

Students who stutter

Information for lecturers at vocational studies and universities



NEDERLANDSE FEDERATIE STOTTEREN

Colophon

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Stuttering is a complex communication disorder which may have a genetic basis. In addition, developmental factors, psychosocial factors and learning behaviour may also play a role.

Approximately 5 percent of all children have stuttered at some point in time. The chance of complete recovery is higher at a young age. Nearly one percent of all stuttering grows into a long-term problem.

Stuttering can hamper participation in education and work.

Research has shown that more than 50% of students who stutter experience this as an impediment in the communication with teachers and/or their peers. As a result of stuttering, some students either graduate later than expected, or feel obliged to end their study. Following graduation, some students with persistent stuttering are unable to find a job.

The majority of the students who stutter are of the opinion that counselling provided by the educational institution is of great importance in coping with the disorder.

Teachers and lecturers in vocational and scientific institutions play an important role in identifying stuttering problems and appropriate coaching of students who stutter, to ensure their full participation in the educational program.

What is stuttering?

In people who stutter the brain produces speech differently than in fluent speakers. An impediment in the execution of the speech movements can cause the speaker to repeat or prolong sounds and can block the movements of the lips, tongue or vocal folds. As a result, speech can consume more time and effort in which it will sound strained or restless.

People who stutter often try to minimize the duration of a stutter moment or/and try to avoid or prevent the stutter moments in different ways.

Stuttering not only influences the fluency in speech but also affects the thoughts, emotions and interaction between the person who stutters and the listener. In this respect, stuttering should be regarded more as a communication disorder than a speech disorder.

Participation in education and employment

- Stuttering influences the participation in education and future employment.
- The inconvenience that students who stutter may undergo during their study depends on the individual. The way in which the student and the environment cope with the communication disorder is of greater importance than the severity of stuttering.
- Students who stutter have developed different strategies to cope with the stuttering, based on the nature of the student and their successful and non-successful experiences with verbal communication. Some students are open about their communication disorders and choose to speak in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Others experience more difficulties dealing with their stuttering.

Verbal-motoric and social strategies

Students who experience more difficulty in stuttering can show an extensive pattern of verbal-motoric reactions.

Examples of verbal motoric reactions to the stuttering:

- pausing before speaking
- taking a quick breath
- looking in another direction
- using stopgaps in the stutter moment
- avoiding words and/or using synonyms
- shortening or reformulating of sentences
- pushing the words to come out



Some students can be ‘successful’ in avoiding moments of stuttering by using synonyms and reformulating sentences so that they seem to speak fluently. In this manner they are continuously avoiding their stuttering (*escape behaviours*). This is not only very strenuous for the speaker who stutters but is also confusing for the listener who might not comprehend what has been said as a consequence of escape behaviours.

Others try to stop their stuttering by pushing a word out. This extra effort will often only aggravate the stuttering (*fighting*).

The most extreme strategy that a student who stutters can utilise is to make sure that he doesn't have to speak. His passivity can evoke negative reactions in others, who will then regard him/her as a 'nerd' or as less competent.

Strategies to avoid speaking situations:

- avoiding eye contact
- looking disinterested
- not asking questions
- not answering
- not giving an opinion
- arriving exactly on time and leaving immediately
- avoiding confrontational situations and activities.



Cognitive and emotional learning

Students who stutter often experience irrational thoughts about themselves, their verbal abilities and the reactions from their environment. These thoughts obstruct the student in their functioning. Fears about stuttering can occupy a student during an oral exam at the cost of failing to focus on the content of the exam. Anxieties about making new contacts could also give them sleepless nights.

A student who stutters can experience “typical stutter anxiety” related to a particular sound, word or situation. These situations may arise during a presentation, an oral exam or a group meeting in where they have to introduce themselves.

These negative emotions can lead to a negative self-perception. This in turn may lead to avoidance of speech altogether as a way of avoiding confrontational situations.

Dealing with stuttering

People who stutter and perform successfully in their occupations, generally have a more active attitude towards their stuttering. They are open and honest about their speaking and choose a communication strategy depending on the situation.

The best way to approach a student who stutters is to carefully confront him with the perceived communicative disorder. The suggestions below can be used as a guide.

Specific advice for lecturers:

- Discuss the perceived communicative behaviour with the student.
- Ask the student if he experiences sufficient support in coping with stuttering.
- Discuss the influences of stuttering in participation in lectures, practise, oral exams, internships and profession.
- Help formulating an aim.
- Point out the different possibilities in counselling that the education system offers to the student.
- Discuss the possibility of stuttering therapy.
- Ask the student in which way he would benefit the best during classes.
- Set an evaluation date.



Different vocational trainings (studies) and universities have a policy aimed at helping students with a handicap, including stuttering. It is important to make students who stutter aware of these facilities, so that they are able to make use of them.

The lecturer can make a difference to the student, not only by approaching the problem directly but also indirectly by being a good listener.

After all, the lecturer is also a listener; therefore the suggestions that are being made to people listening to persons who stutter, apply to him as well

Lecturers in vocational and scientific studies can help students who stutter by stimulating them to be successful communication partners during their study and in executing their profession/occupation.

General advice for the listeners:

- Listen to what is said, not how it is said
- Let the student finish his sentences
- Reduce time pressure
- Do not correct the student
- Keep eye contact
- Reduce the communicative pressure
- Speak calmly and slowly



Questions about stuttering or therapy?

Stuttering therapy should be made-to-measure. There is no single specific therapy that is suitable for all people who stutter. Therefore a good diagnosis is a must. Speech and language therapists and fluency specialists are qualified to diagnose stuttering.

For more information about stuttering, therapy and fluency specialists:

Europe

European League of Stuttering Associations:	www.elsa.info
The Croatian Association for People Who Stutter:	www.udruga-hinkofreund.hr
British Stammering Organization:	www.stammering.org
Bundesvereinigung Stotterer-Selbsthilfe:	www.bvss.de
Nederlandse Federatie Stotteren:	www.stotteren.nl
Belgische Belangengroep Stotteraars:	www.stotteren.be

United States

International Stuttering Association:	www.stutterisa.org/
The Stuttering Foundation:	www.stutteringhelp.org www.tartamudez.org

Information about stuttering worldwide: www.stutteringhomepage.com/

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- Stuttering Foundation the, *Answers for Employers*.



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