

FAMILY AND FRIENDS: SUPPORTING ADJUSTMENT TO THE SPEECH EASY®

The SpeechEasy helps many people who stutter speak more fluently and/or with less struggle and tension. The device is worn in the ear like a hearing aid. It allows the wearer to hear his own voice at a slight delay (Delayed Auditory Feedback - DAF) and a different pitch (Frequency Altered Feedback – FAF). We do not understand exactly why these changes in the auditory signal increase fluency in individuals who stutter, but we have known for decades that they do. The use of DAF/FAF is nothing new. The technological breakthrough is that the devices are tiny enough and comfortable enough to be worn in daily activities.

It is important for those in the patient's family and community to know a few things about stuttering and the SpeechEasy in order to be supportive. Adjustment to the SpeechEasy and newfound fluency may not be easy and may take some time.

Stuttering is a physical condition. Research has not shown any psychological or emotional differences in people who stutter that distinguish them from the general population. There is no evidence that parents of people who stutter differ in their parenting styles from other parents.

Stuttering often “runs in families.” People who stutter have neurological systems that are organized slightly differently for sequencing finely coordinated movements of the speech mechanism. Stuttering is, by definition, an involuntary behavior. Therefore, “trying harder” by means of physical or mental effort may be ineffective and often even counterproductive in management. Stuttering is characterized by unpredictable cycling. Sometimes, stuttering is worsened by stress, but this

is not always the case. Variations are unique to each person and often there is no identifiable “cause” for exacerbations.

While the SpeechEasy is not a hearing aid (it delivers only a small amount of amplification), wearers face some of the same challenges as hearing aid users. Since one ear is occluded and sounds are distorted, hearing other people's voices may be difficult. The SpeechEasy is often ineffective in noisy surroundings. You can help by facing the wearer so “lip reading” can augment hearing. If you are sitting next to the person, try to position yourself by the unobstructed ear rather than the SpeechEasy side. Seek out quiet surroundings, when possible, for important conversations. The SpeechEasy user will not wear the device all the time. Sometimes a break from the signal is essential to progress in wearing the device for longer stretches.

The SpeechEasy is not a cure for stuttering. While stuttering lessens and becomes less complicated, the person who stutters will experience significant blocks. Please maintain good eye contact and wait until he finishes speaking. This communicates that you care more about what he is saying than how he is saying. It is not helpful to offer simplistic advice like: “Relax.” or “Slow down.” Try to avoid the temptation to fill in words or finish sentences. A communication environment in which people do not interrupt each other is helpful to people who stutter and is respectful of everyone.

Some people who stutter have difficulty on the telephone. Extra patience may be needed during phone conversations.

If you are curious about the SpeechEasy you can visit the web site www.speecheasy.com. Good information regarding stuttering in people of all ages can be found at www.stutterhelp.org.