

## **Ironies of Stuttering: A Catch 22 Situation**

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In the May-June issue of Reaching Out, Ben Bogard wrote eloquently about some of the ironies and paradoxes of stuttering, and used the analogy that stuttering is like a Catch 22 situation. I'd like to expand upon some of the important issues raised by Ben in his article. Like Ben, my comments are directed to older kids, teens and adults for whom stuttering has become a significant and chronic problem, and not to children in the early developmental phases.

In its more advanced stages, stuttering often results from the things you do when you try not to stutter again. The more you fear and dread the prospect of stuttering, the more you are apt to act in ways you hope will help you avoid further stuttering. The vicious circle of fear, expectancy, and attempted avoidance contributes to this Catch 22 situation.

Consider the "advice" you have received. I'll bet that 99.9% of you have been told to "slow down" in order to prevent stuttering. You may have been told to prevent stuttering by substituting an easy word instead of a hard word. You have been told to "stop and take a deep breath." As a result, you spend much of your time trying to figure out what you can do to prevent the occurrence of stuttering, and as Ben Bogard said, this only serves to increase the problem. Unfortunately, you develop the negative language of "**don't**." Don't repeat, don't tense, don't block, don't get stuck. **DON'T STUTTER** !!! Ironically, the harder you work to "not stutter" the more apt you are to stutter.

It is far better to try to do more and more things to talk easily, rather than more and more things to not stutter. "Speech Helpers," "Fluency Enhancers" "Fluency Targets" should be used to help you talk easily and communicate effectively, rather than to help you prevent, hide, or reduce stuttering. Indeed, fluency is more than the absence of stuttering.

### **Desirable Outcomes**

Therapy paradigms for chronic/advanced stuttering generally span a continuum that ranges from "fluency shaping" to "stuttering modification" and there are many desirable outcomes that can result from successful treatment. I think the most positive outcome is one in which the person becomes an effective communicator:

- ∑ a person who can talk any time, any place, to anybody, ---
- ∑ a person who can communicate efficiently and effectively, ---
- ∑ a person who can do so with no more than a minimal amount of negative emotion.

The words "stuttering" and "fluency" are not included in this statement of outcomes. It is better to do more and more things to talk easily and communicate effectively rather than to do more and more things in an attempt not to stutter. It is better to be open and honest about stuttering than it is to try to hide, conceal and cover up the stuttering. Desensitization can help reduce negative emotions, but not necessarily eliminate them completely.

## **Happening -versus- Doing**

Emotions are things we have. Behaviors are things we do. Through a powerful history of conditioning we learn to experience negative emotions such as fear, apprehension, worry and dread. We also learn positive emotions such as peacefulness, relaxation, calmness, composure and tranquility. Behaviors are the things we do. So in response to your fears and dreads about stuttering, you do things, behaviorally, in an attempt to manage your fluency and stuttering.

I'll bet many of you believe that "stuttering happens to me." It happens when I am nervous, excited, in a hurry, and under pressure, etc. It happens to me when I try not to stutter. You need to understand that the behaviors of stuttering are the actual thing that you DO, not the things that HAPPEN. Stuttering is what you do when you tense your jaw, hold your breath, and repeat sounds and syllables. You don't "have a block" or "get stuck." You DO THINGS that interfere with talking. Therefore, you are better off trying to do MORE and MORE things to talk easily and well, rather than more and more things in an attempt to avoid stuttering.

Did you watch the Summer Olympics that were just completed in Beijing? I wonder if you see any parallels between the goals that athletes' set, as compared and contrasted with the speech goals you set for yourself? Were the gymnasts trying to "nail the landing" or were they trying to not take extra steps on the dismount? Are you trying to talk easily, or are you trying not to stutter?

## **Trying to Talk Easily - versus - Trying Not to Stutter**

Whether you are working on techniques for fluency shaping, or techniques for stuttering modification, it is important to use them in the most positive way possible. Hence, it is more constructive to do more and more positive things to talk easily, rather than more and more negative things to not stutter.

Which of the following make sense to you?

trying to get on base	-versus-	trying not to strike out --
trying to dive	-versus-	trying not to belly flop --
trying to ride the bike	-versus-	trying not to fall off --
trying to talk easily	-versus-	trying not to stutter.

Indeed, the physical act of "trying not to stutter" (just like trying not to strike out, belly flop or fall off the bike) is most likely to cause physical and emotional stress for you.

## **Use the Language of Self-Responsibility**

Think about the language you use when you talk to yourself about your stuttering. What do you say to yourself? If you are like most people, you tend to label things rather than describe them in behavioral terms. Consider the following questions and answers:

Question: What happened?	Answer: The word got stuck in my throat.
Question: What happened?	Answer: I had a block.

Question: What happened?

Answer: The word wouldn't come out.

Question: What happened?

Answer: I had trouble with that one.

In more than 40 years of clinical work I have never seen a word get “stuck” in somebody’s throat. The answers in the right-hand column attempt to label an event as “happening” rather than to describe the behavioral events that the person did. It is almost like there is a puppet on a string, and things are being manipulated so that things happen to the puppet. But when it comes to you and your speech, it is important to use the language of self-responsibility, and to describe what you are doing. Now, please consider these examples:

Question: What were you doing?

Answer: I was tensing my jaw.

Question: What were you doing?

Answer: I pushed my lips together too hard.

Question: What were you doing?

Answer: I was saying “um-um-ah,” to stall for time before saying the next word.

Question: What were you doing?

Answer: I repeated the first syllable three times.

By being more descriptive of what you are doing, you are accepting more responsibility for having done it. You are DOING something, rather than thinking in terms of what HAPPENED to you. And when you think of what you are doing, you can also think of what you can do to change and modify it.

As I noted above, attempts to hide, conceal and avoid stuttering often make the stuttering more frequent and severe than it needs to be. Ben wrote about things he did to push, challenge and increase his “comfort zone.” He also wrote about the importance of voluntary stuttering. Ben’s examples of the things he has done to expand his comfort zone, and his willingness to do some voluntary stuttering, show ways that he is dealing constructively with it rather than being a victim of it. I’d be willing to give ten-to-one odds that these things have helped Ben to feel and behave with increased courage.

In an article I wrote for the 2007 May-June issue of **Reaching Out** I referred to courage and I mentioned voluntary stuttering and other forms of “advertising” as techniques that can be helpful in coping with teasing. So now, in closing, I again want to leave you with a quotation from Rudy Giuliani the former Mayor of New York City. This is a comment he made following the September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center.

**“Courage is about the management of fear, not the absence of fear.”**

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