

Stammering Advice for Teenagers

What is Stammering?

Stammering (which is also known as Stuttering) is a condition that makes it physically harder to speak. It is defined as moments when the flow of speech is interrupted and words/sounds get stuck, even though you/they know exactly what to say.

Everyone stumbles over their words from time to time and might repeat whole phrases or say “urm”...“er”....when they are thinking.

However, a stammer is when speech is interrupted in the following ways:

Repetitions of whole words or sounds in words e.g. “m...m...maybe we can have ice cream?”

Prolongations where sounds within the word are stretched e.g. “sssssometimes I like to sing.”

Blocking where you/they are ready to say the word but muscle tension prevents it from coming out of the mouth as planned (can be silent or hear some noise) e.g. “my name is Bob.”

Some people also use other methods of trying to get the words out such as foot tapping, sharp intake of breath, blinking, clicking, chin tucking and avoiding certain words.



What do we know about Stammering?

Stammering is not uncommon, however, it affects more children than it does teenagers or adults as, for some people, it happens less and less as they get older. However, for about 20% of those who stammer as a child, the stammer will stay with them and continue to be present when speaking throughout adult life. Scientists have not worked out yet why some people continue to stammer and others stop stammering although they now think that those who have a stammer that happens more frequently or has lots of really tense moments as a young child, might be more likely to continue to stammer as an adult.

We know that stammering occurs in all parts of the world, across all cultures/religions/groups of people and is part of speaking for many different people. There is no link between stammering and intellectual ability and it has nothing to do with someone’s character e.g. being shy or nervous. Many influential people also have a stammer (like Joe Biden — President of the United States) and it is not something that should ever get in the way of any life goals or being who you want to be.



What causes Stammering?

Current research has not reached a complete answer yet on what causes stammering. Brain imaging studies have shown that children who stammer have slight physical differences in the areas of the brain that control the start/stop timing of their speech and that the connections in the brain can be overloaded when speaking. This makes speaking more difficult. This difference within the brain occurs at some point during early childhood development and is linked to genetics (the DNA that the child is born with.) We know that 60% of people who stammer also have a family member who stammers and that boys are also more likely to stammer than girls. There might also be other factors that Scientists and SLT's have not researched yet.



How people respond to the person who stammers either verbally or by their actions/body language can affect how that person feels and whether they have confidence to speak in front of others. The more accepting people are that stammering is not something to be fixed, the more likely the person who stammers will feel good about themselves and their speech.

The Adolescent Brain

During the teenage years, there are significant changes in the brain, particularly in the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is involved in decision making, planning and inhibiting inappropriate behaviour, so stopping yourself saying something rude or doing something stupid. It's also involved in social interaction, understanding other people and self-awareness.

During adolescence, the prefrontal cortex eliminates unwanted synapses (the connections between brain cells), where synapses that are being used are strengthened and synapses that aren't being used are pruned away. Therefore, this is a period of life where the brain is particularly adaptable, a fantastic opportunity for learning and creativity.

There is also development of part of the brain called the limbic system, which is involved in emotion and reward processing, and it gives you the rewarding feeling of doing fun things including risk taking. This region has been found to be hypersensitive to the rewarding feeling of risk taking in adolescence compared to adults.

So you may be feeling a drive to become independent from your Parents, an increased desire to take risks and impress your friends. You may also be feeling more self-consciousness and aware of the difference between yourself and your peers. All of these feelings are perfectly normal and reflect changes in your brain.

Please see [Sarah-Jayne Blakemore: The mysterious workings of the adolescent brain | TED Talk](#)

What is the impact of stammering?

Some young people who stammer may develop negative thoughts or feelings about their talking or themselves due to their experiences of stammering, and research shows us that as a child, people are aware of their stammer or differences in their talking as early as 3 years old.

It is quite common to feel anxious about speaking situations or stammering and a lot of young people who stammer experience this. It's not possible to completely stop feeling anxious as our brains have evolved in such a way to feel anxious so that we are alert.

Please see the 'Happiness Trap: the evolution of the human mind' on Youtube.

However, we do know that what we *think* can influence how we *feel* and if we are able to recognise when we are having negative thoughts, we can change the words we tell ourselves into positive thoughts.

For example, if it is raining



And we think "oh no, I hate the rain, now I can't play football."

We feel sad, annoyed or depressed.

But if we think "great, I can stay in and listen to music."

We feel happy, content or relieved.




So we can recognise negative thoughts and change the language, like "I can't do it" or "I'm not good at this" into positive thoughts, such as "I will have a go" or "It's okay if I'm not good at this I am still learning." This will then change the way we feel into a positive emotion resulting in a positive action and feeling better about situations.

Other ideas to reduce the impact of stammering...

- ⇒ Try to think positively about yourself, remember your stammer is only a part of you, it is something you do, it is not who you are.
- ⇒ Focus on your aspirations; what is important to you? what do you want to get out of life? Try to work towards these and don't let your stammer hold you back!
- ⇒ Try training your brain to notice things that are going well. Every time you think something negative, finish with 'but' and think of something you are happy about. Noticing the good stuff and congratulating yourself, especially when you do something that is out of your comfort zone, can help grow your confidence.
- ⇒ Practice being kinder to yourself. Notice when you are feeling down. Think about how you would talk to your friends if they had a problem and do the same to yourself.

How can I help myself?

- ⇒ Remember it's okay to stammer and a lot of famous people stammer too. What you say and what you do is far more important than the fact that your words get stuck.
 - ⇒ Remember your stammer is not caused by anything you have done. Some days your stammer might not be noticeable and other days you might stammer more. An increase in stammering might be linked to tiredness, stress, illness, speaking on the phone, speaking to someone in authority or in front of a group. And sometimes there is no reason to explain the variability.
 - ⇒ So it is normal for your stammer to change day to day. On the days when it does increase, be kind to yourself. Try to reframe your thinking and instead of saying "I'm having a bad day", say "I'm stammering more/less today."
 - ⇒ Meet other young people who stammer. You can get a lot of support from meeting another person who understands your experiences. You can look online at www.stamma.org/connect or there is a closed group on Facebook: The British Stammering Association Support Group.
 - ⇒ Find out about other people who stammer. For example, you can go to: www.actionforstammeringchildren.org click on projects > stambassador. There are videos of people talking about their lives and careers. You can see how others followed their dreams and achieved their goals.
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- ⇒ Think about how you are speaking. Try to slow down! You might want to speak quickly to get the stammer over with but our brains need time to think about what's next. Also, it might feel like pushing out the word helps, but it actually makes the word more tense and stuck. Instead try to relax, you can practise relaxing with Mindfulness techniques.
 - ⇒ Sometimes you might choose a different word. This might seem like a good idea but it means that you don't quite say what you want to say. Practise saying what you want to say, even if you do stammer. The more you practise the easier this will be! This will help you keep in charge of who you are rather than letting your stammer control you.
 - ⇒ Make sure you wait for your turn to speak and don't interrupt others. Interrupting someone might make you stammer more as you rush to speak.
 - ⇒ Practise your techniques you learn in therapy, practise will make it easier to use them naturally. It is up to you to use them in conversation if you find they help you to make talking easier.

What can the people around me do to help?

As a teenager you go through a lot of changes like moving from Primary to Secondary school. Whilst meeting new people, making new friends and starting new subjects in unfamiliar surroundings, can be exciting it can also be worrying and stressful. There is also an increased pressure of school work and exams, changes in the way you and think, and other things become more important such as the way you look, what you wear and the way you talk.

At school and home, encourage your Parents and Teachers to support you. As you are the expert in your stammer! Tell people how they can help you e.g. making sure they wait for you to finish what you are saying, not interrupting you etc. Or direct them to our website.

Letting other people, like your friends know that you have a stammer and talking about it might also help you feel better about it. If you teach other people about stammering and if your friends know what stammering is, they are less likely to be unkind and more likely to stand up for you and encourage you to be confident.

When should I ask for help?

You can seek support for your stammer at any time, and whenever feels ready for you. It may be that talking to your Parents and School is enough support or it may be that you want to see a Speech and Language Therapist. This may be because you wish to gain more control over your fluency, you want to build your resilience and/or confidence in communicating.



Initially you will receive an assessment by a Speech and Language Therapist and then therapy if this is appropriate for you. The therapy may be in a group with other teenagers who stammer, or one-to-one with you and the Speech and Language Therapist and/or Parents/Carers.

The Speech and Language Therapist will be there to guide you through therapy but you will be the one who needs to be motivated to practise or challenge yourself through new situations. There is also an emphasis placed on accepting your stammer as the stammering community report that this is hugely important to help with changes to fluency and attitude.

Although there is currently no "cure" for stammering, with support of therapy over time, children and young people become more able to manage the impact stammering has on their lives and may achieve more fluent speech.

Stammering Pride

There is a current change in the stammering community of **challenging** why a person needs to be fluent and why a stammer needs **fixing**.

This view shows how society is disabling rather than the stammer itself. So society puts in place barriers, due to perceptions around stammering (e.g. stereotypes on television), how things are organised (e.g. time limited and rushed speaking situations or interviews), and people not understanding stammering (e.g. stammering being thought of as a joke, or that people who stammer are nervous or stupid).

So thinking about stammering in this view, recognises that people who stammer do experience these things and it is actually society which needs changing rather than the person who stammers can help us think about stammering in a different way, as a **natural variation** in the person's speech like a different accent, and their **unique voice**.

How can I find out more about Stammering?

The following websites have support and advice for parents and teenagers who stammer:

⇒ Stamma.org

On Stamma > get support > therapy and courses > options for young people (13-17) provides details of different therapy options for teenagers, for example The Starfish Project and Talking Out.

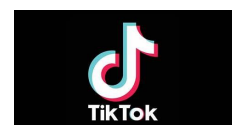
⇒ Michaelpalincentreforstammering.org

⇒ Actionforstammeringchildren.org

⇒ There is also www.youngminds.org.uk for support with mental health

You can check out Abed Ahmed on BBC Three Amazing Humans: The Teacher helping young people find their voice. This is a short video from a Teacher at a Secondary School who stammers, and is supporting his pupils who stammer.

A TikToker called Georgia Scott who stammers, who is raising awareness of stammering and documenting her journey challenging herself to go through new situations.



There are also books you can read called 'Stuttering is cool' by Daniele Rossi and 'The boy who made everyone laugh' by Helen Rutter.