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Stutterers

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has had much broader application, Webster claims that 70 to 75 per cent of his patients have retained normal speaking abilities 30 months after completing his program.

Unfortunately, there are more than a few backsliders—those who finish Webster's three-week program speaking normally, then slowly and maddeningly revert to their old speech patterns weeks or months later.

Indeed, some stutterers say that they'd rather continue stuttering than go through the agony of another try at changing a life-long habit.

For Mike Seock, the agony is over. Seock, a shy 18-year-old, often used to order ham and string beans at restaurants simply because those words were easier to say than what he really preferred, liver and lima beans. Now he orders whatever he wants.

Likewise, Leahy, a St. Louis soccer star before he made it big with the Jets, is looking forward to impressing New York sportswriters this fall with his post-game repartee.

And brother Paulina, who used to get out of his car and point at the pump when he wanted gasoline, now says "fill 'er up" with ease. "I just can't tell you how it feels," he said. "It's like I can conquer the world."

That's a pretty heady remark for a stutterer, a member of an often silent and suffering minority. To be sure, stutterers through the ages—from the Athenian orator Demosthenes down to country and western singer Mel Tillis—have had their days in the sun. For the most part, however, generations of stutterers have had to endure ridicule from thoughtless clods and exotic but fruitless treatments from well-meaning therapists.

Much of the abuse stems from ignorance about just what causes stuttering. "No researcher has ever pinpointed a cause," says Meesey. "Some think it's psychological and others say it's physiological."

Adding to the mystery is the fact that about a 4-to-1 ratio, most stutterers are males. That lends credence to the theory that a trait for stuttering is passed on genetically, Meesey said.

But then, many speech pathologists and psychologists insist that it's all in a stutterer's head. Why else would many stutterers be able to speak quite fluently when talking to themselves or to a pet or a child and then suddenly stumble when

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talking with adults?

Still, there's no evidence that stutterers as a group are slow-witted.

"The only real difference between a stutterer and you is stuttering," Meesey said. "They have no other little quirks. And that's the frustrating part of it all. A stutterer knows he's normal."

Even so, "therapists" have used very unconventional means to help stutterers. One method used only a century or so ago was to shave off a bit of the tongue so the stutterer wouldn't get tongue-tied. Francis Bacon used to prescribe hot wine, presumably to thaw a frozen tongue.

These days some stuttering therapies seem only slightly more sophisticated. One stutterer said that he had tried every program from biofeedback to acupuncture but none of them worked.

That's why Webster's Fluency Shaping Program is attracting many speech pathologists and stutterers.

"This is not a theory-based program," Meesey said. "All we know is that it works. Webster analyzed what people do when they stutter and what they do when they speak normally."

Webster himself prefers to think of fluent speech as being both as easy and as complicated as a golf swing. "You have to put all the technical details together," he said. So, like most golf pros, Webster has a duffer slow down his swing so he'll better understand what it is that makes him hook or slice—or stutter.

That's nothing new in speech therapy. What is new is that Webster has stutterers undergo an intensive three-week course in which they are force-fed proper speaking habits.

For six days a week and as many as 11 hours a day, the stutterers spend most of their time in tiny insulated cubicles. Stopwatches in hand, workbooks before them, they practice stretching syllables. "O-O-O-N-N-N-N" is the first exercise in their workbook. That sound for the

word "on" is supposed to last two seconds.

Gradually, the students go from the "two-second stretch" to one second, then half a second and then to a manner of speech called "slow normal". During much of the course, the students utter their sounds into a microphone that is connected to an infuriating little device called "the black box".

The black box has a little green light that turns on or off, depending upon whether the student has made the right sound. Carter Rainford, speech pathologist at the center, says that she has known some students who would have liked to do great harm to the box.

Whenever the students get particularly frustrated (usually after a week) Miss Rainford says that she shows them an "after" videotape of former students who have reached fluency.

That helps. But stutterers have other motivations, too. Not so many generations ago, children used to be whipped for stuttering. Now there are more subtle methods of punishment.

"I would go in for job interviews, take all their tests and make grades in the high 90s," said Bill Yates, a computer programmer and a stutterer. "Yet employers would say, 'We'll let you know.' I've never heard from most of them."

Only one company actually told Yates why. "They wrote me a letter saying they would like to hire me because I made the highest grade ever on the

test," he said. "However, they decided not to because I would upset the other people in the office with this problem."

Yates said that there wasn't much he could do, except find another job, which he eventually did. But normally mild-mannered Mike Seock took things into his own hands. "There was this one kid in junior high who used to make fun of me," Seock said. "One time I got so mad I turned his desk over. After that, the other kids sort of stood by me and stuck up for me."

Stutterers now have organizations to stick up for them. One is the National Stuttering Project, based in San Francisco. Organizer Bob Goldman says his first priority is to wipe out The Porky Pig Syndrome.

"That may seem like kind of a humorous issue," Goldman said. "But it isn't, as far as I'm concerned."

"What does Porky Pig teach fluent children about people who stutter?" asked Goldman, who is himself a stutterer. "Even more importantly, what does he teach a stuttering child about himself?" Goldman says that his group is gathering evidence to document the negative effects that Porky Pig has had on children.

A spokesman for Warner Brothers, maker of the cartoons, says, "We've had no complaints on Porky whatsoever. She said that Warner Brothers had no intention of making fun of stutterers. "None of our characters were made to be

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dumb," she said. "They all were made in one way or other to reflect people."

Porky Pig isn't Goldman's only issue. Goldman also hopes to provide a consumer service of sorts for stutterers looking for therapy.

Therapy usually costs a lot of money—the program at the Speech & Hearing Center is moderate at \$400—and all too often the stutterer, after some initial success, starts stuttering again. So Goldman is leery of any program that purports to have a high success rate.

So is Eugene Walle, an associate professor in the department of speech pathology and audiology at the Catholic University in Washington. Walle says that he has no use for the Precision Fluency Shaping program. "I have a great deal of respect for Webster, but I pay no heed to his statistics whatsoever," he said.

He prefers to concentrate on research designed to stop children from stuttering before they start. Once they get started, he says, the best that science can offer is only to help them stutter more fluently.

Walle and other critics of Webster's program wonder how many of his graduates will remain fluent for how long. That seems to be the basic question in speech therapy.

It's a question that Bill Yates is asking, too. Yates, who started the three-week course at the Speech & Hearing Center last year with a severe stutter here at the Speech & Hearing Center say that practice makes perfect. Perhaps Yates didn't practice enough?

Maybe so, Yates replies. But there was something about life without a stutter that depressed him. "It's an entirely new feeling," he said. "It's unnatural. It's uncomfortable. It's a-a-a-a-a damn difficult job. Your entire m-m-m-mental process is concentrated on how you are speaking rather than w-what you are saying."

Goldman, who has gone through his share of therapies, put it another way. "Stuttering becomes such a part of you, that you have a hard time giving it up," he said. "For some people, stuttering may be their only identity. You have to give up that person. You have to die."

For those who are reborn, the rewards are great. Mike Seock, once lonely and quiet, says that he feels as if he has a "fresh start."

"This year," he said, "I have a lot more friends."

Strike

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language of the plan, where needed, will be clarified."

The letter specifically noted that the pension fund's board of trustees had asked the city's actuaries to provide cost analysis for a union proposal to provide "a benefit for less than total and permanent disability."

Walker said that the city had agreed to hold a special council meeting, before the council's Aug. 28 meeting, to adopt changes to the ordinance. Kaufman later said he planned to call that meeting for Aug. 22, provided that the Pension Board comes up with recommendations for changes to the ordinance at its meeting next Tuesday.

"They've put it in writing," Walker said. "If they renege, we'll hang it

around their necks. But we see no reason at this time why they would."

Walker said also that it was his understanding, after talking with the city's representatives, that any changes to the pension ordinance would be made retroactive to include Shipley's case.

"This is what we initially wanted," Walker said. "We wanted them to begin the normal legislative process to change the ordinance. It's a shame it took the strike to do it."

Kaufman would not say that he was happy with the firemen's vote, but added, "I strongly believe that a person should respect the integrity of the court."

Earlier yesterday, Walker criticized

County Supervisor Gene McNary at a meeting of the St. Louis County Council. Walker said that McNary had not worked as a moderating force to help settle the dispute between Local 388 and University City. The Supervisor should have acted in that manner if he had had any real concerns for the welfare of the people, Walker said.

McNary had declared a state of emergency and sent County Police into University City during the firemen's strike. The Supervisor also sought an injunction barring the union from interfering with outside fire departments attempting to extinguish fires in University City.

If McNary "had concern for humanity," Walker said, he would have sympa-

thized with firemen's efforts to change the pension plan. Walker suggested that McNary could have provided county revenue-sharing funds to fire districts and could have assisted districts in operating ambulance services.

University City firemen ended their seven-day walkout July 28 when the City Council said it would consider changes in the pension ordinance. The Pension Board Tuesday began work on forming recommendations for changing the ordinance. Those recommendations are expected next Tuesday.

On July 24, a plastics factory was gutted when firemen from five departments refused to cross a picket line set up in front of the burning building by University City firemen.