

Stammering

What is Stammering?

Stammering is a form of communication impairment, characterised by disruptions and stoppages in the fluency and timing of speech. It often starts in early childhood (usually from three and a half years onwards).

Approximately one percent of adults and four percent of children stammer and, although the frequency, severity and types of stammering behaviours will vary for each individual, common traits include the following:

- Repetition of sounds
- Getting blocked or stuck on certain words
- Prolongations of sound

What factors might impact upon a student's fluency of speech?

Various factors can impact on the fluency of speech, including:

- **Environmental/ situational factors**

Certain situations may impact on fluency of speech and increase anxiety levels for people who stammer. For example, some people might stammer more when they anticipate a specific response is required (such as saying their name, address or phone number) or when communicating with certain people. Sometimes stammering may be more pronounced in certain situations, such as when talking on the phone, at an interview or when discussing a topic in Tutorials or Seminars. It should be noted, however, that some people find stress actually increases fluency.

- **Linguistic factors**

According to the British Stammering Association, people tend to stammer most on words which carry information and when using complex words of several syllables. Stammering is often more pronounced at the start of sentences.

- **Physical factors**

Stammering may increase if people feel ill, stressed, tired, excited, or upset.

- **Psychological factors**

How people perceive themselves as communicators and how they interpret other's perceptions of their speech can impact on self confidence and anxiety levels and may lead to increased stammering. In comparison, people who stammer are often fluent when speaking in chorus, singing or whispering.

What Causes Stammering?

There is no known single cause of stammering, although recent research has highlighted differences in the brain activity of those who stammer and those who do not. There is also evidence to suggest genetic factors can influence stammering. Most experts agree that stammering is due to a combination of factors - physiological, neurological, psychological and environmental - but the precise ways that these factors interact is unknown and will vary from person to person.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosis of stammering is usually given by a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT). This can be gained via referral from a General Practitioner or by contacting a local SLT team directly. The Disability Advisory Service at the University can also be contacted if you would like to talk through your concerns (contact details available at the end of this guide).

The impact of stammering on University studies – common concerns

It is important to highlight that every student is different and the extent to which stammering might impact on a person's studies will be unique to them. However, some students may have anxieties regarding the potential impact of stammering in:

- Tutorials
- Seminars
- Presentations
- Lectures
- Admissions Interviews
- Viva Voce examinations (or other oral examinations)

However, there are various types of support which students can access to address any concerns or barriers to study.

What support is available?

The University has a legal duty to ensure students are not subject to discrimination as the result of a disability and students are encouraged to disclose a stammer at the earliest opportunity to ensure any relevant support can be implemented.

- **Discussion with a Disability Adviser**

Students are encouraged to contact the Disability Advisory Service at the earliest opportunity (contact details are included at the end). Your Disability Advisor would be happy to meet with you to discuss and ascertain the most appropriate support and can also inform you of the funding available for support and how this can be accessed.

Examples of support might include:

- **Equipment/ Software** – such as an electronic fluency device or speech easy software, amongst other things.
- **Extra time** – your Disability Advisor can liaise with the relevant College or Department to request extra time if

required, for example, in oral examinations, presentations or admissions interviews.

- **Alternative modes of assessment or presentation** – for some students it might be reasonable to adjust the format of assessments or presentations, for example, to include written elements.
- **Provision of a support worker** – if appropriate, to support with any spoken elements of study which could not be delivered in a different format or which the student would experience a disadvantage without support.

These are examples, however, there may be other forms of more appropriate support which can be discussed with your Disability Advisor.

Please note that medical evidence from a specialist (such as a Speech and Language Therapist), General Practitioner and/or College Doctor will be required in order to access support. The Disability Advisory Service can advise on how to obtain this information.

Funding

Information about the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and other funding for study support can be found at: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das/funding/>

Tips for speaking with someone who stammers

- Listen attentively and never try to fill in words or finish sentences for the person. This makes an assumption that you already know the point they are wishing to make and can make the person feel their opinion is not valued.
- Be patient, don't rush the person. Instead, give people time and your full attention. Maintain eye contact and a natural body language to reinforce that you are interested in what the person is saying.

- Never make comments such as ‘relax’ or ‘take a breath’. This advice is unhelpful, simplistic and demeaning.
- Be aware that people who stammer might have difficulty controlling their speech on the telephone. If you answer a call and hear nothing, don’t automatically hang up, be aware that a person who stammers might be trying to speak.
- In Interview situations, be prepared to offer extra time and do not equate hesitant speech with uncertainty.

Useful websites and sources:

British Stammering Association: <http://www.stammering.org/>

The National Stuttering Association: <http://www.nsastutter.org/>

International Stuttering Association: <http://www.isastutter.org/>

Stutter Talk: <http://stuttertalk.com/>

Contact information

Disability Advisory Service

University of Oxford

3, Worcester Street

OX1 2BX

Email: disability@admin.ox.ac.uk

Website: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das/>

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