

WORKING WITH SOMEONE WHO STAMMERS

You can play an important part in creating an inclusive and supportive working environment for people who stammer. Even small things can make a real difference and help them perform at their best. Fluent speakers can find listening to someone stammer stressful and can make unconscious judgements, equating hesitant speech with uncertainty, confusion or lack of intelligence.

WHAT IS STAMMERING?

Stammering, or stuttering, is largely a neurological condition. Around 60% of adults who stammer have another family member who stammers. Stammering affects the flow of speech, where people know what they want to say but have difficulty producing speech sounds. This isn't the occasional hesitation or repetition everyone experiences. Everyone stammers differently, but commonly it will involve repeating or prolonging sounds or words, getting stuck without any sound, adding extra sounds or words and losing eye contact. Stammering varies from person to person in manner, frequency and severity and can be distressingly unpredictable. Individuals who stammer may be fluent one minute and struggling to speak the next.

Like other conditions which fluctuate and may not always be visible, stammering can have a significant impact on people's lives at work. Centuries of portraying people who stammer as comic, criminal or nervous have left us with a legacy where people too often feel ashamed of their stammer. Misconceptions, stigma and sometimes prejudice, discrimination and bullying mean it takes a good deal of courage to talk openly about stammering.

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

IN A NUTSHELL:

- Stammering affects up to 1.5 million people of working age in the UK

British Stammering Association
Reg Charity Nos 1089967/SC038866

S T A M M E R S

- 4 times more men stammer than women
- Stammering is the same as stuttering
- Stammering is primarily a neurological condition and not caused by stress or anxiety, although the act of stammering can make people stressed and uncomfortable
- People who stammer are found in every walk of life, and can be successful as CEOs, air traffic controllers, teachers, doctors, in the army, navy and air force, customer services and communications.
- In a recent BSA survey, 89% of respondents have felt frustrated by the way other people have reacted to their stammer (78% awkward, 65% anxious, 59% depressed)

BE A GREAT COLLEAGUE

Stammering can be a sensitive personal issue that some people may not want to discuss. You may also find it difficult to discuss something you know little about. But the best way to help an employee fulfil their potential in the workplace is to show them how you'll support them be at their best. Some ideas include:

- Show patience and active listening by focussing on what the person is saying not their stammer
- Don't finish a person's sentences or 'fill in' words. This can be disempowering and unhelpful.
- Advice. Don't go there. Don't tell the person to 'slow down', 'take a breath', or 'relax'.
- Maintain natural eye contact, listen, and wait until the person has finished speaking.
- Let the speaker know that you are listening. Relax. Focus on what the person is saying, not how they are saying it
- While a speaker may appear nervous, this is a result of stammering, not the cause of it.
- If you are not sure, ask "How can I make this easier?" or "Would you prefer to go somewhere quieter?"
- Stammering varies. People who stammer can have most difficulty when starting to speak and less difficulty once underway.
- If you begin group meetings by having colleagues introduce themselves, ask the person who stammers to go first or second. This will prevent anxiety building while they wait for their turn
- If it seems appropriate, ask the person about how best to respond when they stammer
- Offer to introduce them to colleagues and managers as it's very common for a person who stammers to have difficulty saying their own name or when providing personal details.
- See if there is a way you can make a period of increased stammering easier by offering to swap phone calls for written tasks. Speak to your colleague to see what they would value most.

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