Managing stuttering

Dear Alice,

I am a college student with a stuttering problem. I sometimes stutter when talking in the classroom, which causes much embarrassment. I stutter less with friends and family. I've had this problem since the beginning of high school, but it comes and goes ? in fact, sometimes I go months, semesters, or even a year or two without stuttering. Then all of a sudden it comes back. I had very minimal (almost no) stuttering last year, but the problem has come back this year. People say that stuttering is a result of nervousness and/or self-consciousness. I do not deny that I am more likely to stutter when I am nervous, but I also stutter when I am completely calm and worry-free. One interesting thing: I never stutter when I am talking to myself alone.

I have a public speaking presentation at the end of this semester ? do you have any advice on how to limit the stuttering? Any quick tips, since I do not have the time or money to see a speech therapist.

? Wants to Communicate Freely

Answer

Dear Wants to Communicate Freely,

As you mentioned, stuttering often strikes when talking in front of a group or in a more pressurized setting, rather than when alone or with close family and friends. Experts say stuttering is more common when a person is nervous, yet you mention you sometimes stutter when you aren?t feeling particularly nervous, too. Reflecting on how your stuttering comes and goes depending on your audience may provide some hints as to what triggers stuttering for you. And, while there are some do-it-yourself strategies to improve your public speaking skills, you may also consider some accessible and inexpensive speech therapy services to specifically address stuttering.

It sounds like you might have some of your own tricks that work to calm your stuttering, even if you aren't totally aware of them. To increase your awareness, you might also think about paying close attention to how you hold your body and if you breath differently when you're speaking with your family and friends, compared to when speaking in class or to large groups. Here are a few different strategies that you may consider to help calm your nerves:

- **Breathing** ? Many nervous speakers tend to breathe with shallow breaths. This actually produces a sort of hyperventilation. To prevent this, experts on effective public speaking
suggest breathing training:
- Sit calmly in a quiet room for 20 minutes with your eyes closed.
- Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest.
- As you breathe in and out, be conscious of your breath entering your lungs and filling your belly.
- Hold each breath for two to three seconds.
- As you slowly exhale, think or say the word "relax."

If you practice breathing on a daily basis before the speech, you may begin to notice and correct your shallow breathing. Then, on the big day, you might be more likely to breathe deeply and slowly. Hopefully, by feeling calmer and you'll be less likely to stutter.

- **Rehearsing**: Another strategy for speaking in front of a large group - like during your public speaking presentation at the end of the semester - is rehearsing the material in advance to help your actual presentation go more smoothly. Both familiarity with the material and practicing it while breathing in a relaxed manner are likely to help. Plus, being extra prepared for your big presentation can't hurt.

- **Devices**: Digital devices that fit into the ear can play back what the speaker says in a modified way in order to encourage fluid speaking. These devices are considered more effective for improving reading aloud rather than other forms of talking or presenting. While these might be used at home, they are also quite costly, ranging in price from $2500 to $4500.

Although you mention a lack of time and money, seeing a speech therapist really might be your best bet - there are some options that might be cheaper and more convenient than you think. The [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](https://www.asha.org) website may be a good place to begin looking into reduced-cost speech therapy options available to you. Some speech therapists will even video chat with clients, eliminating the need for physical proximity. Best of luck to you as you prepare for your public speaking presentation!

Alice!
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