Stuttering May Also Include a Psychological Component

Now there's evidence that shows adults who stutter don't have the problem when they are alone and think no one can hear them.

November 23, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

The suggestion that most people who stutter can speak without stammering when they talk to themselves has long been a largely unsubstantiated claim. Now not only do new study findings published in the Journal of Fluency Disorders seem to confirm this phenomenon, but the results also indicate that stuttering is less likely if people don't think anyone is able to hear them talk, reports a New York University (NYU) press release.

For the study, scientists gathered 24 adults who stuttered and recorded them on audio and video while they engaged in conversational speech; reading; private speech, where deception was used to increase the probability that participants produced speech that they believed only they heard; private speech with participants reading from a transcription to two listeners; and a second conversational speech situation that involved talking or reading to others.

During the private speech session that used deception, participants were left alone after being led to believe that talking aloud would help them improve their performance on a difficult computer programming assignment. (Individuals thought no one would hear them speak.)

Researchers noted that this situation was the only one participants engaged in where they did not stutter.

"We developed a novel method to convince participants that they are alone—that their speech wouldn't be heard by a listener—and found that adult stutterers do not stutter under these conditions. I think this provides evidence that stuttering isn't just a 'speech' problem, but that at its core, there must be a strong social component," said Eric S. Jackson, PhD, an assistant professor of communicative sciences and disorders at NYU Steinhardt.

Jackson explained that when people who stutter are totally alone, there is no fear of being judged by others when they speak.

"Adults appear not to stutter during private speech, indicating that speakers' perceptions of listeners, whether real or imagined, play a critical and likely necessary role in the manifestation of

stuttering events," concluded the study authors. "Future work should disentangle whether this is due to the removal of concerns about social evaluation or judgment, self-monitoring, or other communicative processes."

To learn more about speech and health issues, read "Singer K-Ci Hailey: Stroke Survivor."

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