



## FIND THE RIGHT WORDS

### **Guidelines for the use of language around and portrayal of stammering.**

For many years, stammering has been used to portray people with character flaws, physical inadequacies and for comic purposes. This stereotyping has real-world consequences for people who stammer. Incorrectly perceived as weaker and less able than fluent people, we're often met with negative and inappropriate responses to our speech.

People who stammer can be memorable, compassionate and thoughtful, often brilliant with words and fantastic communicators. What would the world be like without Lewis Carroll, Margaret Drabble or Somerset Maugham? Or Samuel L. Jackson, Carly Simon and Emily Blunt? All people who stammer.

### **TIME FOR CHANGE**

Words matter. They shape how we see ourselves, how others see us and the world we live in. We want an end to the use of the words 'stammering' and 'stuttering' as shorthand for failure or poor performance. The language used around stammering should be neutral. That's why we've created these Guidelines For Talking About Stammering, which you can read below.

Stammering is simply the way some of us talk. We aren't nervous or inadequate. Our voices should be heard and valued. We want the media to ensure that stammering voices are heard on TV, radio and film. Not in the context of how someone has 'overcome' a stammer, was defeated by it, or how they cured it. But as part of the rich pattern of accents and voices that make up all content.

### **BE THE CHANGEMAKER**

You can help educate those around you. Put the guidelines on the noticeboard at work, college or uni. Email them to your local radio station. If the guidelines are crossed, let people know why they exist. If you work in the media and are planning a programme around stammering, please share these guidelines with those involved.

Join us and create a world where stammering is accepted as a difference. So that all those who follow can grow up and live in a world where they are treated with respect and dignity.

# TALKING ABOUT STAMMERING

Stammering has often been used in TV and film to indicate a character flaw or for comic effect. This leaves those who stammer being seen as less able than fluent people. They face negative responses to the way they speak. This is damaging and wrong. Stammering is simply how some people talk. It is their natural, authentic voice.

## FACTS

- A stammer isn't a weakness or a defect. It is just a stammer.
- People don't stammer because they're not breathing properly or doing anything wrong. Stammering is neurological.
- People don't stammer because they're nervous. If they do appear nervous, it's likely because they've repeatedly been laughed at for how they talk.
- People can learn strategies to manage and perhaps reduce the stammer, but there is no cure.
- Stammering doesn't tell you anything about how competent or intelligent someone is.
- Stammering isn't always obvious. Many people might avoid words or situations if they anticipate negative responses to their stammer.
- Some of our best orators, actors, writers and poets stammer. You can be disfluent and articulate.
- People don't 'grow out of' their stammer. Some stammer throughout their lives, others don't.
- Some might work on increasing their fluency or easing the struggle to speak. Others are happy to stammer openly. Some might do both depending on the situation.

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- Instead of saying people 'suffer from' or are 'afflicted by' stammering, say 'they stammer'.
- Instead of describing someone's stammer as 'terrible' or 'debilitating', say 'they stammer'.
- Avoid saying that people 'defeat' or 'overcome' their stammer. It can't be cured.
- Find a word other than 'stuttering' to describe something that is stalling or failing.
- Avoid describing someone's stammer as 'really bad today'. They are just talking.

## HELPFUL RESPONSES

If you're interviewing, casting, talking or working with someone who stammers:

- Let them finish their sentences without interruption.
- Give the occasional nod to show them you're listening.
- Maintain natural eye contact and try not to look uncomfortable.
- Don't comment on how 'good' or 'bad' their speech is. Or compliment or congratulate them on their fluency. It reinforces the notion that stammering is wrong.
- Don't make a joke when someone stammers. Don't pity them either.

## The best thing you can do is welcome and embrace stammered voices.

STAMMA's guidelines, endorsed by the Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists, are informed by over 40 years of representing those who stammer. They are a living guide and are updated as need dictates. We're always happy to talk about them. Email us at [hello@stamma.org](mailto:hello@stamma.org). STAMMA is a registered charity nos 1089967/SC038866.