

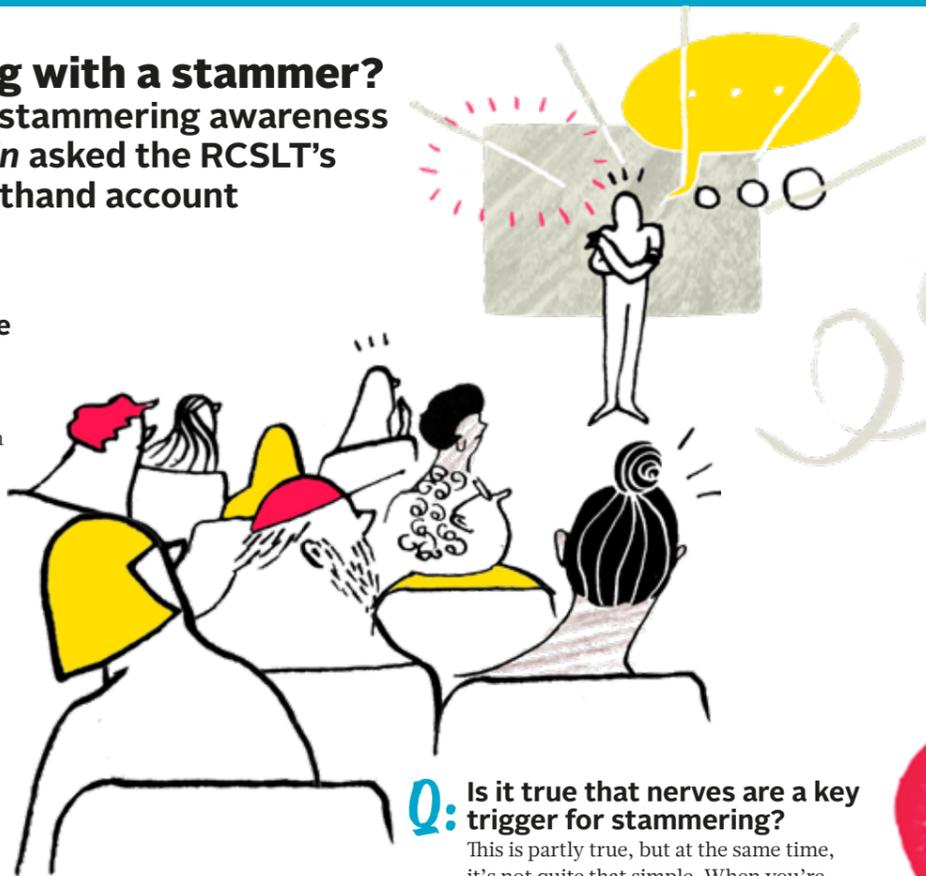
STAMMERING

AWARENESS

What's it like living with a stammer?
To mark international stammering awareness day this month, *Bulletin* asked the RCSLT's Paul O'Meara for a firsthand account

Q: What's the worst experience you've had relating to your stammer?

Without a doubt it was during my time at university. My class were tasked with choosing a film, researching particular aspects of it, and then delivering an oral presentation to our peers. A task like this is problematic for me, as it would be for many stammerers, in that it requires saying particular words, and words that have no substitute. Before I even arrived at university that day, I knew it was going to be a bad experience—and, as predicted, it was horrific. I stammered on almost every word—and even every syllable. Once I started to stammer it got worse and worse as my confidence was massively dented. As a stammerer, I would have liked to have been offered another route to complete an assignment like this. This was some years ago, and I would hope education practices have changed since then.



Q: What aspect of having a stammer do you think people underestimate?

I don't think people realise the daily mental strain that comes with trying to speak when you stammer. Every time you need to talk to anyone—whether it's someone you know or a total stranger—you're constantly thinking, not only of what you will say, but how you will say it. Each situation is different, too. You know the words or sounds that are difficult to use and you are always thinking of the best way to navigate around them. Fluent speakers give little or no thought to the physical action of speaking; it is second nature to them. Whereas a stammerer experiences a near-constant stream of thought dedicated to enabling the delivery of most words. It really is tiresome. I compare it to having a second full-time job!



Q: Is it true that nerves are a key trigger for stammering?

This is partly true, but at the same time, it's not quite that simple. When you're nervous it can be worse, but for me, it is more related to the words I need to say in a situation, rather than my own nerves. For example, I've given speeches at weddings and although I was nervous—terrified, actually—because I wrote the speech and chose the words strategically, my delivery was relatively successful. But in something like a job interview, nerves can get the better of you. This is a situation where a lot rides on not only your words, but on you delivering your messages with relative fluency, and it can be overwhelming.

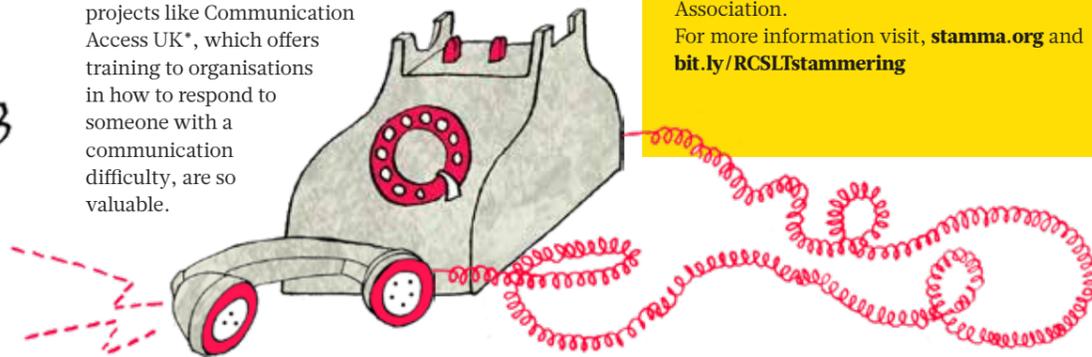


Q: What can people do to help?

As I've gotten older and become more comfortable with my stammer, this is something I've given a lot more thought to. I think most stammerers would agree that it helps if people do not ridicule, mimic or laugh at you when you struggle. Letting me finish my words is very important. Even if people are sure they know what I'm trying to say. This is often a matter of pride for a stammerer—or at least it is for me. And although it may be difficult, holding eye contact is also important, as if people look away or seem agitated, or even bored by me stammering, it can feel quite insulting.

Q: Do you think society does enough to cater for stammerers and others with communication difficulties?

I think the answer to this falls into two categories, as on a general day-to-day basis with people you encounter on the street, you will always receive a variety of reactions and responses. As a stammerer you accept that some people just don't take time to appreciate that we can't all communicate to the same level. However, I do think that people who work for public-facing companies or organisations could be armed with better skills and knowledge when it comes to interacting with people who have communication difficulties. For example, calling a service provider on the phone can be incredibly frustrating when you stammer, as the person on the other end will probably not know how to respond in a way that is helpful. This is why projects like Communication Access UK*, which offers training to organisations in how to respond to someone with a communication difficulty, are so valuable.



*The Communication Access UK project is working to make the UK more communication friendly, through training programmes and the implementation of a communication access symbol for business and public spaces. For more information, visit www.rcslt.org/policy/communication-access-uk

Stammering: the facts

- 8% of children aged 2 to 5 are affected by developmental stammering, the most common type of stammering.
- The majority of children who stammer will stop naturally or through speech and language therapy.
- Stammering often runs in families: around 60% of people who stammer have a relation who stammers or used to stammer.
- Stammering has a neurological basis: research tells us that the brains of people who stammer are wired slightly differently from those who don't.
- Up to 3% of people continue stammering into adulthood—that's around 1.5 million adults in the UK.
- Some people who stammer choose to change the way they speak, while others are completely comfortable with their stammer.
- There are many ways people can learn to manage their stammer—not one type of therapy is effective for everyone.
- Stammering can have a significant impact on a person's wellbeing at home, in education and in the workplace.

Facts supplied by the British Stammering Association.
For more information visit, stamma.org and bit.ly/RCSLTstammering

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