

When Fluency Shaping Does Not Fit

By Jeff Ingram

Like many people I have met, I "graduated" from a renowned intensive fluency shaping program and relapsed. I was confused and felt guilty when I realized that practicing more and more of the same *targets* offered no solution. The only advice the program had after graduating was "practice targets more."

Many of my underlying fears and anxiety were not addressed in the fluency shaping program. When I felt anxiety I was unable to control my tongue, lips, and vocal cords enough to use the targets. Countless fluency shaping grads have told me the same.

I had developed a sense of guilt after practicing the targets over and over and not getting tangible progress. Tim Mackesey helped me remove the mystery of stuttering.

The **first presupposition** of fluency shaping programs is that the person who stutters (pws) will be able to be calm, resourceful, and able to control micro movements (targets) in feared situations. Every teen and adult pws I have met has a long list of specific fears and triggers that lead to panic. I have learned this fear is called *social anxiety, anticipatory anxiety*, and/or *fight or flight*. My laundry list of fears and anxiety was not addressed in the fluency shaping program.

Fluency shaping appears to treat the symptom and not the root of the problem. Why do pws change words and avoid talking? They fear stuttering. The topic matter in every support meeting I have been to for pws is about fears and feelings about stuttering.

Back in the 80's, I attended the fluency shaping program... TWICE. It was very intense and very expensive. The premise of the program is to reconstruct speech by training students to talk extremely slow. For example, a one syllable word would be stretched out for two seconds. As you progressed through the 3-week course, the syllables were shortened to one second and then half second intervals. One part of the program involved making phone calls to businesses and asking questions such as, "How late are you open?" At the end of the program, we went to a local mall and asked people more questions. All the time, trying to monitor the targets we learned. (Full Breath and Stretched syllable targets).

Although sometimes "fluent," the sound of our speech was monotone and robotic. I was somewhat fluent when I left the program. This might be deemed a success, if not for the short lived duration of my fluency. The reality is the world talks at a much faster rate of speech, which made it even more difficult to monitor targets. Even after daily practice at home, using a stopwatch to count the duration of the stretched syllables, I sunk back into my old ways.

I figure the safety and insulation of being in a relatively comfortable stuttering environment for so many days created temporary decrease in fear. But, my specific fears, such as cold calling prospects and professional introductions, awaited my arrival home.

I have learned what an *internal conflict* is. It might also be called *split intention*. The **second presupposition**, pws like to talk with targets, is the culprit here. The often drone, elongated speech is very unnatural. I think pws fear losing their identity when using glaring, elongated speech. Pacing of speech, pitch, and volume are the means through which people express their personality, isn't it? People resist losing this identity, which is why such robotic speech is unsatisfying.

The pws is expected to return to his work, family, and social group with robot talk; and act like nothing has happened. It is demanding a whole *identity shift* from the pws. As one of my fellow shaping grads said: "Targets bring more attention to my speech!" We 'shapers' went along with the program in Virginia but many of us had a voice in our head saying: "I'll talk this way here, but not at home." So, for many pws the program is doomed because of *internal conflicts*.

I learned that this split intention can actually cause a speech block. I remember professional meetings in which we took turns introducing ourselves. I felt like being in the middle of a tug-o-war: one side screaming "use your targets" and the other side saying "you will definitely stand out with targets." This reminds me of an athlete about to take pitch, shoot a basketball, or putt in golf. Right at that moment of motor skill you cannot have a voice saying "DON'T MISS IT." That voice in a pws head that says "I will sound extra abnormal with elongated, drone speech" will cause an internal conflict and can trigger a speech block. When a pws is in a panic trying to not stutter and not reveal himself as different, easy onsets and other targets are often impossible.

Prior to meeting with Tim, I wasted money on an in-the-ear device. I saw the device portrayed on Oprah as a 'medical miracle.' I was frustrated with my fluency shaping experience efforts and wanted the fast relief I saw on Oprah. The device turned out to be a major distraction when trying to speak. The background noise was intolerable. Anticipatory anxiety was again a culprit here: when anxious I could not focus on the echoed voice in my ear. I am in sales and the device failed when I need it the most! Again, this type of treatment doesn't address the emotional root causes of stuttering.

When I moved to Atlanta, in 2000, I looked up local speech therapy groups and came across Tim Mackesey. After just a few sessions with Tim, I began to finally discover how and why I blocked and stuttered. At the fluency shaping program, they focused solely on the physical aspect of stuttering. In contrast, Tim concentrated more on the emotional aspects- the very anticipatory anxiety that makes speech targets so unreliable. He introduced me to Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Neuro Semantics (NS). NS is a new domain of NLP. NLP is like a big tool box of strategies that help people change their thoughts and feelings that contribute to fear, and ultimately blocking.

It's like reprogramming your brain to think a different way. For example, when I was in high school, I remember doing oral book reports and stuttering terribly in front of the class. This traumatic experience carried over into my adult life, causing me to fear talking in front of people...even small groups. Tim took me back on the timeline and created a new movie for my mind. We "reframed" that moment and many other specific experiences that were 'traumatic' at the time they occurred. These memories no longer have hurt. If you reflect on an old memory of stuttering and still feel something in your body, that memory can and has to be edited/reframed. For example, memories of stuttering on our name during an introduction that occurred many years ago can unconsciously trigger fear today and tomorrow. The mind storing stuttering memories also explains specific word and sound fears. I can now make those positive experiences and bring them forward into my present life.

In addition to 'editing' old movies from my brain I also learned how to reframe away anticipatory anxiety before phone calls and meetings. Controlling my speech is MUCH easier when I know how to run my brain and be calm. What a fresh and effective way to work on stuttering!

I am pleased to say that I am very successful in sales now. I am also very active and very verbal in my church activities. I now understand stuttering, true control, and greater consistency.

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