Managing stuttering

Dear Alice,

I am a college student with a stuttering problem. I sometimes stutter when talking in the classroom, which causes much embarrassment. I stutter less with friends and family. I've had this problem since the beginning of high school, but it comes and goes — in fact, sometimes I go months, semesters, or even a year or two without stuttering. Then all of a sudden it comes back. I had very minimal (almost no) stuttering last year, but the problem has come back this year. People say that stuttering is a result of nervousness and/or self-consciousness. I do not deny that I am more likely to stutter when I am nervous, but I also stutter when I am completely calm and worry-free. One interesting thing: I never stutter when I am talking to myself alone.

I have a public speaking presentation at the end of this semester — do you have any advice on how to limit the stuttering? Any quick tips, since I do not have the time or money to see a speech therapist.

— Wants to Communicate Freely

Answer

Dear Wants to Communicate Freely,

There are plenty of ways to try to get your messages across clearly. Although you're reasonably looking for less expensive ways to manage stuttering, seeing a speech therapist might be your best bet. Experts recommend seeking professional help if a stutter develops after childhood. Given that you first experienced stuttering in high school, it may be worth considering. That being said, there are methods that you can use to try to reduce some of the triggers associated with stuttering. Keep reading for resources that can direct you to reduced-cost options, as well as suggestions for how to tolerate the times stuttering occurs and manage nerves during public speaking.

When thinking about how to best address a stutter, it can be helpful to know that stuttering is a speech disorder characterized by fluency and flow issues, often in the form of vowel or consonant repetitions, prolongations, and abnormal pauses. Although the causes of stuttering remain a mystery (genetics or an error in speech motor control development are possibilities),
tracking when your stuttering comes and goes (as you have done!) may provide hints as to what triggers it for you. As you mentioned, for many, stuttering often strikes when speaking to larger crowds or experiencing nervousness, but is less likely to occur when alone or with close family and friends. A person may also stutter when feeling stressed, tired, rushed, self-conscious, or even excited. Stuttering may lead to embarrassment, anxiety, and avoidance of speaking, along with instances of bullying and low self-esteem.

It may be helpful to note that completely getting rid of a stutter after childhood is challenging. A key part of treatment when you’re older may be working to accept and tolerate stuttering, and building self-confidence and communication skills in an effort to reduce the negative effects stuttering may have on your life. Studies show that individuals who are able to tolerate the moments they stutter and exhibit confidence when talking actually speak more clearly and more frequently. There are a number of actions you could take to try to help reduce the stuttering you experience or the discomfort around your school presentation assignment:

- **Public speaking preparation:** In addition to considering treatment options, you may want to take a look at these tips for overcoming public speaking nerves [2], which include taking plenty of time to prepare, rehearse, and study your immediate surroundings.
- **Breathing exercises:** When it comes to speaking, the breath supports the strength of the voice, regardless of whether or not someone has a stutter. If you find that you often take short or shallow breaths, which is common for many, taking deeper breaths may help your voice be more supported as you speak, creating a stronger sound. Taking deeper breaths can also help reduce the feelings of stress you may be experiencing that may be associated with the presentation.
- **School accommodations:** In addition to speech prep and deep breathing, you may find it helpful to reach out to your professor or university about accommodations. Colleges and universities are increasingly becoming more accommodating of student concerns such as stuttering, although more awareness is certainly needed regarding the prevalence of individuals who stutter and the accommodations people who stutter may need. For example, in certain situations, you may try asking if you could complete an alternative assignment that doesn’t include public speaking.
- **Professional treatment:** Although you mentioned not having money or time for a speech therapist, seeking out the care of one may be helpful for future situations to prevent stuttering. Treatment for stuttering is typically tailored to an individual’s goals as well as their developmental stage. Along with the acceptance and confidence building strategies, a clinician (such as a speech pathologist or therapist) may also have a person engage in desensitization (facing their public speaking fears in different settings and contexts), cognitive restructuring (adjusting the way people think about themselves and their stutter), and communication with others about their stutter to further promote tolerance. In addition, a person in treatment may be taught speech and stuttering modifications. Speech modification strategies, also known as fluency shaping, help a person alter the timing of pauses and speech production while speaking. Stuttering modification strategies are designed to help individuals identify patterns of disfluency and work to decrease points of tension when having difficulty speaking. Increased pausing between words and syllables may help improve speech patterns.

If you’re interested in scheduling an appointment with a speech pathologist, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
website may provide information about reduced-cost speech therapy options available to you. Some speech therapists will even video chat with clients, eliminating the need for physical proximity. You may also try to see if your school has any speech therapists on staff who could help for low or no cost. Whether you see a speech therapist or not, there are some actions you can start to take to hopefully alleviate some of the stress.

Best of luck to you as you prepare for your public speaking presentation!

Alice!
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