

Usually, singing out of tune follows a certain pattern:

The person has no confidence, as he's been told he "can't sing", "has a tin ear", is "tone deaf". (I really hate that one, implying a physical condition, and is a nonsensical term, as anyone who can hear at all can distinguish pitch to some degree, such as a squeak vs. a growl.)

The keys typically chosen when they've sung are not in a comfortable part of their vocal range. They take a wild swing at singing a few notes, they don't connect (and they know it), and then they lose their nerve and pretty much quit. A few experiences like that in front of other people usually get enough negative response so that the person assumes they somehow "can't" sing in pitch, and they should stop trying. So they do, and I see that as a small tragedy.

What makes a huge difference is to offer the song in a key they can sing in. For guys, they'd be most comfortable in a register something like their speaking voice. For songs that many male bluegrass singers might do in G or A, often a better key for the "non-singer" is half an octave lower, like C or D.

For most women, most songs that guys do in G would be better placed in C or D. So a woman who typically sings out of tune may have a higher-than-normal voice, favoring keys like E, F, or even G for that song. Or she may have a lower-than-typical female voice, and prefer G or A.

The choosing of the key is important, because if the first few notes are right, the rest of the tune has a much better chance to stay right. With a chording instrument playing along, at a slow tempo, and someone else singing in the person's optimum key, the "can't sing" person connects almost 100% of the time. Sometimes it helps for the instructor to sing and play a little and have the learner listen before coming in. It's possible that after an initial clumsy start, the learner will catch on with the help of the teacher.

The teacher needs to be patient and gently encouraging and persistent. Make sure you have the time, if necessary, to make this initial attempt successful. The learner has had enough failure!

I used to find the optimum key for a learner by having him "just sing the song, just start." And they would start, quite awkwardly, and go astray immediately. But during that time, I'd try to hum a few of the notes they were humming, and have them stop, and then use my instrument to figure out what the notes were -- and go ahead and sing in that key and figure out what key it actually was. (When you get to the last note, the pitch of that note is the root note of the key.) This approach works well in finding a good key, but I've found it easier to just move the key a half-octave or so from the typical key that a person of that gender would sing the song in, and that tends to work, without having to go through the above sequence.

Once you know the optimum key, start chording in that key, and when you start singing, the other person will generally join in correctly. Once they do, just say, without making a huge production of it, "You're in tune now. Keep going," and keep singing with them, and then let them keep going without you, giving quiet encouragement now and again, or joining in again if they waver.

After a while, you can raise the bar. Say you're singing Will the Circle Be Unbroken. That's commonly done in G. Typically, out-of-tune male singers would do better with D. So start them in D and once they connect, sing it a while in D, and then stop and raise the key to E, while chording and singing. They will go a little higher, and not find it difficult. Congratulate them again. See if they can make the key jump just by listening to the chords, as you raise the key up to F. Generally, they'll follow fine, though they may be having trouble with the highest note (C on "waiting"), but they will probably go for it and get close, if you're there encouraging them and singing along a little. A lot head nodding and smiling in

a low key way helps the process feel good and comfortable for the learner. Finally, you can raise the key to G. Now they're at the upper edge of their vocal range, but you've led them to the commonly used key, by first bringing the key to them, getting them "in", and then leading them slowly higher. If you throw the difficult key at them first, they tend to fail and then give up. Instead, you lower the bar till they can clear it, and then raise it slowly while keeping the success rate high.

Once they're singing in G, another congratulations, and have them keep singing. You might be able to switch right into another easy song in G, without losing them. More congratulations: They can do it on more than one song.

At this point, all that's needed is for them to build confidence, by doing it more.

Point out that the proper chords on an in-tune instrument (guitar, piano, banjo, whatever) help the singer stay in, because:

Most of the important notes in the melody are chord tones in the proper chords for the song.

In other words, as you sing "circle" or "broken", all the notes are actually part of the G chord. A few notes stray out of the chord (like "Lord" on the C chord). But almost every one of the main melody notes is duplicated in the notes of the chords that fit. You'll hear them right on the guitar or banjo as part of the chord. This helps people pick up the concept that there's a connection between melody and the correct chords. They realize that a chording instrument will help them sing better.

Among the benefits is that the player will start hearing how the correct chord sounds better with each part of the melody, and can start trusting their ears to hear the difference between "works" and "doesn't work". This awareness is a big part of the increasing confidence.

At that point, it's great to get a tape recorder out (every student should have a ready-to-go one in his case) and recap the learning process, starting with the initial finding of a good key. The person should hear their own voice on the recording, doing that first song correctly, so make sure the recorder is close enough to pick it up. Go through the slow raising of the key, finish in G, and then switch to another song. Get it all recorded.

Now it's time for a little speech. Recap that after a lifetime of been told, and believing, they "can't" sing in tune, we have proved "them" (the supposed authorities) wrong, and we have recorded proof. Walk them through how they can now play the recording for their spouse, or any person who has told them they "can't carry a tune". Most novice singers at this point get a bit emotional, and I think they're entitled to it. Let it happen and then add in conclusion:

Now that you know you can sing in tune, you can get a lot better at finding notes more easily and quickly, simply by practicing singing, with a chording instrument, and no distractions of listeners, except possibly a gentle guide. Find a songbook with songs you know in it, and chords easy enough to play while you sing. You may need to transpose the keys to a half octave lower. [Transposing is another lesson, which some people pick up quickly and some don't.] Every so often, it would make sense to have a knowledgeable musician listen to you and affirm that you're still doing it right, and if you're not, help you make corrections.