

# Overview - Stammering

Stammering (or stuttering) is a fluency disorder characterised by a tense struggle to get words out. This distinguishes it from the normal non-fluency we all experience which includes hesitations and repetitions. Commonly, stammering involves:

- Repeating and prolonging sounds and words.
- Getting stuck without any sound (silent blocking).
- Some people who stammer may also make facial or body movements in their effort to speak.

Around 1% of the adult population has a stammer, with about four times as many men as women affected.

Someone can become so adept at hiding their stammer through avoiding words and situations that you may not have realised they stammer at all. This in itself and the perceived need to maintain an image of someone who does not stammer can cause a lot of hidden stress and anxiety. There can be a lot going on under the surface for someone who stammers whether they have an overt or covert stammer.

Stammering varies tremendously from person to person and is highly variable. A person who stammers may be fluent one minute and struggling to speak the next.

## **Students who stammer may experience the following issues:**

- Fear being laughed at.
- Low self-esteem and the misperception that they are poor communicators.
- Difficulty participating in seminars and group work.
- Anxiety about giving presentations in front of large groups.
- Avoidance of seminars or modules that demand a lot of speaking or have oral assessments.
- Concerns about job interviews and employment prospects.



## Top tips for teaching students who stammer:

- Remember that stammering is not caused by nerves: it is a neurological condition. Some people who stammer will be anxious about speaking situations but this is a rational response, given their difficulty speaking.
- Be open to conversations with students about their stammer and what helps them.
- Try not to finish someone's sentences for them unless they indicate to you that they wish you to do so.
- Find out if they would rather not be put on the spot in lectures or seminars.
- Consider allowing students to make a presentation to a smaller group or to record the presentation.
- Give students the option of longer presentation times for assessments.
- Make sure that you are rewarding content not fluent speech in assessed work.
- Remind them that they are more than their stammer and emphasise that it is what they say that is important rather than how they say it. With positive support and encouragement from staff they can work to achieve whatever they would like to regardless of their stammer.

### Useful links

- The British Stammering Association - <https://www.stammering.org/>
- Times Higher Education article on stammering - <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/stammering-higher-educations-invisible-disability-must-be-tackled>
- Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust - <http://www.cornwallft.nhs.uk/services/adult-speech-and-language-therapy/>

Thanks to Lucy Seale for writing this guide

