

# INTERVIEWING PEOPLE WHO STAMMER

# STAMMA



A briefing guide for  
journalists & the media



# INTERVIEWING PEOPLE WHO STAMMER

Radio and TV both rely on voice communication and carefully controlled timings. We understand you might feel anxious about interviewing someone who stammers. What kinds of things should you say or not say? When, if and how to interrupt? What are acceptable questions? We've prepared this briefing to help you through.

## **What to expect / What you should know**

If someone has flagged that they stammer, there are a few things worth knowing.

- People who stammer might repeat, elongate, or get stuck on sounds or words when they speak. You might see signs of physical effort as they work to push out a word. Or they might look away from you when they are concentrating on speaking.
- People who stammer will commonly stammer or get stuck on words which they can't change, such as name, address, date of birth.
- It's normal for stammering to fluctuate widely and be different person-to-person.
- Some people try to hide their stammer. It might not be obvious to you, but they can be working hard to maintain that impression of fluency, perhaps swapping words to find a different way to say the same thing. Don't assume that their fluency is easy.
- They might have interesting points to make but say much less if they're concerned about how others will react when they stammer. Eye contact and nodding to show you're listening, can help them feel comfortable in saying more.

Stammering is just how some of us talk. We aren't nervous or inadequate. We just stammer. But we'd like our voices heard and valued.

# POINTS TO CONSIDER

## Ask the Interviewee

It's normal for stammering to fluctuate widely and be different from person-to-person. With that in mind, it's ok to ask the interviewee what happens when they stammer. For example, do they push through the stammer and say exactly what they want to say? Do they try to find a different way to say the same thing? Do they repeat a previous phrase as a run-up to a difficult word?

You might say, "I want to create a good environment for the interview, so tell me a bit about what happens when you stammer and how you work through those moments, and if there's anything you'd find helpful or unhelpful. That way, I can make sure I'm responding appropriately."

Doing this will mean you're much less likely to misinterpret moments of stammering as something else. It also helps to make things more comfortable for your interviewee.

## Formats & Audience Size

Some people might stammer more in particular interview formats. For example, many prefer in-person or video call conversations to telephone conversations. Some might find it easier to express themselves verbally in pre-recorded rather than live interviews. Some might feel comfortable with fewer people around. It varies. So, where there is flexibility with regards to format, discuss preferences with the interviewee.

## Time to Talk

Some people who stammer need more time to say what they want to say. So, you may need to allocate a little extra time for that interview.

## Introductions

It's common for people who stammer to find saying their names very challenging. If introductions are part of the interview, ask the person whether they'd like to introduce themselves or if they'd prefer somebody else to do it.

## Don't Jump in

Most people who stammer find it unhelpful if someone jumps in and says a word *for* them. Give the speaker space to finish their words and sentences.

## It's OK to Challenge

Just because you're not finishing off someone's words or sentences, doesn't mean you can't challenge them on the *content* of what they said. People who stammer aren't any more fragile than other interviewees. If they've said something controversial, questionable or incomplete, go ahead and challenge them!

## Don't Praise Fluency

Try not to congratulate the person if they speak fluently. This implies that stammered speech is wrong and unacceptable. Praising fluency might offend the person if they are proud of the way they speak.

It's the *content* of what is said that's important, not whether those words are stammered or fluent.

# INTERVIEWING SOMEONE ABOUT THEIR STAMMER

## Language

Fluency and stammering are not inherently good or bad. So just be aware that the language you use can very easily imply that stammered speech is 'less than' or is not ok when, in fact, it's simply the way some people talk.

- Avoid using judgemental language when describing someone's stammer. It's just how they talk. When describing them, say 'they stammer' rather than using phrasing like "they suffer from a stammer".
- If you're exploring someone's stammer, talk about when they stammer 'more' or 'less' rather than it being 'worse' or 'better'. Take the judgement out of the conversation. Avoid describing someone's stammer as 'really bad today'. They are just talking.
- Don't congratulate them on their fluency.

## Unhelpful Angles & Dead Ends

It can be tempting to provide a narrative about how someone has 'overcome' their stammer. Stories about 'overcoming' stammering suggests that if someone hasn't 'overcome it', they are failing.

There isn't a 'cure' for stammering. While it can reduce dramatically for some people and others can control their stammer, this is not the case for everyone. Avoid encouraging people to give their stories about curing their stammer – it reinforces the false impression that it is curable (if only they relax and breathe properly or work hard enough at speech control techniques). It also sends out the message that those who can't control their stammers are failures.

It is interesting that people who stammer don't stammer when they sing. But it isn't a helpful topic. They can't sing all day.

## Discussion Points

A less frequently discussed angle around stammering is around the barriers people face. For instance:

- In a 2025 survey, STAMMA found that 65% of recent calls made by people who stammer to a business or organisation went badly. They were hung up on, laughed at, or got stuck in voice recognition systems when they stammered.
- One mother explained that her daughter never spoke at school because she stammered. Teachers didn't see it as a problem, as she was a bright kid who got good grades. What they didn't realise was that she had no friends and would rather walk to school in the rain than get on a bus and ask for her stop.
- Lots of people who stammer have been blocked from following the career they're interested in because they were told, early on, that being a teacher, lawyer, or nurse, would not be possible.

- Insurance companies unaware of the fact that people commonly stammer on their own name, often flag them as being deceptive. We've heard many stories where someone who stammers has been perceived as lying and lost access to their bank account, or been refused medication when collecting their prescription from the pharmacy.
- Many organisations have flags in place for a range of differences or vulnerabilities. But there's rarely an opt-in flag for speech disabilities or differences, so the group remains largely 'unseen'. Consequently, people who stammer may give up on a phone call, or fail an interview or exam. They might not get that mortgage, claim that insurance or book that appointment - because they get hung up on or aren't believed. Or they're misjudged on their intelligence or personality.

## FACTS

- A stammer isn't a weakness or a defect. It's 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, although some people might stammer *more* when nervous.
- It's normal for stammering to fluctuate over time. People will stammer more at some times than others.
- Some people choose to learn strategies aiming to control their speech and to reduce the intensity of their moments of stammering. These strategies can be difficult to implement and maintain. They are useful for some people, but not all.
- Stammering doesn't tell you anything about the person's personality, competence or intelligence.
- Stammering isn't always obvious. Some people mask the stammering, but are likely to be doing a lot of work under the surface to maintain the impression of fluency.
- Some of our best orators, actors, writers and poets stammer. You can be disfluent and articulate. You can also be disfluent and a really interesting speaker to listen to.
- Stammering gradually resolves and disappears over time for some people. Others stammer throughout their lives.
- Some might work on increasing their fluency or easing the effort to speak. Others are happy to stammer openly. Some might vary between the two depending on the situation.

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