The Adult who Stammers

Some questions answered

The British Stammering Association
What is stammering?*
Approximately one person in every hundred stammers, and you may think that most of these people stammer in the same way that you do. In fact, people stammer in different ways so that the term ‘stammering’ covers a wide range of behaviours. One person may get blocked or stuck on a certain word or sound, another may repeat sounds, another may go back in speech and take a run at the difficult word, and yet another may do all of these things and many more.

Consider your own speech: you will probably find that you are fluent at times, perhaps when by yourself or with a friend. At other times you stammer, and this may occur more frequently when you are tired, excited or under stress. Your stammer may be worse when speaking to someone in authority or when you are on the telephone. Why is it that you are fluent at times, and at other times, you stammer?

Stammering usually starts in early childhood, but when you were small your speech may not have bothered you as much. Probably in your early teens, you became more self-conscious and more aware that you were not speaking in the right way. Once aware and conscious of a problem, you tried to do something about it. At the same time, you started to develop feelings and thoughts about stammering, as to how it affected you as a person and what people thought about you. These feelings and thoughts have stayed with you into adult life. They may have grown and changed, but they have become part of your stammer.

Over the years, you have used certain strategies to cope with the situation. You may have come to the conclusion that your best course of action is to keep talking regardless of how you speak; or you may have decided to hide and avoid your stammer, even if it means not speaking when you want to do so.

Whichever way you have coped, your feelings and thoughts have become associated with the speech difficulties. Therefore, you instinctively get tense when you think you are in a situation where your stammer will be a nuisance, and this tension will make your stammer worse.

Other people, even close relatives, may think that your stammer is solely related to your speech, or they may not know that you stammer because you hide it so well. Regardless of what others think, you will know that the answer to the question ‘What is stammering?’ is that it is a speech problem, but also a problem of the feelings and thoughts associated with the act of speaking.

Why do you stammer?
We don’t know exactly what causes stammering, or what triggers it in some situations. Current research suggests it results from the way some people’s brains process speech. Stammering is not caused by anxiety or nervousness. There could be a genetic factor because stammering tends to run in families. You might have a parent, grandparent or other relative who stammers, but often this is not the case.

You may believe that if you can find out why you stammer, then you will find a cure. However, it is rarely possible to find one particular reason. We know that more men than women stammer; that there is a 20 per cent greater chance of you stammering if a close relative has a speech problem; that stammerers often had some difficulty with learning the words or sounds of speech in early childhood; and that emotional stress on a child can be an issue.

When studying these factors, you may realise that, whatever might have caused

*Although the word stammering has been used throughout this booklet, stammering and stuttering are two words with the same meaning.
your stammer, this knowledge is of little help because you have gone through considerable changes since those early childhood days.

**What can you do about your stammer?**

You should get the help of a speech and language therapist – preferably one who specialises in the treatment of stammering. If you have already had therapy and feel that you were not helped, try again because therapy may have changed and you may have changed. Details of how to get help from a speech and language therapist are given at the end of this pamphlet. However, you may be unable to get the help of a therapist and would like some ideas about how to help yourself – starting immediately. Here are some suggestions.

1 – **Defining the problem**

When dealing with any problem in life, the first step has to be to define that problem accurately. You know that you have a stammer, but what does that mean? What do you do when you stammer?

- Do you repeat sounds (s...s...supper) or syllables (su...su...su...supper)?
- Do you prolong sounds (sssssssupper)?
- Do you get blocked in speech so that you are unable to make any sound (s...upper)?
- Do you close your eyes or rush through speech?
- Do you try to avoid the word by changing it for another that is easier to say?
- Do you give up speaking altogether?

These are the sorts of questions you need to ask yourself to begin to understand what it is that you do when you stammer. You also need to consider what you think and feel about your stammer:

- Do you think it is severe or quite mild?
- Do you think that it is holding you back in your social life or at work?
- Do you think it is better with some people and in some situations than at other times?
- How do you feel when you stammer: embarrassed? annoyed? frustrated?
- Do you get angry at other people, at yourself, or both?

2 – **One step at a time**

Once you have begun to think about your stammer as being like a jigsaw puzzle, with small pieces that fit together and make up the whole, you can then tackle one piece at a time. Start with a piece which you feel might be possible to change. For example, you might take one sentence of your speech two or three times a day and make a special effort to say that sentence slowly and calmly; do not allow yourself to rush or panic.

There is considerable evidence that, when speaking more slowly, most people stammer less. Perhaps you might find it easier to try and concentrate on not looking away from people or closing your eyes when you stammer. Try and make changes very slowly, a little at a time and step by step.

3 – **Don’t try to hide it**

Another important issue is the use of avoidance behaviours, i.e. anything that you do to hide or avoid your stammer. The reason you need to hide the stammer is because you may have become convinced that people think all sorts of things about you once they hear you stammering. Are you certain this is so? Most people have their own problems and are often not particularly concerned with the way that you speak. If you use quite a lot of avoidance, you will find that the more you avoid, the more you need to go on avoiding.
Also, there are times when it is almost impossible to avoid. If you are avoiding very successfully, you may be thought to be fluent by your boss, workmates, partner and friends. In order to maintain this fluency, you have to be constantly vigilant. You know, of course, that your stammer does not go away or improve because you hide it. Therefore, it will help you gradually to reduce the number of times that you avoid either saying a word, talking to a particular person or speaking in a certain situation. As well as experimenting with stammering more openly, you may find it useful to try and talk about your stammer to one or two people who are close to you. In this way you will become less anxious as you start to learn that people are not as critical as you had thought, and the world does not stop because your stammer comes out into the open.

4 – Degrees of fluency
You may think that there are only two possibilities: either you stammer or you are fluent. Watch and listen closely when people are speaking on buses, on radio phone-ins, at home and in shops. Is everyone as fluent, concise and articulate as you had imagined? Perhaps you will discover that many fluent speakers are often hesitant when speaking, and that there is not such a clear division between being fluent and stammering. Because of this you could now begin to accept that you do not have to be fluent all the time.

5 – Get expert advice
Contact the British Stammering Association (see helpline numbers below) to get accurate information and contacts for therapy, and to talk with someone who understands stammering and who can outline the options available to you.

The most important thing is to find a specialist therapist. You may need to spend some time exploring until you find the approach that will work best for you.

Where can I get help?
1. Most speech and language therapy is provided through the NHS. Contact BSA to see if there is a specialist in your area and to get contact details.
2. Contact your local speech and language service directly – in most areas you will need a GP’s referral.
3. Contact other people who stammer. There are several online discussion groups for people who stammer as well as self-help groups in some parts of the UK. Many people who stammer find it valuable to talk openly about their experiences with others who understand.

www.stammering.org/selfhelp_internet.html

You are not alone.
There is help available.
Contact the British Stammering Association – today!

Helpline
0845 603 2001
08453 303 800 (Scotland)
The British Stammering Association (BSA) is a registered charity founded in 1978. It aims to help child and adult stammerers to overcome the limitations set by their dysfluency and thus communicate more effectively.

BSA offers a free information and support service. We can provide details of specialist speech and language therapy, intensive courses and self-help groups. We also provide a professional telephone counselling service offering confidential information and support to all whose lives are affected by stammering. Through these activities we aim to provide up-to-date information about therapy options available to people who stammer. We also aim to empower stammerers to help themselves. In addition to the above, BSA works to raise awareness of stammering together with those difficulties experienced by people who stammer. We aim to initiate and support research into stammering and wherever possible we aim to promote enhanced life experiences through shared understanding.

**Becoming a member of the BSA**

The benefits of membership (which is open to any interested person) are: quarterly issues of *Speaking Out* – the world’s leading magazine on stammering; invitations to friendly BSA ‘Open Days’ all over the country as well as the BSA Annual National Conference; access to the BSA postal lending library and the Telephone Link-Scheme and Pen-Pal list.
Helpful publications:
‘Stammering: Advice for all ages’
by Renée Byrne and Louise Wright, Sheldon Press
‘Self Therapy for the Stammerer’
by Malcom Fraser, Stuttering Foundation of America

BSA leaflets:
Additional information on stammering therapy for adults
Features of interiorised stammering
Stammering and employment
Information for the partners and spouses of people who stammer

For further information, please contact:
The British Stammering Association
15 Old Ford Road
London E2 9PJ
Tel: 020 8983 1003
Fax: 020 8983 3591
Helpline: 0845 603 2001 (local rate call)
Website: www.stammering.org

BSA Scotland
Helpline: 08453 303 800
8 Barclay Terrace, Edinburgh EH10 4HP
email: bsascotland@stammering.org

© The British Stammering Association 2007
Reg. Charity No: 1089967/SC038866
Registered Business No: 4297778