

Ian's Homerun

A Phone Therapy Story

“If you don’t set goals, you can’t regret not reaching them.” – Yogi Berra

My first memory of stuttering dates back to when I was 11 years old. My friend’s dad was driving my friend and I back from our baseball game, and I stuttered as I was speaking to him. I remember him saying “I didn’t know that you stuttered. That’s a bad habit, you should stop.” I don’t think that he had any ill intentions in making that statement- he was a used car salesman who simply said what he thought- but it was a statement which I never forgot. It was not until speaking with Tim years later that I realized this off-hand remark was shaping my life.

I would classify my stutter as mild. In most situations I speak fluently. In fact, some people who know me probably don’t even know that I stutter. However, this was due to the fact that I became very skilled at word substitution. There were certain words which were difficult for me to say, and I developed a habit of substituting words to avoid the stutter which would occur if I used the word that I wanted to. While word substitution avoided the embarrassment of stuttering, it lowered the quality of my speech and was not applicable in some situations (i.e., reading). The short term relief of word substitution fertilizes a long term phobia. This inability to express myself in the way that I wanted to was frustrating.

I played baseball throughout my youth. I was consistently my team’s #1 pitcher and a starting outfielder. I made the league all-star team and went on to play junior for the most storied team in the Canadian province in which I lived. Throughout my baseball career, I can’t remember stuttering during a game or a practice once. I can vividly remember strike-outs, homeruns and other key plays, but I can’t remember one instance of stuttering. I don’t think that I ever stuttered while I was on the ball diamond. How is it a person who stutters can be consistently and spontaneously fluent in some situations?

Despite my ability to speak fluently while on the diamond, I can remember many times when I stuttered off of it. While watching a football game with the guys I stuttered. Discussing a school project with my group members I stuttered. Shopping for a new suit I would stutter. These were all seemingly inconsequential conversations- I highly doubt that the other parties in these conversations even remember them- except for the fact that I stuttered and that someone commented on it. But these conversations remained stuck in my memory, just like my memory of driving home from baseball with my friend and his dad. Why? What purpose were these memories serving? And why could I speak fluently in some situations yet stutter in others? My reflections on these “time-line” memories (as Tim refers to them) would pop up and cause anxiety years after they happened.

It was not until I was 24 years old that I finally decided that I wanted to beat this “bad habit”. I had graduated from university at the top of my class and I was working at one of Canada’s leading investment banks. The interview process for the job had been very competitive, with hundreds of applicants vying for only two positions, but after numerous interviews I received an offer, which I happily accepted.

For two and a half years I worked as long as necessary to do my job and to do it well. I was well-respected at work, my boss was very happy with my performance and I got along well with the clients. My strength was the analytical aspect of the job- I was able to create a detailed financial model with the best of them. If I had a weakness, it was on the sales side- due to my stutter, I was

not as out-going or as confident when speaking to clients as others were. Ironically it was the sales aspect of my job which I enjoyed the most. I recognized my weakness and realized that, if I was going to feel truly fulfilled at work, I had to overcome my fear of stuttering. I was forced into action when a coveted position in Sales & Trading came open at the firm. This position had everything that I wanted- a focus on the stock market, a fast-paced environment and, most importantly, a heavy focus on client interaction and on sales. I put my name forward for the position.

That evening I searched the internet for web sites using "stutter" as a subject. I found Bob Bodenhamer's web site and I was impressed by his credentials and his theories to such an extent that I purchased his book, "Mastering Stuttering and Blocking". The theme of the book was intriguing and reassuring -- that the stutter was in my mind and that there was nothing physically wrong with me. It made perfect sense, since I knew that there were times when I spoke fluently yet there were also times when I stuttered. The book was the key to opening a door behind which was a whole new world for me. Immediately after finishing the book, I contacted Bob to request an appointment. While he was unable to accommodate me at the time, he recommended that I contact Tim Mackesey. So I did. And within the week I had scheduled my first appointment.

All of my weekly sessions with Tim were conducted over the phone due to the distance between our home cities (I live in Toronto, Tim lives in Atlanta). Over the course of eight weeks, Tim taught me numerous techniques to achieve fluency in all situations. He worked with me to edit my timeline by revisiting my recollections of stuttering, to address those memories and the problems that they created, and to "wash them away" out of my memory since they were hurting my ability to develop as a person. He helped me to understand why I had attributed such negative connotations to stuttering, and he helped me to change them. He trained me to recognize the warning signs that a block was going to occur. He taught me how to "fly into a calm" and how to approach speaking situations with a positive frame of mind. He introduced me to the Meta-Alignment Pattern, which I use every morning, to increase my confidence and to start the day off right. Most of all, he allowed me to realize that I am a success and that the fact I stutter on occasion is inconsequential and immaterial to who I am. While "Mastering Stuttering and Blocking" was the key to opening the door, Tim provided me with the ability to open it, and to open it with confidence.

I am now happy to say that I have improved my speech to such an extent that I rarely, if ever, stutter. When I feel that a block is going to occur I am able to, metaphorically speaking, step out of the batter's box and prepare myself, and then to step back into the conversation in a better frame of mind. And on the very rare occasions when I do stutter, I am able to brush it off and to make light of it with an off-hand remark because I have learned to appreciate myself for who I am. I discovered that the key to overcoming my stuttering was confidence -- I didn't stutter when I felt confident, which exemplified my frame of mind when playing baseball. Tim taught me how to apply this state of mind to everything that I do.

I am also very happy to say that I received the job in Sales & Trading. Six months ago I never would have thought that I could work in this position due to my stutter. But thanks to Tim, I was able to realize that I am so much more than someone who stutters. I am very happy with my job, and I firmly believe that I would not have been selected had it not been for my newfound confidence gained with Tim's help.

The skills that Tim taught me are invaluable. I would recommend Tim to anyone who stutters or who lacks confidence when speaking. I don't know if I ever really believed that I could beat stuttering. It seemed like an insurmountable goal. But with Tim's help, I was able to achieve it. To finish with a quote from Yogi Berra, "it's not too far, it just seems like it is."

1) Bodenhamer, Bob (2004). Mastering Blocking and Stuttering: A Cognitive Approach to Achieving Fluency. Wales, UK Crown House Publishing

