

How Beliefs and Self-image Can Influence Stuttering

by Alan Badmington

from Wales, UK

Although I began stuttering during early childhood, it is only during recent years that I have gained an understanding of how I developed my stuttering mindset.

Throughout my life, there were times when I experienced difficulty in communicating with others. I blocked on many words and struggled to speak in various situations. Each time I stuttered on a particular letter/word, I became more afraid of saying that letter/word. I also stuttered more noticeably when speaking to specific people.

As a result of the problems that I encountered, I developed certain beliefs about myself. For example, I believed that I could not use 13 letters of the alphabet and would avoid them at all costs. I adopted avoidance strategies, including extensive use of word substitution. I also believed that I would stutter when I was the centre of attention; giving detailed explanations; or addressing groups. There were many other self-limiting beliefs that I held in relation to my speech, the most powerful being that I would never be able to deal with my stuttering issues. The latter belief remained firmly ingrained until 2000 when I met someone who had made immense strides in overcoming his stutter. This caused me to question whether I might also be able to attain some improvement. He became my role model.

SPRINGBOARD FOR CHANGE

Shortly afterwards, I acquired new tools and techniques that I found relatively easy to implement in the group environment in which they were being taught. Everyone was so supportive and accepting - I felt totally at ease.

Within a few days, I achieved a high degree of control over my speech, eliminating blocks and learning how to cope with the challenging words that had always held such an emotional charge. For the first time in my life, I enjoyed talking. I grew, immensely, in confidence.

But although I was able to speak well in that reassuring setting, I suspected that it would be difficult to transfer those gains into the outside world. Memories of past traumatic experiences triggered self-doubt, while concerns that others might judge my new speaking behaviours were never far from the surface. I recognised that the acquisition of tools and techniques, in isolation, had only limited value. I knew that I needed to do so much more than simply focus on the mechanics of my speech. You see, I was still operating under my old belief system. I continued to have reservations about ordering at a drive-thru; of speaking on the telephone; of addressing an audience; and of saying those letters/words that had caused me so many problems.

Our beliefs and self-image play such a prominent part in our lives because what we believe (and how we see ourselves) colours how we think. Correspondingly, our thoughts influence our behaviours and emotions.

I set about dismantling the psychological framework that had supported my stutter for more than half a century. In order to initiate change, I first identified those areas in which I had been holding back. I then devised an extensive plan of action that allowed me to consolidate (and test) my new speaking patterns in a wide range of situations. I expanded my comfort zones and did the things I always thought I could not do. (Badmington, 2003)

DISSENTING VOICE

Changing my beliefs and self-image was a gradual process. In the early stages, there were times when my inner critic would interrupt (while I was speaking) and say such things as "Why aren't you stuttering? You should be stuttering. You ALWAYS have problems in these situations."

When I initially became aware of this negative internal dialogue, I would momentarily experience the discomfort and insecurity associated with my past difficulties. I was uncertain of my identity. I felt that I should still be stuttering because that is what I had done since childhood. I did not 'feel' like Alan Badmington.

Gradually, the voice became less talkative and, finally, fell silent. I came to accept (and felt comfortable with) the new techniques and different manner of speaking. It no longer felt 'strange'. I was far more relaxed, more assertive, more confident and more in touch with happenings.

I also grew accustomed to my wider self-image that incorporated many additional and challenging roles. These new responsibilities no longer felt unfamiliar. I became more adventurous with each challenge.

SELF-CONCEPT

Persons who stutter (and, indeed, those who do not stutter) develop a mental blue-print of themselves. This personal concept is influenced by what they consider to be their failures and successes; their strengths and weaknesses; their competency and worth; and the way in which others have reacted towards them. Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are consistent with that self-determined identity, irrespective of the reality of that image. Our personal opinions about ourselves are more influential than facts.

Our beliefs and self-image create the script by which we act out our lives - they set the boundaries to our accomplishments. Throughout my life, everything I did was in accordance with what I believed about myself and what I thought I was able to do. These views restricted me from undertaking many things that I considered lay outside my scope.

POWER OF BELIEFS

The majority of our belief system is established during childhood and adolescence. So, regardless of your current age, the beliefs that dictate the way in which you live your life today were largely developed during those formative years. That hugely critical period will continue to dominate our current lives, unless we reassess our long-established opinions and self-worth. Account should be taken of more recent and relevant information that challenges those views, or has been acquired from experiences that bring them into question.

If we fail to confront our disempowering beliefs, they can imprison us. I admired (and had dreams of emulating) those who appeared at ease in front of an audience. Yet, I always shunned public speaking, justifying my avoidance by the fact that I stuttered. I could never envisage successfully fulfilling that role.

Persons who are of a reserved nature may claim that they have always been shy, accepting timidity as an irrefutable and permanent part of their makeup. Such beliefs confine us - they shape our expectations, influence our attitudes and limit our future attainments.

Many of us hold beliefs that are based upon inaccurate or irrational information. Even though they may not be true - because we accept them as authentic, they have a direct bearing upon the way in which we think and behave. Our screening process filters out information that is inconsistent with our innermost beliefs.

What we believe about ourselves moulds the way in which we perceive the world. It influences our educational and employment paths; it determines our relationships and social interaction. But, most importantly, when we believe that we cannot do something, then it's almost certain that we will not do it. The unconscious mind accepts whatever it is told. If we tell ourselves that we cannot speak in front of an audience, it helps us to behave in a way that supports that statement. We may decline invitations or (when avoidance is not an option) become so stressed that our performance is adversely affected, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we believe that we will encounter difficulties while ordering a beer (or meal), then we may allow others to make the purchase on our behalf. If we convince ourselves that we will struggle to say a particular word, we will probably substitute it with another. If we think of ourselves as inept in a particular area, and continuously reinforce that view with negative language, we will act out that viewpoint and substantiate our belief.

Much of our belief system was inherited from those with whom we came into contact during our childhood. As an adult, the majority of our programming now comes from within. Instead of being persuaded by outside opinions, we

tend to rely upon self-suggestion to determine who we are, and how we choose to live our life.

Some people routinely forecast pessimistic scenarios, reflecting their negative inner programming. We need to be diligent in recognising those harmful utterances because they creep furtively into our internal chatter without us realizing. The words become habitual - the damaging messages play over and over in our heads.

INTERNAL IMAGES

The self-image is such an important factor in determining our quality of life and in effecting change. The ability to formulate and hold picture images in our minds is, apparently, unique to the human species. In effect, we are the director, producer and scriptwriter of all the images that appear on the motion picture screen in our heads, as well as being the principal actor. To a very large extent, our achievements (or lack of them) are as a direct result of those images.

In addition to physically expanding my comfort zone, I hastened the process of changing my self-image by utilizing a technique known as visualization. By creating internal movies that depicted me speaking in the manner of my choice, I duped my subconscious into believing that I had already successfully spoken in circumstances that I always considered beyond my capacity.

Successful athletes regularly create visual images of desired behaviour to improve their performance. I built up a reservoir of positive speaking experiences (within my subconscious), thus reducing (and then totally eliminating) anticipatory fear of stuttering.

HABITUAL BEHAVIOURS

Most of the tasks that we undertake are performed unconsciously. When we attempt something new it will, invariably, feel strange. That is why so many people (not just those who stutter) avoid venturing outside their comfort zones, preferring their habitual (tried and tested) way of doing things.

But behaviours are not changed by retaining the status quo. We need to widen our self-concept to accommodate the new behaviours and roles; otherwise our existing self-image will continue to impose its restrictions.

Many of us have difficulty letting go of the past. We cling onto our old self-image because we (and those around us) derive a sense of security from the familiar face that it presents. Self-concept is at the very core of our life experience - it can cause us to resist attempts to embrace change, even though it may be to our advantage to do so. The moment I relinquished my old self-image, I discovered incredible opportunities for growth.

DUAL APPROACH

It is relevant to mention that I confronted my stutter on two fronts. Firstly, I consciously applied the new techniques to the physical side of my speech. The resultant control served as a springboard, giving me the confidence (and means)

to address the cognitive and emotional issues. By cultivating more empowering beliefs, I gained the impetus to make things happen. I strengthened my self-efficacy by regularly using positive affirmations, while also choosing to view challenging situations as learning experiences, and not difficulties.

Although our long-established beliefs may be deeply entrenched, it is important to understand that they are NOT set in stone. The realisation that I could reappraise (and adjust) my beliefs was hugely empowering and a cornerstone of the advances I have made during recent times.

Having eliminated my negative thoughts about the physical act of stuttering, and my personal attachment to such behaviour, I no longer find it necessary to constantly focus upon my speech. By adopting a holistic approach, and working on different areas of my life, my speech improved as a by-product.

(Badmington, 2001)

FULFILLING POTENTIAL

Thomas Edison wrote: "If we did all the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves."

I, wholeheartedly, agree. For so many years, I was oblivious to my true potential - sacrificing my aspirations for the false illusion of comfort and safety. When I took charge of my thoughts, and systematically exposed myself to risks, I created the perfect antidote for the debilitating effects of fear and self-doubt.

During recent years I have achieved things that, for most of my life, I considered impossible. Public speaking has now become an integral and exciting part of my life. Stepping outside my comfort zone, and treading less familiar paths, has greatly enhanced my existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Badmington, Alan (2003). STEP OUTSIDE: Why expanding comfort zones can improve our stuttering and lead to more fulfilling lives. ISAD Online Conference, 2003.

<http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/isad6/papers/badmington6.html>

- Badmington, Alan (2001). Stuttering is not just a speech problem. British Stammering Association Conference, 2001.

<http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster/Infostuttering/badmington.pdf>