

## CHANGING HABITS AND LEARNING TO COPE WITH FEELING WEIRD

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The May-June, 2010, issue of *Reaching Out* presented a list of “Ten Thoughts on Growing Successfully with Stuttering” by Kristen and Tom Chmela. In this article I want to expand upon one of these great thoughts: namely, that “IT FEELS WEIRD TO CHANGE YOUR SPEECH.” In my forty years of working with kids, teens and adults who stutter, I have heard this said by countless people who stutter so if you feel this way, you are not alone.

Before getting started, I think it is necessary to decide what we actually mean when we say that something feels “weird.” Most of us usually think that “weird” feelings are bad and negative. Those of us who have worn dental braces to straighten crooked teeth remember how weird our mouth felt, and how mushy our speech sounded, when the braces were first put on. Most of us remember the weird, tingling feelings we experienced when we experienced a bad bump on the head. So, we often think of “weird” in negative terms: examples could be things that are eerie, strange, uncommon, unnatural, out of the ordinary and unusual. On the other hand, I can think of weird things that would be positive. Examples that come to mind would be when I had three birdies in a row playing golf. (I rarely did this, so it felt pleasantly weird then I did.) During my early school days I was not a very good student. If, by some fluke of good fortune, I earned a high grade on a test, it felt happily weird when my parents congratulated me.

The fact of the matter is that there are lots of things other than your speech that would feel weird if you tried to change them. This is especially true for things that have been well learned and often repeated. It is often said that “old habits are hard to break” and this is certainly true. Well-established patterns that have been repeated many times are well ingrained and have become largely automatic. You can do them without even thinking about it.

But how did things get to be so well established and so automatic? In the beginning, you did not have these patterns. But gradually, over time, you learned them. Here are some quick examples. Then you tie your shoelaces and are making the first knot, do you put the right lace over the left lace or do you put the left lace over the right lace? When you get on a bicycle, do you put your left foot on the pedal and then swing your right leg over the seat, or do you put your right foot on the pedal and then swing your left foot over the seat? When you first learned to tie your shoes or ride your bike, you probably had to think about these things, but now you just do them automatically.

Let me assure you that I do not think that stuttering is simply a bad habit. No, Indeed!! But there are some aspects of stuttering that do have a lot of habit strength, and it will feel weird to change them. You have learned to react, both by how you feel, and by what you do, in ways that help maintain and perpetuate your stuttering. For example, the telephone rings and you get nervous, or you get ready to speak and gasp for a quick breath of air before you start. It wasn't this way in the beginning, but has become this way over the time it has taken you to learn these emotional and behavioral reactions.

As Kristen and Tom Chmela said, the speech changes you make will at first seem weird. This is because they are different from your habitual way of talking. If your usual way of talking involves extremely rapid sound repetitions, it may seem weird for be using easy

and effortless sound prolongations. If your usual way of stuttering involves quick inhalations, it may seem weird to be taking slower and easier breaths. If your usual way of stuttering involves lots of re- starts and recoils, it may seem weird to be staying“ in the moment” and then being successfully able to release easily.

One of the great pioneers in the field of stuttering therapy was Charles Van Riper. As a youth and young adult he stuttered very severely. So much so that his stuttering was an embarrassment to his father, so when they had company for dinner, young Charles was forced to eat alone at a different table in another room. One of the things Van Riper emphasized was the need for the person to be able to **VARY** his usual, typical, habitual way of stuttering. Variation was important to breaking down the strong habit patterns that had been established.

Obviously, I do not know you. We’ve never met and I’ve never heard you speak. Therefore, I’ll leave it up to you and your speech clinician to decide upon things that you might need to vary and change. But what I can do is to give you some non-speech things to vary and change. By working to vary and change these things you can gradually reduce the feelings of “weirdness” that you experience. As you learn to accept these non-speech feelings of weirdness you will learn to cope with them, and hopefully be able to relate them to the speech changes you will make later. At the beginning, these changes will seem weird. But in time, the weirdness will be reduced and you will not feel quite as uneasy with them.

Listen below are some examples of non-speech things you can change. Start these changes on Monday, and continue them every day until Friday. On Saturday, see how your “feelings of weirdness” have changed.

- Σ For boys: Do you customarily keep your wallet in your back-left or back-right pocket? Change this and go for five days wearing your wallet in the opposite pocket.
- Σ For boys: wear your wristwatch on the other wrist.
- Σ For girls: Do you customarily have your purse strap over your left or right shoulder? Change this and go for five days wearing your purse on the opposite shoulder.
- Σ For girls: When you put in your earrings, do you put on your right earring or your left earring first? Change the order and try doing it in the reverse order.
- Σ For everybody: When you are sitting in a chair with your legs crossed, do you have your right leg over your left leg or your left leg over your right leg?
- Σ For everyone: Next time you make a phone call, either cell call or land-line call, hold the phone in your right hand and dial the numbers with your left hand, and then when it is time to talk, put the phone to the other ear from the one you ordinarily listen with.
- Σ For everybody: Fold your hands. If your right thumb is on top of your left thumb, the bottom finger will be the little finger of your left hand. If your left thumb is on top of right thumb, the bottom finger will be the little finger of your right hand. Now, reverse the order of ALL your fingers so that the other thumb is now the top thumb and the other little finger is not the bottom little finger. (Don’t just reverse the top thumb. If you do this correctly, no two fingers of the same hand will be touching each other.
- Σ Now, fold your arms. For some of you the left forearm will be on top of your right forearm and under your right biceps.... and for some of you your right forearm will be on top of your left forearm and under your left biceps. Now, reverse the usual way you fold your arms and see how weird you feel. (If this doesn’t feel weird, you probably did not do this correctly.)

When we do things differently from the way we have customarily done them, it will at first seem weird. Does it sometimes feel weird to be speaking easily in situations where you used to stutter severely? Do you ever surprise yourself by using words that you used to avoid because you were afraid of them? Does it feel weird to look forward to getting a phone call when in the past you dreaded using the phone?

I've never asked one of my stuttering clients to do an assignment or activity that I have not done first, or would not be willing to do if asked. Many years ago I was working with an eighth grader and helping him to cope with making speech changes without feeling weird or uncomfortable. I challenged him to make some changes, and told him he could ask me to also do something that would seem weird. He knew that I wore contact lenses and challenged me to change the order in which I put the lenses in and took the lenses out. I always did the right eye first, so it really did feel weird to do the left eye first. My task was to do this every day for five days. Monday and Tuesday went well, but Wednesday I got myself totally goofed up and by the time all was said and done, I didn't know which contact was the left one and which was the right one. I even thought that one of them was inside out. I had to make an appointment to see my optometrist to get myself straightened out.

I hope you have fun feeling weird with some of these activities. Maybe you can get your parents, siblings, friends and even your SLP to try them.