



# Understanding Stammering

A guide for employers

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## 1. Introduction – why this guide?

*“Having a stammer makes me choose my words carefully, to be more considerate and compassionate in how I communicate.....”*

People generally think they know what stammering is because they recognise it when they hear it. However stammering can be overt, covert or a mixture of both. This means that it isn't always obvious to other people.

Whether an individual's stammer is obvious to other people or not, there is likely to be a great deal going on “beneath the surface” of which others may be entirely unaware.

Along with many other conditions which fluctuate and which may not always be visible, stammering can have a significant impact on people's lives at work. Misconceptions, stigma and sometimes prejudice, discrimination and bullying mean it takes a good deal of courage to talk openly about stammering.

Common work and recruitment processes – such as initial telephone interviews - present numerous barriers.

People (not necessarily consciously) sometimes make adverse judgements and assumptions about people who stammer and their ability to communicate and perform well, based purely on their degree of verbal fluency.

Stammering is a significant vocational handicap<sup>1</sup>. It has been found that many employers hold negative attitudes towards people who stammer<sup>2</sup> and this can impact on the likelihood of successful recruitment or promotion<sup>3</sup>. Recent research<sup>4</sup> has indicated that people who stammer face daily, casual discrimination at work, that the normal recruitment process with interviews militates against them, and that they often do not achieve their potential but 'settle' for menial jobs with little communication demands.

We therefore conservatively estimate that people who stammer are likely to be at least twice as likely to be unemployed (more so if someone has a severe and overt stammer). This simply means employers are missing out on talent. We know that stammering only affects fluency of speech, not intellectual capacity or intelligence. Research shows that

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<sup>1</sup> Hurst, M.A. & Cooper, E.B. (1983) Employer attitudes toward stuttering. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 8, 1–12

<sup>2</sup> Hurst, M.A. & Cooper, E.B. (1983a). Vocational rehabilitation counsellors' attitudes toward stuttering. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 8, 13–27

<sup>3</sup> Klein, J.F. & Hood, S.B. (2004). The impact of stuttering on employment opportunities and job performance. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 29, 4, 255-273

<sup>4</sup> Butler, C. (2014) Wanted: straight talkers – stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment & Society*, 28, 5, 718-734

people who stammer often have strengths and qualities that employers rate highly, such as resilience, empathy, listening skills and creativity.<sup>5</sup>

People tend to shy away from talking about stammering. But this “conspiracy of silence” is beginning to change. Increasingly, people who stammer are speaking out and challenging the many misconceptions others have. They often demonstrate their strengths by doing so, including their ability to communicate with great conviction. They are also leading the way in their own places of work and through the British Stammering Association’s Employers Stammering Network (ESN) – with whom this guide has been written - see sources of support section for more information.

This guide aims to help employers and colleagues understand more about stammering and to put simple good policy and practice measures in place that are beneficial for everyone. It all starts with having conversations about stammering between people who stammer and people who don’t. Those conversations are less awkward to open up if people know more about stammering in the first place.

## 2. What causes stammering?

Research shows that stammering is at root a neurological condition. Studies have shown differences in the anatomy and functioning of the brain of those who stammer compared with other people.

About 2 out of 3 adults who stammer have another family member who stammers<sup>6</sup>. Stammering usually begins in childhood, at 2-3 years, affecting up to 5% of young children<sup>7</sup>; when it continues over a period of years it is likely to persist in adulthood<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Stammering can be seen as something that can impart strengths, such as empathy and compassion for others, personal growth and strength of character and working to compensate through higher resilience or greater creativity (Hughes, S., and Strugalla, E. (2013). Recognizing Positive Aspects of Stuttering: A Survey of the General Public. Poster presented at Stuttering Attitudes Research Symposium (Morgantown 2013)). Butler (Butler, C. (2014) Wanted: straight talkers – stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment & Society*, 28, 5, 718-734) also identifies strengths such as “listening intelligence” and this ties in with Brocklehurst’s (Brocklehurst, P (2014). The Hidden Strengths of People who Stutter. [www.stammeringresearch.org](http://www.stammeringresearch.org)) findings that “Respondents identified a variety of strengths associated with their stammering and a number of ways in which their stammering had a positive impact on others.”

<sup>6</sup> Poulos & Webster, Family history as a basis for subgrouping people who stutter. *J Speech Hear Res.* 1991 Feb;34(1):5-10.

<sup>7</sup> Yairi & Ambrose, Early Childhood Stuttering I: Persistency and Recovery Rates. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 42, 1097-1112

<sup>8</sup> Yairi, Ambrose, Paden & Throneburg, Predictive factors of persistence and recovery: pathways of childhood stuttering, *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 29, 51-77 1996

Some adults acquire a stammer later in life, for example as a result of strokes, side effects of drug use or drug treatments or severe head injury. This is far less common than developmental stammering

As an issue that affects communication, stammering can have a deep and lasting psychological impact – and this, in turn, can make stammering more pronounced.

### 3. What is stammering – effect on speech

People who stammer know what they want to say but have difficulty producing speech sounds. This goes beyond the hesitation or repetition everyone experiences sometimes when speaking.

Stammering may involve repeating or prolonging sounds or words, getting stuck without any sound, adding extra sounds or words and losing eye contact.

Stammering varies tremendously from person to person in manner, frequency and severity and is unpredictable. Individuals who stammer may be fluent one minute and struggling to speak the next.

Environmental, linguistic, physical and psychological factors can affect this at any moment.

*"I live in this weird parallel universe where saying good morning can sometimes be harder than giving a 20-minute talk to an audience of 100."*

### 4. How different factors affect people who stammer at work

**Environmental factors:** People who stammer may become more dysfluent when:

- Increased demands are made of them in speaking situations
- They have high expectations of themselves in certain situations and with certain people (e.g. at an interview, to someone in authority)
- A specific response is needed, such as saying one's name or having to use a particular form of words (e.g. when answering the phone).

On the other hand, in some people this stress actually increases fluency.

**Linguistic factors:** people who stammer often do so on the words that carry the most important meaning in a sentence and when using complex words of several syllables. They tend to stammer more at the start of sentences. This matters in work meetings, as people who stammer can find themselves unable to make a valuable contribution because others haven't noticed that they wanted to start speaking. How seating is organised can make communication easier for everyone.

**Physical factors:** Sometimes it is more difficult for people who stammer to speak fluently if they are, for example, feeling ill, stressed, tired, excited, or upset. So, with environmental and physical factors combined, it is very likely that someone may stammer more at an interview than they might do later on a day-to-day basis in a particular job.

**Psychological factors:** People who stammer may become more dysfluent depending on: their feelings about their speech; their perceptions of themselves as effective communicators; and others' reactions to their stammering.

## 5. Understanding the hidden aspects of stammering

Despite persistent misconceptions in society to the contrary, people who stammer are just as intelligent and intrinsically no more anxious or nervous than people who don't.

However, people's beliefs and their responses when listening to someone stammer can make people who stammer feel understandably anxious about speaking and how they will be perceived. Those responses may be conscious or unconscious:

*"Sometimes it feels like people are 'switching off' when I talk"*

Whether people stammer obviously or not, fear and anticipation of stammering and of people's negative reactions can cause strong feelings such as frustration, anger, hurt, sadness, embarrassment and shame.

Many people who stammer monitor internally what they are about to say on a constant basis. They may avoid sounds and situations or switch words that are easier for them to say, or try to talk around a word, using a slightly roundabout turn of phrase. They may also simply say nothing even when they have something valuable to contribute.

*"Because I stammer, my vocabulary is quite extensive, as I have to think to myself which words describe a situation, how many different words for that situation do I know, how difficult to say is each word, what sound does each word have and how will that word sound after the preceding word – all in the blink of an eye during a conversation."*

This consumes a lot of energy and can be exhausting, although the effort involved may not be apparent to others.

*"Many of my colleagues have no idea how much time I take up keeping my fluency and hiding my stammer. Sometimes I just keep quiet in meetings because I'm just too tired to talk"*

Switching words is not possible in some situations where people need to say something specific, such as their own name:

*"Having to say my name and what I do in front of everyone always throws me. I can feel my heart beating faster as it gets to my turn, and that dread feeling that I'm not going to be able to say my first name and surname fluently."*

People may go to such lengths to hide their stammer that others are completely unaware of it and can't hear it at all, even though underlying feelings that accompany it are still there and can really hold people back:

*"When people find out I have a stammer they say I hide it well or had no idea; although to me it is blatantly obvious in nearly every sentence."*

The stigma that often accompanies stammering can further undermine self-esteem and self-confidence, increase feelings of isolation and adversely affect interactions.

People who stammer may not only find it difficult to say their own name. They may have difficulty in any situation where a specific word or form of words is needed. This extends beyond the workplace to, for example, ordering food and drinks.

Perhaps the person you thought was unreliable, who often misses introductions at the start of meetings or who seemed anti-social because they never go out with colleagues, is in fact hiding the fact that they stammer (or another hidden condition that may affect verbal communication). It is often difficult for others to understand or interpret correctly what is going on when a stammer is hidden in this way.

Sometimes very simple measures can create the right conditions for an open conversation to take place:

*"About six months ago I was part of a team that invited the British Stammering Association to one of our team meetings. An important point was that the line manager had done this with the permission of the person who was joining the team and who had a stammer. I found the session really empowering, giving me some practical tips to be more inclusive in the way we communicate or chair a meeting, for example. Not only did the session help bring the team together, the person who thought up the idea was helping us with knowledge about the subject area and by doing so making us a more productive team in the way we communicate with each other."*

The golden rule before organising any adjustment, or awareness event, is to speak to the person concerned first and give them the opportunity to say what their needs are. They are the ones best placed to do so.

It is also worth remembering that, while 1 in 100 adults stammer<sup>9</sup>, many more people in the workplace may be indirectly affected if they have a family member, friend or close colleague who stammers.

*"Interiorising the stammer, developing extensive strategies for maintaining the overt fluency, meant that I'm pretty sure that even my family were largely unaware of the problem that I knew I had. Living with this secret was a nightmare. The constant hiding and fear of being found out caused many problems."*

As people start to speak out, rather than hide, so the strengths of people who stammer become more apparent:

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<sup>9</sup> Andrews, G., & Harris, M. (1964). The syndrome of stuttering, Clinics in developmental medicine, No. 17. London: William Heineman Medical Books Ltd.

*“Up until recently I would have done everything to conceal that I stammer...But I’ve grown tired of it.... I want to have a voice. One where I’m not judged or laughed at because I stammer. One where it’s ok to be who I am with a stammer.....Having a stammer has wired my brain so I have to think about what I say and how I say it.....So it makes me consider the impact of my words. Even when I have to give bad or difficult news, I think about what I say and how I say it. To give the right message without damaging the relationship”. (See footnote<sup>10</sup>)*

## **6. Good practice for employers**

### **6.1 Types of job**

- People who stammer work very successfully in all kinds of jobs e.g. as actors and stand-up comedians, air traffic controllers, teachers, doctors and in customer services and communications.
- Do not assume what might be an appropriate role for someone who stammers.
- The experience of stammering may give people strengths that are very valuable to an employer in a wide range of roles e.g. resilience and creativity.

### **6.2 Communication skills and describing job roles**

- Good communication is not the same as speech fluency.
- People who stammer can have excellent engagement and communication skills: e.g. showing empathy, positive body language, reading situations accurately, adapting tone and volume of voice appropriately, listening actively and writing well.
- Many job adverts simply ask for ‘excellent communication skills’. This blanket requirement may deter great candidates, including people who stammer, from applying in the first place, as they assume this refers to speech fluency.
- Make sure you define the specific communication requirements of a role in any job specification.

### **6.3 Job interviews**

- People who stammer may find job interviews a more nerve-wracking prospect than they are for people in general, which in turn can make stammering more severe.
- Highly capable people who stammer may find themselves unable to perform at their best at interviews. Drawing on the expertise of HR and organisations like the British Stammering Association can be helpful in agreeing a more informal arrangement.

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<sup>10</sup> The iceberg that no one sees. May Breisacher, senior consultant at EY Financial Services and a member of the Employers Stammering Network.

[https://fscareers.ey.com/top-stories/uk\\_cbs\\_may-breisacher/](https://fscareers.ey.com/top-stories/uk_cbs_may-breisacher/)

- Having longer to speak, offering role play scenarios or giving greater consideration to written as well as spoken information can all enable an employer to see candidates' capabilities and strengths.
- If you are interviewing someone who stammers, think through how to overcome possible barriers including before people reach the interview room – e.g. can you avoid entry-phones, are reception staff prepared and trained?
- Telephone interviews can seriously discriminate against people who stammer.
- Have you considered offering an informal individual chat as an opportunity to all candidates before the interview itself? This can be helpful for all.

#### **6.4 Creating and reviewing policies**

- People who stammer tell us that what affects them most at work is a positive attitude from line managers and recruiters.
- It is a good idea to create/review your policies for job applicants with communication needs (ask the British Stammering Association if you want help with this).
- Ask yourself whether your policies and reality match up e.g. if you offer face-to-face rather than telephone interviews, are you sure all the interviewers are able to be in the same place to do that?

#### **6.5 Using the telephone**

- Many people who stammer lack confidence and experience anxiety when using the telephone, especially in front of others, and find it easier if they can prepare.
- You can help by being patient and not hanging up if you hear a few moments' silence.
- It may be possible to offer the option to make or take calls away from others or to pass telephone work to colleagues if someone is having a difficult day with stammering (in return they can relieve colleagues of other tasks).
- If someone is open about their stammer, it may help them to include a message in their email footer indicating that they stammer and extra time may be required if you call them. But ask them what might help rather than make assumptions.
- Try to avoid negative impressions of a person based on the way they sound on the phone.
- If someone who stammers is offered an initial telephone interview, offering a face-to-face interview instead will very often be a reasonable adjustment to make.

#### **6.6 Meetings, group interaction and presentations**

- People who stammer often struggle in situations where a specific response is needed – e.g. saying one's name, address or phone number or having to say particular words.
- This can be particularly difficult in introductions in group meetings. People who stammer will often try to avoid this for fear of stammering on their own name.

- It might help for the person who stammers to go first or be introduced by someone else or each person in the meeting might be invited to talk to and then introduce the person next to them rather than themselves.
- If you chair a group session, ask the person who stammers beforehand what would be helpful, rather than make assumptions.
- Be aware of anyone who may give you a non-verbal cue that they would like to speak. This means thinking carefully about the best layout so everyone can see everyone else.
- If someone often arrives a bit late at meetings where introductions are involved, consider whether this could be because they stammer.
- Talk to your employee and encourage training and work opportunities in areas in which they may have excellent skills, but may have previously avoided, such as giving presentations. When the person feels confident about being open, stammering can become much less of a concern.
- Encourage the person to develop their confidence and take on challenges which will benefit their speech, without pushing the person too far. Don't make assumptions but ask the person about what they want to contribute to a job and about any concerns they may have.

### 6.7 In conversation with a person who stammers

- **Be patient.** Most people who stammer strongly prefer to speak for themselves. You may be tempted to finish a person's sentences or 'fill in' words but this can be very disempowering and unhelpful, especially if the listener guesses wrongly.
- **Remember that it is OK to stammer.** Don't give advice such as: 'slow down', 'take a breath', or 'relax'. Maintain natural eye contact, listen, and wait patiently until the person has finished speaking.
- **Be a good listener.** Let the speaker know, by what you say and do, that you are listening. Try to actively convey a relaxed and accepting attitude as any obvious discomfort that you show will only increase the discomfort of the person who stammers. Focus on what the person is saying, not how they are saying it.
- **Remember that stammering varies.** People who stammer can have most difficulty when starting to speak and less difficulty once underway. Don't be surprised if a person stammers more in some situations than others. The telephone, speaking in front of a queue or in earshot of others can cause increased difficulties.
- **Remember that stammering is not caused by nervousness.** While a speaker may appear nervous, keep in mind that the nervousness is a result of stammering rather than a cause of it.
- **If you are not sure how to respond, ask the speaker - but always do this sensitively and in a way that leaves the speaker in control.** This might involve asking an open question such as, "Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?" Or, if someone is stammering severely, closed questions such as "Would

you prefer to go somewhere quieter?" or "Would you prefer to write this down?" Please note that the tone of these questions is very important.

- **In conclusion...**

Try to empower the person by offering a choice rather than imposing your solution. Always err on the side of being patient and give the person the opportunity to speak for themselves.

### **6.8 Tone and sensitivity**

- Stammering can be a sensitive topic. Never force the issue if someone is unwilling to talk about it. On the other hand, many may welcome your respectful interest.
- Don't equate hesitant speech with uncertainty, confusion or lack of intelligence.
- A stammer may be unnoticeable, so if someone seems to lack confidence when speaking consider whether there may be a communication issue. For example, pausing or over-using phrases like "you know" or "sort of" or "actually" may be strategies to avoid stammering.

### **6.9 Unconscious bias**

- When talking with someone who stammers it's common to experience an unconscious physical stress response.
- Unconscious bias affects us all. It is often at play during recruitment and at work and can adversely affect our response to people who stammer. It is important to recognise this.
- Some people can/do hide their stammer very effectively. Try to avoid misreading someone trying to conceal a stammer as something else e.g. that someone can't make eye contact or isn't succinct.
- People who stammer may feel more negative about the effect of their speech on others than is actually the case. Helping a person to realise this may open up a positive dialogue on stammering.

### **6.10 Legal**

- Stammering will often meet the legal definition of 'disability' in the Equality Act.
- However some people who stammer do not consider themselves disabled, so if offering adjustments at interview you may want to mention this without reference to stammering as a disability.
- Offering adjustments may in itself make a person who stammers feel more relaxed; so more time offered may not ultimately mean more time is actually needed.
- Further information on stammering and the law: [www.stammeringlaw.org.uk](http://www.stammeringlaw.org.uk)

## **7. Case study – Senior Consultant at EY**

"I was a new graduate, joining EY straight from University and I had never been in the business world. It is a daunting experience for anybody, let alone for me, having a speech

impairment. I remember that I was so determined not to show any 'weakness' when introducing myself but I persevered and took ten seconds to say my name - it felt like an age. I thought I would always be held back by my stammer from then on and it was a depressing thought because of how much I wanted to succeed.

I met Iain Wilkie, who has a stammer, during my internship. When I came back to EY as a graduate I was delighted to know he was still at the firm. Having a Senior Partner in the business demonstrating that stammering isn't an issue was an incredible experience. In a difficult conversation, he suggested to me to be open about it so that I can give people a chance to support me when needed. Iain trusted the members of his firm and their characters so he wanted to give them an opportunity to change my perceptions of how people would react to my stammer. Having never been open about my stammer with new people, it was a revelation. The negative thoughts in my head were gone as soon as I told my team managers and they were extremely supportive.

I now tell all my clients that I have a speech impairment and it is great to see the positive reactions I get. My confidence has shot up as a result and I am now happy to admit, I have a stammer but it doesn't hold me back."

## 8. More case studies

**The Civil Service Stammering Network** has a website with insightful blogs from individuals about their experiences: <https://ukcssn.com/>

**MyPlus Students' Club** includes stories from people who stammer from a range of work settings and career stages: <https://myplusstudentsclub.com/>

## 9. Sources of support

The **British Stammering Association** (BSA) is the national UK charity supporting adults and children who stammer.

The BSA website has lots of useful resources: [www.stammering.org](http://www.stammering.org)

- Join BSA (anyone can join whether they stammer or not if they support BSA's vision and aims). Membership is free: [www.stammering.org/join](http://www.stammering.org/join)
- Join BSA's closed Facebook page for people who stammer: [www.facebook.com/groups/stammeringbsa](https://www.facebook.com/groups/stammeringbsa)
- Follow BSA on Twitter <https://twitter.com/stammer>

The **Employers Stammering Network** (ESN) is a BSA initiative. It aims to create a work culture in all employers where people who stammer can achieve their full career potential. Existing members employ over 1.5 million people. [www.stammering.org/esn](http://www.stammering.org/esn)

We support employers and employees in raising awareness of stammering and work with others to influence policy and practice.

ESN runs tailor-made half-day workshops on Stammering Awareness for Managers aimed at HR, line managers or other colleagues of staff who stammer.

Some ESN members already have internal networks of staff who stammer, for example:

The Defence Stammering Network

The Civil Service Stammering Network <https://ukcssn.com/>

EY Stammering Network.

At the time of writing, our first regional network has just come into being in Bristol, serving the southwest [https://twitter.com/ESN\\_Bristol](https://twitter.com/ESN_Bristol)

## 10. Appendices

### Appendix 1 - Facts and figures

- About 70 million or 1% of the world's adult population stammers.
- This 1% is constant across all countries and cultures and in all social groups
- Communication impairments affect over 4.5 million people in the UK
- About 500,000 of these are adults who stammer, about 380,000 of working age
- About 60% of adults who stammer have another family member who stammers.
- Stammering usually begins in childhood, at 2-3 years, affecting up to 5% of young children; when it continues over a period of years it is likely to persist in adulthood
- Some adults acquire a stammer as a result of e.g. strokes, drug treatments or severe head injury. This is far less common than developmental stammering
- About 4 times more men stammer than women
- Stammering is the same as stuttering. Stammering is more often used in the UK, Ireland and India. In North America and Australia stuttering is the word used

### Appendix 2 - Putting the record straight on stammering

- Research tells us people who stammer have different brain anatomy and function
- This affects speech fluency but not intelligence, speed of thought, or ability
- People who stammer are intrinsically no more or less anxious than anyone else
- Stammering is not an illness and there is no magic "cure" although many young children who stammer do regain fluency
- When whispering, speaking in unison or singing, people who stammer are generally fluent. This does not mean you should ask someone who stammers to whisper or sing what they want to say!
- In adulthood, therapy can improve fluency, confidence and communication
- Generally it is helpful for people to be more open about their stammer
- This may lead to their stammer being more rather than less apparent, because they are now saying what they want to say and not holding back.

## 11. Keep in touch!

- Follow ESN on Twitter <https://twitter.com/stammering4work>
- Sign up for the ESN e-newsletter [stmr.co/ESNList](http://stmr.co/ESNList)

- Visit our website: [www.stammering.org/employment](http://www.stammering.org/employment)
- Join the Employers Stammering Network

We'd love to hear from you.

For more information or any questions please contact:

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