

*MY FIVE STAGES OF RECOVERY*

*HOW MY STUTTERING DISAPPEARED*

*BY JOHN C. HARRISON*

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### **HOW MY STUTTERING DISAPPEARED**

People often want to know when I first became fluent, and I sometimes feel as if they're looking for the particular moment when I could speak without blocking. It's not like that at all. Recovery from chronic stuttering does not happen overnight, except in very rare instances.

Most people change gradually, in stages, and although you can create mechanical fluency overnight with various speech techniques, true fluency occurs when the constant fear of blocking has disappeared. Your total system has changed sufficiently so that you do not automatically default to a speech block when you are under stress.

It is not necessary to achieve this level of recovery to feel that you've successfully licked stuttering. I know many people who are elegant, charismatic speakers, even though they still manifest an occasional block. And I know others who still have significant blocks and yet are successful people and compelling presenters.

Eloquence does not revolve around fluency. It has to do with the ability to connect with people and to say what is in your heart. It has to do with being genuine. It has to do with never compromising your convictions but speaking your mind, regardless of the circumstance. This is when chronic stuttering has truly been defeated.

### **FIVE STAGES**

The history of my stuttering can be characterized by five distinct stages: denial, acceptance, understanding, transcending, and reprogramming.

#### **STAGE ONE: Denial.**

Almost everyone I've met who's had a chronic stuttering problem spent his

(or her) early years in denial, and I was no exception. Why my speech would suddenly freeze up was a total mystery to me. I just knew that it happened, and I was terrified by the social consequences. I dreaded doing anything that could be made fun of, so when I blocked, I never displayed any bizarre struggle behaviors, or what the therapists call “secondaries.” I simply out waited the block until it released, and I could say the word. But those breaks in my speech were harrowing. I was very self-conscious and overly sensitive about deviating from the norm. I was your classic “closet stutterer” and distanced myself from anything that appeared even slightly out of the ordinary.

I remember one day when my father referenced the fact that I stuttered, and I immediately shot back, “I don’t stutter, I *hesitate*.” Though I was constantly afraid of speaking situations, such as talking in class or speaking to authority figures, I would never acknowledge that there was any problem. This mindset continued until the summer of my senior year in high school.

That summer my parents sent me to a daytime program at the National Hospital for Speech and Hearing Disorders in New York City. Not much changed in my speech as the result of my two months participation in the group since I don’t think we ever did speech therapy or modification per se. But there was one significant change in my attitude. By the end of the summer, I was willing to acknowledge that I had a stuttering problem. I could say the word “stuttering” without feeling like a pariah; however, I still had not reached a point of acceptance where I could share my problem with the non-stuttering world.

### **STAGE TWO: Acceptance.**

Being in denial keeps you stuck, and although it may be painful to accept your present circumstances, it is essential that you do so if you want to move forward. To create an analogy, imagine you suddenly find yourself standing in a four-foot hole. “Omygod,” you say, “I’ve really gotten myself in a hole,” as you push and struggle to climb out. But suppose you believe that smart, intelligent people should never be seen standing in a four-foot hole. Since you consider yourself smart and intelligent, and since you want people to think well of you, you immediately fall into denial about your current situation.

“Me? Standing in a hole? That’s crazy! Why would I be doing that?” you ask, but then, when you go to walk away, you find yourself strangely

hampered.

Of course, the situation is absurd. Yet people cast themselves in this position all the time. Consider the individual who gets himself into a hole financially, but is unwilling to accept his current lot. "I have plenty of money," he says. "Of course I can buy that car. Of course, I can take that vacation. Of course I can buy those new clothes." So he spends and spends until one day everything crashes down around him.

Why would someone be in denial about his lack of funds? Because it's *scary* to be in that position. If he is unwilling to feel the fear, he'll try and change his reality into something that is more comfortable. Similarly, when people are unwilling to accept their stuttering, it's not the actual stuttering they fear, but the *feelings* that are brought up when they stutter. It's scary to feel helpless. It's scary to feel like you're different from other people. It's scary stand there and not be able to talk.

But emotions are simply emotions, and choosing to experience them does not mean that you're stuck with them forever. Quite the contrary, when you accept and experience what you're feeling, the emotions release, and the way is open for another, more positive set of emotions to take their place. In the fall of my eighteenth year, I left home for university.

As incoming freshmen, we were subject to various tests to evaluate our proficiencies in foreign language, English composition and mathematics. We were also called to the speech lab to see if there was any aspect of our speech that needed to be remedied. When I heard this, I was immediately on guard. My knee-jerk reaction was to hide my stuttering.

I kept my date at the speech lab and read through the required paragraph without a hitch. Had the evaluator been able to measure my anxiety level, it would have been a different matter, but I was able to pass for "normal" and left the lab greatly relieved. However, it was a hollow victory.

Though I was not identified by the university as someone with a problem, in reality I very much had a problem, even though I was the only one who knew about it.

The maddening thing about my speech blocks was that they didn't show up in everyday conversation. They only appeared when I had to speak in front of the class or in time-bound situations such as having to stop someone on

the street to ask a question.

This intermittent problem left me with a confused self-image. Was I a normal speaker, or was I a stutterer? I never seemed to be one or the other, and this left me in a state of limbo. I lived in constant fear of suddenly blocking with a person with whom I had been fluent up to then. I was afraid of how they would look at me. I did not want to answer their questions. And most of all, I did not want to seem strange or different.

What brought matters to a head was a philosophy class in my sophomore year. The professor, a short, intense Russian-born man, was popular among the students, and the class was large, numbering over 100. In each class the professor asked several of the students to stand and read their paper. I lived in terror of being called on, and finally went to the professor and asked if I could simply hand in the paper and not be called upon to read. He was quite amenable, but I was mortified at having to ask him to make this concession.

That was when I decided it was time to do something about my problem. The school had no speech therapist who was knowledgeable about stuttering, but I did find a professor in the speech department who said he could help me. As I recall, I didn't see him for very long, nor do I remember much of what we did. But what he did offer me – which made a big difference in my life – was a clear and detailed explanation of how speech was produced.

For the very first time, my mysterious speech blocks were correlated to specific physical behaviors. They weren't something that struck me out of the blue. They were something I was doing, and I could actually picture how the vocal folds could close and prevent air from passing. It was the first step in *de-mystifying* my stuttering.

Later that year, I also took another big step in coming out of the closet. I took a public speaking class, and in one of the speeches, I gave a talk on stuttering. The cat was finally out of the bag. I still have the outline for that talk in a box of school papers. It's one of my university mementos I'll never throw out.

### **STAGE THREE: Understanding.**

The seven years from the time I graduated college until I was 30 years old were marked by a dramatic increase in my level of self-knowledge. After six months of active service with the army and a two year stint working in

New York City in various entry-level jobs, I boarded a plane one day and relocated to San Francisco.

By this time I was very much caught up in trying to figure out who I was and what my stuttering blocks were all about. Before I left New York, I had attended a 14-week Dale Carnegie course and had my first positive experience with public speaking. In every evening class each of us had an opportunity to make two short talks, usually no longer than 60 to 90 seconds each, after which we received vigorous applause and several positive comments from the instructor. I found out that, although it ramped up my anxiety level, I rather enjoyed being in front of people, and in the totally accepting environment of the class, I discovered I was a bit of a ham. When I came to San Francisco, I joined Toastmasters, and eventually became president of the Chinatown Toastmaster Club. During my three years in Toastmasters (I rejoined 35 years later and am still a member), I became more and more comfortable in front of an audience.

Aside from helping me become more comfortable in front of people, these speaking programs gave me an opportunity to experiment with my speech in safe, yet “risky” situations. If you want to explore your stuttering with the intent of understanding what it’s about, you *must* put yourself in a variety of speaking situations. And this is precisely what I did.

I began to notice some interesting things.

I discovered that if I released a little air before I spoke, it often made speaking easier. Some years later, I discovered that Dr. Martin Schwartz had developed an entire therapy around this airflow technique. In addition, whenever I blocked, I would also routinely repeat the block to see if I could discover what I had done to cause it. Then I would repeat the word without blocking. I later learned that this procedure is called cancellation and was a technique regularly used by Dr. Charles Van Riper.

What I have come to realize is that most of the techniques used by speech clinicians can be figured out by an enterprising stutterer who’s willing to experiment.

I was also helped by my involvement with a unique organization that helped to foster my development as a person. Synanon was started in the late 1950s by Charles Dederich, a recovering alcoholic, as a 24-hour residential facility where recovering drug addicts, felons, and other acting

out character disorders could be brought back into society. It was an organization that ran strictly by the seat of its pants, without any government funding. The underpinnings of Synanon were honesty and self-reliance.

Their major vehicle for self-discovery was a group interaction called the Synanon Game. This was a group dynamic without formal leadership where you could develop proficiency in confronting yourself and others. The only rule was that there would be no acting out of feelings, except through verbal expression. People were free to run through their whole range of emotions. The game would be focused on an individual's unacceptable behavior, and that individual would feel compelled to defend himself.

The subtle ways of getting people to see the truth was often awe-inspiring. The leadership in the group shifted from one person to the other as an individual took on the job of building an indictment against an individual for some kind of unacceptable behavior. Experienced people played the most dominant roles, and the way you gained experience and proficiency in the game was to look, listen, defend, and attempt to lead the charge in building an indictment on somebody else. People were verbally cornered into exposing their lies and weaknesses as they tried to make themselves look good.

Ironically, individuals looked the best when they were completely honest, open, candid and forthcoming. They looked their worst when they tried to defend themselves and hide. Moment by moment, it was a big verbal free for all, sometime soft, often loud, frequently funny. Any emotion was fair game, provided it stayed as an emotion and was not acted out. The game was also very, very manipulative. Those who were in touch with their emotions and could express them easily and openly played the most powerful roles. This also helped to build skills in dealing with society at large.

As newcomers came back week after week, they, too, began to build their own skills as they dug deeper into their own emotions and peeled back the layers of their own personality. The only hard and fast rule was – no physical acting out.

Today, the concept of personal growth and development in a group setting is commonplace with many kinds of creative programs available to the

public in many countries. These by and large follow a much gentler approach. (Keep in mind that the Synanon game was designed for hardcore drug addicts and other character disorders). But even today's personal growth programs, like the Landmark Forum, which is available worldwide, have advanced programs where the environment becomes more challenging.

I should emphasize, however, that formal programs of any sort – either in speech or in personal growth – are not essential if you're a good observer and have the willingness to put yourself at risk. But it does help to have people in your life who are of like mind and with whom you can share your challenges and successes.

When I began my involvement with the Synanon Games, I could not say more than a few sentences before my anxiety level went through the roof, causing me to become uptight and stop talking. I was totally intimidated by stronger personalities, and always felt I had nothing of value to say. It was a year into my involvement with the Synanon Games that I had my first breakthrough.

One night, all the strongest and most experienced people in the Game were absent, and I found myself among the most season people present. Suddenly, my mouth became unshackled. Without authority figures in the room, I began assuming roles that just a week before I would have totally avoided. And you couldn't stop me from having my say.

#### **STAGE FOUR: Transcending.**

I stayed involved with Synanon for about three years, during which I participated in a variety of activities. They ranged from two-day stay-awake marathons that helped us probe deeper into our psyches to hawking tickets to a boxing match with nationally ranked fighters at a local sports palace. This was a big fundraiser for Synanon and a huge stretch for me who had always hated to ask people to do anything for fear of rejection. These activities that pushed me out into the larger community played an important role in my recovery.

Throughout all this, I tried to remain a good observer of myself, and very slowly, a new picture of John Harrison began to form. I wasn't as nice or as good as I thought I was. I saw sides of myself I wasn't proud of. I saw how I routinely capitulated to those who I felt were stronger or more knowledgeable. And I got in touch with how much anger I'd been holding in

since I was a little boy.

In this open environment, I began to understand that my speech blocks were only marginally about speech. I saw that at the heart of it, I was blocking out my own experience of myself. I was trying to present myself from knowing and experiencing ME. The awful me. The arrogant me. The scared me. The pushy me. The weak me. The strong me. All those me's had been suppressed years ago as I tried to adapt to what I thought the adult world wanted of me.

Once the genie was out of the bottle, so was my ability to express myself. When that combined with all the work I'd done in building awareness of my physical blocking process, I began speaking more easily and with only infrequent difficulty.

### **STAGE FIVE: Reprogramming.**

As I carried what I learned into the larger world, my default behavior – the automatic blocking behavior that I had built up during my first two decades – slowly weakened and gradually disappeared. Simply understanding what my blocking was about was not an automatic cure. This was, after all, a survival strategy that had been ingrained into every muscle and fiber of my being. Even though they happened only infrequently, I still hated those blocks. I was still uneasy around authority figures. But now I knew that those fears would only go away if I taught the primitive part of my brain – the part that initiated the fight or flight response – that these were not life-or-death situations.

Chronic blocking and stuttering is like a large black spider. There's nothing inherently frightening about spiders. After all, spiders don't scare entomologists. There are actually people who keep tarantulas as pets and pick them up and allow them to walk up and down their arm.

So it's not the spider we fear, but the *feelings* they bring up. We see the spider as a threat, and our sympathetic nervous system triggers an instant flight-or-fight reaction to protect us from a perceived danger.

But if the spider is no longer perceived as a danger, the feelings are not triggered.

Changing default behavior is like anything else. It comes through practice and persistence. It's like the martial artist student who one day is surprised

that he automatically did the right thing when attacked by an opponent. The recovering stutterer discovers one day that he just spoke without thinking in a situation where normally he would have never risked speaking. And if he happens to block, he says, “Oh look at that. I just blocked. I wonder what’s going on?”

Then he can review what he experienced and what he did and heighten his awareness of his automatic fear response. In so doing, he can stop himself from slipping into a full-blown panic response.

If he (or she) has studied an approach for managing the block such as McGuire technique, air flow or fluency shaping, he can call that up to handle the mini-crisis, and then slip back into automatic speech. By and large, for those who have beaten chronic stuttering and blocking, communicating has become fun, and they welcome any opportunity to talk. Remember that the bottom line is not perfect fluency. Some people will naturally be more fluent than others.

The bottom line is whether you can say what you want, the way you want, when you want, and to whom you want. And whether you can truly show up as yourself.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

As I was finishing this piece, I found myself wondering whether some PWS will take all this as a *precise* blueprint for *their* recovery. So I would like to add this postscript.

These five stages of recovery described here are five *general* stages. Your details will be different because after all, you and I are different people. We see things in unique ways. We have different backgrounds and experiences. Each of us has his own personal story. What’s important is to understand the *essence* of each stage so that you can apply it to your own recovery.

Through the years I’ve observed recovery as an evolutionary process. And if a person tries to jump over something that requires attention, his or her psyche will make it difficult to accommodate the change. The only time that quick fixes seem to work is when the individual has already laid the groundwork for recovery. Everything is in place. They are a recovered person just waiting to happen.

