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# Speaking Freely

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# Speaking Freely

*Tyler Grant*

There lies an ever-looming threat in my thoughts and voice. When it descends upon me, a pressure creates itself in my throat, a quick, confused look falls on the faces of friends and family, and it begins to dawn on them that the situation has changed tone. The sentence quickly gets caught in a snare, the mood becomes ruined, and the social circle begins to hastily try to remedy it. The situation instead worsens, my infamous beet red face rears its ugly head, and the tics, the very same ones I desperately try to keep under control, begin to crack the façade that everything is fine. A wall erects itself between my mind and the word it needs to utter. The mind begins desperately and frantically searching for a way around the block, and it typically comes in the form of a word to the left or right of the wall, but sometimes not at all.

A stutterer, when they experience their first stop in the middle of their speech, learns something. They learn not to take for granted their ability to speak. What others get to do, often with reckless abandon, they will never be able to. When every sentence uttered has the potential to be cut short, harshly removed from the conversation, it can haunt every speaking moment. A clever quip, which would leave the room roaring, can come to mind. Yet, the decision comes to ignore it because the feeling in your chest seizes your throat, and you know all it will lead to, at best, is a slow dawning of the joke, or, at worst, horrid sympathy laughs.

For some, a stutter haunts them every second of their day and every second of their speech. They have to pick specific names for their children in order to avoid the sounds they cannot say. Others must pick words other than “love” to describe their feelings for a significant other. Worse yet are the ones who stutter even on the word “stutter,” which leads to embarrassment as they try to explain themselves. The frequent stutterer quickly learns every social event creates a chance for unspoken embarrassment, or, in some families, outspoken resentment. Then, a fear emerges about the unspoken resentment: the idea that people around you do not wish to hear your thoughts, do not wish to endure your stutter for the simple chance to hear what you have to say. This means you must make every word count.

When the ability to speak freely is lost, or never existed, it shapes the way a stutterer’s thoughts are processed before being spat out. My stutter, for instance, gets particularly triggered by attempting to remember. This makes me seemingly unable to do anything involving memory and attempting to vocalize. It means the reality I live in becomes one of purely the present, never dwelling on my past. This also shapes my humor. I can rarely recite a joke I’ve heard or tell a humorous story from my past. I realize I will never know the reality of describing myself as a fantastic storyteller, and this previously bothered my younger self. Yet I, and many other young stutterers, quickly realize only two paths lie ahead: one of acceptance or one of conflict.

Many people who stutter make the mistake of “fighting” their speech patterns, and a very real sense of failure comes with every single block they fail to prevent. Anxiety begins to build itself up around the ability to speak, pushing the metaphorical “stuttering wall” higher and

thicker with every battle. In *The Way We Talk*, the narrator of the documentary describes his own stutter with a story: “One day, as I was driving, I noticed this pier that had been blocked off. And it hit me as being exactly how I felt about stuttering: a taking-off point, boarded up, surrounded by silence.”<sup>1</sup> This reality can quickly and irreparably become the reality so many stutters see. They see stuttering as the barrier between them and what they believe to be their launching point, whatever that may be. Their dream career, their dream girl, and their dream life can seem impossible to attain because of their obnoxious, irreparable stutter.

Those who choose the path of acceptance with their stutter quickly recognize it as a piece of their personality instead of a hindrance. They realize the stuttermaker’s main obstacle in building relationships can actually become themselves. In the words of one commentator from *The Way We Talk* on his friends that stutter, “It’s like a cadence, not inhibiting what you have to say or my understanding of you.”<sup>1</sup> This can be a huge realization for any stuttermaker, as they often view their stutter as an obstacle to developing relationships with potential partners or friends. My own viewpoint changed at the age of eighteen. For nearly two decades, I fought my stutter every step of the way. Now, instead of attempting to shove my stutter down until it becomes unnoticed, my objective is to understand myself, be understood by others, and build a thriving social life for myself. That is the power of personal acceptance.

The personal outlook on one’s stutter becomes easily molded by the outlook of peers, colleagues, and family. That much is obvious, but parents can easily become frustrated and saddened watching their young children begin to stutter. Given that stuttering is heavily

influenced by genes, with a whopping eighty percent heritability rate, a multitude of scenarios emerged in my brain. It shocked me when I discovered stuttering had a genetic component. Nobody in my family has a stutter, and now I deeply worry about hearing my future child's first stutter. They will have to struggle in the same ways I have, experiencing a deep, constant struggle with such a large facet of human life. Luckily, I know they will have someone by their side who understands, and listens.

The trials and tribulations of stuttering vary from person to person, but nobody should hate their stutter, and nobody should shame them for it. The skills learned to cope with stuttering can cloud daily life. And many stutterers never even discuss their stutter, choosing to blindly hope nobody notices. They do notice, but they don't care, and that is the way it should be.

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<sup>1</sup> Burge, A. (Producer), & Turner, M. (Director). (2014). *The Way We Talk* [Motion Picture]. USA: Real Light