

Just let us speak, say those who stutter



By MELISSA NANN BURKE
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Colin Firth portrays King George VI in The King's Speech. The stutterer is unsure if he is worthy of the throne. Stuttering advocates hope the exposure will raise awareness and public understanding of the condition. (AP Photo)

Meetings at work made Brad Foltz anxious. Even with no presentation on the agenda, he might have to speak and, therefore, stutter -- a condition he's lived with since childhood. "It would occur from time to time, and you just get to the point where you make yourself feel small," said Foltz, a surveyor from York Township.

Those who stutter say the condition carries an emotional toll that can be crippling. At times, they avoid speaking unnecessarily. They might bypass jobs and social situations for fear of being teased or gawked at.

Such inner conflict and frustration is explored in the much-lauded film "The King's Speech" -- the story of King Edward VIII's younger brother, a stutterer thrust onto the throne (and the radio) after Edward abdicates in 1936 to marry his lover. The movie is up for 12 Oscars on Sunday. Stuttering advocates hope the exposure will raise awareness and public understanding of the condition.

"The opening scene with the giant close-up of a microphone strikes terror in a stutterer's psyche," Foltz said. "At the end of the movie, the average person would realize the fear." Much is not understood about the causes of stuttering or how to treat the estimated 3 million Americans who stutter. Once thought to be an emotional or nervous condition, physicians now consider stuttering a neurological one that is partly genetic. Men who stutter outnumber women 4 to 1, experts say.

"Everybody stutters. It's whether or not it impacts your everyday communication as to whether it's considered to be a deficit or impairment," said Meghan Allshouse, a speech-language pathologist at Memorial Hospital. Stuttering usually begins between ages 3 and 5 when children are learning to talk, although 70 to 80 percent of preschoolers grow into more fluent speech, experts say.

For those who don't, therapists try to improve their fluency using techniques such as elongating vowels, easing into particular sounds and parsing speech. Some people practice an hour or more a day. Nervousness doesn't cause stuttering but can exacerbate it, so therapists also teach methods for reducing anxiety and confronting fears of speaking. "There's really no cure for stuttering -- just intense therapy," said Katie Hein, a pediatric speech-language pathologist at York Hospital. "It's not just magically going to go away, unfortunately. You really have to work at it."

In the film, the future-king, Bertie, reads Shakespeare perfectly while listening to music (under headphones) instead of his own voice. Rhythm can influence fluency, as can taking on a persona. Stutterers often speak fluently when acting a role, singing or reading in unison with others. Foltz, 58, didn't seek therapy for his stutter

until he was around 42. He gained confidence and improved his fluency after attending a program in Virginia and now gives hour-long speeches to auditoriums full of peers. He feels more comfortable in everyday conversations but still must practice breathing and other exercises at times. "You just want an operation or a pill -- just something to be done with it," Foltz said.

In nearly all cases, stuttering recurs. The goal is to manage it. "We put such stock in people's abilities to share ideas in society. When stuttering robs you of that . . . you're not expressing your whole self," said John Sloan, director of the Center for Fluency Enhancement at the Hearing and Speech Agency in Baltimore.

Some people struggle into adulthood to accept the condition and themselves, Sloan said. Those who don't know other stutterers can feel isolated, Sloan said. He hosts a monthly support group affiliated with the National Stuttering Association. Group member Jodi Lessans, 32, of Pikesville, Md., used to become extremely frustrated when people cut her off mid-stutter or told her to slow down. "I had anxiety ordering in a restaurant or driving up to McDonald's. I even had panic attacks about speaking," Lessans said.

"Now, I don't really care what people think about me. If they make fun of me, it is their problem, not mine." Sean Brown, 40, of Owings Mills said he never thought he would have a social life, a successful career or get married with a stutter. Now, he's a motivational speaker who discusses his journey of self-acceptance. "I still find myself stuttering when I talk way too fast or am very excited about something," he said. "I accept the situation for what it is."

Many people who talk to Travia Harris in person or on the phone never know she stutters. When she does, she can joke about it with friends. "They know it's not something I have control over," said Harris, 38, of Dover Township. "It's good stuttering is getting so much exposure now. I hope people won't be so ashamed about their stutter and more people 'come out.'" "Everybody has their things we work on. This is mine."

mburke@ydr.com; 771-2024

Tips for talking with a stutterer

- Don't make remarks like, "Slow down," "Take a breath," or "Relax." Such simplistic advice can be demeaning and is not helpful.
- Maintain natural eye contact and wait until the person is finished.
- Try not to finish sentences or fill in words. Use a relatively relaxed rate in your own speech.
- Be aware that those who stutter usually have more trouble controlling their speech on the telephone, so be patient. If you pick up the phone and hear nothing, be sure it is not a person who stutters trying to start the conversation before you hang up. -- *The Stuttering Foundation*

Stuttering myths

Myth: Nervousness causes stuttering.

It does not. Never assume people who stutter are prone to be nervous, fearful, anxious or shy.

Myth: Stress causes stuttering.

Complex factors contribute to stuttering. Stress is not the cause but can aggravate stuttering.

Myth: People who stutter are not smart.

There is no correlation between stuttering and intelligence.

Myth: It helps to tell a person to breath deeply or think about what they want to say.

Such comments can make a person self-conscious, making the stuttering worse. It's more helpful to listen patiently and model slow, clear speech yourself. -- The Stuttering Foundation

Online

National Stuttering Association, www.nsastutter.org

British Stammering Association, www.stammering.org

Friends, www.friendswhostutter.org

The Stuttering Foundation, www.stutteringhelp.org

The Hearing and Speech Agency, www.hasa.org