

HEALTH

I lost my voice. I had no idea how that would affect every part of my life.

Essay by [Jenna Glatzer](#)



Courtesy of Jenna Glatzer



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- I was diagnosed with sulcus vocalis, scarring of my vocal cords, which has led me to lose my voice.
- I can't order food at a counter or speak on the phone.
- It's even affected how I parent because I can't quiz my kid on their homework.

"You're *WELCOME*."

Every time someone holds open a door for me, I worry I'm about to hear that — because someone is going to think I'm rude for not saying, "Thank you."

It's not that I don't want to. It's that I can't.

Three years ago, I was diagnosed with sulcus vocalis: scarring on my vocal cords. No one's sure why it happened, but the leading theories are acid reflux that made its way into my throat or damage from a breathing tube during sinus surgery.

Because of the scarring, I've developed severe muscle tension dysphonia, which means the muscles around my larynx bunch up to compensate for my difficulty making sounds.

Vocal therapy hasn't solved it, and surgery is likely to make it worse instead of better.

I took my voice for granted

On good days, my voice is hoarse. On bad days, it's gone altogether and I feel like my throat is closing — normally for a week or so but currently for a month and a half. When you have a functional voice, you take it for granted; I'd never considered how much I stood to lose without my ability to speak.

Everyday interactions have changed. I can't order food at a counter or ask someone for directions unless I type it on a text-to-speech app and hope for patience and understanding.

I pin a sign to my bag now and point to it as needed; it says: "I have no voice."

I can't talk on the phone, so I use T-Mobile's IP Relay service. That allows me to type what I want to say for an operator to read to the person I've called. Then the operator types back the response to me.

It's affected my parenting and my work

At home, I communicate with my daughter through texts and notes, even when she's sitting right next to me.

I can't quiz her for her Spanish vocabulary tests. I can't sing along to the radio with her. I can't call out to say it's time to leave for school. There are too many "can'ts" these days.

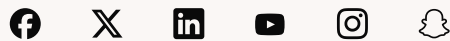
The biggest obstacle is work. As a ghostwriter, I depend on my ability to interview people, often for hours at a time. I haven't been able to do that in six weeks.

Our world depends so much on speech that it's difficult even in the digital age to move through a normal day without it: a neighbor saying hi, a shopper asking whether you know which aisle toothpaste is in, a cashier asking whether you'll round up for charity, someone complimenting your shirt.

All of it can be nourishing; we're built to connect, to talk with people. And when I can't contribute on my end of that, it's deeply lonely.

My voice will come back again eventually, though not permanently, and my ailment has taught me how often I might have misjudged situations. When you see people texting while sitting together in a restaurant, consider they might be communicating, not ignoring each other. And when someone doesn't say thank you when you open the door, maybe, just maybe, they can't.

I feel lucky to live in a time with avenues for communication that don't depend on my voice, and I still long for a solution that will restore mine. The best I can do is to persevere and hope medical science will advance. In the meantime, I redefine myself in the uncertainty, ever adjusting, ever hoping for wholeness.



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