

Mail Today

Stammer is not contagious

BY RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

MANY believe that those who stammer are possessed by evil spirits. Others think stammering is a contagious disease. Either way, people who stammer are both pitied and ridiculed, and life in such unforgiving conditions can become very difficult. "People tend to think that because a person cannot speak properly they must be a bit thick."

"I have been regarded as being strange, a freak or maybe mentally retarded," explains Rahul Sen, a 26-year-old IT professional. He says the negative reactions began in school, causing him to feel very embarrassed and shy and even turn into a "wreck" in high pressure social situations. "I've had shop assistants just walk away from me because they wouldn't wait until I had finished my sentence." The worst part about this speech problem is that embarrassment prevents people from seeking treatment. Some think there is nothing they can do about it.

IT ISN'T A DISEASE

"Stammering, also called stuttering, is an involuntary block in the normal flow of speech. Sounds, syllables or words may be repeated or prolonged, often with accompanying blinking, lip twitching, and jaw or body spasms resulting from the huge effort of trying to speak," says Dr Ankur Chopra, speech pathologist, Fortis Hospital. "While the cause of stammering is still fuzzy, it is four times more common in men than in women and tends to run in families. Researchers are still trying to confirm this genetic link and establishing a connection between this and possible abnormalities of muscle control."

STRESS AGGRAVATES IT

Certain situations, such as giving a public speech or talking on the telephone may increase a stammer. At the same time, stuttering may almost disappear while singing, or talking to a close friend or colleague. "It all depends on how relaxed a person is feeling. When the stress levels rise, the stammer will increase proportionately," adds Dr Ankur. Interestingly, a person who stammers can sing perfectly because he knows the sequence of the words and there is a rhythm to them. An impromptu conversation that requires quick thinking and articulation is, however, a challenge. "Speech is a complicated business which requires coordination of breathing, coming together of the vocal cords and movement of the palate, tongue, jaw and lips. Stammering is most likely to start in childhood when a child's speech and language abilities can't keep up with their verbal requirements," says Dr Raj Sharma, speech therapist, Max Healthcare.



Shahrukh Khan made stammering fashionable in *Darr* with "I love you K-K-Kiran" but in reality reactions to those who stammer are anything but charitable

SOME MAY OUTGROW IT

One in 20 children do stammer but, fortunately, many grow out of this so-called 'developmental stammering.' Those who don't are usually reprimanded by the parents for stammering, which causes extreme stress and aggravates the problem. If a child doesn't outgrow his speech problem by the time he is five, doctors recommend that he go in for therapy. Rahul's parents would scold him incessantly for stammering, hoping that would make him stop. When this did not work, they behaved as though his problem needed to be hidden and made him watch TV in his room when guests were over. This behaviour continued until Rahul's aunt stepped in and took him to a speech therapist. After therapy, his stammer has reduced considerably.

THERAPY CAN HELP

In general, most parents look away from their stammering child and hope the problem will settle itself. This inaction worsens the problem. "If your child stammers go to a speech therapist before it is too late. Early

treatment can cure a stammer completely," advises Dr Neeti Sharma, speech therapist, Rockland Hospital. Dr Sharma also advises parents to become more pro-active. "Instead of putting pressure on them and completing their sentences, parents should encourage their children to relax and speak slowly."

DON'T AVOID THE ISSUE

Although it's tempting to avoid situations that increase stammering, it's actually the worst mistake to make. 24 year old Rishabh Ghosh, used to avoid articulating words that precipitated the stammering. "If I wanted to say telephone, instead of stuttering on the T, I would just say mobile," he says. This is tantamount to sweeping the problems under a carpet, but fortunately therapy makes a difference here too. "Avoidance reduction therapy is geared to taking the embarrassment out of stammering and helping people face up to rather than avoid situations where they need to speak, and focus especially on the words that they tend to tumble on," says Dr Raj, stressing on the need to practice the techniques.

THE KEY IS TO BREATHE

Breath control is an important part of the therapy. "We exhale when we speak. If we are breathing too fast or holding our breath when we are speaking we don't get enough air and that affects the quality of speech," says Dr Sharma. Learning to relax during a conversation, reading aloud, listening to a tape and then repeating after it some of the methods used to cure a stammer. Techniques learned with a therapist or a small group can then be extended to everyday situations. "We also counsel the clients to identify any emotional issues that might be contributing to the problem," says Dr Raj.

FIND YOUR OWN WAY

Everyone is different and no single treatment for stammering works for all. Rahul benefited from a month long course that helped him modify his breathing so that he could speak in complete sentences. He also took time out to stand in front of the mirror and practice talking slowly. Rishabh is learning not to avoid difficult words, but to draw out the words he has a problem with. "I try and elongate the word that I stammer on instead of hurrying over it. It works, but it's mentally exhausting to practice all the techniques," he says.

None of the treatments for stammering bring overnight results. It takes hard work and a lot of practice to change the speech patterns of a lifetime. But for Rishabh and Rahul, and the hundreds of other people who do learn to control their stammers, being able to hold a conversation with friends, family or even perfect strangers is well worth all the effort.

IF YOUR FRIEND STUTTERS

- Try slowing down your speech as this will help him to slow down and he will feel less hurried.
- Keep sentences short and simple.
- Make lots of eye contact and really listen to what he is saying as this helps build confidence.
- Don't interrupt and don't finish his sentences.
- Treat them like equals and encourage them to mingle with your other friends

rituparna.mukherjee@mailtoday.in