

Future-oriented and rich in opportunities: BDG Durchatmen®

by

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Durchatmen® is one of the newest courses offered by the BDG Academy (BDG: Bundesverband Deutscher Gesangspädagogen). Since August 2021, over 90 BDG members all over Germany have been trained in specially designed seminars to competently use their vocal pedagogical expertise and experience in working with those affected by Long Covid. The unique feature of our initiative is that only trained and experienced singing teachers are allowed to participate in the seminars. At the same time, this is the basis of our quality management, as befits an officially approved educational institution such as the BDG.

[Singing, breathing, coping: holistic approaches to managing the breathlessness and anxiety of long COVID \(who.int\)](#)

[An online breathing and wellbeing programme \(ENO Breathe\) for people with persistent symptoms following COVID-19: a parallel-group, single-blind, randomised controlled trial - The Lancet Respiratory Medicine](#)

The term "**regeneration support**" is intended to make it clear that, adjunct to medical, psychological or physiotherapeutic treatment, we use our knowledge in the field of singing-based breathing, light vocalisation, perception and mindfulness as our special contribution in working with those affected by Long Covid.

Like other programs around the world, we were initially inspired by "ENO Breathe" (English National Opera): a free, six-week online program, funded by the *ENO Supporters and Members* and medically supervised by the National Health System's more than 80 clinics. This online program was accompanied by a study, the results of which were published in the *Lancet* (April 2022).

However, our BDG **Durchatmen**® takes place under completely different conditions, which we feel obliged to take into account. That was a major consideration for us right from the start. The German healthcare system is very different from the English one; we are not in the privileged situation of having patients who have already been diagnosed sent to us directly from clinics. Nevertheless, we already enjoy several successful collaborations with pulmonologists and family doctors. Our graduates work so far on the basis of a private service, with payment by the clients, detached from the health system. To date, it has been shown that humming, vocalizing, and the emotional benefits of singing familiar songs and attentive listening can successfully contribute to wellbeing. Our expertise and support therefore contribute to mental health in the broadest sense, thus establishing a link to medical treatment.

The exclusive participation of professional, experienced singing teachers in our seminars and the topics chosen underscore the serious intent of our educational mission.

Our goals and seminar contents have proven their worth. Since we can count on seminar participants to be able to instruct good breathing and teach effective relaxation techniques, mindfulness and perception, we instead focus on raising awareness of the special needs of those affected by Long Covid: fatigue, exhaustion, breathing impairments, lack of concentration and reduced physical capacity.

Practical advice on concept development, client-centered communication, what to do in case of emergency, and self-help techniques are just as important as knowledge of the current state of research and therapy. We are constantly learning and developing: through attendance at the Long Covid Congresses in Jena in 2022 and 2023; through personal contact with Dr. Jördis Frommhold at her Long Covid Institute in Rostock; through communication with numerous other specialists; and through ongoing, attentive study of reputable, relevant media such as the German Medical Journal.

But above all, it is necessary for us to put aside our focusing on high-level performance as we habitually do in singing lessons. Instead, the importance of pacing and a constant focus on PEM (post-exertional malaise) cannot be emphasized enough and must remain our first priority.

These two factors were even named in numerous presentations at the 2nd Long Covid Congress in Jena 2023 as the two most important things to be considered *sine qua non* when adapting rehabilitation centers for specializing in Long Covid.

Post-exertional malaise (PEM) refers to the worsening of symptoms after physical, mental or emotional activity. It must be avoided at all costs. The tricky thing about it is that a debilitating reaction (called "crash") is not immediately noticeable, but may only become apparent one to three days later. Such an overstepping of an individual's personal activity limit can cause a relapse in the progress of therapy and even lead to a chronification of the symptoms. For this reason we, in our seminars, always emphasize the following: flexibility in adapting the length of the sessions, anticipating the need for frequent breaks, and, if necessary, being constantly ready to stop a session immediately in order to avoid a "crash." We must constantly remind ourselves that the speed of progress, in regeneration support, is usually much slower than that which we typically experience in vocal sessions.

In October 2023, the **Durchatmen**® team was contacted by Prof. Dr. Anke Steinmetz, Professor of Physical and Rehabilitative Medicine at the University of Greifswald. She has designed a study on singing-based breathing training (*gesangsbasiertes Atemtraining*, or GAT) and has submitted a multicenter funding application for singing-based respiratory therapy in post-COVID which is currently under review. If the application is successful, graduates of the BDG **Durchatmen**® could be actively involved in the study.

Anke Steinmetz



Anke Steinmetz: "Singing is already used in a wide variety of areas as a supportive therapy and rehabilitation method, e.g. for chronic lung diseases. In addition to the positive effects on breathing and mood, singing is associated with cardiorespiratory activation, making it ideal for use in patients with post-COVID."

One problem remaining for us is the fact that our work has to be paid for privately. Therefore, the **Durchatmen**[®] team has joined the German competence network Social Prescribing and is actively participating in it. We owe this contact to WHO Europe and the support of BDG Council Member Prof. Dr. Philipp Caffier. With his support we were able to contact the head of the competence network for social prescribing, Prof. Dr. Wolfram Herrmann of the Charité in Berlin. In the long run, "culture on prescription" could become one way to actively support those affected and, at the same time, establish a financial basis for our work.

For all those who have completed the basic seminar, these two exciting developments mean a big step towards scientific recognition of this special vocal pedagogical work. The advanced seminar **Durchatmen**[®] **PLUS** offered to seminar graduates in March 2024 will enable an even more intensive preparation for regeneration support, through the participation of several renowned guest speakers and the presentation of our **Durchatmen**[®] exercise catalogue.

In the meantime, research has found that numerous symptoms which have gained more visibility through Long Covid are also prevalent in many other diseases and ailments. Therefore **Durchatmen**[®] has begun to offer its regeneration support not just to those affected by Long Covid but also to many others who benefit from it.

We dedicate ourselves to alleviating the symptoms of those affected and support them on the way to improving their quality of life, remaining within our professional area of competence. Our concept is future oriented, enabling a sphere of influence beyond those affected by Long Covid. Seminar graduates report significant qualitative improvement in their own teaching and more attention to self-care due to the knowledge gained in our seminars.

Conclusion and outlook:

There is great need: in Germany alone, there are half a million affected by Long Covid (17 million throughout Europe) who can benefit from our support. The work is rewarding and very individual. It inspires us to implement not only our vocal pedagogical skills but also all of our human and emotional resources in order to achieve a special, socially oriented goal.



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