

Stuttering and the Tug-of-War: Good Guys and Bad Guys

Stephen B. Hood, Ph.D.

Many years ago, as a student taking an introductory course in stuttering, I was first exposed to the theories and therapies expounded by Dr. Joseph Sheehan. Later, I was introduced to his wife Vivian Sheehan. I read their work with keen interest and attended many of their professional presentations. Years later I was honored when I looked out into the audience of some of my own presentations and saw one or both of them sitting in the audience. In this short paper I will attempt to build upon some of the clinical ideas championed by Joe and Vivian Sheehan. Dr. and Mrs. Sheehan believed that much of the problem of stuttering involves various levels of learned conflict. These conflicts are not present when stuttering first begins, but develop gradually as stuttering progresses in severity.

In your own life, and apart from stuttering, I'll bet you have experienced various types of conflict. Here are some examples:

In an **approach-approach** conflict there are two pleasurable choices that you face: for example you have some money to spend at the shopping mall. You find two items that you really like, but can only afford to buy one of them. Your predicament is a "happy one" because your conflict is deciding between two pleasurable options.

In an **avoidance-avoidance** conflict there are two choices, but this time neither one of them is pleasurable. An example of this would be if there was a very important class examination that you had to take at school the next day. You really didn't want to fail the exam, but you really didn't want to study for it either. Neither studying nor failing are pleasurable choices.

In an **approach-avoidance** conflict the situation presents you with both a positive and a negative outcome at the same time. Suppose for example that you wanted to snatch a few of your mother's freshly baked chocolate fudge brownies, but she had specifically told you that they were all needed for her dinner party and that if you took any you would be "grounded" for the weekend. The pleasurable consequence of eating the brownies is in conflict with the undesirable consequence of being grounded for the weekend.

Dr. and Mrs. Sheehan believed stuttering involves a special kind of conflict between the desire to speak and the desire to remain silent. They believed that the act of speaking holds the promise of communication, but the threat of potential stuttering. Silence holds the promise of not stuttering, but at the cost of abandoning communication. Guilt can be associated both with speaking (because of stuttering) and guilt can be associated with remaining silent (because of not communicating.)

In this diagram the happy face shows a positive outcome and the unhappy face shows a negative outcome.

Speaking	Remaining Silent
☺ Communication	☺ Not Stuttering
☹ Possible Stuttering	☹ Not Communicating

Clinically, it helps to do more and more things to increase the approaches and reduce the avoidances. You need to try to do more and more things to talk easily, rather than more and more things to avoid stuttering.

I guess if avoidances always worked and never resulted in stuttering, then maybe these avoidances could sometimes be helpful. This is especially true if there are readily available synonyms to use. If you wanted to use the word “car” you might say “auto.” If you wanted to say “cheeseburger” you might say “hamburger with cheese on it.” Unlike the “old days” when you had to place an order by actually telling the clerk exactly what you wanted, now-a-days you can go into a fast-food joint and simply order by number. But sometimes it’s hard to come up with a synonym and awkward to try to talk around the word. For example if I wanted to find out if you could go to a party with me next Saturday, it would seem really weird to ask “Can you go to a party with me next Sat-Sssater-Sater, ah, um, next ah -- on the day after next Friday.” And, speaking of ordering by number, I know a person who went to McDonald’s to order a cheeseburger combo with french fries. He used the drive-through so he could place his order through the audio squawk-box and not have to stand in a long line and place his order in person. When prompted to say his order he panicked at the prospect of having to say the number “3” so instead, he ordered a “6.” He ended up with some type of Chicken McNugget, that he totally disliked.

My longtime friend, Dr. Fred Murray, has said that avoidances are bad, and even worse than crabgrass that has infested the lawn. He said that dealing with avoidances is like dealing with the crabgrass – “Maybe you can’t get rid of it completely, but you can at least mow it down and keep it just as short as possible.”

Sometimes a pictorial image is helpful. One image that I have found useful is the “TUG-OF-WAR,” where both teams consist of kids who stutter.

Imagine a tug of war where two teams are lined up on opposite sides of a deep river. One team is the “good guys” who are the approachers and the other team is the “bad guys” who are the avoiders. Members of the losing team will be pulled into the river.

The approachers’ goal is to say what they want to say, as easily as possible, and use their “speech helpers” to make speaking as easily as possible. Their goal is to communicate effectively, and not be bothered by some minor fluency bobbles. They use “speech helpers” such as easy onsets, pullouts, and light contacts, etc, to help them talk easily and communicate effectively. This team consists of kids who are positive, optimistic and who challenge themselves to take reasonable risks.

The avoiders’ goal is to prevent stuttering as much as possible. These people do things such as pause, stall, postpone, and substitute easy words for hard words. Sometimes, they totally refuse to speak at all in order to avoid stuttering in stressful situations. This team consists of kids who are negative, pessimistic, and afraid to take reasonable challenges.

In the long run, reliance on avoidance is a poor solution. Sure, they may at times give short-term relief, but will not be helpful over the long haul. There are just too many situations where you

can't dodge the bullets of difficult words and situations. Often, the things you do to avoid will later come back later to haunt you.

Best wishes for future success. My hope is that you are on the "Approach Team" in the Tug-of-War battles you will face down in the future.

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