

Shining a Spotlight on Covert Stuttering

Some People Who Stutter Don't Actually "Stutter"

Stuttering is a complicated condition that involves more than observable stuttering behaviors. In addition to the speech disruptions that may be apparent to listeners, people who stutter may also experience negative reactions to stuttering, including anxiety about speaking, difficulty communicating, and an overall adverse impact on quality of life.

Some people do not actually exhibit any stuttering or stuttering-like behaviors that others can see. This condition, known as "covert" (or "intrinsic" or "interiorized") stuttering, can cause considerable difficulty for speakers and SLPs. To better understand covert stuttering, one must first understand more about stuttering itself.

Stuttering as a Behavior vs. Stuttering as a Disorder

Part of the confusion surrounding covert stuttering comes from the fact that the words "stutter" and "stuttering" can be used in different ways. One usage refers to speech behaviors a person might exhibit, such as repetitions, prolongations and blocks. ("He just 'stuttered' in that sentence.") Another usage refers to the problems in life that one might have due to difficulties in verbal expression. ("He is a person who 'stutters.'")

When these two usages are differentiated, we can recognize that some people "stutter" (i.e., exhibit certain disfluencies) without having a "stuttering" disorder." Other people—those who stutter covertly—may experience problems in their lives but not actually produce speech disfluencies very often. For these individuals, the experience of stuttering is under-the-surface, where only they can sense it. Their stuttering does not break the surface, where others can see it.

Importantly, the disruption in language planning or speech production experienced by people who stutter covertly is real. They still experience the sensation of being "stuck." The difference is that people who stutter covertly work hard to hide their stuttering from others. Hiding stuttering is actually quite common. Many people who stutter report changing or substituting words, picking words they can say fluently, avoiding situations where they might stutter, or using starters to try to prevent stuttering from occurring. Such avoidance behaviors are understandable, for stuttering is uncomfortable for people to experience. Some speakers become so adept at hiding their stuttering behaviors that others may never see or hear the stuttering behavior in their speech. Those people stutter on the inside, but they do not stutter on the outside.

Some people might think that covert stuttering is, in some way, a positive outcome. After all, the speaker is not "stuttering." The problem is that this can be a very difficult way to live, always monitoring speech, thinking of which words can be said, not engaging in activities if stuttering might occur, not participating fully in life because of the need to always hide stuttering. The fact that listeners do not hear covert stuttering does not mean that the person is fluent, however. It just means that people who stutter covertly are not letting others see their turmoil.

The longer a person tries to hide stuttering, the harder it is to break free. Think of how awkward it would be to "start" stuttering all of a sudden when talking to friends with whom you have been ostensibly fluent! The pressure to continue hiding grows more intense over time, and the speaker finds fewer options for how he must talk. The trap keeps getting set again every time the speaker interacts with a new person and pretends to be what he is not: a fluent speaker.

SLPs Can Help

Fortunately, there is much that SLPs can do to help people who stutter covertly, though the treatment is challenging. For example, speakers can gain relief through desensitization exercises, learning to think differently about stuttering, focusing on effective communication rather than fluency, and learning that it is okay to stutter. Put simply, people who stutter covertly need to overcome their fear of stuttering. As they learn that it is okay to stutter out loud, they can begin to reduce the restrictions they have placed on themselves. They can begin to talk in situations they have previously avoided and live their lives with less fear. Will this result in more disfluent speech? In all likelihood, yes. If it results in better communication and less turmoil, the speaker will ultimately benefit.

For more information about covert or interiorized stammering, see Chapter 4 of *Stammering Therapy from the Inside*. The chapter is written by master UK clinicians Carolyn Cheasman and Rachel Everard; the book is published by J&R Press and made available directly in the USA by Stuttering Therapy Resources, Inc.