



# THE WAY WE TALK

A discussion paper by the British Stammering Association on language  
when talking about stammering

*Patrick Campbell*

## Contents

Scope of Paper .....	2
Introduction .....	2
Myths debunked .....	3
On language .....	4
Starting close in: Stammer Affirming Language at the British Stammering Association .....	6
References .....	7

## Scope of Paper

This discussion paper by the British Stammering Association (BSA) explores the use of language around stammering and affirms positive changes in language to reduce stigma in society against stammering.

### Introduction

Differences in-between individuals in a society have a well-known tendency to be stigmatised. Stammering, like race, religion and age, follows this trend. Research has shown people who stammer are generally being seen as 'weaker', 'less confident' and 'less able' than fluent individuals (St Louis, 2015). This prejudice has real-life consequences across all stages of life:

- Children who stammer are more likely to be bullied in school (Davis *et al.*, 2007)
- People who stammer are at higher risk of mental health problems than the general population (Iverach and Rapee, 2014)
- People who stammer can be excluded from employment and find it more challenging to get a job (Butler, 2014)

We need to challenge all stigma that harms the lives of people who stammer. Unfortunately, a negative narrative of stammering is so woven into the fabric of our society that it can be easy to overlook. One particular insidious example is our language.

The words we use are not innocent. They express a particular perspective, value, or preference as our language is wrapped up in culture. The language we commonly hear, read, and speak is from a society that is predominantly fluent and holds these historically negative views of people who stammer. It is unsurprising therefore to find the words used to describe stammering are often negative (afflicted, struggle). Some words may initially sound positive (overcome, defeat) but have subtle oppressive connotations.

To change perceptions about people who stammer and challenge stigma, we need to change this negative language we often use to talk about stammering.

With this in mind, we have produced this discussion paper for talking about stammering. It aims to make a positive change in the language we, and society, use to describe stammering: reducing stigma, raising awareness, and appreciating the nuances of life with a speech difference.

*"The most important aspects of things are hidden from us by virtue of their simplicity and familiarity"*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

## Myths debunked

Before beginning to unpack negative language surrounding stammering, we first need to explore – and debunk – the common myths that underlie society's harmful views of stammering. These underlying views are at the root of the negative language around stammering.

### Stammering is not due to nervousness

People who stammer are not necessarily more nervous than anyone else. It is true that some people who stammer will be more anxious about speaking situations. But when speaking can be difficult and fraught with risk, feeling anxious about speaking is a rational and normal, though not always helpful, response. Nervousness is a natural response to stammering in a society with negative views towards it, not the cause of the stammer.

How often a person stammers does not reflect how nervous they are. Some people may stammer more when they are nervous. Others may stammer more when they are relaxed because they feel they can 'let their hair down' and do not have to try to be fluent. No two people will have the same experience with stammering.

### People who stammer are not less intelligent

Some people assume that if a person has difficulty speaking, they are less intelligent. Research indicates that people who stammer have the same range of intelligence as the general population. A person who stammers knows what they want to say but has difficulty getting the words out.

### Stammering is not caused by childhood trauma

Most experts agree stammering is primarily a neurodevelopmental condition, based in the wiring of the brain. Certain genetic traits appear to predispose to stammering, with early environment, and other factors interplaying to cause the neurological changes that precipitate stammering.

### Stammering is a disability

A stammer can often meet the criteria for disability within the Equality Act 2010. A stammer can have (as required by the Act) a substantial and long-term adverse effect on one's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, such as having a conversation or using the telephone.

### Stammering is not always a bad thing

Variety is the spice of life. Some people who stammer just see their speech as different, like an accent, they do not see it as a negative. Some people who stammer take pride in their speech. They appreciate unpredictability of their unique voices and the chance it provides them to become part of a community of people who speak with a stammer.

## On language

Stammering is talked about throughout society in vastly different settings, ranging from chats in playgrounds to newspaper headlines to academic papers. Each of these contexts comes with its unique style and language. To make an all-encompassing guide to all language in conversations regarding stammering is not possible.

What is possible is to begin to recognise the shackles traditional language has placed upon us when we discuss stammering. This will allow individuals and organisations the opportunity to identify and challenge the language they use around stammering and consequently its underlying stigmatised views. What follows is a table that looks at of some of the language commonly used around stammering and how they may be deepening societal stigma. We then suggest possible alternatives.

Don't Use	Do Use	Why Not?
'person who suffers from stammering', or 'person afflicted by stammering'	'person who stammers' or 'stammerer' or 'stutterer'	'Person who stammers' is objective and factual. 'Sufferer'/'afflicted by' assumes stammering has to be a negative in their life, which may not be the case.
'speech impediment' or 'speech defect'	'speech impairment', 'stammering', 'speech dysfluency'	Speech impediment implies the stammer gets in the way of talking. People may just speak with a stammer and it is not necessarily in the way or a problem. 'Defect' is worse, giving a strong message there is something wrong with the person. 'Impairment' is more neutral language, used both medically and in equality law.
'grow out of stammering'	'regain fluency as they grow older', 'regain fluency naturally',	'Grow out of stammering' is commonly used when describing children who stop stammering. It suggests those children who have not stopped stammering have failed to grow up, lack confidence, and have lower intelligence.
'bad' or 'debilitating' stammer	'severe' stammer	'Severe' is a more neutral word, rather than saying a severe stammer is a 'bad' thing. Also 'debilitating stammer' is a stereotypical phrase implying people who stammer cannot live a full life.
'defeat', 'overcome' or 'conquer' stammering	'accept', 'learn to manage', 'found their voice', 'embrace'	'Defeat' and other fighting language imply stammering is an enemy that can be beaten if enough effort were applied.
'struggle with a stammer'	'live with the negative stigma of stammering'	'Struggle with a stammer' is a stereotype feeding into the preconception that people who stammer will struggle in life.

This negative language can become particularly powerful when woven into the personal vocabulary of people who stammer. Whilst the most prominent function of language is to communicate between individuals, we also use language to communicate with ourselves. We think, process and

consider with the language at our disposal. If a person who stammers vocabulary on stammering is entirely negative, they are going to internally interpret their own speech and their life experiences as a speaker in a stigmatised light. They are likely to hold themselves back in life and not believe in their own voice because of how they see their own speech.

However, when we introduce new positive language into the lives of people who stammer they have a chance to change their internal language. To interpret their stammer in less a less damaging way and empower themselves to achieve their aims.

## Starting close in: Stammer Affirming Language at the British Stammering Association

*"Think Global, act local" Patrick Geddes*

Here at the British Stammering Association (BSA), we are going to start by changing the language we use. From now on, the BSA is aiming to use affirming language on stammering in communications, that is language without a pre-conceived stigma of stammering attached. We've already made a few changes, for one small example we previously described the cause of stammering as follows:

"Stammering is at root a neurological condition, based in the wiring of the brain. Studies have shown **abnormalities** in the anatomy and functioning of the brain of those who stammer compared with most other people."

But abnormalities imply people who stammer have 'faulty brains' – those old stigmas raise their head again. So, we've changed it to "**differences** in the anatomy and functioning of the brain". There's no longer a value placed on having a brain which produces a fluent speech pattern.

Perhaps the largest step forward in our language has already taken place in the Employers Stammering Network. The Employers Stammering Network aims to profoundly change the culture around stammering at work, to enable people who stammer to fulfil their potential. The language of the ESN has needed to break away from that traditionally used in normal society. The language has looked to place stammering as a personal trait that should be respected, and in some cases even pushed stammering as a strength.



The new tagline of the British Stammering Association is "talking about stammering". We are going to use stammer affirming language when doing that talking. We encourage others – organisations, the media, stammering therapy programs and individuals – to do the same.

*"For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice." T.S. Eliot*

## References

Boyle, P. (2015). Relationships Between Psychosocial Factors and Quality of Life for Adults Who Stutter. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 24: 1-12.

Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society* 28(5): 718–34.

Davis, S., Howell, P., & Cooke, F. (2002). Sociodynamic relationships between children who stutter and their non-stuttering classmates. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines* 43(7): 939-947.

Iverach, L., & Rapee, M. (2014). Social anxiety disorder and stuttering: Current status and future directions. *Journal of Fluency Disorders* 40: 69–82.

St Louis, K. (2015). Stuttering Meets Stereotype, Stigma, and Discrimination: An Overview of Attitude Research, West Virginia University Press, Morgantown.