

Information about stuttering

Stuttering is a disability according to the World Health Organisation and the Australian Human Rights Commission. It affects 1–2% of all people from all ethnic backgrounds and cultures worldwide.

Onset and course

Stuttering typically starts in the pre-school years; however, many children recover naturally within a few years. If this does not occur, without effective early intervention stuttering persists through adolescence and into adulthood. It is known that stuttering persists into old age and hence the disabling effects of stuttering can last a lifetime.

Moments of stuttering

Stuttering interferes with communication effectiveness, with severe stuttering moments lasting up to 15 seconds. Stuttering behaviours vary in type and severity from person to person. Severity also varies within individuals typically according to speaking situations.

Cause

To date, the cause of stuttering is not fully understood. However, it is considered a physical condition, underpinned by transient problems in the brain with the timing of speech production. This condition does not appear to lessen with age. Many but not all people who stutter have a family history of stuttering but there is no clear pattern of inheritance.

Social anxiety

Social anxiety is commonly associated with stuttering. From a very early age, children who stutter are at increased risk of being teased and bullied by peers. This can be very stressful and lead to social anxiety. This anxiety can add to the disabling effects of the stuttering itself, as it typically increases severity. Social anxiety can also lead to avoidance of words and topics and even speaking situations, and this can become a vicious circle as avoidance typically perpetuates the anxiety.

Impact on daily life

Many people who stutter report having poor quality of life compared to their peers. For many, stuttering interferes with achieving their educational and vocational potential. Children who stutter are known to minimise classroom participation and adolescents and adults who stutter are typically not employed for jobs that require communicating with the public.

Professional interventions

In Australia, both speech and anxiety interventions for people who stutter are available in public and private settings and in many university clinics. The efficacy of these interventions is supported by clinical trials conducted in Australia. The Australian Stuttering Research Centre leads the world in treatment research. For children, early speech intervention is critically important and should start as soon as practical after onset. This is typically delivered by a parent or caregiver in the child's everyday environment, under the guidance of a speech pathologist. If stuttering persists into late childhood and through to adulthood, professional

speech intervention typically consists of a speech pathologist providing the individual with speech techniques to control or minimise their stuttering. This is not a cure, and further intervention down the track is frequently needed to maintain that control, along with on-going support from peers, such as from the Australian Speak Easy Association. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and other psychological interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) are needed to alleviate social anxiety. These may be provided by speech pathologists, but if the anxiety is severe the individual should see a clinical psychologist. The aim of all therapy for children, adolescents and adults is to assist them participate more fully in society, particularly in social, educational, and work situations.

Conclusion

Stuttering is life-long disability and while early intervention can stop further development, there is no cure for persistent stuttering. Its disabling effects mean that those who stutter must be supported to have access to treatment when needed, throughout life. As will be clear from the above, stuttering is highly complex and is not just about speech dysfluency. Every person who stutters is different, as is their stuttering and its effects on their quality of life. A detailed assessment by a speech pathologist who has experience working with people who stutter is the best guide for understanding the individual needs of each person who stutters, of whatever age.

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