

Case Report

A Stutterer's Search for Fluency: A Case Report

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Abstract

This case report is written for speech-language pathologists and other health services providers by a certified speech-language pathologist in order to provide others who provide services on behalf of those with fluency disorders with insights that may prove to be valuable as they develop their strategies for working with their patients. The article presents a chronology of events that lead from the early childhood to adulthood of a severe stutterer. In this article, the young stutterer works to analyze the reasons for his severe dysfluencies, and as he subsequently develops strategies to achieve fluency, he eventually reaches his goal of speaking fluently.

INTRODUCTION

When I was very young, I was called a “pretty boy” by those who saw me, so I suppose appearance can disguise disabilities somewhat. Among my recollections that I was doing something different was when I was six years of age and in the first grade. As I was walking the four blocks from my elementary school to our home, three tough boys from my school met me about half way. I did not know their names, but I knew they were tough by reputation. They were laughing and teasing me because I was a “stutterer”. “He talks funny!” they said as they knocked me down and walked away. The teasing was occurring with greater frequency, and I was angry at those who teased me, and angry at myself for obviously being so different. To reduce the teasing, and the tension that was increasing in our home, my parents moved from our home in town to my grandfather’s farm, a less stressful environment.

CASE PRESENTATION

Before and after that incident, my parents tried to offer their own brand of therapy to “cure” what they called “stammering”. “Slow down”, “think about what you are saying”, “sing your words”, were among my parent’s “cures”. Of course, none of those worked, and my dysfluencies became worse as my fears and my inability to say my name or answer the telephone without severe stuttering “blocks” continued and strengthened [1]. The stuttering blocks had become so severe that they prevented all vocalization from being emitted.

What kept me going, however, was the realization that I did not stutter when I talked to my dog Laddie. So, I talked frequently to him. I also did not stutter when I talked to the calves I was preparing for the 4-H Fair, or when I was feeding the cows each morning and evening on our farm. I was always fluent [2].

And, being quite musical vocally, I was also aware that I did

not stutter when I sang. I reasoned, then, that I perhaps did not *have* to stutter, that perhaps there was nothing organically wrong with me!

The Course of Action

So, with the knowledge that there were times when I did not stutter, I set about to “cure” myself from the stuttering that I considered to be a dark cloud that was with me wherever I went, and whenever I spoke.

My first course of action was to begin placing myself in situations that required talking, and to do that as many times as it took to begin to experience success. I reasoned, correctly or incorrectly, that if I was occasionally successful in speaking with greater fluency, then those successes might breed further successes.

They included:

High school plays: Perhaps due to my youth as a high school student, and perhaps with more youthful bravery than good sense, I had what I thought was a good rationale for auditioning for acting roles in plays. My rationale was that if a part in a play was offered to me and I accepted, one cannot walk off of the stage during a production since the other actors would be depending on me to say my lines, and say them correctly. I auditioned for every play I could during my years in high school. My Freshman year in high school, I was given the role of “Johnny Appleseed” in the musical by the same name. Since I could sing, and had a rather high tenor, near soprano pubescent voice, the role fit. Thankfully it was a non-speaking role. All I had to do was sing two solos, and I sang fluently. It was a great morale booster when I heard the applause from the audience [3].

Intro to public speaking 100: But, successes can have road blocks. On the first day of a required high school course that was entitled “Public Speaking 100”, the teacher asked each student to

introduce her or himself. As my turn became eminent, my face and larynx began to tighten in preparation. As I feared would happen, as I stood by my desk, I opened my mouth, and nothing came out! I uttered "Mah...mah...mah...mah....", trying desperately to say, "My name is ...". Students around me began to snicker quietly. I quickly sat back at my desk, not wanting to look at anyone.

Becoming a radio disk jockey: My Junior year in high school, I did something that I did not think I would ever have the courage to do. I drove to a local radio station after school one day. I nervously asked the secretary at the front desk if I could see the station manager. She consented, and from a script that I had written ahead of time to help me to speak as fluently as possible, I asked him if I could have 30 minutes every afternoon Monday through Friday for a rock and roll disk jockey show. He had apparently thought about it before, because he finally said "Yes, I think we might try that. We'll see how it goes. You will begin next Monday at 4:00 pm.

So I had three days to prepare! The show was eventually expanded to an hour, from 4:00 to 5:00 pm Monday through Friday as its popularity grew. For the first few weeks, I spoke and introduced songs by reading from a script that I wrote each day. Eventually, the script was placed aside, and I was fluent!

Intercollegiate Oratory: As I entered college, I continued to place myself in situations that required talking. During my senior year, among those "places" that required talking was intercollegiate oratory in which the competitors were to prepare and give twelve to fifteen minute orations from memory. The day of the state competition, I was to drive to one of the large universities in our state of Kansas, about 90 miles away from our farm. It was winter, and it was snowing. But, I drove there anyway. After arriving and walking through a grassy field of mud and slush, I finally arrived at the correct building. But, the lower one-third of the pants of the new blue suit and my new shoes were covered with mud. I hurried to the room where the competition was being held, and slowly opened the door. I walked without hesitation to the front of the speaker's room, faced the judges and the other orators and their coaches who were seated near them, and without forethought, began my 15 minute oration from memory. I was so concerned about being late, and the appearance of my shoes and the slacks, I did not have time to build any level of anxiety. If there were dysfluencies, I tried to use them as pauses for purposes of emphasis.

At the conclusion of my oration, I simply thanked the judges, walked from the room, and drove the 90 miles back to our farm in central Kansas [4]. I was embarrassed by what I thought had been a poor performance. At about 9:00 pm, the telephone rang and my mother answered. She said that my forensics coach wanted to speak with me. As I put the receiver to my ear, he spoke and was almost beside himself with excitement. He was informing me that I had won First Place in the Kansas State Intercollegiate Men's Oratory Competition, the first time it had happened to anyone at our small college! It was difficult for me to believe what had just happened, that I was the best orator of the best from the colleges and universities in my state! It was a grand achievement in the life of a stutterer [5].

CONCLUSION

At that point, my stuttering extinguished to the degree that I was essentially fluent most of the time, and I have been since that time. Everything seemed to boil down to the fact that my original plan was the best one. **Success does breed success!** That has been and continues to be my premise. At this time in my adult life, I am still a stutterer, but I am able to control it to the point that it is unnoticeable. Today, this former stutterer is a sought-after public speaker on, "The Art of Communication in Professional Practice", quite a turnabout from his many prior years of embarrassment as a severe stutterer.

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