

STAMMERING AT WORK

ISSUE 6

Q1'25

SUPPORT & GUIDANCE FROM STAMMA FOR TRADE UNIONS & THEIR MEMBERS

INCLUDING
2025
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POSTER PACK

Welcome to Stammering At Work. This is a quarterly newsletter with information and resources related to stammering and the work of your union. STAMMA is a UK charity. We work with people who stammer and with those whose jobs bring them into contact with staff, customers and service users who stammer.

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**EMPLOYMENT
SUPPORT SERVICE**





Jack at Stammafest copyright STAMMA 2024

BREAKING THE BUBBLE

INVITING PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT STAMMERING

Jack Nicholas



It always puzzles me that we happily talk for hour about nothing much — on average apparently, we each spend 52 minutes a day gossiping — but some fearful force pulls us away from discussing anything personal and important.

For example, I have often been in situations where I have worked for organisations for months, years, and neither I nor the people around me have mentioned that I stammer. It's like I am in a glass bubble. I can see them. They can see me. But we can't touch. Admittedly, sometimes this feels safe — but more often it is constricting, isolating.

The question is: how do you magic away the bubble leaving both parties feeling safe? We all know what is going on. We are just afraid to talk about it. I can imagine why my colleagues were reluctant to start the conversation.

"What do I say? What will he say? It feels so awkward. He would have said something if he wanted to talk about it. I must respect his privacy. It's not my place..."

How would I want such a conversation to go? Honestly, when I started writing this, I had no idea. So, I did what we all do today when we don't know something and I turned to artificial intelligence. As it happens, not ChatGPT or CoPilot, but Claude AI as I usually find him more friendly. I asked Claude if we could role play me inviting him to talk about his stammer. He seemed up for it, so we started like this:

Me: "Hi Claude, we've never mentioned this, and tell me if I am talking out of turn, but obviously I am aware that you have a stammer, and I wonder if you would like a quick chat to see if there is anything we can do to make working here easier?"

Claude AI: "I manage fine, thanks. It's not a problem." glances away and shifts papers on desk "Why? Is something wrong with my work? Has anyone said anything?"

And there you are, I was cold-shouldered by a chat bot. Which is sort of what we fear will happen in real life.

To be fair, I can understand why Claude was defensive. Speaking up has its risks. Entrenched and well-known risks.

Tell people that you stammer, and people may start to judge you differently. They may define you as someone with a disability rather than assessing your true skills and competence. This can impact your workplace relationships and your chances of promotion.

No surprise then that many people prefer not to talk about their stammer (or any impairment) in the workplace. And if you think this isn't the case, remember that we live in a world where prejudice and discrimination are being encouraged, where the President of the United States can suggest, without evidence, that a plane crash was caused by employing people with disabilities.

But that silence has its own price.

- Both people inside and outside the bubble can bear an emotional burden through having to repeatedly work around issues no one wants to talk about.
- There is a fine line between being politely respectful of someone's privacy and excluding them.

- The most trivial of reasonable adjustments can have a huge impact but if you don't ask, you don't get.
- All of which can be detrimental to people's effectiveness at work and to their wellbeing.

Clearly, there are risks either way but removing the bubble, breaking the silence can be life-changing, a genuine act of inclusion, solidarity even.

You almost certainly have power to help here. As a fluent speaker, it may be easier for you to start the



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conversation. And your role in the organisation may also give you a way in.

What you are doing is inviting someone to talk about their stammering. However strange that may feel, there are several pointers that can help you.

1. Put some thought into making the invitation at a time and place that is appropriate and safe.
2. You don't have to beat around the bush. It is fine to be direct — as long as you are respectful. It is usually best to use plain language.
3. You are not a psychologist or speech therapist. You don't have to focus on the stammer — channel the conversation around support and solutions instead.
4. If the person who stammers calls stammering a stutter, then you do the same. Nothing breeds

rapport faster than following someone's lead on language and terminology.

5. If the person does not want to engage in the conversation, then that is fine. You have tried. Respect their decision and boundaries. Hopefully, you have sown a seed that will bear fruit in some time to come.
6. Remember, it's just a conversation.
7. But also remember, it's never just a conversation. You are doing something important here. It may be the first time someone has ever been invited to talk about their stammer.

Get all of this done and you can pat yourself on the back. Job done. Or perhaps not...

Because your best conversation can be hobbled if the culture and processes in the workplace are not up to scratch. There may also be work for you and others to do improving processes and policies, building trust, and setting high standards for inclusion and respectful behaviour.

But that is no excuse to leave people trapped in the bubble. Starting the conversation is a challenge, and there are risks, but the benefits can be life-changing.

At STAMMA, since my unpromising conversation with the AI chatbot, we have been thinking about other ways of starting that conversation. We think that something like this might be worth a try:

"I noticed you sometimes stammer while talking. I hope it's not uncomfortable for you, but if it ever is, I'd love to know if there's anything we can do to be more supportive at work. For example, is there anything I do that makes talking harder for you?"

If not those exact words, I am sure you can come up with something similar that feels right for you. The important thing is to give it a go.

If you want to practice it, call the STAMMA helpline and say that you would like to try out your approach. Unlike Claude, they will be delighted to hear from you

Jack

Did you know that lots of companies offer ways for customers with communication difficulties and differences to access their services in the way that suits them best? For example, if you're based in the north-west of England, the local water company United Utilities welcomes people who stammer to register as Priority Services customers. Being a Priority Services customer means that, if you do need to call United Utilities, you get access to the Priority Services phone line where the call handlers have additional time to spend on each call. That way, you can have the space to stammer and say what you need to say. See below for more information about United Utilities' Priority Services scheme, but look out for companies in your own area offering similar schemes.



Help when you need it most

We can all benefit from a bit of extra help at some stage in our lives. This could be due to age, ill-health, disability, mental health problems, financial worries or language barriers.

Registering for Priority Services is free and it means that you will benefit from additional services to support your particular needs.

So if you, or someone you know, would appreciate a little bit of extra help, please register online at:
unitedutilities.com/priorityservices
or call 0345 6722888.

Scan the QR code to register online



Priority Services - how we can help

- Dedicated team on hand to help.
- Nominee scheme, which allows you to choose a carer, family member or friend to speak to us on your behalf.
- Bills in Braille or large print, or on coloured paper. We can also talk you through your bill.
- Password scheme to protect you from bogus callers.
- Recite Me accessibility service on our website.
- We will deliver bottled water within six hours of your water being turned off if you are one of our most vulnerable customers.
- We can help with reading your water meter or move it to make it easier to read.
- Our 'knock and wait' service means we give you extra time to answer the door when we visit.
- Translation services.
- We will give you notice if we need to turn your water supply off.
- Alternative water supply if your water will be off for a long time.

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Water for the North West

STAMMERING & THE UNIONS

Gary Clark



This is the second article in our series on Unions and stammering. In this issue, I'll be giving you some general information on stammering, as well as talking about reasonable adjustments for people who stammer. In the next issue look out for "How unions and STAMMA can work together to make a difference". But for now...

WHAT IS STAMMERING?

Many people who don't stammer don't really think about the challenges stammering can bring. You might think "it's only a stammer". You might have seen it on TV, maybe in old programs like Open All Hours or in the movie The King's Speech. You might even have thought stammering is a bit funny but never stopped to consider the barriers that people who stammer face in the workplace.

A stammer (sometimes known as a stutter) means that someone knows exactly what they want to say but the words are sometimes difficult for them to actually say. They might repeat sounds like "My name is G-G-G-G-G-Gary, or prolong a sound like "What daaaaaay is it". Or they might find that no sound comes out at all for a few seconds when they try to speak. You might also see signs of physical effort as someone who stammers tries to push out a word, or they might close their eyes and look away, their breathing pattern might change, or they might use "um" and "er" to try to launch into words they might find more difficult to say.

They might repeat sounds like "My name is G-G-G-G-G-Gary, or prolong a sound like "What daaaaaay is it".

Some people try to hide their stammer some or all the time due to the fear of the response that they might get. You might not realise it when someone is working hard to avoid and replace certain words that they think that they might stammer on but that doesn't mean it's not happening. Or the person might say less than they want to, or choose not to go into certain situations at all if they feel that stammering isn't welcome.

Most people who stammer start in early childhood, often between ages of 2-5 but not everyone.

Research shows there is often a genetic link as 60% of people who stammer will have a family member who stammers or used to stammer.

We don't know exactly what causes a stammer but the latest research shows that the parts of the brain that control speech work slightly differently in people who stammer compared with those who don't. We also know that, for some people, stammering starts in later childhood or even in adulthood, when it sometimes results from a head injury, stroke or even Parkinsons. Very occasionally, stammering seems to be triggered by PTSD or traumatic events.

Regardless of the cause, stammering is fairly common. Around 8% of children will stammer at some point in their childhood, and at least 1% of adults stammer. It's simply how some of us talk



Gary Clark

Photograph by Craig Maclean

STAMMERING AND THE EQUALITY ACT

A stammer can have a major impact from the way a person is perceived at interview, to the sort of roles they are considered for, to the way they are treated at work by management and fellow workers.

One question that many people will ask is whether stammering is covered under the Equality Act/DDA? Is stammering a disability? Can we ask for reasonable adjustments? The short answer is yes, yes and yes.

For most people who stammer, stammering definitely meets the criteria for disability under the Equality Act or the Disability Discrimination Act (Northern Ireland). The criteria require that the person has stammered for more than 12 months (or is likely to do so) and that stammering impacts on the way they engage in day-to-day activities.

This may well include aspects of the person's job role, and it's certainly true that standard ways of working were rarely designed with people who stammer in mind. That's why reasonable adjustments can be brilliant tool to support members who stammer and for helping employers learn how to make their working practices more inclusive for staff who stammer.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS AND STAMMERING

Not everyone who stammers will want or need reasonable adjustments but some will. So where might a person who has a stammer require reasonable adjustments? Is it just a bit extra time they will need? Or something else?

It will all depend on the individual and, if they are finding aspects of their role or interactions with their peers and managers difficult, exactly which aspects are affected. Here are some ideas to get you thinking.

- For someone who finds speaking on the phone difficult when their colleagues can overhear them, the option to use a quiet room to make or take work-related calls can be helpful
- For someone whose job involves using radios to communicate with colleagues, consider using callsigns that let all operators know that this person needs a bit more time to speak
- Lots of people who stammer find it hard to say their name on demand. If someone feels really anxious about introducing themselves to new people, consider how icebreakers and introductions can be managed within teams so that everyone feels comfortable
- For people who find they get talked over in meetings, good chairing and management of turn-taking in meetings can be a huge support. Agendas being sent out early, so meeting participants can let the chair know in advance if they already know that they want to contribute to certain topics can also be helpful.
- Placing equal value on spoken and written contributions in online meetings means that all participants can share their thoughts, opinions and knowledge in the way that works best for them in that moment.

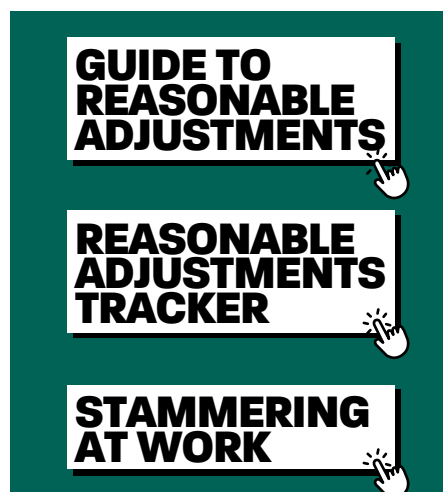


RESOURCES

There are lots of other examples, including adjustments related to job interviews for people who stammer. STAMMA have a downloadable guide to reasonable adjustments with a more comprehensive list of suggestions.

We have also developed a form that you can use to track requests for reasonable adjustments.

I hope this information will help you in supporting members who stammer with reasonable adjustments. I'd also encourage you to look at our webpage on stammering at work. It's full of useful examples and resources.



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS FOR UNION AFFILIATES

Check the following pages for
a printable full page poster
pack to help your members
get the most from your
affiliation

Tuesday
29th APR '25
1pm
30 minutes

WORKING WITH PATIENTS WHO STAMMER

SIGN UP

Wednesday
14th MAY '25
1pm
45 minutes

UNION PROCEDURES & STAMMERING

SIGN UP

Monday
23rd JUN '25
1pm
60 minutes

THE TELL, THE THROW & THE CATCH: A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCLOSURE

SIGN UP

Thursday
10th JUL '25
7pm
45 minutes

SUPPORT & RESOURCES FOR ADULTS WHO STAMMER

SIGN UP

WHAT IS STAMMERING?

Stammering is different to the occasional repetition or hesitation that everybody experiences. From a listener's perspective, stammering is when someone repeats, prolongs, or has silent pauses or blocks when they are trying to say sounds and words. There might be visible signs of effort or tension as the person works hard to get the word out. However, stammering tends to fluctuate so you might not always know that someone stammers if it's not happening much at that particular moment. Also, some people work hard to make their stammer less obvious some or all of the time to avoid negative, unhelpful reactions from others. So while you may not notice the pauses, the swapped words, the exhausting preparation in sounding fluent, or everything they are not saying, that person stammers.

WHAT STAMMA OFFERS

Our aim as part of the employment support service is to provide support to both individuals and organisations when it comes to thinking about stammering and the workplace. If a member of your union is having an issue related to stammering at work, STAMMA's Employment Service offer free consultations to your union reps and the union member to discuss the issue and explore options including reasonable adjustments, advocacy work, and training and resources for the employing organisations.

We also work directly with organisations to review and provide guidance and resources ensuring the organisation's processes and procedures are accessible for union reps, union members, staff, service users and customers who stammer.

**DO REACH OUT TO US FOR SUPPORT, INFORMATION,
TRAINING & RESOURCES OR JUST TO CHAT.**



employmentsupport@stamma.org

Drop us an email at a time convenient to you and one of our team will get back to you.



0808 802 0002

Give us a call and ask someone from the Employment Support Service to call you back.

STAMMA