

Understanding the Speech Block

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At the heart of chronic stuttering -- specifically, the kind of dysfluency that ties you up so you momentarily cannot utter a word -- is something called a "speech block." We have traditionally seen speech blocks as having a life of their own, mysterious and unexplainable. Speech blocks seem to "strike" us at odd moments, usually without our knowing why.

You're standing in line at Macdonalds, about to say "hamburger," when suddenly, a speech block zooms out of the ether and (WHUMP!) hits you in the vocal cords and renders you speechless.

The blocks seem as if they are not connected to us, giving rise to such phrases as "I was hit by a speech block."

In response, we search for explanations. You hear statements such as, "Speech blocks are genetic." -- a prime example of using one unknown to explain another. But when you understand what a block is about, it begins to make sense. There is no need to resort to such esoterica as genetics. Sometimes, simple explanations are the most compelling.

Opposing forces

I'd like to invite you to undertake a little exercise. Hook your hands together with your elbows pointed outward in opposite directions. Now try and pull your hands apart while making sure that your hands stay locked.

This is an example of a block. You have two forces of equal strength pulling in opposite directions -- the force you're exerting to pull your hands apart opposes the force you're exerting to keep your hands locked together. As long as the two forces are equally balanced, you remain blocked.

If you want to get past the block, what are your options? Well, you can.

1. decide to stop trying to pull your hands apart;
2. decide to stop clamping your hands together;
3. decide that this silly demonstration is not worth wasting another moment of your time and go do something else.

Any of these alternatives will instantly resolve the block.

Let's look at what these three options have in common. All of them involve your intentions -- in this case, your conflicting intentions. The block is caused by attempting to do two things simultaneously that pull you in diametrically opposite directions -- pull your hands apart and hold them together.

How does this relate to speech?

A speech block is created when you intend to do two things that are directly opposed to one another. As long as you keep trying to do them both, you will experience yourself as blocked.

Shooting the horse

To better understand the nature of a block, let us examine it within a totally different context. Let us say that one beautiful summer afternoon you're riding your favorite horse in the back country. Your mount is a splendid Arabian that you've raised from a colt. Riding this gallant steed has become your most beloved pastime, and over 15 years the two of you have become fast friends. When you're not riding, you're in the stable, grooming the horse and caring for it.

Today, as you canter through the tall grass, you're lost in a magical, timeless world. Then suddenly, disaster! Your world collapses! The horse steps into a hidden hole, crashes to the ground and hurls you over its head. You roll. You pick yourself up, knees and elbows raw. But you're oblivious to the pain, because the unthinkable has happened. Your best friend, the Arabian that you've loved for 15 years, is lying on

the ground with its leg broken. It is in pain. It is suffering. It cannot be saved. You know that the only humane thing is to put it out of its misery. Right here. Right now.

Because this is snake country, you have gotten in the habit of wearing a side arm. You have one with you now, a .38 colt. You draw the pistol, and walk slowly up to the horse. You can see its pain. This has to be done. You stretch your arm in front of you, hand gripping the .38. You aim the pistol at the horse's forehead, and slowly squeeze the trigger.

But your finger freezes. The horse is looking straight into your eyes. You look back. This is your best friend. How can you possibly pull the trigger? You think of all the years you've spent together, all the happy hours in the back country. *How can you just stand there and kill your best friend?*

You try again, but again, you cannot get yourself to pull the trigger. Your index finger is rigid and won't move. You're aware of what's holding you back. You are not willing to experience the grief you know will arise the second after you pull the trigger, the pistol lurches in your hand, and the horse's eyes glaze over. *You just cannot pull the trigger!*

At this moment you are experiencing a block. Two forces of equal strength are pulling you in opposite directions. Pull the trigger and lose your best friend. Don't pull the trigger, and cause your best friend to suffer needlessly. You find yourself frozen.

How can you get past the block?

You can choose not pull the trigger and allow the horse to suffer, or perhaps have someone come and do the job for you. Another option is to pull the trigger and accept the pain you're sure to feel. Whichever route you take, to get past the block, something has to give.

Losing self-awareness

Were you in this position, there would be no mystery about what was going on.

You'd know why you couldn't pull the trigger. You loved the horse, and the pain of shooting it was something you could not bear.

Now let's modify this story. Let us say that *you were out of touch with the fact that you cared for the horse*, because you traditionally hid your feelings from yourself. You were just not the type to admit that you cared.

Okay, same scenario. The horse falls and breaks its leg. You draw your pistol and point it at the horse. You start to squeeze the trigger, and again, your finger freezes. But now, the frozen finger is a mystery, because you are out of touch with your feelings. You do not allow yourself to *know* that you care for the horse, although you care terribly. You have pushed this caring out of your awareness. Nevertheless, the fear of having to confront those feelings is holding you captive. Some *thing* is stopping you from pulling that trigger. It seems beyond your control because you're out of touch with your fears about shooting the horse. It's a matter of will. What is stopping you is your own reluctance to act.

The speech block

This is analogous to what happens with a speech block. You have a divided intention -- speak/don't speak. But because you have learned to prevent yourself from experiencing painful emotions, you close up and hold back. You push the fear (embarrassment, discomfort, etc.) out of your conscious awareness.

Thus, the block seems outside of your control, because you're only aware of half the conflict. You know you want to speak, but you are not aware of the simultaneous reluctance to speak because of the underlying fear and pain. You hold yourself back without being aware you're doing so. That is why speech blocks seem to happen to you.

The antidote is to begin paying attention to what you're feeling...or at least start noticing and questioning what's going on when you block. The most compelling question I used to ask myself when I was afraid of blocking was, "Suppose I do speak right now in this situation. *What might I experience?* Usually, the first thing I thought of was, "I might stutter." Perhaps. "But what *else*, might I experience?" Here's where so many people go blank. They simply don't know what else might be lurking down there.

Is it a fear of asserting yourself...of looking aggressive or coming on too strong...of being the real *you*? Usually, the problem lies in this area. There is something about yourself that you feel is unacceptable, so you hold back until it feels safe to talk. "Safe" means that you can now talk because the intensity of the feelings has dropped and you can now remain within your comfort zone.

A second scenario

Just to confuse things, there is another, completely different scenario that can also lead to a speech block. It, too, involves a divided intention, but it is driven by different forces. It has to do with one of the body's natural responses -- the valsalva reflex.

William Parry in his excellent book, [*Understanding and Controlling Stuttering*](#) (available from the National Stuttering Association or from Amazon) postulates that a speech block can result from the misapplication of a valsalva maneuver.

What is a valsalva maneuver? A valsalva maneuver is what your body does whenever you try to lift a heavy suitcase, open a stuck window, give birth, take a poop, or do anything that involves a concentrated physical effort. Your chest and shoulders become rigid. The muscles in your abdomen tighten. And your throat -- in particular, your larynx -- becomes completely locked. The locking of the larynx is the body's way of closing the upper end of the windpipe in order to keep air in the lungs. It is called an *effort closure*.

Why does your body do this?

Blocking the upper airway at the same time as you tighten your chest and abdominal muscles puts pressure on your lungs and creates internal pressure. This, in turn, creates strength and rigidity. It allows you to push harder. It gives you strength. It's why four inflated tires can hold the weight of a heavy automobile.

Initiating a valsalva maneuver makes sense if you're lifting your new 32-inch TV onto its stand. You need the added strength. But it is a non-productive strategy if you're asking someone where the post office is, and you expect to have difficulty saying "post," so you start preparing yourself to push the word out. The very muscles that are tight and rigid and clamped together to give you strength are muscles that should be soft and pliant and relaxed in order to create the resonant tones associated with speech. No wonder you can't speak.

Then why do we tighten everything?

Professor Woody Starkweather in an e-mail on the Stutt-L listserv on March 29, 1995, offered an excellent description of how some children end up misapplying the valsalva maneuver as they first struggle to learn to speak. Here's what Woody said: Personally, I think that most "garden variety" people who stutter (PWS) when they are very young find themselves repeating whole words. At this point, they aren't usually struggling (there are exceptions), but they are still being impeded in their ability to say what they want to by these sometimes long, whole word repetitions. Their first reaction to this is usually frustration. They want to talk and they can't go forward as quickly as they want to. Typically, this happens between two and four years of age.

At this age, the most common strategy for a child to use who is hindered by something in a task he or she wants to perform is to push hard. If something is in your way, you push it out of the way. The idea that some things work better if you

don't try harder is an alien concept to the preschool child, by and large. So they start to push the words out, and it works a little and some of the time because eventually the word does come out, in spite of the pushing, and it feels as though the child has pushed it out.

So he or she learns to push (with subglottal air pressure) when they feel stuck, and a nonproductive, maladaptive strategy for coping with stuttering has been born. The effect on the stuttering behavior is that the repetitions get shorter, i.e., part-word instead of whole word, blockages may increase because at a certain threshold of pushing the vocal folds clamp tighter together (the valsalva reflex), and the tempo of the repetitions increases because pushing harder usually also involves trying to talk faster through the stuttering behavior, that is, trying to stutter faster to get it over with.

There are a variety of strategies -- some kids focus on speeding up during stuttering, others just push hard, others learn very early to avoid by turning away, stopping talking, saying "never mind," etc. And I believe quite strongly that the only way to recover from this problem is first to become very aware of what you are doing during the stuttering. For an adult, this will usually involve learning about even more strategies that have been layered on top of those early ones, but eventually the PWS comes to know and understand those very early pushing, speeding up, and avoidance behaviors.

Building awareness

So there you have it. Not just one but *two* credible explanations for what causes a speech block, and not once did we have to mention genetics or faulty brain functions.

Losing awareness of your intentions is not specific to stuttering. People develop blocks around all sorts of things. I once knew a guy who was not able to urinate in a men's room whenever someone else was in the room with him. Same problem. For whatever reason (usually such fears are deep-seated) he held himself back by tightening his sphincter, but he didn't know he was doing this. He just knew he couldn't urinate. When the person left the room, then his sphincter relaxed, and he could complete his business.

As with most problems like this, the recovery process begins by developing your awareness of what's going on and bringing these unconscious behaviors back into consciousness. This calls for observing each blocking situation carefully, perhaps keeping a diary so you can keep track of what threads are showing up consistently from one blocking experience to another.

Do you block around authority figures. Do you block when you're afraid you'll be wrong. Or when you're afraid of looking foolish? Or aggressive? Or embarrassed? Do anxious feelings come up when you have to assert yourself?

Do you notice that each time you block, you also seem to be holding your breath? What else do you notice you're doing? What else can you begin to bring back to conscious awareness.

Either of the scenarios I described above can cause a speech block. And sometimes, both are operating at the same time. So you really need to pay attention. Nobody said that recovering from blocking is easy. It's not. But making the effort -- and keeping at it -- will eventually pay off by helping you take conscious control of an unconscious reflex.

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