

From: Johnson, W., Stuttering and What You Can Do About It, pp. 169-180

If you are personally caught up in the problem called stuttering you are by no means alone. You are one in seven of every thousand, a vast company of over one million persons in the United States. Assuming the same ratio, there are more than a million stutterers in Russia, a third of a million in England, four million in China, and approximately twenty million among the nearly three billion men, women and children in all the world.

The better your understanding of your speech problem, and of what you yourself are doing that complicates the problem, the more you can do to help yourself feel capable of dealing with it successfully. Here are some things to think about in order to gain a better understanding of what you call your stuttering. (What sort of language do you use in talking about your problem? Are the questions you ask vague or down to earth? Do you talk mostly in generalities or do you usually try to make specific and descriptive statements about what you do when you stutter?)

Do you talk or think mainly about your stuttering as something that happens to you--or as something that you yourself do? Do you take for granted that you are a "Stutterer," as though you were a native of Stutterania, perhaps, a special kind of being? Do you assume you have something or other inside you, such as a "tendency to stutter," or "nervousness"--or "Stuttering," like that, with a capital S, as though "it" might be a Something with a will of "its" own that comes and goes, and gets better and worse, as though you had no control over "it" or responsibility for "it."

It is much better for you to talk or think about what you do, rather than what you are or have. When you talk about what you are and what you have you tend to keep yourself from considering what you might do that would be an improvement over what you are doing now. If you tell yourself you are a kind of person--a Stutterer, for example, as though Stutterers were somehow in a basic way different from Normal Speakers--then you are likely to feel that there is nothing you can do about it: "The leopard can't change its spots." "If you don't have it you just don't have it." If you are in the habit of thinking and of saying things like that you are likely to tell yourself also "Once a Stutterer always a Stutterer"--and you might then go on to the depressing thought that there's really no hope for you. Or if there is, it is the wishful hope that Somewhere Sometime you will be lucky and find Someone who will take away, or drive away, what you have and transform you, as though by sorcery, from the Stutterer you are into the Normal Speaker you long to be One Day. Such wishfulness makes for dreams, particularly daydreams, about magical potions in the form of pills, or secret and mysterious Methods that can work Wonders. It does not encourage you to face up to the problem yourself and do something constructive about it here and now by your own efforts.

When, on the other hand, you talk about what you do that interferes with your speaking--such as pressing your lips together tightly, or holding your breath by tensing the muscles in your throat--you are more likely to see that you don't really have to do those things, and that you would talk more smoothly if you didn't. You can try, at least, to go ahead and talk without doing those things and find out what you do then. If you just talk, fine. When you do something else instead, like pressing your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you can sort of smile at yourself, as it were, and wonder what in the world you are doing that for. There is no need to scold yourself for doing it. There is much need not to scold but rather to be wholly accepting and understanding of yourself.

It is very good for you to understand clearly that the things you do that interfere with the normally easy flow of your speech are indeed things you do yourself. They do not just happen to you. The reason you find

this hard to grasp is that whenever you tense up you do it so very suddenly, as a rule, practically before you know you've done it. It is easy to get the illusion that you had absolutely nothing to do with it. On top of that, you will swear that the only thing in the world you want to do is to go on with what you are trying to say--but that "the word just won't come out." Of course, if you stop to notice what you are doing--you are perhaps pressing your lips together very tightly, and that is not a very good way to go on talking! It's downright surprising, isn't it, to come to and discover that with all the effort you are putting forth you are mainly keeping your mouth tightly shut, when all the time you thought you were making a mighty effort to speak. It is very much as though in driving your car you were to press down harder and harder on the brake, thinking all the while that you were stepping on the gas.

Now, if in driving your car you did find that you had pressed down on the brake instead of the gas, it would be sensible to lift your foot, and then take it off the brake altogether before pressing gently on the gas. It doesn't take much effort to step on the gas; it takes much more to press down on the brake and hold it down. In driving a car, then, whenever you are exerting any noticeable effort, and your car begins to slow down or comes to a stop, you know that you are stepping on the brake and not on the gas.

Speaking is a good deal like that. When you seem to be wanting and trying to go forward, but at the same time are plainly stopped, it is sensible to stop straining, and just do, with no more effort than is called for, what comes next. It takes almost no effort at all to go forward, making one movement--or, rather, one flowing pattern of movements--after another in speaking. It takes considerable effort, however, to bring your speaking to a halt, or to hold back from beginning to speak when you want to talk. In speaking, then, as in driving, whenever you find that you are exerting any noticeable effort and you begin to stall or come to a stand still, you know that you are trying for some reason to keep from talking, as well as trying to talk. When you try to do both at the same time you find yourself doing the things you think of as your stuttering.

What you call your stuttering and your effort to avoid or to break out of "it"--these are one and the same thing! What is "holding the word in" is simply the effort that you are exerting to "force it out." What you call your stuttering and the things you are doing to avoid "it" are the same. What you call your stuttering and your effort to say "potatoes" in spite of "it" are not two things, but one only.

In other words, the behavior you call your stuttering is more or less self-perpetuating. It feeds on itself. The more you expect to stutter, and then do the things that to you are stuttering, the more you will expect to stutter, even though the stuttering you expect is only what you yourself do because you expect to stutter. The more you try one time--or the more times you try--to "force the word out in spite of the stuttering," perhaps by pressing the lips together very hard, and then finally say the word, the harder you will try again the same way--or the more often you will try--to "force the word out in spite of the stuttering." In other words, you learn the error of thinking that the stuttering against which you struggle is different from your struggle, when all the time the stuttering lasts only so long as you struggle against it--because your struggle and what you experience as your stuttering are one and the same.

You refer to your stuttering much as you would speak of a living thing. It comes and goes, you say, and gets better and worse of itself. You seem to be saying, indeed, that you are somehow possessed. You even talk about words that won't come out, as though the words had minds of their own and they themselves decided whether to come out or stay in. You say your tongue gets tense, as though it were not you who tensed your tongue, pressing it yourself against the back of your teeth. The illusion you express in these ways is that your stuttering is not of your own doing. You tend, therefore, to take for granted that it is a "disorder" of some sort, a "symptom" of something or other like a disease, or a "weakness," or an "instability." Under the spell of this way of thinking--and this sort of language--you see nothing to do but to contend with "the stuttering" as though "it" were an outside force, to try to control "it," to struggle against "it," to strive to talk in spite of "it." You do not see that what you speak of and think about in this animistic way as your stuttering is, in fact, something you do yourself--and that you can change what you do. As soon as you see this, you can see also some of the ways you can change what you do in order to improve the way you speak.

The handicap of stuttering is traditionally defined in terms of the blockings, repetitions, mouth posturings and grimaces that the stutterer goes through in trying to utter a word, but it is much more than that.

A stutterer is one who does not know where his next word is coming from. Moreover, he does not know when the next situation will arise in which he will need that word. Even his fluency may give him little more than a feeling of thin ice. The to be or not to be, to speak or not to speak is always with the stutterer, and from this gnawing pervasive uncertainty springs the major portion of his handicap. The symptoms we see make up only the top of the iceberg; far greater, and more dangerous and destructive, are those that lie underneath.

The average person who meets a stutterer is similarly divided in his choices. Should he watch the debacle, or avert his gaze? Should he help the stutterer with a painfully obvious word, or let him flounder? Should he give some friendly recognition to the difficulty, or help the stutterer pretend it is not there? Knowing little about it, he gets his cue from the stutterer himself. And as a result, he usually concludes that stuttering is something very shameful.

The blockings seem to come in waves, and those waves hit hardest when the stutterer has to say something important to someone important. Yet it is not always so and the stutterer can sometimes surprise everyone, including himself, by speaking fluently in a crisis. Such breaks are seldom really lucky for the stutterer: people may grow more intolerant, saying, "Well, that shows he can talk if he really wants to." And that same fluency may be experienced by the stutterer as a buildup of pressure for the future.

The partial predictability of stuttering, the anticipations of stuttering as a probability but not as a certainty, add a gambling aspect to the handicap. Should the stutterer enter the situation or not? Can he say the word or not? This is part of the under-the-surface, iceberg aspect of the experience of stuttering. Ironically, the most severe stutterers are most optimistic in their hopes for success and fluency, as if level-of-aspiration-for-fluency may be taken as a measure. Once the stutterer commits himself to speak fluently, he increases the probability that he will stutter. Such sequential or dependent probability estimates comprise a significant portion of the stutterer's emotional burden (Sheehan, 1963).

Every stutterer becomes in time a "walking museum," or perhaps a "talking museum," of those crutches, devices or mannerisms he has employed to conceal his stuttering. The history of the stuttering pattern of any one individual is clustered in what he does each time he stutters. In the adult, unraveling the tangle of false behaviors is a major goal of therapy.

The ideas presented below have been found to be essentially supportive for any stutterer.

1. Stuttering is a false-role disorder. You will remain a stutterer so long as you continue to pretend not to be one.
2. Just as you have stuttered most of your life up to now, you will stutter somewhat the rest of your life.
3. You have a choice as to how you stutter. You do not have a choice as to whether you stutter.
4. What you call your stuttering consists mostly of the tricks, the crutches you use to cover up.
5. Your stuttering is like an iceberg--most of the handicap you keep concealed beneath the surface. Get more of it up above the surface, and you will get rid of it more easily.

6. Your stuttering is something you do, not something that happens to you. It is your behavior, not a condition. Not a defect nor an illness, but a series of mistakes you continue to make. Mistakes you can correct with a little self-study and courage.
7. Working on your stuttering can be fun--to attack and conquer situations from which you have always retreated.
8. Role therapy is not something interminable. You have learned a set of attitudes, feelings and habits. You can learn a new set of attitudes, feelings and habits.
9. It is far better to stutter openly and honestly than it is to use a trick, especially if temporarily successful.
10. Your stuttering won't hurt you and your fluency won't help you.
11. In accepting yourself as a stutterer, you choose the route to becoming a more honest, relaxed speaker.
12. You have a choice--you can exercise a choice to stutter openly and smoothly.
13. The more you run away from your stuttering, the more you will stutter. The more you are open and courageous, the more you will develop solid fluency.

In contrast to the above principles, here are some notions that you should reject, for they increase "holding back:"

1. "Control." If you try to "control" stuttering, you are likely to be suppressing it, covering up, and this aggravates the problem. For it is the direct opposite of the basic goal of being open.
2. "Symptom." Your stuttering is your own behavior, something you have learned, something you can unlearn. It is not a "symptom" of an illness or of some deep personality disturbance. It is neither an entity nor something that happens to you, but the result of your effort to cover up.
3. "Guilt over fear." You must expect during therapy to experience fear, for it is only in that way you can progress. A block is not a failure; a fear is not a failure.