



Stuttering/Disfluency

Stuttering has been written about for centuries. One can find volumes of information on the internet about stuttering. We still do not really know what causes stuttering to occur in most situations. The newest research reported supports the ideas that there are genetic and neurological differences involved in fluency disorders. Famous people have had problems with stuttering. Notorious people have had problems with stuttering. Very ordinary people have had problems with stuttering. Most young children actually go through a period of speech disfluency when learning to talk. Fortunately, most of those children do not have lasting disfluency affects in their speech development. Others may have some problems for a longer period of time. And others might develop into more severe, lifelong problems with disfluency.

When I was a younger therapist without much experience, and when parents would bring in a young child with fluency problems, I used to counsel them to just be patient and let the child grow out of the problem.

I have largely left that way of thinking behind. By the time a parent feels the need to bring the child in for speech evaluation, something has been happening in the child's speech that triggers in the parent's mind that this is not what should be normally happening. I would say that I tend to err on the side of caution now. I want to give the parents more information and strategies for them to create a better speech environment at home. I want to give the child some simple tools that they can understand and use to help them develop more fluid speech. I want to give them a pathway to develop a sense of speech success.

When a grade school child, teenager, or adult comes to see me with fluency problems, I want them to know that I do not have all the answers. I have some ideas about the nature of their problems and answers for some of those problems. I do not know how fluent the person can become. To me therapy for fluency problems is a process of finding what kinds of speech skills that this person needs. It is not about trying to learn to talk fluently. It is more of the "zen of speech." Taking apart what has been happening and trying to find and develop ways of speaking that let this person talk in a more fluid pattern, not perfectly, but differently and naturally. The client and I do not know what will happen until we try. It is a process of chipping away at old behaviors and introducing new speech behaviors that elicit and promote better speech fluency

Notes to Listeners

When someone to whom you are talking is having trouble speaking fluently, they most likely have a stuttering problem. You will probably react appropriately by instinct, but if you are not sure what to do, you are not alone.

Stuttering is often misunderstood and can cause the listener to feel anxious. If you keep the following in mind, however, the experience will be a more comfortable one for you and the person who stutters.

What to Know

1. About one percent of adults and four percent of children stutter.
2. We do not know why people stutter, but apparently it is not a nervous or personality disorder. People who stutter are normal except they lack the ability to varying degrees to get words out fluently. It is known that stuttering runs in families, and research shows neurological components are probably involved in the disorder. Stuttering almost always starts between the ages of two and five. Also, boys are five times more likely than girls to stutter, a gender ratio we see in other developmental disorders.
3. People generally do not stutter when they sing, whisper, speak in chorus, or when they do not hear their own voice. There is no universally accepted explanation for these phenomena.
4. The degree to which people stutter varies widely. Some people who stutter have more natural control over their speech than others do. And the degree of stuttering depends on the particular situation in which they find themselves, the difficulty of the words they must say, and how they feel, in general, at the moment. People who stutter universally report having “good days” and “bad days.”
5. Stuttering may look like an easy problem that can be solved with some simple advice, but for adults it is a chronic, life-long disorder. People who stutter can achieve more control over speech, but total fluency is not a likely, realistic goal for adults.
6. The list of notable people who stutter (past and present) includes: Moses, Aesop, Isaac, Newton, Charles Darwin and his grandfather, physician Erasmus Darwin, Somerset Maugham, Lewis Carroll, Clara Barton, King George VI of England, Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe, John Updike, Mel Tillis, Bob Love, James Earl Jones, Bruce Willis, Carly Simon, Bo Jackson, and Annie Glenn.

How to React When Speaking with a Person who Stutters

1. You might be very tempted to finish sentences or fill in words for the person. Unless you know the person well and have his or her permission, please do NOT do this. Your action could be taken as demeaning. And, of course, if you guess the wrong word, the difficulties multiply.
2. Refrain from making remarks like: “Slow down,” “Take a Breath,” or “Relax.” Such simplistic advice can be felt as patronizing and is not constructive.
3. Maintain normal eye contact and try not to look embarrassed or alarmed. Just wait patiently and naturally until the person is Finished.
4. Be aware that people who stutter usually have more trouble controlling their speech on the telephone. Saying “Hello,” in particular, often presents a special problem for them. Please be extra patient in this situation.
5. People sometimes ask if they should ask the person questions about his or her stuttering. This is something we must leave to your judgment. But surely, stuttering should not be a taboo subject. If you have a question about it, the person will probably appreciate your interest. It is in your mutual benefit that it be talked about openly.

6. The person's stuttering sometimes makes it harder to understand what he or she is saying. If you do not understand what is said to you, do not be afraid to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you said." No matter how much of a struggle it was for them to say it, this is preferable to your pretending you understood, or guessing what his or her communication was.

7. Set a relaxed pace when possible, using a moderate rate of speech yourself.

8. In general, let the person know by your manner and actions that you are listening to what he or she is saying and how he or she is saying it. Be yourself. Be a good listener. Stuttering is something we do; it is not something we are.

Contact the [National Stuttering Association](#) for more Information.