

# Stammering: Solving the Dilemma of 'Misunderstood'

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'Why do I stammer?' Can there be a single stammerer who has not, at some time or other, yearned for an answer to that question? I imagine some of us wonder about it more urgently than others. For me it has refused to go away, in spite of the fact that I have been consistently discouraged from searching for an answer. The widely held view is that it will not help a stammerer to know why they stammer, because the therapy would be the same in any case. As a lay person and a stammerer, I challenge that view. It seems obvious to me that discovering the cause and understanding the origin of a disorder is very likely indeed to result in a better understanding of appropriate therapy and preventive measures. If we have not yet understood much about the aetiology of stammering, perhaps it is simply because we have been asking the wrong questions and looking for answers in the wrong places.

I have had to search for my own answers. I have approached my self-therapy from a psychoanalytical point of view, something else I was discouraged from doing. The effect on my life has been dramatic. My speech is not only outwardly fluent (to a large extent it was so at the outset, my being

one of those stammerers with, to use Joseph Sheehan's analogy, an almost completely submerged iceberg), but I am able increasingly to experience it as fluent and free from struggle. More than that, I have been able to step outside the trap of the internal conflict which seems to have characterised my whole personality and behaviour, and am learning progressively to keep myself out of it and to walk free.

Many stammerers share an intuitive perception that their stammer originated in some terrible experience in childhood. Their perception is consistently dismissed as being irrelevant and fanciful, but surely such a prevalent notion deserves closer examination?

My thinking about terrible experiences in childhood has been influenced by *The Continuum Concept* by Jean Liedloff. She writes that until recently in human history babies were always constantly against their mothers' bodies, slept in physical contact with their mothers, and enjoyed the physical closeness of breastfeeding. In short, they were treated in a way which respected their expressed needs and was in harmony with their innate, evolved expectations. Jean Liedloff argues that more

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recent childrearing practices thwart the biological expectations of the infant, causing untold distress to the baby and neurosis in individuals who have been deprived of the in-arms experience at the start of their lives.

Famously, Johnson suggested that stammering 'is born in the mind of the parent and not in the mouth of the child', and mainstream thinking seems to have been unable to move past his hypothesis. I postulate that stammering originates in the mother-child relationship, but that the problem begins long before the infant even tries to form her first words, in her deprivation of a continuum-correct experience; in her attempts to communicate in an environment where her message is never received. A new-born baby behaves instinctively. She is equipped with the ability to signal her need and has an innate expectation that the signal will be understood and the need met. But what happens if that expectation is thwarted and the baby is denied the feeling of satisfaction of having the signal understood? The baby's experience is then incomplete, and she continues to attempt to complete it. The only instinctive resource the baby has to deal with such circumstances is to signal harder (Try Hard).

In self-therapy, I was able to relive a memory of that experience as a very young baby. My experience suggests that I came to try so hard that I became overwhelmingly alarmed by my own signals and felt the need to cut myself off from my vocalisations, for I would go mad if I continued in that state. My body instinctively found a way to hold in the signals (Hold Back). Yet, the awareness remained with me that what lay inside me, behind my holding back, was evil beyond belief and I must shield myself from it. I had trapped my need inside me,

from where it would continue to find expression. I could not understand that it was the environment which was wrong for me. My infantile perception was that there was something terribly wrong with me; and indeed something had now become terribly wrong with me.

Human beings have an ability to 'feel with' one another. A mother is uniquely able to feel with her baby. When she fails to do so, or fails to communicate to her baby that she does so, the baby's experience is 'misunderstood' or 'misempathised with'. 'Misunderstood' denotes for me a painful feeling associated with an awareness of incongruence between my self-image and the expectations of the world around me. It also assumes an attitude of low self-esteem resulting from that sense of incongruence. As a stammerer, I carried my experience of 'misunderstood' into my adult life, still seeking to complete the experience of communicating and being understood, but relying on the same infantile frame of reference in ways which ensured that I could never satisfy my need.

The experience of 'misunderstood' was reinforced in many ways in infancy and the pre-school years. Hold Back and Try Hard messages proliferated. It seemed as if my feelings and wants were never acceptable. I grew up believing that I felt and wanted whatever someone else told me to feel and want. Yet my need remained to feel accepted for who I am, not for what I achieved. When I started school, my need to feel understood increased in what was an alien environment for me. At the same time the probability of feeling understood decreased, the prohibition on expressing my needs tightened and the expectation that I should try hard increased. It was too much for me. Unable to confront the in-

congruence between my self-perception and the expectations of the world around me, the conflict in me found expression physically in my stammering. That is, my body found the same solution it had found when I was an infant, to tense the muscles of speech in such a way as to block the signalling, the communication, the speech.

I have shown how my childhood life-experience led me to make a decision about how best to survive and get my needs met. The decision is circular in nature, so that the problem is apparently insoluble, in the pattern described in an article by Phil Bernd Schmid. My frame of reference around the experience of 'misunderstood' can be formulated thus: 'Nobody understands me. Therefore I must try hard to be understood. But if I try hard to be understood, they still won't understand and something bad will happen to me, so I must hold back from trying to get them to understand. But when I stop trying I feel lonely and rejected, so I must try hard to make them understand...'

Thus I find myself needing to try hard and hold back simultaneously. I must strive to Try-Hard-and-Hold-Back with increasing intensity because if this frame of reference should fail me, I will be faced with the same fear, panic and anxiety I knew as a baby and I must shield myself from those feelings at all costs. I suggest that in those stammerers with a largely visible and audible Sheehan iceberg the Try Hard message tends to win the argument, whereas Hold Back tends to win in those with a hidden or submerged iceberg.

The pull-push conflict expresses itself both internally and physically. Internally, it is as if I am impelled simultaneously to move forwards and to stay where I am; to share myself with others and to hold back from sharing; to struggle very hard against a prob-

lem and to surrender to it; to try to make people understand me and to give up trying. Just as my speech gets 'stuck', so I end up 'stuck' psychologically. It will be clear how my trying hard and holding back simultaneously expresses itself physically in a struggle to speak. I believe that the physical tensions which 'happen to me' are the same tensions which I experienced in infancy. At that time, they did indeed 'happen to me', as if outside my control, because they were instinctively driven.

My experience has been that the circular nature of the dilemma means that it is exceedingly difficult, in practice, to step out of it. It seemed clear that the antidote for my trying hard was the transactional analysis allower Do It, and that the antidote for my holding back was Be Open and Express Your Wants. However, initially when I got out of Hold Back I would end up Trying Hard and when I got out of Try Hard I would end up Holding Back. Also, my perception that it was 'exceedingly difficult' to affirm the allowers tended to land me right back in Try Hard. I needed somehow to break free from the whole circle.

Schmid writes of the need to take a 'meta-stance' in order to break free from such a dilemma circle. From inside the circle the problem seems insoluble, but from a new perspective outside the circle the mistaken nature of such circular thinking becomes clear. I have to say that, from inside my circle, I found it impossible to grasp the concept of a meta-stance. It was only from my new standpoint outside the trap that I was able to understand where I had been and how I had stepped outside the circle. Schmid recommends the use of metaphor to help the client to obtain such a meta-stance. I found my own way out of the circle in imaginative prayer, and sug-

gest that any use of the imagination will be helpful. Further, I suggest that an understanding of the origin of the decision about 'misunderstood' in terms of the Continuum Concept will be helpful in achieving a meta-stance. If the client can see, as an adult, how the infant came to make the circular decision, he/she will be looking at the problem from a meta-viewpoint.

Schmid writes: 'The way out of a dilemma often leads through feeling desperate and experiencing exhaustion. It demands that the client acknowledges former losses or realises an inevitable loss at present, that he learns to live with the fact that he has suffered for a long time, but cannot expect anyone to make it up to him . . . he will have to undergo a profound change in the new way he sees and experiences himself. He will have to learn new ways of experience and behaviour and tolerate the insecurity that accompanies this change.'

That indeed has been my experience. Breaking through the dilemma circle was accompanied by a feeling of total bewilderment and disorientation; and I have needed to grieve over my former losses. It is little wonder that I encountered in myself such a strong resistance to change all along the way towards healing. Therapy should provide for the client a safety net of experiences of feeling 'understood' in order to facilitate change. I have no doubt that what enabled me to set out towards healing was the attitude of empathy and unconditional acceptance offered me by some close friends. The atmosphere of 'understood' is

like a catalyst within which healing can take place. In fact it is interesting to note how much the helpfulness of understanding/listening to/empathising with the client comes across in the literature about therapy for stammerers, though I have never come across anything which makes that an explicit aim of the therapy.

My experience suggests that psychotherapy for stammerers could yield very positive results. More than that, prevention is possible, if every mother is encouraged to mother her baby in a way which will satisfy the baby's innate expectations. It is important to stress that in nearly every case the mother has no intention of causing such distress to her baby; quite the opposite. But if we want to communicate our love to our babies, we had better send the message in such a way that the infant can receive it, and make ourselves receptive to her messages in return.

Many people admit to feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable when they hear someone stammering. Could it be that all of us, at some deep level, recognise in stammering the distress caused to all of us by the deprivation of a continuum-correct experience? That like the stammerer, all of us struggle to avoid confronting that distress? Could this be why we have been so reluctant to look for the origins of stammering in the psyche of the stammerer, and thus unable to find the way to healing? Stammerers continue to attempt to communicate their need to be understood, and their message continues to fall on deaf ears.

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## Further Reading

Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept*, Arkana, 1989

Dr Phil Bernd A. Schmid, 'Breaking Through the Dilemma Circle' in Erika Stern (ed.), *T.A.: The State of the Art*, Dordrecht Foris Publications, 1984