

From the Ed's Head Just Slow Down!

By Connie Dugan

"Take your time." "Talk slowly." "Just slow down." People who stutter often hear this kind of advice. Usually they say it annoys them. Being told to "slow down" can be upsetting; yet slowing down is one of the most useful things a person who stutters can do. So why the paradox? Why is this good advice so bothersome? I think I know some reasons.

Often, it's because the person bestowing this suggestion is being just plain rude. It is bad manners to interrupt someone who is talking and no one likes to be treated impolitely.

Sometimes it's because the advice-giver seems to be focusing too much on speech and too little on communication. It doesn't feel good when someone responds as if he cares more about what you're doing with your mouth than about your ideas.

Maybe it's because the suggestion to "slow down" is made by someone who knows nothing about stuttering. Who welcomes guidance from someone who clearly doesn't know what she is talking about? !

Sometimes it's not the advice but the tone of voice that is upsetting. Does the speaker sound critical, patronizing or (no thank you!) pitying? Or maybe the same "expert" who tells you to "Take your time!" also says things like, "See, you said that fluently! Now all you have to do is talk like that all the time!" (Ha!)

Maybe the words "slow down" are associated with unpleasant memories. The person talking right now may be perfectly nice. She may be trying to tell you (if awkwardly) that she isn't in a rush, really wants to hear what you have to say, and thinks you are well worth the wait. But if her words remind you of someone was unkind in the past, your reaction may be colored by that former bad experience. You may completely miss the current message.

Or maybe hearing "slow down" is frustrating because you know it's just not as simple as that. Slowing down is NOT The-One-And-Only-Easy-And-Obvious-Complete-And-Utter-Absolutely-Guaranteed-Cure-For-Stuttering. If only it were that simple, but it's not.

And what in the world does "slow down," mean, anyway? Does it mean to talk like a robot syllable by syllable with no expression? Does "slow down" mean yyoouuuuu sssttttrrrreeettttccchhhhhh oooouuuutt eeevvrrryyy ssssoouuunnnddd like a tape recording played at the wrong speed? Or does it mean to move your whole body more slowly, or "just relax," or delete interesting things from your schedule, or get more sleep, or be calm, or wait a minute, or what?

For these reasons, hearing the advice "slow down" can be a real pain. But with some clarification it really can be EXCELLENT advice for someone working on managing stuttering. (I said "managing," not "curing.") Let me give some examples of ways to slow down that can help a lot.

Slow down. . . and carefully examine at what you are actually doing when you block so you can find less complicated, less exhausting ways of stuttering.

Slow down. . . and give yourself permission to use the exact word you want to use even if you stutter. (A thesaurus is a fine thing but who wants to be one?)

Slow down. . . and ease through your blocks rather than pushing and struggling through. Surprisingly, it often takes less time in the long run!

Slow down. . . and take the time to cancel any blocks you haven't handled to your satisfaction.

Slow down. . . and develop a habitually slower speaking rate with lots of natural pausing. This will make you sound confident and thoughtful, not stereotypically "nervous." It will also make it easier to use the techniques you find helpful.

Slow down. . . and incorporate some form of relaxation exercises into your routine. Stuttering = Tension at many levels. Understanding what both tension and relaxation feel like in big muscles can increase awareness of what the little speech muscles are doing.

Slow down. . . and study up on stuttering. Don't accept "folk myths." Some people bothered by stuttering know very little about the condition. Being armed with facts can help in dealing with ignorant remarks. Most helping professionals (physicians, psychotherapists, teachers. . .) don't know much about stuttering. If you are well informed you may be able to help them serve you more effectively?

Slow down. . . and give yourself enough time to learn whatever techniques you're trying use. Take the time to practice and don't give up. It isn't easy break old patterns and learn new habits. People who stutter require just as long to make changes as everyone else.

Slow down. . . and catch yourself when the voice inside your head (it's yours) says things that don't help you. Learn to turn off any old negative "tapes" and replace them with positive self-talk.

Slow down. . . and avoid jumping to conclusions about what that "look" your listener gave you means. (Did you ever do a double-take when you saw something unexpected?) Noticing something unusual is not the equivalent of making a negative judgment about it.

Slow down. . . when someone says or does something inappropriate regarding your stuttering. Don't immediately discount him as a jerk. He may not know what is appropriate and might even appreciate being told in a diplomatic way. (Do you know the best way to guide a visually impaired person or transfer someone from a wheelchair? Is it the same for everyone?)

Slow down. . . and don't assume that someone doesn't respond to you the way you'd like because you stutter. (Maybe she's shy, or preoccupied, or engaged, ...) If there's a problem, it unrelated to stuttering.

These are some ways to "slow down." Each has been helpful to someone I know as part of stuttering therapy. Any of these suggestions could also be followed in a self-help

approach. It would be important to collect information; outline a systematic but flexible plan; be able self-evaluate and self-reinforce; and have plenty of will power. Participation in a supportive self-help group could be invaluable in sticking with the effort, especially if professional therapy were not available. Depending on your specific goal, you might find the following books to be useful:

* *Self-Therapy for the Stutterer* by Malcolm Fraser, Stuttering Foundation of America, Memphis, \$3.00.

Study this first whatever your goal.

* *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns, 1981, Signet Publishing, \$5.99.

Based on the cognitive therapy principle that people can make great changes in both their feelings (moods) and behavior by learning to think in ways that help them. Excellent if your goal is to work on self-talk.

* *The Relaxation Workbook and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay, 1988, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, \$13.95.

This really is a workbook. It covers many techniques for relaxation and stress reduction including progressive relaxation, nutrition, coping skills, assertiveness, thought stopping, and many more. A smorgasbord of techniques, explained clearly. Choose the ones that suit your nature.

* *Stuttering: in Perspective* by Lloyd Hulit, 1985, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Illinois, \$29.95.

This book is a treasure! Excellent source of information about stuttering for the layperson. See review page 14.

* *Stuttering: The Search for a Cause and Cure* by Oliver Bloodstein, 1993, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, approximately \$40.00.

Excellent source of information about stuttering for curious thinkers.

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