

WHAT IS STUTTERING?

Stuttering is a speech disorder in which the forward flow of speech is involuntarily disrupted. Stuttering generally involves repetitions or prolongations of sounds and syllables, or hesitations or blocks in making voiced sounds. It also may be accompanied by secondary behaviors, such as closing the eyes or arm movements that are intended to avoid, postpone, or hide the blocks. A person who stutters has no problem in finding the words to say, but rather, in physically saying them.

HOW COMMON IS STUTTERING?

It has been estimated that about one percent of the general population stutters. This would amount to almost three million people in the United States alone. Stuttering is about three or four times more common in males than females.

WHAT CAUSES STUTTERING?

The precise causes of stuttering are still unknown, but most researchers now consider stuttering to be neurologically and genetically based. Although the interference with speech is sometimes triggered by emotional or environmental factors, stuttering is basically neurological and physiological – not psychological – in nature. Intelligence and emotional stability are not affected.

Roughly 4 to 5 percent of people experience stuttering at some time during their early childhood as language develops. While the majority of people stop stuttering naturally, stuttering may continue to be a chronic, persistent problem into adolescence and adulthood.

A relatively rare kind of stuttering, known as acquired or neurogenic stuttering, may occur at any age following certain kinds of brain injuries or other trauma. Such stuttering can be more common within the military, given the potentially difficult experiences associated with service.

MILITARY RESOURCES

For more information on how the NSA supports our service men and women who stutter:

westutter.org/military

Stuttering affects the speech of one out of every 100 adults. Therefore, military personnel are likely to encounter people who stutter within their workforce or among new recruits. People who stutter can make extremely valuable contributions to the military. Unfortunately, skills and talents are sometimes overlooked or under-utilized because of misconceptions and negative stereotyping about stuttering. For an individual to be judged solely on the basis of fluency is not only unfair to the person who stutters – it can be a real skill loss to the military.

This brochure is intended to provide information about stuttering for military, supervisors, recruiters, and interviewers. It will address frequently asked questions to clear up some common misunderstandings about stuttering.

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The National Stuttering Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Since 1977, we have dedicated ourselves to bringing hope and empowerment to children and adults who stutter, their families, and professionals through support, education, advocacy, and research.

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STUTTERING & THE MILITARY



WHAT MILITARY LEADERSHIP & SERVICE MEMBERS SHOULD KNOW

STUTTERING IS VARIABLE

Stuttering severity varies widely among individuals. It may also vary in the same individual from day to day depending on the speaking situation. Saying one's name and speaking to authority figures may be particularly difficult. For some individuals, fatigue, stress, and time pressure can increase their stuttering. When stutterers feel compelled to hide their stuttering, it generally becomes worse.

Patterns of stuttering behavior can also vary. Some individuals try to avoid stuttering by pausing before words, substituting words, and interjecting phrases such as "you know", "well, actually", "um", etc., whenever they anticipate a block. As a result, the person may create the false impression of being hesitant, uncertain, confused, or nervous.

An interview or medical examination may be the single most difficult speaking situation a stutterer will encounter. Stuttering could be at its worst. Therefore, the degree of stuttering at the interview/exam should not be used to predict how the person will actually speak on the job. Many stutterers are quite fluent in the heat of the moment, when their focus is on getting the job done, instead of being fixed on fluency in front of superiors or evaluators.

STUTTERING CANNOT BE CURED

Despite scientific research breakthroughs in the field of stuttering, there is still no proven, consistent cure for stuttering. Many individuals benefit from various forms of speech therapy and from support groups like the National Stuttering Association's Military Support Group.

It is unrealistic to expect that any treatment will completely eliminate stuttering. Methods that appear to benefit some individuals may not work for others, and relapses can be common. With a proper referral, TRICARE (military insurance) can and will support treatment for stuttering. Seeking therapy while on active duty should not be interpreted as an acknowledgement of a disqualifying medical condition. Personnel desiring stuttering therapy should start by discussing this with their Primary Care Physician. SLPs within TRICARE should understand this process and be familiar with this brochure.

STUTTERING & SUCCESS

People who stutter have the same drives and ambitions as their more fluent colleagues. People who stutter have distinguished themselves in all walks of life - including business, law, medicine, science, education, entertainment, politics, and military service. Therefore, military supervisors should welcome the opportunity to lead people who stutter, as well as offering them leadership roles and paths for promotion, consistent with their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

STUTTERING & COMMUNICATION

Many stutterers perform very effectively in jobs requiring them to interact with the public on a daily basis. Most persons who stutter are capable of adequate - and often excellent - oral communication, regardless of their disfluency.

Good communication involves more than just fluency. It includes good listening skills, the ability to empathize with people, thoughtfulness and diplomacy, and having something valuable to say. A person who stutters often will possess these qualities, including valuable "people skills" gained through past work and life experiences.

A person who stutters should not be rejected simply because a job description requires "excellent oral communication skills". The supervisor should consider what kind of "oral communication" the job actually involves, and apply the previously discussed information to make an informed decision.

Disqualifying potential service members because of their stutter will deprive our military of the valuable skills that these individuals can and do contribute to our nation's armed forces.

The greatest obstacle to communication comes when an individual feels compelled to hide his or her stuttering out of fear of reprisal. For supervisors to demand fluency as the price of one's job only creates a vicious spiral of stress and anxiety that tends to make stuttering worse. Many people who stutter choose to advertise that they stutter, so it is not "the elephant in the room".

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

The true potential of individuals who stutter can often be overlooked because of negative stereotypes. These stereotypes include the widely-held misconception that stutterers are nervous, shy, quiet, self-conscious, withdrawn, tense, anxious, fearful, and guarded. In fact, stuttering is not caused by nervousness or emotional disturbance. The notion that service members cannot serve successfully as a person who stutters is false, and represents an incomplete understanding of the disorder.

LISTENING TO A PWS

Stuttering is nothing to be embarrassed about for the person who stutters (PWS) or the listener. The following are some tips that will make it easier for both of you:

- Listen attentively and wait for the person to finish. Don't try to fill in words or complete the person's sentences.
- Focus on what the person is saying, not how they are saying it.
- Speak normally in a relaxed manner.
- Maintain natural eye contact, even when the person is stuttering.

PWS CAN SUCCESSFULLY SERVE THEIR COUNTRY

People who stutter want to excel at their work and to hone their skills just like anyone else. They appreciate supervisors who give them opportunities, rather than judging them on the basis of fluency. Some of the benefits brought to the workplace by people who stutter may include:

- Patience and perseverance, gained from dealing with their stuttering
- Greater sensitivity to the needs of other people
- Heightened listening skills
- Appreciation of the value of preparation
- Better understanding of communication issues in the workplace
- Enhancement of your organization's image as one that promotes diversity and inclusion

By refraining from making assumptions about an individual's qualifications based on stuttering, both the supervisor and member can achieve a productive and mutually beneficial relationship.