey but might not integrate the techniques as quickly. And of course Sammy at 10 years old is right in the “sweet spot” for teaching these techniques.

At 10 years old, a child can comprehend, repeat, and integrate the techniques into their basic singing habits. So, I recommend that you have them go to their singing teacher for 45 minutes. Sammy (10) would get the first 15 minutes to himself and then spend half hour practicing the techniques taught. Abigail (7) would be in for the second 15 minutes and practicing for 15 minutes afterwards. And Joey (4.5) would be in for the last 15 minutes. That would be 45 minutes of rest for you mom, and your children would all be learning to breathe for singing.

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## Sing or Breathe? Which is first?

Singing is not all imagery based vocal exercises. Body awareness is equally important if the student is going to be able to progress at a reasonable rate. To teach singing without first having the student understand their body as an instrument is to promote bad habits.

Imagery and standard vocal pedagogy techniques alone do not solve body issues with students. Most if not all need more specific techniques for body release apart from the techniques required for the act of singing.

The whole body is an instrument and the instrument has to be properly tuned. When students can't produce vibrato, have tongue tension that limits their progress, have body tension that sacrifices sound quality, etc. their teachers will tell me they are frustrated.

With the limited amount of time available in a lesson teachers must focus on the whole instrument as it applies to the music. Given good body release techniques your students' singing will improve quickly, your reputation and results will be evident and your career will flourish.

Diaphragm training is one body awareness and development technique that works. Diaphragm Target Training, or DTT, includes instruction and knowledge about tension release in areas of the body. Using these techniques we have been able to *accelerate the singing success of thousands of students.*

When the singer learns the proper release of the body and diaphragm training, apart from the act of singing, your application of good vocal instruction speeds up their progress geometrically. So, consider in your next lesson spending the first 15 minutes teaching your students body awareness.

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## I like my washboard abs, but my singing teacher told me to lay off exercise. What should I do?

Exercise done correctly will support your singing, and maybe your emotional health. I think your singing teacher is worrying that you might tighten your abs too much. Remember that the diaphragm is part of a system. When you are building the lego truck and you put too tight a rubber band around the wheels, it becomes difficult for the other parts to move. Likewise, as you tighten the muscles around your diaphragm with too many ab crunches, it may take more work to loosen the muscles around the diaphragm so it has proper space to move. (I imagine you are breathing a sigh of relief to take a break from your crunches). Keep breathing – passively!

So, my advice would be to stay away from core (abdominal) workouts within 2 days of a performance or important audition. I am NOT recommending that you let you become a “nerf person” – soft around the middle, but there are lots of exercises that are great regardless of your performance schedule.

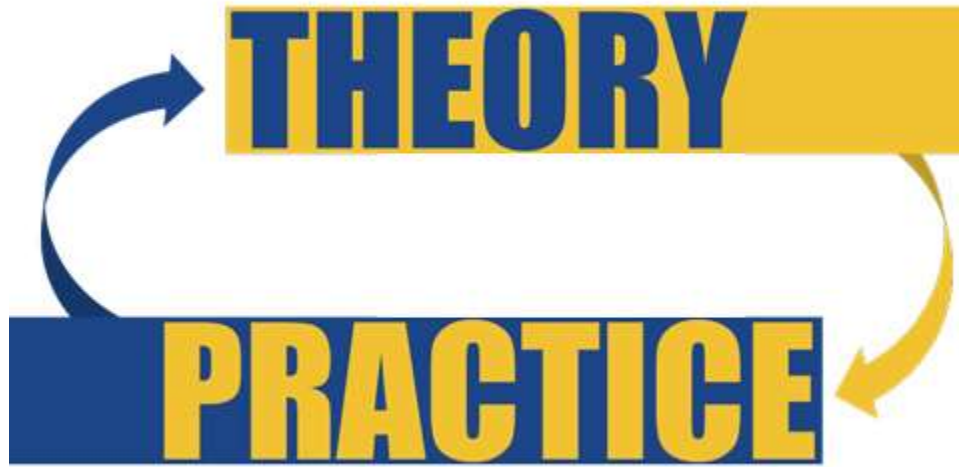
For example, aerobic exercise is great, strength training is terrific – but not body building. Try combination intervals with low weights and high reps. That will lengthen your muscles, instead of bulking you up – and the stress on your body will be moderate so you have plenty of physical energy and strength for singing.

Yoga is also okay if you do not hold or control your breath while you are holding your postures. The key with singing is to let the diaphragm operate organically and passively. Often yoga teachers ask their students to monitor and control their breath. This is contrary to the requirements your singing body has. Try to do the yoga postures but let your breath be completely free and passive.

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# The Practice



## ARIA: Awareness, Release, Intention, and Activation™

So you want to sing better? You want it to appear that you sing effortlessly? When singers appear effortless, it is because they have mastered the mind-body connection in release. If you don't take things too seriously, the release will be easier. To be successful you have to lighten up and relax.

“But I am nervous about the upcoming performance? That is not a setting for me to relax! I have to be on my game....” (You may be saying).

So here is our technique for you to release your mind, and free your singing in turn.

**AWARENESS:** Take stock in how you are feeling. Are you feeling tense or worried? Not sure about the key of the music? Couldn't pay your rent this month? Not enough cash to pay your Singing Teacher? These things can affect your singing in a negative way. First be aware that we all have tensions and they will still be there AFTER your singing session. So for the time you are singing, try to go in your mind to a safe and calm place. (For me, that place would be right in my own studio, playing my drums.) Think about and feel what your body feels like when you go to that place. FEEL IT.

**RELEASE:** Now that your body is calm, relax your abdomen and open your mouth - let your breath become very calm and regular. Feel your body relax into this calm, even more. Let the movement of your body naturally release any remaining tension.

**INTENTION:** Try to consciously feel how your body will behave as you sing with this new released energy. Think about releasing your body into your song.

**ACTIVATE:** Sing and move naturally as you sing. TIP: Release your abdomen completely after every phrase of music. (Easier said than done).

Be prepared to hear this comment! *“Look how free that singer seems!”*

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## Diaphragm Training As Religion

In the 80's, the fastest runner of the 50 yard dash could do it in 5.24 seconds, yet in 2013, the fastest runner made it in 4.35 seconds. That is a direct result of the coaches' understanding the body and training their athletes better. Likewise, voice "coaches" can speed the learning curve of their students.

In the beginning singers were focused on the external muscles of vocal support. Back in the 30's and 40's teachers of the voice believed that if you trained abdominal, chest, back and intercostal muscles that your vocal support would be enhanced .

THEN- the prophet appeared! Doing studies with emphysema patients in military hospitals in the 50's and 60's Carl Stough changed our belief system FROM focus on the external muscles TO focus on the internal membrane of the diaphragm. Carl was an award winning choral director when he was asked by a pulmonologist to do this research. This seemingly small discovery changes what is possible for vocal development and achievement.

Every religion has ritual, and once the singing community embraced Stough's work, then the rituals around training the vocal support and technique also changed. Training the diaphragm with specific exercises is now isolated from the act of singing itself.

Singers have less body tension and vocal stress when training of the diaphragm is isolated. As a result, they can learn more quickly and safely and reduce the chance of injury. Today, disciples of Carl Stough are only beginning to see the positive effects of our new belief system.

While we are still a growing congregation, if you are interested in incorporating these beliefs into your teaching practice, try teaching your students to add just one exercise to their daily routine and see what the results are. Here is the most basic exercise one can do for diaphragm training.

- a. Lie down with pillows under your head and knees – placing one hand on your lower abdomen and one hand on your upper chest. Make sure that your chest and abdomen are completely relaxed.
- b. Breathe through your open mouth – 10-20 breaths and notice that there is no tension in chest and abdomen restricting your organic breathing pattern.
- c. For 5 breaths, use your exhale to passively produce a "la la la" sound.
- d. Do the exercise again, breathe for 10-20, and la la la for 5-10. Then, get out of bed and go to work!

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# The Holy Trinity of Your Articulators

In some religions, it is the trinity that makes things work out. Typically one is earthly, one is spiritual, and the third is the creator. When they fight, and don't agree, really bad things happen. Floods, Plagues, crucifixions, and other nasty destructive things come into play.

Likewise, your articulators must work in concert or you could be crucifying your voice. You can control your own trinity. It includes: YOUR JAW, YOUR TONGUE, and YOUR LIPS. When they are working together, the rainbow appears, showing a myriad of colors and lightening up the sky.

To get the body trinity to work together we recommend the following daily exercises:

Jaw Traction: Repeat 3 times with 2 minute breaks (light chewing) in between

1. Sit or stand with balanced body alignment in front of a mirror
2. Hook the pads of your thumbs behind your jaw and under your ears
3. Rest your hands on your cheeks
4. Open your mouth so your teeth are one inch apart
5. Keep your mouth open and push your lower jaw straight forward as far as you can comfortably
6. Keep your mouth open one inch still and pull your jaw straight forward further, using your thumbs
7. Hold the traction for 45 seconds until it feels comfortable

Tongue Thrusts

1. Sit or stand with balanced body alignment in front of a mirror
2. Envision your tongue at the back of your throat
3. Thrust your tongue forward from the place that you have envisioned
4. Hold it for three seconds and release
5. Thrust harder for 3 seconds and release
6. Thrust it one more time even harder, and release
7. When you get an impulse to cough or your jaw wants to lock up before the 3 repetitions, you have completed this exercise.

Lip Trills

1. Let your lips touch lightly
2. Breathe out through your lips --- saying an elongated bbbbbbbb
3. Vary the pitch sliding it up and down
4. Practice until you can keep the lips with a consistent buzz throughout the pitch variation

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## If a Violin or Wine improves with age, why doesn't my voice?

Dear Breath Support Master:

*I am a 45 year old man and I remember vividly when my voice changed as an adolescent but who expected to yet again have to worry about my voice changing as I turned middle aged? I seem to have already lost some vocal power, endurance and some pitch control.*

Signed,  
*getting older every day*

Dear Getting Older:

Some think that the voice is like the violin or wine, improving with age. If the violin is stored correctly and played, and the wine is kept in a climate controlled environment, they will improve with age. Likewise, our voices may sound completely different yet improve if we train it correctly, separating the diaphragm from the voice training as we age. And age can give your voice a quality that you could not achieve as a younger singer, especially if you do diaphragm training.

We have taught 70 year old singers and seen significant improvement over a brief time as they incorporated diaphragm training into their daily routine. Another benefit of this type of practice is that older singers regain vocal power, endurance and flexibility.

Diaphragm training is like restorative yoga for the voice. Here is one seated position diaphragm training exercise to prove my theory. Try it 5 times (consecutive breaths) each morning for a week and see if you feel and sound different when you sing.

1. Sit in a hard chair so you can feel your "sit bones" against the chair.
2. Position your knees at 90 degrees and feet shoulder width apart.
3. Place your hands, one across lower abdomen, one under the collar bone on upper chest.
4. Open your mouth so your breath and let your breath happen without intention.
5. Let your head hang forward taking the rest of your upper body in a forward rolldown.
6. As you roll down, let your voice connect with the air coming out in a gentle way using an "ahhhh" vowel.
7. Try to roll back up in a relaxed manner, letting the head up last and notice your body will naturally bring the breath back into your lungs.

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## Hurry up and Relax! Speed up your vocal development

The pace of our lives has increased geometrically. And in turn we want faster results. Students and their parents want to see real results in weeks, not months or years. To accommodate them, we have to teach our students to relax. No pressure!

Really, we mean NO PRESSURE.

To experience the phenomenon of NO PRESSURE in your body yourself, try these steps in a morning routine. When you do it every day for a month your diaphragm will grow stronger:

- a. Lie down with pillows under your head and knees – placing one hand on your lower abdomen and one hand on your upper chest. Make sure that your chest and abdomen are completely relaxed.
- b. Breathe through your open mouth – 10-20 breaths and notice that there is no tension in chest and abdomen restricting your organic breathing pattern.
- c. For 5 breaths, use your exhale to passively produce a “la la la” sound.
- d. Do the exercise again, breathe for 10-20, and la la la for 5-10. Then, get out of bed and go to work!

Notice that when you do this practice you do not have to consciously push air out – it is a reflexive, organic behavior. Transferring this behavior to your students’ singing will result in a quicker development with less tension. Viola! Hurry up and calm down!

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## Hoola Hoops and Salsa to Inform Your Body Movement for Singing

I can't really do hoola hoops but I like moving my hips. Still, hoola hoops are a great metaphor for finding your base of stability for singing.

Like with the hoops, your stance should be stable yet give you a base to move easily in 360 degrees without having to move your feet. If you do not have this position, the hoop will be on the ground!

This same position, will allow for the movement that will keep your diaphragm from being restricted.

Your knees are another key element in keeping the hoop up. The knees have to follow the flow of the hoop, gently moving up and down as the hoop goes around your body. Likewise, gently bending your knees while singing will promote your free pelvis and released abdomen.

But the hips are not supposed to move in such a big circle for singing. You can, instead drop your bum to follow the movement of your knees and the hips will follow.

Then, think Salsa Dancing, as you gently release your ribs from side to side while you sing. Let your back round and your head naturally rest on top of your neck.

Isolating the parts of the body by releasing each part and then coordinating their movement together will give you the best stance and movement for singing.

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## A newborn teaches us how to set up our daily routine

When I was younger, my mother made me take piano lessons and every day I had to practice. I had a great teacher who loved to teach me the songs but I needed technique, I had to start my practicing extremely boring scales which gave me the familiarity with the instrument that I needed to play the rag time riff I loved to play.

So how does one make the daily ritual fun enough so that our students will actually do it? When you teach students to have joy, they will both do the work, and it will provide freedom for them to grow as singers more quickly.

Our recommended morning routine which warms up the body before singing, which our students find pleasurable and easy to integrate into their day is detailed in the article titled: [Exercises for you to improve your Daily Practice](#)

While you are still in bed – connecting body release and organic breath –

***the baby is breathing and turning over in his crib:***

1. **Find Your Breath:** The Organic Breathing Exercise
2. **Connect Your Vocal Cords:** Diaphragm Target Training

On the edge of your bed – loosening up the articulators – ***the baby is crawling***

3. **Free your Articulators:** Jaw Traction and Tongue thrust release exercises

Standing Now – putting it on it's feet --- ***the baby is walking***

4. **Taking your Stance:** Balance and Body Release Practice
5. **Put it Together:** Vocal-eases

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## Exercises for you to improve your Daily Practice

### Find Your Breath: The Organic Breathing Exercise: Become Aware!

1. Lie down with pillows under your knees and rolled towel under your head or neck.
2. Place one hand on you lower abdomen and one on your upper chest making sure that both are completely relaxed.
3. Leave your mouth open letting air flow freely in and out through mouth and nose.
4. Let your breath settle into the most organic rhythm.
5. Take note of how your body moves when your breath is settled.

### Connect Your Vocal Cords: Diaphragm Target Training

1. Lie down with pillows under your head and knees – placing one hand on your lower abdomen and one hand on your upper chest. Make sure that your chest and abdomen are completely relaxed.
2. Breathe through your open mouth – 10-20 breaths and notice that there is no tension in chest and abdomen restricting your organic breathing pattern.
3. For 5 breaths, use your exhale to passively produce a “la la la” sound.
4. Do the exercise again, breathe for 10-20, and la la la for 5-10. Then, get out of bed and go to work!

### Free Your Articulators: Jaw Traction and Tongue Thrust and Lip Trill release exercises

Jaw Traction: Repeat 3 times with 2 minute breaks (light chewing) in between

1. Sit or stand with balanced body alignment in front of a mirror
2. Hook the pads of your thumbs behind your jaw and under your ears
3. Rest your hands on your cheeks
4. Open your mouth so your teeth are one inch apart
5. Keep your mouth open and push your lower jaw straight forward as far as you can comfortably
6. Keep your mouth open one inch still and pull your jaw straight forward further, using your thumbs
7. Hold the traction for 45 seconds until it feels comfortable

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1. Sit or stand with balanced body alignment in front of a mirror
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3. Thrust your tongue forward from the place that you have envisioned
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5. Thrust harder for 3 seconds and release
6. Thrust it one more time even harder, and release
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## Lip Trills

1. Let your lips touch lightly
2. Breath out through your lips --- saying an elongated bbbbbbbb
3. Vary the pitch sliding it up and down
4. Practice until you can keep the lips with a consistent buzz throughout the pitch variation

Standing Now – putting it on it's feet --- *the baby is walking*

### Getting Vertical: Balance and Body Release Practice

1. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart from front to back and side to side
2. Bend your knees slightly letting your bum drop to follow the motion
3. Bend your upper body forward slightly from the hips
4. Round your shoulders forward slightly and let your back round to follow the motion
5. Keep your head steady --- not forward or back.

### Movement Exercises: Body Release and Diaphragm Freedom

1. Still Standing in your balanced orientation, wiggle your ribs side to side (loosens back and frees diaphragm).
2. Slightly bend your knees and use the movement of the bent knees to help release pelvis and abdomen
3. Soften your upper chest so it releases down
4. Let your head rock back slightly to open your throat
5. Sing and experience your new found joy

### Put it Together: Vocal-eases

#### A. HUMMS

1. Vocal Focus; let the inside of your lips touch gently
2. Spastic Rabbit; move your upper cheeks up intermittently
3. Hum using random pitches, middle, low and then high voice

#### B. UGLY AAAHHHS

4. Relax your throat and let your mouth widen
5. Say the ugliest AHHHH that you can yet make sure that your throat is relaxed while doing it

*Steven Flam is the developer of the groundbreaking teaching technique called BreathingRx For Singers which includes diaphragm target training. For more information or to debate the content of this article please contact him at [info@breathingrx.com](mailto:info@breathingrx.com) or check out our website at: [www.breathingrx.com](http://www.breathingrx.com)*

