

I Miss My Mochaccino

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Storied experience

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INTRODUCTION

I am a 22-year-old artist, a sister, daughter, and stutterer. I remember having speech-language therapy when I was in primary school, but I don't remember stuttering or being teased about it at that age – it was other things that people teased me about. It was only in my late teenage years that I became more self-conscious and stressed about stuttering and it has influenced many daily and long-term decisions. At this stage of my life, in the last few weeks of my art degree, I have been reflecting on my future and know that I need to accept this aspect of who I am to do well in my future career. This storied experience is part of self-reflection for this purpose, and it may let readers know about what it is like to live with a stutter.

BACKGROUND

Stuttering is a communication disorder which can include repetitions (re re repeating sounds), prolongations (being ssssstuck), or having gaps in speech (blocks, with no sound). Stuttering is also known as stammering, although the correct term is actually dysphemia. One per cent of people stutter, so that is 40,000 people in New Zealand. There is support for children, but very little assistance for adults. Famous stutterers include Lewis Carroll who was not allowed to enter the priesthood because of his stutter but instead wrote books such as *Alice in Wonderland*. Marilyn Monroe was reportedly a stutterer whose measured, breathy, speech may have been her way of managing her stutter. The recent movie *The King's Speech*, starring Colin Firth, used the story of King George VI to highlight the stress and effort a stutterer experiences. The movie also illustrated the difference between strategies and 'cure' and the lifelong nature of this experience for some people.

MY EXPERIENCE

My stuttering becomes more pronounced when I am tired, stressed or nervous. This becomes a vicious circle as the more stressed I am the more

I stutter and the more I stutter the more stressed I feel about talking. Even in those situations when I am with people who I am familiar and comfortable with, my stuttering becomes more pronounced when I am tired. At the beginning of a school term I can order a mochaccino, but by the end of term I have to order a cappuccino because I stutter over the 'M' too much. Similarly, although I love Big Mac combos, sometimes I just have to choose a Chicken McCheese even though I don't want it. I've had to teach myself to like to eat and drink things I don't prefer just because they are easier to order.

I may always have a stutter, and is not something that can be cured or that I'll grow out of. On bad days I'll avoid people as much as possible. I can think of days when I've got on a bus, been unable to say where I want to go, and just got off again and walked home. On good days people don't even realise that I stutter – and in fact some people that have known me for a long time still don't really notice that I stutter. This is because I work enormously hard at 'covering' my disfluency by choosing alternative words. This is not always possible, for example the initial letters 'L' and 'M' of my name are amongst those that are often hard for me to say.

Talking on the telephone is harder than face to face, and I will avoid that whenever possible. Being able to use the internet for many bookings and enquiries is my first option always, but if that is not possible then I would much rather go to see someone face-to-face than have to call them by 'phone. This is because when people can read my body language they are more likely to be patient and allow me to finish my sentence. Over the 'phone people often misinterpret silence.

MY STRATEGIES

Some of the strategies that I learned when I was at primary school have remained memorable, and there are still stickers in our house provided by the Ministry of Education speech-language therapists with messages on that say "Remember your slow talking" (with a picture of a tortoise) and "soften your consonants" (with a picture of a soft cuddly teddy bear). An example of softening consonants is

that instead of saying “cat” with a hard “k” initial sound I can blow a soft vowel sound before the beginning of the word. It is still hard for me to do this without worrying that people think I speak weirdly, but it does help the sound to come out. When I was younger it was also suggested that it could be easier for me to substitute other words at times for those that are tricky to say. This is the strategy that I have probably used most to date.

I lie awake at night thinking of all the people I am going to meet the next day and all the conversations I might have, and talk the words aloud in my mind to figure out which I might stumble over the most, then choose alternative words. Even when I am speaking face-to-face with people I will run the conversation in parallel in my head a few words ahead to try to substitute words in time. This becomes quite exhausting. It also results in the use of more ‘fillers’ like “aah” and “um” while I think of replacement words, which might look to people as if I am having to figure out content knowledge even when I do know my topic well.

Sometimes there are no alternative words, or they don’t readily come to mind, and then I might avoid speaking. At a recent block course for extramural students we were asked to note down some critical reflections on *The Tempest*, by Shakespeare. When the lecturer asked if there were any other ideas I wouldn’t contribute my idea because I knew I would stutter, despite the student next to me encouraging me to contribute my comment because it added something new. When it is really important to say something and I know that I will struggle over a word I will sometimes use a strategy of pretending that I have forgotten a term. For example, I recently wanted to refer to the artist Andy Goldsworthy, but instead said “the guy who did a little installation from nature”. Goldsworthy is a hard word to say because of the hard “G” sound and because there is a break in the word between “Golds” and “worthy”. As another example, I wanted to comment on a painting of a running dog by the artist Balla. Because a “B” is a hard initial letter for me to say, instead I said “you know, that futuristic painter who did the work with the dog and the moving leg”. I worry that people think I am unintelligent, or unprepared, or that I don’t know as much as I do because of my use of this strategy.

In August 2011 I attended an intensive speech-language therapy block course in Christchurch, for adult stutterers. During the three days of therapy I was encouraged to discontinue my strategy of avoiding words and to push myself to say what it is that I really have to contribute. I have learned to monitor the levels of my stuttering severity, naturalness scale, and anxiety. I also learned that

for every stutterer the mix will be different: some people stutter more profoundly but are less anxious about it, others like myself have a relatively mild stutter but are more anxious. The level of ‘naturalness’ also differs between stutterers. On a one to ten scale, with ten representing an absolute robotic monotone with full, round sounds, most people are within the two to five range.

I gesture a lot to support communication. For example the letter “L” is hard to say, so instead of saying “left” I might say “that way” and point left. As a student of Art and English, I feel more comfortable to use visual and written kinds of communication than verbal.

PEOPLE’S REACTIONS

Most people make almost no reaction to my stuttering. My friends and family accept me fully, and as noted earlier, some people may not even notice my stutter that much. However, I have also had some very distressing experiences that outweigh others. Only a few months ago I telephoned someone about exhibiting my artwork, and the man actually laughed at my stutter and hung up on me. Other people laugh at characters on TV who stutter or have other kinds of speech-language disorder, such as lisps, without realising that I take this laughter personally. It is not helped that the characters on TV who are stutterers are often portrayed as idiots, for example the character of Albert Arkwright, played by Ronnie Barker in *Open All Hours*, or the Warner Brothers’ character Porky Pig.

Some people seem to think that because the stutter can be inconsistent, that if I tried harder I could manage it better, without realising that every hour of every day I work really hard to manage the stutter. When I was at school I detested having to read aloud, and some of my teachers insisted that I could do it and was just being objectionable if I resisted. Other people appear confused as when I do give speeches and presentations I often get a good grade, so they think that my anxiety must have just been nerves or lack of confidence in public speaking. There is an enormous difference between public speaking skills and speech-therapy strategies.

FEEDBACK

The feedback and advice I would give to teachers and anyone else who interacts with someone who stutters include the following:

- Don’t feel you have to comment on the stutter (mostly I’d rather not discuss it!).
- Be patient with gaps and pauses.

- Find opportunities to show that you value the person as anyone will have less anxiety when part of a positive relationship.
- Understand that someone can have a disorder even if it isn't always visible.
- Avoid requiring anyone to read or recite aloud to a group unless absolutely necessary.
- Offer a range of assessment tasks where possible - speeches and oral presentations could be substituted with essays, portfolios, powerpoint slides supported by notes rather than verbal explanation. There are many ways to show learning!
- Offer online contact, including email and facebook, as alternatives to telephone contact.

FINDING OUT MORE

- The Stuttering Treatment and Research Trust (START) is based in Parnell, Auckland. The website gives information and contact details at www.stuttering.co.nz
- Speak Easy is a support group with regional networks. Contact details and general information about stuttering can be found at www.stuttering-answers.com
- Speech-therapy training is offered by Canterbury University, Massey University at Albany, and the University of Auckland.
- The Ministry of Education, Special Education offers speech-language services to children nation-wide, depending on intake criteria.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Lisa Margrain



Lisa Margrain is a tertiary student at Whitireia Polytechnic and expects to complete her Bachelor of Applied Arts in November 2011, majoring in Visual Art and Design. Her chosen medium is painting and she has had work exhibited at Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures (2010), the Wai Art National Portrait Awards at the Carterton Exhibition Centre (2011), and Te Manawa Museum of Art, Science and History (2011). In August 2011 Lisa returned to her previous secondary school, St Oran's College, to present a solo exhibition, titled Gaia.

Lisa attended Dyer St and Pinehaven primary schools in the Hutt Valley, then St Oran's College for Years 7-13. She has a Certificate of Applied Visual Imaging from UCOL. While studying her art degree full-time at Whitireia Polytechnic in Porirua, Lisa additionally studies English and Media Studies extramurally from Massey University, and works weekends and holiday breaks at Te Manawa Museum of Art, Science and History in Palmerston North. She hopes to continue to work in gallery/museum environments, learn curatorial skills, and one day have her own art gallery.

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