

Ringling Stress – situations which hinder learning

There is no doubt ringing is a challenging activity and, because of this, it can be stressful. Some forms of stress help progress. For instance, the adrenalin-releasing frisson of fear felt in competitive situations or when attempting something new for the first time can promote enhanced performances. There are, however, numerous ways in which “stress” is unhelpful, leading only to worry, dissatisfaction, even despair. The teacher who is aware of many of the commoner ways in which learners suffer stress can do much to alleviate the pressure and, thus, help the learning process. Both teachers and learners do well to realise experienced ringers can suffer irrational fears, just as novices do. A very capable, highly experienced ringer I know told me that he developed a phobia about letting go of the tailend. It was so bad he stopped ringing peals for around three years. Then he described it to someone else who promptly found he had the same problem while my friend was cured!

This Agony Aunt style section deals with a number of the factors that ringers, mostly novices, but including a sprinkling of the experienced, have found stressful. I have gathered them from a selection of ringers, different areas, different experiences, and from noting the major complaints aired at a couple of “Ringling Stress” seminars. They are written as if giving advice to inexperienced, stressed ringers (whom I hope they may help). However, “Learning –what helps, what hinders” is primarily for teachers and suggestions for dealing with these problems for teachers and tower captains are made at the end of many sections. Newer ringers can be very reticent about what may be troubling them, afraid they may be seen as “wimpish” or not up to the standard expected. If you teach ringing, please consider whether any members of your band secretly suffer some of these stresses and be as ready to help them as the loud and open complainers. Only those who feel comfortable ringing at their tower will become happy, confident ringers.

I can’t ring when there are “scary” people around.

One of the most difficult situations is trying to ring well when there is a person (or people) in the band with whom you do not feel comfortable. It may be personal but, more likely, it is because the “scary” person acts in a superior way, which makes the learner feel inferior, that he or she is sharp-tongued or by word, gesture or attitude belittles those whose ringing does not please. If the atmosphere is not right, the ringing will not be good. There are a few things the learner can try to improve the situation:

1. Try to “blank out” the “scary” person.

2. Imagine the “scary” person in ignominious situations – sitting on the loo, perhaps.
3. If all else fails, find another tower where you feel more at ease. It is better than giving up altogether!

Teachers and conductors would do well to take Steve Coleman’s advice: “The calmer the ringers, the better the striking. The more tense and frightened the ringers, the worse their striking. . . . Do not spook your ringers by lecturing them beforehand, bawling at them during and belittling them afterwards. There are many ringers who strike badly only when they are frightened of the conductor.” (The Bellringer’s Bedside Companion.)

Teachers and tower captains should be aware of group dynamics and do all they can to ease what can be very tricky situations, including pointing out to the “scary” person the effect of their attitude and making it clear that this is unacceptable.

If I told my classmates that I rang, they would treat me as a weirdo.

Ringling is perceived by many children and teenagers, for reasons that are inexplicable to the rest of us, as fuddy-duddy and “uncool”. Some young people, while enjoying their ringling, go to lengths to make sure their classmates continue in ignorance of their secret passion. In my Guild we had a lad who was (and is) a keen and very able ringer. I am publicity officer and he was delighted if anything about him appeared in “The Ringing World” but requested that there should be no mention of his ringling achievements in any local paper. Of course, I respected this. It would be of no advantage to anyone if he had suffered ridicule or bullying at school because he chose to spend time ringling bells in churches.

Tower captains should ask any of their ringers who are still at school whether their classmates know about their ringling and, if they would mind, if they did. Potentially embarrassing and unpleasant situations can be avoided by this.

I am frightened of bells I don’t know.

Tower outings are fun – but not to everyone. Some ringers, especially in their early years, are frightened of ringling bells in a new tower. “What will happen when I pull off? Will I be able to control the bell?” they think. I have to admit that in my early days, every time I went to a new tower, I would feel a little sick and shake as I took hold of the rope. After about 7 years and around 100 towers, this just wore off. I suppose I had

developed the sense to know that 90% of bells are quite easy to ring and the nasty 10% are unlikely to hurt me and can be put down to “experience”. And ringing at different towers is, indeed, very good experience. Nevertheless, the sensitive teacher would do well to stand unobtrusively near any pupil whom he suspects is fearful when the band goes ringing. It boosts confidence. To discuss what the bells are like and in what ways different from the home tower may also be reassuring. If unknown bells worry you and you don’t like to ask someone to stand with you, pick a rope close to where someone experienced is sitting or standing. If you mess up, help should be at hand. Don’t forget, it is always worthwhile waiting until others have rung so you can ask how they found the bells and it is quite reasonable to ask to try the bell before everyone pulls off.

I can’t bear being shouted at.

Some people can’t bear being shouted at. It is almost like an allergy. Calm and quiet comments are always likely to be more helpful and gain better results. Shouting, at best, may relieve the conductor’s feelings; at worst, it can cause distress to certain ringers, making them ring badly, quite unable to heed the noisy instructions. The stress caused by being shouted at leads to a build up of adrenalin which, in turn, leads to panic and a panicky ringer will be physically unable to take instructions as the brain is already overloaded. Occasionally, if bells are very loud and the conductor is flustered, the odd shout is probably inevitable but routinely barking like an angry bull-terrier at ringers is neither useful nor reasonable. Civilised adults do not shout at each other. Just don’t do it.

I find background noise very distracting.

Having peace to listen to one’s own bell and concentrate on what is being rung is very important and some ringers are more distracted than others by background noise. It can make it very difficult to hear the rhythm of the method as well as individual bells. If those who are sitting out chatter, they are being rude and inconsiderate towards those who are ringing and whoever is in charge should not allow it. Unfortunately, those who find background noise difficult are also likely to be distracted by remarks the conductor quite properly makes, for instance, to put another ringer right. That is something that cannot be avoided but learners should not be afraid to ask that all sounds, other than the bells, are kept to a minimum.

This might be a suitable point to mention **“Standing Behind”**. For many, having an experienced ringer stand with them, is a stress reliever but it does require a sensitive relationship between learner and helper. It can hinder as well as help. I once attended a discussion group about standing

behind. The general consensus was that those standing behind generally say far too much and the only useful remarks to make were “Lead next handstroke,” and “Dodge with . . .”. Upon reflection, I think I would add “Faster” and “Slower”. It seems many standers-behind feel they are not doing their job if they don’t keep talking but it can be annoying to be told each piece of work as it approaches. It gives the impression the teacher doesn’t believe the learner has done any homework and doesn’t give learners a chance to test themselves. A discussion between novice and stander-behind is useful. First, if the ringing room allows it, the helper should ask on which side the learner would prefer him or her to stand. Then, questions like, “Shall I keep reminding you what comes next?” or “Does it help you if I count your places for you?” are helpful. This kind of preparation can make it a really useful experience. Actually, I’m not sure if I’m qualified to comment on this as usually no-one is willing to stand with me. No wonder because I complain if they talk! There is just one local ringer I would always ask for help. She stands there silently but, perhaps because of a slight hesitation or body language, instinctively seems to know when I am about to get lost or go wrong. She corrects me with a few quiet words, then falls silent again. That is my ideal stander-behind!

Conductors can also help those who are easily distracted in the way they go about **Putting Right**. Some are best helped by words and others by pointing and gestures. (Generally, this will equate with the ringer’s preferred style of learning – auditory or visual.) Of course, it can be difficult to recall who likes what “on the hoof” but that is no reason for a conductor not to try. Dog trainers teach that owners should always use the pooch’s name before a command. For instance, “Fido! Sit!” Conductors who can manage to give a command like, “Esmeralda! Lead next handstroke!” let all the other ringers know, at the very first word, that the instruction does not concern them.

I can’t look and listen at the same time.

Well, that is because it is psychologically impossible to concentrate fully on more than one sense at a time. That is why we automatically close our eyes to hear something better or to savour the taste of some wonderful food. However, it is possible to look and listen if intensity is moderated. Perhaps, try listening hard first and then swapping to concentrate on looking, then both together but with less concentration on either. It is a matter of learning the balance. A simulator can help the listening without the distraction of looking. But keep practising both; it gets better in time.

I feel I don't get my fair share of "turns" at practices.

I have heard this complaint at towers where there are several young learners. The teacher seems to think that children must be given more ringing time and made more of a fuss of than older learners. (Maybe, the children fidget when they are not ringing! But, if that is the case the person in charge should see that they are not a distraction.) In my experience, most tower captains do their level best to see that all ringers get a fair crack at the whip. I have heard of one who, towards the end of each practice, asks, "Anyone feeling a bit left out?" However, if your tower captain seems to ignore you, make your feelings known (politely, of course) and, if the situation continues with the person in charge making no effort to improve matters, find a tower where you are treated more fairly.

It is vitally important for tower captains and teachers not only to be fair but also to be seen to be fair. This may involve writing down what each person at a session would like to practise. Ideally, everyone at a practice should get the opportunity to ring at least one thing which he or she really wants to.

I can't relax at ringing because our tower captain is always so tense.

Different people have different characters, thank goodness. Keep trying to be tolerant. Remember, most tower captains are not trained teachers or leaders but are volunteers just doing their very best to keep ringing going at their tower. Beyond that, if the atmosphere is getting tense, relax your muscles and smile. It may spread. And if you know you are that up-tight tower captain, tell yourself that, in the light of history, it doesn't really matter so very much that Unco-ordinated Una has just ruined the Plain Hunt for the 100th time this year. Be glad that she keeps trying. Take a little break, a few deep breaths, relax your neck and shoulders, lower your voice a little in both pitch and volume and smile at everyone. Remember that a calm, happy atmosphere creates better ringing.

I am useless. I'm always being criticized.

It is very unlikely that you are useless. Probably you are like the child that writes a 100 word essay, makes 10 spelling mistakes and the only comment the teacher puts is "Take care with your spelling". Child feels the work has been found to be poor. (There were, and probably still are, teachers like that!) But looked at another way, that child achieved 90%, a high score in anyone's book. If you have just rung 100 strokes, maybe 10, even 15, were really badly struck. That means 85 were okay and, quite

possibly, 10 or 15 of those were really good. The trouble is that it is a teacher's duty to improve what a pupil does. And the pupil can only work on weaker areas if these are pointed out clearly. Unfortunately, some teachers forget that pupils need praise and encouragement too. The teacher does not have to concern him- or herself with what is already up to standard but if the pupil is not told what is good, or better than last time, he or she will believe that their ringing is uniformly mediocre. Feedback on what is going well is very important, for future progress as well as morale. Teachers are often better at praising children but many adult learners are less confident and more nervous than children are and desperately need every scrap of praise they deserve. Those who feel they are always being criticised should never forget that if they really were useless their teacher wouldn't bother to correct them. A teacher will only try to correct the faults of those who are clearly capable of doing better.

I think my teacher means well but he often upsets me.

This is generally an adult lament. It is hard for some teachers to realise that a poised, confident, adult learner (who may well be older, more highly qualified, more influential and/or richer than the teacher) can be extremely oversensitive about ringing. Such an individual will be highly motivated, working hard at ringing and desperate to make progress. It is frustrating and upsetting to have it plainly pointed out that progress has been minimal.

Some teachers unintentionally go about "helping" pupils in rather odd ways. I remember watching incredulously as a teacher quite angrily told a ringer that he would never make progress until he relaxed. "Just relax!" he shouted. Another instruction which is likely to have the opposite effect from that desired is to tell someone, "You **must** get it right." The implied compulsion is more inclined to hustle them into errors.

Sometimes it is tactless and unkind to point out a ringer's mistakes in front of others. Steve Coleman makes a graphic analogy:

"(It) is rather like having a ringer in the band with their zip undone. **You** would rather it were not undone, **they** would rather it were not undone but they would, nevertheless, be very embarrassed if you shouted at them about it in front of everybody." (The Bellringer's Bedside Book")

Sometimes teachers put meaningful criticism in tactless ways. I was ringing, far from home, with people I had never met before. I was nervous and when I am nervous I tend to drop my backstrokes. A man took me aside and said, "Probably you have never been told this before but in ringing there are two strokes, handstroke and backstroke. You are only noticing handstroke." I felt I was being treated like an idiot and, worse still, my very able teacher was being criticised. I mumbled

something about being nervous because I didn't know the bells. "Now you are blaming the bells," he said. "It's not the bells, it's you." I had never doubted that it was me but I went away feeling very tearful. A couple of days later I was at it again, dropping backstrokes, ringing with more or less the same people (but at this tower the bells looked really daunting!) A very experienced ringer remarked to me, "You were nervous, weren't you?" I admitted that I had been. "I could tell," she said, "because you are just like me. I always drop my backstrokes when I'm feeling nervous." What a tactful way of giving me useful information!

I can't concentrate.

Older people often find it harder to maintain concentration but this is not simply a problem for the long-toothed ringer. Absolutely everyone loses concentration at times.

A friend of mine, worried at her lapses of concentration, was given advice by four experts (specifically to help her through a quarter peal). Some of these may help you too.

If items around a strange ringing room tend to distract you, take time to look around, and note all the other ringers too, before you begin. Try to keep just enough information about what you are doing in your head at a time, not overloading the brain, not giving it room for other thoughts.

Knowing you are the weakest link in a band can, depending on you, either give you confidence that the others will look after you, or somehow make you fall into errors because the others are expecting it. Sometimes knowing you owe it to a second weak ringer in the band to keep right can be a greater help.

Set yourself fairly short concentration targets e.g. "I'll do three pieces of work or two place bells without making a mistake," and when you get there repeat the target. If you make a mistake, have a little punishment ready for yourself. (The suggestion was to look at the clock because the oftener you look the slower time seems to pass.)

Try not to feel too pressurized or too relaxed before you start.

Avoid the tendency to think, "Ah, this bit is easy," and so allow your mind to wander.

Do your "homework" until ringing the chosen method is second nature. Practise gradually longer and longer lengths, try calling touches, study how the method is put together and how the touches work.

Sometimes so many people are telling me what to do, all at the same time, that I just get confused.

This is something that does happen in ringing, probably more so than in most activities (perhaps, because one teacher with several pupils is more common in other pastimes). Several well-meaning people all try to help/correct a learner at once. Whereas different ways of explaining the same thing can be most useful, it certainly isn't if the different explanations are given simultaneously! It can be infuriating to the learner who, in addition to trying to listen to the advice, is also trying to control a bell and remember what he or she has memorised. In virtually every case, teachers/experienced ringers should bite their tongues and leave it up to the official conductor/teacher at the time. Two, three (or even four!) different voices at the same time, however splendid the advice, will only lead to confusion and disaster. While a kindly word to learner and/or teacher/conductor afterwards may well be appropriate, the person in charge should make sure advice comes from only one source when ringing is in progress.

I find that because I am a woman I am overlooked. For instance, I am never asked to conduct although far less experienced men do so frequently.

Whisper it ever so quietly but there is some sexism in ringing. I think that most male ringers would deny this and it is not, indeed, very prevalent, nor does it make ringing different from many other activities. Remember that until well into last century there were very few women ringers. Also, traditionally, the conductor rings the heaviest working bell and there is a tendency, in most places, for women to ring the lighter bells, while men head for the heavier ones. It also appears areas of the country differ markedly in this. However, if you feel your progress is really hindered by this at your own tower, visit other towers where you are given conducting chances and “gang up” with other women to make your feelings known. This prejudice must not be allowed to continue.

Tower captains/teachers should consider whether sexism is rife in their area and, if so, do what they can to stamp it out. It is pointless, unpleasant and detrimental to the Exercise.

I can ring quite competently now but find that most of the ringing I do is to help beginners. Of course, I don't mind that but would like to make personal progress too.

This seems both commendable and reasonable. Take your ringing out and about by visiting other towers where they ring methods to challenge you, get to district meetings, attend courses etc. Possibly you could find

yourself a “mentor”, a more experienced ringer with whom you have a rapport and who appreciates your level of ability and your ambitions; someone who will take you along to slightly more advanced practices or suggest where you should go, who will put your name forward as someone to include in suitable quarter peals etc.

Long draughts really terrify me.

Well, they are difficult, especially if you are not used to them. I know the feeling. Your stomach turns over as your eyes travel up more and yet more rope and, horror of horrors, it's about a mile to the first rope guides! However, remember that the more different and different kinds of bells you ring, the better ringer you will be. So, have a go. Other people ring those bells so why not you? Tell yourself you can do it, pull off rather more firmly than you normally would (because the longer rope is heavier and to get the bell up to the balance will need a stronger pull. If you don't get the bell up to the balance, the backstroke will be all over the place.) Pull both strokes right to the bottom and make a supreme effort to ensure that every stroke is pulled down absolutely straight and more smoothly than you thought possible. All that is, however, easier said than done, especially if you're nervous. So, get someone experienced and confident to stand with you. If, after a few strokes, the bell feels totally out of control and you are shaking, ask him or her to take it from you. You have tried; you can, and should, try again but there is no point in scaring yourself witless.

Much of this applies equally to other less usual bells – light, heavy, short draught, springy ropes, jumping sallies etc. Check the actual handling techniques advised for your particular bete noire in John Harrison's “The Learning Curve Vol. 1 ‘Learning the ropes’” or Steve Coleman's “The Bellringer's Early Companion ‘Funny Bells’” or ask your teacher.

The bells go faster than my brain.

Many people when trying a new method find it all starts fine but there comes a time when memory fails – but the bells go on! What a pity bells can't be rung in slow motion to give more thinking time! It can help to learn methods in chunks but practise, practise, practise is the main way forward.

I am so useless I should give up.

Please don't. I don't expect you are useless but ringing is difficult. There are so many things to do and co-ordinate at once. Everyone feels depressed and frustrated at times, yes, everyone. Discuss your feelings

with your teacher or another established ringer. Try to find yourself a “mentor”, a more experienced ringer who will understand, listen and give you encouragement. Read Steve Coleman’s books, especially “The Bellringer’s Early Companion”. That kept me going when I thought I might give up.

Teachers should realise that some beginners need a huge amount of encouragement in the early stages. To a beginner even those who can only ring Call Changes may appear to be experts and to be a sole beginner can feel very lonely.

I wish I could practise on my own at home.

Most people do! Some people find computer programmes, such as Abel, useful but it’s not at all the same as ringing on tower bells. If, for instance, one is learning a musical instrument, improvement comes from hours of practice at home. It is one of the things that makes ringing difficult that practice time is necessarily limited because it can only be done in a group – and all your mistakes are made in front of other people.

Of course, this is not a comprehensive list of every problem and worry a new ringer has ever suffered. It should, however, suggest some remedies to learners and make caring and thoughtful teachers more aware of situations which may be hindering progress for their pupils.