

Stuttering doesn't need royal expletives to be overcome

Simone Lees
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Comments 10



Colin Firth provides a true portrayal of the social and emotional implications of being a person who stutters in *The King's Speech*.

Stuttering is ancient, but its treatment has now evolved away from stuffing your mouth with marbles and you don't have to swear to deal with it.

Playing a character with an impediment of some kind has long been thought of as Oscar bait. Colin Firth's depiction of King George VI's journey to overcome his stutter in *The King's Speech* is going down that route after he snagged a Golden Globe for best actor.

Although the stammer may have sent critics' thumbs a wagging, it was more Firth's portrayal of the social and emotional implications of being a person who stutters that nailed the part.

Stuttering is an age-old disorder, evident in Egyptian hieroglyphics, noted by Greek scholars Aristotle and Plato in 300 BC and referred to in the Bible by Moses and Isaiah.

Greek orator Demosthenes (4th century BC) was reported to have rehearsed his speeches with pebbles in his mouth, speaking above the roar of the sea to increase his stutter-free speech. The use of pebbles and over-articulation was also portrayed as a treatment for King George VI.

Other treatments have involved more extreme measures, such as surgically removing parts of the tongue, using mechanical devices in the mouth to support oral movements and experimentation with shock therapy.

But none of these barbaric and rather outdated methods combat the fear of being unable to express yourself or feeling as though you are always being negatively evaluated. Speech pathologists see people who have immense fear of speaking as well as coexisting phobias and depression. Just contacting a speech pathology clinic can be immensely confronting.

Imagine not being confident that you'll be able to say your name or ask a question. Imagine having the person on the other end of the line hanging up, thinking the call was a prank or a wrong number. Stuttering can be an isolating disorder.

It is also complex and poorly understood. Unlike the movie suggests, stuttering is not caused by negative childhood experiences or psychological issues. Stuttering is a neurological problem that causes a breakdown in the co-ordination and timing required for speech. Anxiety certainly makes stuttering worse, but it is not the cause.

While speech pathology is experiencing a raised profile thanks to this movie, contemporary techniques rarely involve jaw shaking vocal drills or repeating expletives.


Behavioural programs are successful for children who stutter, yet stuttering becomes more resistant to this treatment with age. This means that adults who stutter can be stutter-free, but they may need to use an altered speech style to facilitate fluency.

Marilyn Monroe's breathy voice is said to have less to do with her sultry qualities and more to do with concealing a stutter, while actress Emily Blunt attributes her stutter-free speech to taking on novel accents.

For adults, years of concealing their stuttering or living with anxiety can make asking for help difficult. Consequently, the [Australian Stuttering Research Centre](#) is investigating use of Skype-hosted treatments and web-based cognitive behaviour treatments specifically designed for adolescents and adults who stutter. Clinic-based treatments are also readily available, offering a range of evidence based treatments.

At any age there is a way to deal with stuttering. As King George VI said, "I have a voice!". He had only to master it.

Simone Lees is a senior speech pathologist at La Trobe Communication Clinic.

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Comments

10 comments

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»the age has to stop publishing articles such as these. this comes hot on the heels of david mcallisters complaints regarding black swan. black swan was directed by darren oronofovsky, whose previous films (pi, requiem for a dream, the fountain and the wrestler) concerned mathematics, heroin addiction, time travel and, well, wrestling. i do not recall, although i am happy to be corrected, mathematicians, heroin addicts, physicists or wrestlers being given column inches to complain about these. its a movie. its meant to be entertaining. its not a documentary. «

»the swearing in the king's speech was seemingly included for comic relief and was bloody funny. it also served to underline the point that george VI and logue had an UNCONVENTIONAL relationship. also, in case you weren't watching too closely, the character played by geoffrey rush had no formal training as a speech pathologist. just, fyi«

cassingles | Melbourne - January 24, 2011, 8:56AM

» «

»Cassingles, you have missed the point of the article. Simone Lees is not attacking the film, which in my opinion was a very good film, but rather she is commending it on how it depicts the effects of stuttering and explains that stuttering treatment has evolved in the past 80-90 years.«

MelbourneStutterer | Melbourne - January 24, 2011, 9:16AM

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»As an ex stutterer I found Simone's article really good - it reinforced the fact that a single solution does not exist. All I can say is that it is an totally maddening thing to have. As a boy and as a young man growing up in South Africa in the 60's and 70's little help existed. Being too private to disclose my personal circumstances growing up, I think my stutter was a result of low self esteem and little confidence. As I went out into the world and my confidence grew, my stutter got less and less. I do not stutter today . Whenever I come across a stutter, I still break out into a sweat thinking of those crazy times when I was a young man and understand everything they are going through. I was moved by the movie and could totally identify with a man who was unable to express himself. I only wish I had met my Lionel when I was young.«

Jonathan | Melbourne - January 24, 2011, 12:13PM

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»Goodness, what an overly earnest article. Gees, who would have thought that the neurological understanding of stuttering, and its treatment, would have moved on since the 1930s, which is what the movie depicts!?!?!?!?«

LuxuryYacht - January 24, 2011, 12:25PM

» «

»"Unlike the movie suggests, stuttering is not caused by negative childhood experiences or psychological issues."«

»Wouldn't it be more to the point to say that medical opinion at the time (much influenced by Freud) attributed stuttering to psychological issues? It's not the FILM making the suggestion. «

»The various methods tried remind me of an incident when Charles I discussed methods of dealing with a stutter. He suffered it, and had just met Nicholas Ferrar, a man he much admired, who suffered from it too. Pebbles in the mouth didn't help, but singing did. he said.«

LL - January 24, 2011, 1:28PM

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»I have read the article by Simone Lees and find it very heartening to see that she understands the nuances of stuttering. She has obviously seen the film and is not commenting on the film. She is commenting on the fact that there is help available for people of mature age: and it would have been better if parents had taken their child to see speech therapists in their youth. I find stuttering to be an affliction that can wear one down because other people tend to think they know what is about to be said and 'fill in the gaps' and often they are incorrect in their perception. This causes much embarrassment to both parties and further discourages the stutter from speaking. Stop before you think to help me or someone else when we are searching to put that word into sound so that you may understand what we are saying. Congratulations Simone Lees for having the nerve to write an article in the first place and comment on such a delicate topic which is bound to bring the uninformed out to rail against you. Take heart as I and many other applaude you.«

Aussie Ed | Melbourne - January 24, 2011, 2:19PM

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»Thought the header did not indicate what the article is about. «

»And it is hardly surprising that treatment of stuttering has changed over the last 70 - 80 years.«

MJM - January 24, 2011, 3:46PM

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»As a 65 year old man I can still remember as a child having a bad stutter my parents sent me off to boarding school in the hope that the teachers would be able cure me. One of the things we did was sing and I can remember doing this often in class. I saw the Kings speech and felt like crying as I remembered my own battles to overcome this awful curse which thank God I did.«

VJR - January 24, 2011, 4:24PM

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»Thanks Simone for this well written article. You wrote that 'it was more Firth's portrayal of the social and emotional implications of being a person who stutters that nailed the part' that hit home to me. These comments truly reflected how I felt while watching this movie as I have never experienced the effects of this crippling and isolating disorder either first or second hand. Well done and thanks for your input!«

craig | Melbourne - January 24, 2011, 4:51PM

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»VJR, craig and AussieEd, appreciate and agree with your comments. I too am a stutterer and although it is not as bad as when I was younger, it is always lingering. I saw the movie and was quite emotional as I recognised so much of myself in it. I also agree wholeheartedly with how we don't want people to try finish our sentences...Funny how you don't stutter

when you're thinking or talking aloud to yourself isn't it?? If only I was able to rest easy it would never happen again...especially when on the phone. Facial contortions, different octaves of voice, tapping feet, saying five other words to avoid one particular word...only stutterers will understand what I mean. Good luck to all of us out there.»

Nic | qld - January 25, 2011, 12:22AM

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