

# EDITORIAL GUIDELINES AROUND STAMMERING

**Stammering or stuttering is a way of talking, a physical condition which makes it difficult to talk.**

The use of stammering in culture for comic purposes, or to indicate a character flaw or physical inadequacy, has resulted in negative and inappropriate responses to people who stammer.

Research shows that when people stumble in their speech, they are dismissed as 'weaker' and 'less able' than fluent individuals. This seeps into the treatment, portrayal and coverage of people who stammer, creating a demeaning and patronising environment.

Few people who stammer are visible in our culture and the narrative surrounding the condition is mainly about how people 'overcame' a stammer, were 'defeated' by it, or how they 'cured' it. Words shape how we see ourselves, how others see us, and the world that we live in.

**Let's change the conversation about stammering.  
Let's find the right words to create a world where people who stammer can live with dignity and respect.**

## Don't use negative words.

- People do not 'suffer from' and are not 'afflicted by' stammering. They stammer and live with it.
- A stammer is not a 'weakness' or 'a defect'. It is simply a stammer.
- A stammer is not 'terrible' or 'debilitating'. Moments of stammering might last longer for some.
- People don't 'defeat' or 'overcome' their stammer. They 'manage' it.

Don't use 'stammering' as a pejorative description. It reinforces the idea that it is bad, and something people shouldn't do. There are other words to describe a failing politician, project or football match.

## Unhelpful Assumptions

- That people who stammer want to sound fluent. Some don't, some do.
- That they should learn to breathe properly. Breathing techniques may help some people manage a stammer; they don't remove the condition.
- That there is no longer a struggle to speak if the stammer isn't obvious or occurs less often.
- That they can't communicate properly. Many who stammer are adept wordsmiths. Some of our best speakers, actors, writers and poets stammer; with an appreciation of words shaped by their stammer.
- That stammering is a negative trait. It isn't, it's how some people talk.
- That it is surprising they excel in their work. Stammering isn't a reflection of competence or intelligence.
- That people 'grow out of their stammer'. Some people continue to stammer throughout their lives, others don't.

## Unhelpful Responses

- Don't make a joke when someone stammers.
- Don't assume that they're nervous or need to take a breath.
- Don't pity someone who stammers. This may or may not capture how they feel about their stammer.
- Don't describe someone's stammer as "really bad today". It suggests that they're failing in some way when all they're doing is talking.
- Don't congratulate someone who stammers on their fluency. It reinforces the idea that they should strive not to stammer, and that stammering is bad. It isn't, it is how some people talk.

**The best thing to do for someone who stammers is to not mind that they stammer.**

*These guidelines were written by Stamma, the British Stammering Association (a registered charity numbers 1089967/SC038866) and informed by over 40 years of representing those who stammer. They are a living guide and will be updated as time and need dictate. The guidelines have been endorsed by the Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists. Last edited 09/10/20. Please email any queries to [mail@stamma.org](mailto:mail@stamma.org) or phone 0208 983 1003, find us at [stamma.org](http://stamma.org).*