



CREATING A SETTING FOR FLUENCY

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BY JOHN HARRISON

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Ever own a ring with a stone in it? Got one on your finger right now? Hold it up close to your eye.

Notice how perfectly the setting is configured to support that particular stone. Notice the snug fit.

Let's say your ring holds a one carat diamond. Think you can replace it with a two carat stone?

Not without changing the setting. Seems obvious, doesn't it.

Well, guess what. Your speech works the same way. You - the total you -- are the setting for your speech. And the only speech patterns you'll ever be comfortable with are those which reflect who you are.

Back to the ring. You could try and fit a differently shaped stone into that setting. You even might get it to stay...for a little while. But you know what'll happen? The setting will stand the stress of the misfit for just so long. And then, when you're not looking...POP!...the stone will fall out.

Isn't that the experience so many people who stutter have with therapy programs? Here you've coughed up several thousand dollars to go through the Precision Fluency Shaping Program...or the air flow program...or spent months with the delayed auditory feedback machine...or whatever program you've struggled with. Maybe you made no progress at all. But more maddening...maybe you've upped your level of fluency substantially,

only to see it slip back in the weeks and months that follow.

"Why?" you ask. "Why, why, why?"

You won't find the answer by continuing to look for the Holy Grail (the one therapy program that works). You'll have a lot better luck if you go about changing the "setting" that supports your particular speaking behavior.

Let me explain.

GETTING EVERYTHING INTO ALIGNMENT

Your mind and your body each are marvelously interconnected mechanisms. I have a taste of that every few months when I stop in to see my osteopath. My complaint is usually a sore muscle in my lower back, one of those frustrating aches deep inside that I can't put my finger on, but which hurts when I bend over.

Except that Dr. Chapman never starts out working on my lower back. That comes later. She begins with my hips, progresses to my rib

cage, and loosens other muscles that I would never expect were involved.

What I've discovered is that the body is a web of interconnections, and that when one muscle becomes injured, I unconsciously adjust other muscles to compensate. Dr. Chapman not only has to release the spasm in my lower back muscle; she also has to release all the supporting muscles in the other parts of my body.

If she doesn't disable the "system" that I've created to compensate for the "spasmed" lower back muscle, the recovered back muscle will find itself in an "alien" environment -- one that it set up to support a sick muscle.

And guess what? Since nature abhors a vacuum, I will somehow reinjure my back muscle so that the compensatory system I've created can once more be in balance.

Stated another way, my spasmed lower back muscle is the "jewel".

And the rest of my body is the "setting" that holds this jewel in place.

Your psyche works the same way.

As a child with a speech problem, you made certain psychological adjustments to compensate for your speech...and especially, for the negative emotions associated with stuttering.

Over a period of years these adjustments became a part of your basic personality. For example, you might have assumed the role of a helpless, dependent person so that other people would have to talk for you.

You might have avoided sharing your feelings, because feelings --anger, hurt, even joy - - caused you to stutter all the more. And of course, people who stutter should never be assertive, because their slow speech is an imposition on others.

Since you desperately needed the approval of others, it was always necessary to assume an apologetic posture.

You get the idea.

So then one day you're thirty years old and you read about this terrific new therapy program. All kinds of people have attested to its efficacy. So you fork over the cash, commit yourself to the

struggle, set aside a block of time, and away you go.

Lo and behold, you get results. In the room with the therapist you talk freely for the first time. It is exhilarating. With the therapist's encouragement, you step into the world, conquer the fear of talking to strangers, make a zillion phone calls for merchandise you'll never buy, and prove to yourself that the monster, indeed, has feet of clay.

It can be conquered.

Of course, not everyone reaches this level of success, but almost everyone who makes the effort will show some degree of improvement.

Therapy ends. Heady with success, you move out on your own.

And then one day you have a relapse.

Who knows what caused it? It could be a boss who assumes a parental role. It could be a dashed hope. A rejecting lover. Or maybe the planets weren't lined up properly.

The one thing you do know is that you're back in that old, hated familiar territory again.

Blocked. Scared. Helpless. Dysfluent as hell. Your new lack of confidence pulls the rug out from under you.

In desperation, you fall back into old speech habits, until one day, it's like that heady trip with the therapist never ever happened.

The response is totally appropriate.

See, you thought that you could change the stone without changing the setting.

Did you do anything about your posture of helplessness?

Or your reluctance to communicate your feelings?

Or your lack of self-assertiveness?

Or your unwillingness to be totally responsible?

Or your constant and grinding need for approval?

Oh, you didn't?

But those were the adjustments you made to support a stuttering habit. If you didn't change the components in this system, the system has just

been sitting around waiting for the missing component -- your stuttering -- to reappear.

Sure enough, one day it does.

And everything is back in balance.

Now along comes the National Stuttering Association (or some other group designed to promote personal growth.)

The organization says, "Now's the time to take charge of your life. Right now. Before you're fluent. Before everything is perfect. Right this very minute. Here's a terrific opportunity. If you're afraid of making speeches, come to a meeting and take a chance. Afraid of being responsible? Write to some people and see if you can get them to join (i.e.: take responsibility for the organization. After all, there's nobody there but us to make this all happen.)"

Afraid of asking a girl for a date? Try it anyway, and if you don't succeed, share the experience with others at an NSA meeting. If you aren't near a chapter, write about it for the newsletter. Or at the very least share the hurt with a friend.

If you feel you need an NSA chapter to support you and there's not one around, start one yourself. (Lots of people are doing it.) The NSA has all the tools to support you.

If you're in the dark about how to be assertive, and most of us are; (we confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness -- big difference!), sign up for a self-assertion class. Or if that's too scary, at least buy a book about it.

And then read it!

If you've never communicated about stuttering to anyone else and there's no one around who you think would understand, write to someone in the NSA. If you don't know who to write to, write your intentions to be a correspondent, and we'll publish your name and address in the NSA newsletter "Letting Go."

I'll guarantee you'll have a pen pal -- probably more than one -- who will know exactly where you're coming from; a person who will be able to share many similar experiences.

All of these efforts will pay off, because they'll help you to change the very negative,

repressive behaviors that support your speech blocks.

Ironically, only one person in ten will ever take a stab at this.

Most of us will continue to try and change our stuttering without changing the "setting" that holds this behavior firmly in place.

Why?

Because we have a huge investment in the status quo. We may not like what we have, but it's all familiar and totally predictable. To take a chance means to step into the unknown.

Most of us hate stepping into the unknown. We act like the man who drops his car keys on the lawn at night, but insists on looking for them on the sidewalk under the street light...simply because he can see better there.

We don't want to risk. But the truth is, there's little likelihood of success in the safe, familiar places. Just observe your success rate to date. To find what you're searching for, you have to look where you have never looked before.

So...you want a good place to start? Here's

a little exercise:

List all the ways you can think of that you changed your life to compensate for your stuttering.

Now put a check after each one you're willing to give up.

Let's see how serious you are.

Make a list on a separate sheet of paper indicating what you are willing to start doing right now to strengthen this weakness. And indicate when you are going to start doing something about it.

I dare you to take the first step.

One final observation: It has been my privilege to meet a number of people who have really changed their ability to communicate. Some have made remarkable progress in therapy. And all of them, without exception, had already made the changes in their lives to support an easier, more fluent way of speaking.

Remember, if you want a different stone, you first have to change the setting.