

NATIONAL STUTTERING ASSOCIATION

IF YOU *stutter*, YOU ARE NOT *alone*.



**Tuesday, September 22, 2020**

## **Dropping the "C" in Covert Stuttering at Work**

People who stutter often try to be as covert as possible at work, so they are not exposed and labeled as less intelligent, anxious or emotionally unsound, all of which we know are myths about stuttering. Stuttering covertly denies opportunity to bring one's full self to work, which is needed for relationship building, creativity, team work, and innovation.

**Facilitators: Pamela Mertz (PWS / NSA Special Project Co-Chairs) and Charley Adams, PhD, LSP-CCC**

### **Behind the Scenes - Chat Room Excerpt**

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| Carl: | Yes, I experienced so many of these things in my early 20s/in college when I was deep in my covert days. My friends dubbed me the "flake" because they knew I'd cancel on plans but it was really b/c I didn't want them to see me on a "bad" stuttering day. |
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## Behind the Scenes - Chat Room Excerpt

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| Jacob:  | Ditto.  |
| Carl:   | I hated that I did that, but I figured I'd rather be seen as a flake/bad friend than a stutterer.   |
| Jacob:  | Exactly - really highlights how stuttering can be perceived as extreme embarrassment, and perhaps something even worse than death. Also speaks to in-group/out-group behavior - stuttering as a means of social exclusion |
| Carl:   | Indeed, my friend.  |
| Jaime:  | Unfortunately, it often depends on where you sit in the organizational chart. As I moved up, it became easier to "force" others to deal with my stuttering.   |
| Carl:   | What do you think is the cause of imposter syndrome still lingering?  |
| Jacob:  | Interesting point Jaime - there are a lot of these points to be made re: stuttering and power   |
| Carl:   | Jaime - I'd never thought about that, but definitely makes sense due to power dynamics. Interesting stuff!  |
| Lisa:   | I've always stuttered on my first name. I hated introductions. People would laugh and say "did you forget your name?" I felt so much shame so I just avoid it.  |
| Jacob:  | There's always something to feel anxious about...   |
| Jonah:  | Carl - Likely because of a high-performance work environment with lots of ambiguity.  |
| Jonah:  | I stopped being covert at work a few years ago, but I still have terrible impostor syndrome. While I feel I have more freedom to be myself and stutter openly, I still feel the "penalty" of impostor syndrome.           |
| Taylor: | Lisa - That is my problem too. Once I am past the introductions I feel ok.  |
| Jaime:  | Whenever I make public presentations, I start off with this: "Please bear with me as I stutter and I am a fast speaker. Not a particularly helpful combination, but you will get used to it in no time."                  |
| Thomas: | Lisa - I have been there. I was in management so everyone knew I stuttered...   |
| Jacob:  | Jonah - The high-performance work environments make it so much more difficult.  |

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| Carl:    | Lisa and Taylor - I always try to initiate intros first if I can... I find that being in "control" of the interaction helps me mitigate that anxiety somewhat.   |
| Taylor:  | Carl - I find that is helpful for me too.  |
| Carl:    | Jaime - I love framing disclosure in that way. Nothing apologetic about it, just up front and addressing it from the start.  |
| Jacob:   | Introductions are the worst...   |
| Taylor:  | Sometimes I'll get to a meeting early and introduce myself to people individually first.   |
| Jacob:   | I disclose for big talks, helps so much.   |
| Carl:    | Jonah - I could imagine feeling that, especially when you work with so many smart and driven folks... stutter or not.  |
| Scott:   | Lisa - 100% agree I hate saying my name.   |
| Lisa:    | Carl and Taylor - Thank you. Everyone at my work knows I stutter but I still feel like "damaged goods" however nobody seems to care.   |
| Taylor:  | I find it hard to disclose when just casually meeting someone for the first time - I am starting grad school right now and am nervous about the social events.   |
| Thomas:  | I disclose at every presentation I do and there are many.  |
| Romelle: | Personally, I do have a level of imposter syndrome when I attempt to remove any hints of covert stuttering around others, namely in the office. The IMS (imposter syndrome) for me is that I can tell everyone about living with stuttering, but they either "don't get it" or are unwilling to understand it. |
| Scott:   | I just started grad school too, it's tough but I try to introduce first as well.   |
| Taylor:  | My classes are on Zoom so I actually find that easier in class because my name is on my square.  |
| Jacob:   | Good luck to those who started grad school - it's certainly a ride!  |
| Jaime:   | I also let them know I have epilepsy and tell them not to be frightened by that either. I let them know if I have an episode, they simply need to protect my head.   |
| Scott:   | Luckily we have name place cards in class so I don't have to say my name if the teacher forgets.   |

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| Taylor: | I also don't want my thing to be that I'm the girl who stutters, I feel like it's memorable in an introduction and I don't want it to define me   |
| Carl:   | Lisa, it's hard to break these deep rooted thoughts and feelings associated with our stuttering. But it gets easier and easier as we continue. Progress, not perfection is how I try to approach it.  |
| Thomas: | I sign all my emails with T-T-Tom.  |
| Scott:  | Haha I like that Tom. The thing is people don't really care.  |
| Jacob:  | Perfection and unrealistic fluency standards are the enemies.   |
| Lisa:   | Carl - Thank you.   |
| Jacob:  | Also culture...lol ;)   |
| Taylor: | Yeah I've found people I've told haven't really cared or don't realize how much it impacts me.  |
| Scott:  | I agree Taylor but once they get to know you they don't care. People are more focused on themselves, but as I say that it's tough to believe ...  |
| Taylor: | Does anyone feel like a fake saying that you stutter, if people will rarely hear it?  |
| Thomas: | Agree, most people don't care if I stutter or not. ATC cares as the phrases have to be crisp and distinct.  |
| Taylor: | I almost think life would be easier if I couldn't hide it.  |
| Carl:   | Taylor - I can understand that and resonate with those feelings so much. I let people know that I stutter and it's a part of me... but I also have other things that I'm passionate about. Being more open about my stuttering allows folks to focus on the other aspects of my personality/life that are important to me |
| Scott:  | I hear you Taylor - I have a mild case, it is very circumstantial   |
| Taylor: | Carl - That is a good point, not avoiding things because of stuttering can allow someone to be more themselves.   |
| Jacob:  | But in certain contexts, it really comes out, very frustrating. The inconsistency truly sucks.  |
| Jaime:  | Charley - It is hard to avoid those mechanisms that you have become expert in.  |
| Scott:  | Agree Taylor. Some people say "it's barely noticeable."   |
| Carl:   | Jacob - Bingo. The inconsistency/ambiguity of how stuttering manifests itself in different situations has always been the super frustrating thing about it for me.  |

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| Scott:  | Yes, great point Jacob.  |
| Carl:   | Dr. Scott Yaruss has talked about the variability of stuttering and is doing some research focused on better understanding it.   |
| Taylor: | I met with the disability office at my school today to discuss possible accommodations for stuttering and grading on presentations and I didn't stutter once...  |
| Frank:  | Realizing stuttering isn't my fault has helped me to desensitize and disclose.   |
| Carl:   | Taylor - Interesting how that works, right? I find that often when I'm talking about stuttering, I don't stutter.  |
| Jaime:  | Taylor - Both my boys stutter except when we are at the IEP meetings.  |
| Scott:  | I sent an email to the professors saying something like "wanted to let you know I stutter so if you need me to repeat anything just let me know."  |
| Carl:   | Scott - What response did you get from them when you sent that? (if any)   |
| Scott:  | They said thanks for letting me know and that it'll be difficult to hear everyone this year with everyone wearing masks.   |
| Kevin:  | I'm finding that transitioning to work-from-home is causing me to stutter more... probably due to communicating on Zoom or over the phone rather than in person. I imagine my co-workers are seeing this as well. Part of me feels like I only accepted my prior level of stuttering at work while in person, but now that my stuttering has increased while working from home, I'm trying to accept this new level of stuttering as well. |
| Jaime:  | Scott - Interesting about the masks. Not being able to hear someone is not the same not being heard.   |
| Jacob:  | Anyone changed how they stutter as they got older? I've realized it has more of a physical component now, perhaps since I would rather block than repeat or elongate words.  |
| Scott:  | Hmm good point, Jaime, but I think they understood overall. In one class though the professor has cut me off a couple times so I might bring it up with her.   |

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| Sjoerd:   | Hey Pam and Co. - I just wanted to thank you for the information shared in the last half hour, it has highlighted some very important aspects of covert stuttering. Really amazing! I have to leave the webinar at this point but am definitely looking forward to the recorded video that comes out next week! Thanks so much!!                 |
| Jennifer: | I stutter sometimes in certain situations, that's why I am hesitant to request or use accommodations because people could think you don't stutter enough for accommodation. It's a lot of hoops to jump through.   |
| Carl:     | Frank - Really good point. When I realized stuttering wasn't inherently "bad" it was just how I talked, that helped me be more open to disclosing and being more open to stutter in front of others.   |
| Scott:    | Anyone have any non-presentation ideas for letting people know.  |
| Tiffani:  | Yes! I love that, Charley, thanks for saying that. I hope SLPs are listening!  |
| Taylor:   | Scott - I wonder this too. I feel like I'm more comfortable with it in a formal setting like a presentation and less so just meeting someone at a party  |
| Jake:     | Jennifer - That is my experience too. I might be the most fluent person on the call today, but am the least fluent person at my company.   |
| Scott:    | But I also feel it's obvious sometimes I stutter so people will figure it out but I hate when they think I'm nervous,  |
| Carl:     | Scott - Great question. I think that would be a good one to pose during the Q&A,   |
| Scott:    | Good call Carl.  |
| Jennifer: | Jake - Right! It's almost like a catch 22!   |
| Rukayya:  | As a result of stuttering, I also tend to talk fast.   |
| Douglas:  | Very good point Pam. Although, I have a special affinity for SLP PWS and I chose my speech therapist based in part because he stuttered. I know quite a few very good stuttering therapists who don't stutter. They must be fully involved with the community and understand that stuttering is much more than just the physical stutter itself. |

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| Jaime:    | I'm bilingual so it is easy to pretend I don't know the word in English.   |
| Cassie:   | Rukayya - I talk fast as well because of my stuttering too!  |
| Frank:    | Does using speech therapy techniques encourage the imposter syndrome?  |
| Lynne:    | As an SLP who does not stutter, I feel that it is probably very helpful for the SLP to be a person who stutters. But this is not always possible. This is why I participate in forums directed by people who stutter and with the NSA whenever possible and appropriate. I also make an effort to connect my clients with people I know who stutter. |
| Jaime:    | I find that people don't tolerate silence very well, so if I wait long enough someone will fill in the blank.  |
| Scott:    | Yes, Jacob, I often pace a lot and move around.  |
| Taylor:   | I wait it out silently but it's because no sound will come out. I would rather have a repetition   |
| Cassie:   | Yes, I do the same!  |
| Carl:     | I find that if I block on phone calls I get the "hey, are you still there?" Question often.  |
| Kevin:    | Taylor - Same, I don't think people understand blocks but they understand someone repeating there words as stuttering.   |
| Lisa:     | Growing up I couldn't get a sound out—it was all air and a struggle. Shifted as I got older to much shorter blocks and repetitions. What's hard is that you don't know why it changed or what caused the change.   |
| Scott:    | Sometimes if it's really bad I hang up, haha.  |
| Taylor:   | Kevin - Yes exactly. That is why I feel like people are confused when I tell them I stutter.   |
| Romelle:  | Jaime, I have experienced that uneasy feeling plenty of times when people feel uncomfortable with silence. I find silence a tool for me to think, process, and come up with a response, without interruption.  |
| Scott:    | I "lost the connection"  |
| Jennifer: | People ask if I am busy on the phone or if they could call back later.   |

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| Bhavesh:  | I feel if I be open about my stuttering and let people at my workplace know, I would create an image in my own mind that I am a stutterer and that identity will stick. I also think I stutter moderately and get by with most conversations, so should I focus on managing my stutter better or go in the other direction where I accept it and let people know about it? |
| Carl:     | Scott - I find that I am better when I can control the situation... initiating the phone call, introducing myself to people first, etc.  |
| Daniel:   | I am in the same place.  |
| Jennifer: | Being on the phone makes me block more because you rely on your voice more.  |
| Tiffani:  | Jacob, thank you for your openness and vulnerability in sharing.   |
| Scott:    | Hang in there Jacob!   |
| Carl:     | Whenever I am put on the spot with the "what's your name" or "where are you from?" questions I tend to freeze up.  |
| Scott:    | It'll get better. 100% Carl.   |
| Romelle:  | Jacob - You're echoing the same situation I've dealt with.   |
| Scott:    | I am so scared of that question, haha.   |
| Carl:     | Jacob - Love hearing about your vulnerability. You have a group of people who completely get it and are rooting for and with you.  |
| Taylor:   | Carl - It's crazy but I've considered different neighborhoods to live based on what I can more easily say.   |
| Lisa:     | I've recently been very proactive about telling people I work with at intro that I stutter. It's very obvious but is a step to embrace who I am.   |
| Carl:     | Taylor - Have thought previously about that with potential naming of my kids! Haha. It's amazing how much it can dictate things. You're preaching to the choir, brother.   |
| Jaime:    | The "meandering" is what is the most difficult part for me.  |
| Taylor:   | Carl - Yes I've thought about this too and I'm not even close to having kids.  |
| Scott:    | Anyone still embarrassed by the word or label of stutter? So I sometimes say speech impediment.  |



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| Dustin:  | I've stuttered for as long as I can remember. I started school a year early just for the speech pathologist resource. I feel as though I was taught my speech was something to be healed from and that one day that would happen. This became very discouraging as years went on and my "healing" had not come yet. It wasn't until college that I feel as though I became more comfortable with stuttering and the idea that it I may just have to accept it rather than focus on it going away forever. I'm now in my 6th year at my current job as the HR director for a small business. After my group interview for this position, I stayed afterward and introduced myself to the owner and explained my situation. It was terrifying as I struggled very much and thought I bombed the interview. Later I learned that it was that introduction afterward that showed them what kind of individual I was and part of the reason why I was offered the position. I feel very blessed to be surrounded by a workplace of people that are real and care. |
| Lisa:    | Scott - Yes, me.   |
| Taylor:  | Dustin - That is really awesome to hear.   |
| Douglas: | AMEN to YET!   |
| El:      | One of the things that helped me:  |
| Lisa:    | Great resource I'm reading "The Happiness Trap."   |
| John:    | Hi, everybody. Such amazing insight here. I'm a 32—year-old journalist who stutters — I wrote an article about Joe Biden and stuttering last year for The Atlantic. I'm now writing a book about stuttering and I'm interviewing stutterers from all over the world about their lives. If any of you would like to talk, please email me! lifeondelaybook@gmail.com  |
| El:      | Realizing that we can inject a mouse with a stuttering GENE and it will start stuttering. Helps me remind myself that it's not my fault.   |
| Scott:   | Oh wow - I loved that article John.  |
| Carl:    | This is a really good episode of This American Life from not too long ago that featured a performance artist who stutters - <a href="https://www.thisamericanlife.org/713/made-to-be-broken">https://www.thisamericanlife.org/713/made-to-be-broken</a> .  |
| Tiffani: | Lisa - I agree, the Happiness Trap is amazing!!  |
| John:    | Carl - That episode was fantastic! Jerome is amazing.  |

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| Carl:    | John - I loved it. One of my fluent best friends recommended it to me and I loved researching Jerome's story further.   |
| Anu:     | This is all very emotional.   |
| Joanne:  | Jacob - My husband Herb and I are SLP's in practice for many years and Herb (who stuttered for years - but not for the past 40+ years) wanted to reach out to you to offer support for you, We both just were moved by this story.  |
| Lisa:    | Great article John and opened up so many doors for people who stutter and giving insight to the rest of society   |
| Lisa:    | There is a very good documentary on Hulu called When We Stutter. Very inspiring.  |
| Carl:    | Jacob - It's a constant journey. One day at a time, friend.   |
| Jaime:   | John - I had my boys watch Obama's and Biden's inauguration just because I wanted them to know that it was okay to stutter.   |
| Romelle: | John – It is so awesome for you to jump into the webinar. We're still continuing to talk about your talk at the NSA online conference a few months ago.   |
| Jory:    | I am an SLP who stutters, never covertly, but work with some people who are. Question to people who are covert: “coming out” is hard, once you do work on being more overt, have you ever regretted it and can you revert back to covert if you want?   |
| Lisa:    | Thank you Tracy!!! Great points!  |
| Taylor:  | Also something to think about is that not all fluent people are great communicators.  |
| Scott:   | Very true, Taylor.  |
| Tiffani: | Jory - I'm an SLP who stutters and I identify as covert. I'm not as covert as I used to be but I still completely hide my stuttering with my family. I have come out to just about everyone, including my family. For the most part it was great but with my family it wasn't good and they weren't accepting. I did resort back to my covert ways and still hide my stuttering with them but despite this very negative reaction, I still don't regret coming out to them. |
| Kate:    | Definitely - some fluent people talk WAY too much / think out loud rather than selectively speaking. We all have things that make us unique.  |
| Carl:    | I've got chills. Thanks for that Tracey.  |

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| Lynne:   | Tracey, you are amazing!!!! Thank you! Saw your segment with Vivian! Y'all did such a great job!!!  |
| Tiffani: | Thank you Tracey, that was so wonderful. :) Also Jacob, you're awesome!! I got my bachelor's in archaeology but don't use it. It's so cool you're doing that!   |
| Jory:    | Thank you Tiffani! Sorry to hear about the reaction from your family. But I'm glad to hear you feel that sense of freedom and also have choice.   |
| Ashlee:  | Tracey - As a Speech Pathologist, I really enjoyed listening to you. I picked up some wonderful tips that I will be sharing with my clients. Thank you!   |
| Douglas: | Big THANK YOU, Tracey! Hugs!  |
| Margie:  | Tracy - Your message is fabulous and your perspective has gotten you to an amazing point. Thanks so much!   |
| Charley: | As we run out of time, please feel free to email me questions, and I will either try to answer them or forward to someone who can: charley@sc.edu   |
| Lisa:    | You got this! It's okay to feel those things, they are real.  |
| El:      | "A quick shot in the arm" love that!  |
| Jonah:   | Regarding my earlier comment on impostor syndrome ... while I have the freedom to stutter and be myself at work since I opened up about it a few years ago, I do still feel impostor syndrome the same way people who don't stutter feel impostor syndrome. Just wanted to set expectations for people who may think impostor syndrome *only* exists because of stuttering. |
| Lisa:    | YES!!! it's amazing to be seen  |
| Joanne:  | Daniel - Thank you for taking the time to express your concerns, and stuttering freely. Even in this group, this takes determination. Keep going - be open!   |
| Kevin:   | Daniel - I believe speechIRL is located in Chicago, Illinois. You may want to check them out - <a href="https://www.speechirl.com/">https://www.speechirl.com/</a>  |
| Tiffani: | Daniel, best of luck! You're gonna be awesome! You'll be able to connect to your clients in ways that many won't! I had a counselor who stutters once and it was amazing cathartic! You can do it! :)   |
| Douglas: | Dan - Stay engaged with the NSA. This whole thing is a process and a journey. Like Pam said, we can connect you with people who can help you in your path and reach your goal.  |

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| Joanne:   | I am so glad I could join you! This was powerful! I am an SLP and can't wait to share with one of my clients who just jumped out of his comfort zones to take a job and disclose at work! I will pass all the resources along to him and our other clients. Thank you all!  |
| Barbara:  | Thank you for a wonderful webinar. Covert Stuttering is very difficult and definitely deserves attention.   |
| Rachelle:   | Thanks everyone! I always thought I was alone with my feelings of Importer Syndrome and covert stuttering. Nice to see/hear I am not alone :)   |
| Carl;<br>Taylor;<br>Jacob:<br>Tiffani;<br>Lmb:<br>Margie:<br>Scott:<br>Lisa:<br>Douglas:<br>Jonah;<br>Rick: | Thanks Pam and Charley for facilitating!; I wish this could go on for a few more hours! This has been great; Thank you, Pam and Charley, this was awesome! Also thanks for everyone's interesting comments, questions, etc. This was a great discussion!; Many thanks, excellent presentation!; Fabulous, amazing webinar! Thanks to all; Thank you! Thanks to all! Great seminar!; FABULOUS WEBINAR PAM AND CHARLEY! Great discussion, Pam and Charley!!! Thank you! |

### Links:

[www.westutter.org/CareerSuccess](http://www.westutter.org/CareerSuccess)