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# Would You Date a Person who Stutters? College Students Respond

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify attitudes toward dating a person who stutters (PWS) held by college students. One hundred and thirty-two college students responded to a 19-item questionnaire. Survey items included questions about participants' familiarity with persons who stutter, family and/or personal history of stuttering, knowledge of stuttering behaviors, beliefs about the cause of stuttering, whether they would date a person who stutters, and factors that would influence their decision to date or not date a PWS. Results indicated that approximately 30 percent of respondents stated they would date a person who stuttered. Approximately half of the participants were unsure if they would date a PWS and would base their decision on the personality, severity of stuttering, the physical attractiveness and intelligence of the PWS. Findings suggest that at least three of the four factors cited by participants as important in their decision to date someone who stutters can, to varying degrees, be modified by the PWS (i.e., personality, stuttering severity, and appearance). These are potential treatment outcome goals for many PWS and should be explored by the client and clinician as part of the process of therapeutic change.

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## Introduction

Stuttering is a speech disorder that occurs across all cultures, in which the normal flow of speech is disrupted (ASHA, 2009; Daniels, 2008). Stuttering affects over three million people in the United States, roughly one percent of the population (Bloodstein & Bernstein Ratner, 2008). Several types of disfluencies such as repetitions, prolongations, and blocks characterize stuttered speech. Unusual facial and body movements, referred to as secondary behaviors, are associated with stuttering (Bloodstein & Bernstein Ratner, 2008). Stuttering may also affect interpersonal relationships and reminds us that intervention is not just with the person who stutters (PWS), but also with all people within his/her communication network (Klein & Hood, 2004; Shapiro, 1999; Sheehan, 1970). Shapiro (1999) notes that this communication network could include spouses, girlfriends, and boyfriends. Studies suggest that many PWS view their stuttering as an obstacle to forming relationships and often

makes it difficult for them to talk to members of the opposite sex (Hayhow, Cray & Enderby, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004). In fact, one survey investigation conducted by Shears & Jensema (1969) reported that adults who stutter were rated as suitable marriage partners by only seven percent of respondents (all of whom were non-stutterers). Moreover, it has been reported that although PWS are thought to have minimal disadvantage during the initial phases of relationships, they are viewed as having greatly diminished opportunities for successful long-term romantic relationships (Zhang, Saltuklaroglu, Hough & Kalinowski, 2009). However, others have suggested that PWS have the potential for full and satisfying intimate relationships (Boberg & Boberg, 1990; Linn & Caruso, 1998).

Yaruss (1998) underscored the potential social handicap associated with stuttering such as inhibited participation in social activities like dating. Indeed, Shapiro (1999) stated that, "stuttering affects the emotions and dreams of all members of the communication system within which a person who stutters communicates" (p. 27). Thus, for some PWS, the desire to establish loving relationships are, to varying degrees, thwarted by legitimate or perceived barriers associated with stuttered speech.

Persons who stutter often develop strong emotions toward, and thought processes about, their stuttering (Craig, Blumgart, & Tran, 2009). Importantly, Silverman (1992) stated that the degree to which persons who stutter are handicapped will be determined, in part, by their beliefs concerning the impact of the disorder on them; those beliefs or "certainties" can cause PWS to limit their activities. Manning (2009) speaks cogently about clinicians assisting persons who stutter "live life in a broader and deeper manner as we help them in becoming 'unstuck,' not only from their speech but from a life of restricted decision making" (p. 289). Thus, therapeutic change in stuttering intervention must also focus on changes in the thought processes and attitudes of PWS.

Attitude and belief change have been shown to be successful in reducing severity of stuttering in PWS (Bennett, 2006; Bloom & Cooperman, 1999; Manning, 2009; Silverman, 1992). An example of such attitude and belief change is asking the PWS not to assume that a person with normal speech will not want to date someone who stutters (Silverman, 1992). Some college students who stutter with whom we have worked have cited their stuttering as a major factor in the dissolution of dating relationships, stating further that their stuttering and their efforts to avoid stuttering "got in the way of their relationship." Based on this experience, they often assume that "no one will want to date them." Thus, testing of these assumptions by the college student who stutters can be an important part of intervention. It also seems important that clinicians challenge the attitudes of those individuals within the communication networks of the college student who stutters (i.e., fellow college students) in an effort to identify prevailing positive and negative attitudes toward PWS. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine opinions held by college students about dating a PWS.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study consisted of 132 college junior and senior students (66 females and 66 males; mean age: 22.4 yrs, range: 19.5 - 34 yrs) who attended a large public university in the South-Atlantic region of the United States. Students were randomly selected from class sections of a career planning course offered for upperclassmen at the university. Sixty-three of the students were seniors and 59 were juniors. Participant inclusion criteria were as follows, (a) undergraduate college student, (b) pursuing a college major other than communication sciences and disorders, and (c) a person who did not stutter. The academic majors of the students included, business/economics (27), liberal arts (23), education (22), social sciences (21), health professions (17), natural sciences (13), and performing arts (9). With regard to their marital status, three students reported that they were married and two indicated they were divorced. Over half of the participants (60%) were residents of the region (i.e., Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia).

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Informed consent was obtained from all participants per the policies of the university. Students were not paid for their participation in the study.

### ***Procedure***

A 19-item survey questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study (see Appendix A). Portions of the questionnaire were adapted from Van Borsel and associates' (1999) survey of public awareness of stuttering among a European population. The first six survey questions pertained to participant background information (e.g., age, gender, college major, year in college, marital status and state of residence). The remaining thirteen question items were designed to determine: (1) participants' level of familiarity with persons who stutter; (2) if they had a family history of stuttering; (3) any personal history of stuttering; (4) their knowledge of stuttering behaviors; (5) their beliefs about the cause of stuttering; (6) if they were currently dating or had ever dated a person who stutters; (7) if they had dated a person who stuttered, why did the relationship end; (8) if they would date a person who stutters; and (9) those factors that would influence their decision to date or not date a PWS.

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to participants over two days at an on campus classroom location. The survey was administered by the authors to groups of no more than twenty students at a time. The students were told that they were participating in an informational survey on stuttering and instructed to answer all of the questionnaire items. The students were allowed to ask clarifying questions prior to beginning the survey. Following the return of all 150 surveys, the authors reviewed each questionnaire for completeness and participant eligibility. Questionnaires were considered incomplete and excluded from the study if any participant background information (e.g., age, major) or responses to questionnaire items were missing. Returned questionnaires were also excluded from the study if participants did not meet all inclusion criteria. Out of the 150 questionnaires distributed and returned to the investigators, 18 did not meet inclusion criteria and were eliminated. Therefore, 132 surveys (88%) were used in the present study.

### ***Data Analysis***

Participants' responses to the questionnaire were grouped into five categories: familiarity with PWS and family history of stuttering, knowledge of behaviors that constitute stuttering, opinions on the causes of stuttering, willingness to date a PWS and factors that would influence the decision to date or not date a PWS. The findings are reported as descriptive statistics under each category.

## **Results**

### ***Familiarity with Persons Who Stutter and Family History of Stuttering***

The majority of participants (92.4%) knew someone who stutters. As seen in Table 1, nearly three-quarters of respondents knew between one and five PWS. Fewer participants (12.8%) reported having a family history of stuttering; as displayed in Table 2; male relatives were most frequently identified by participants as the family member with a history of stuttering.

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**Table 1.** Participants' level of familiarity with persons who stutter

| Number of Persons Who Stutter Known By Participants | Number of Participants (N = 122 out of 132) |
|---|---|
| One to Two Persons                                  | 47  |
| Three to Five Persons                               | 55  |
| Six to Eight Persons                                | 9   |
| Nine or More Persons                                | 11  |

**Table 2.** Participants' reported family history of stuttering (N = 17 out of 132). Participants were allowed to identify more than one family member if appropriate.

| Family Member Who Stutters | Number of Participants |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Father                     | 16                     |
| Grandfather                | 12                     |
| Brother                    | 11                     |
| Sister                     | 7                      |
| Mother                     | 6                      |
| Uncle                      | 4                      |
| Niece/Nephew/Cousin        | 4                      |

### *Behaviors That Constitute Stuttering*

The participants were asked to list those features or behaviors that constitute stuttering. The question was framed broadly as 'What happens when a person stutters?' in order to allow respondents to list a range of features, from motor behaviors to affective reactions. As shown in Table 3, repetition of words was listed by all participants as a behavioral component of stuttering, while sound repetitions and blocks were also identified by the majority of college students as behavioral features of the disorder. None of the students specifically listed phrase repetitions or sound prolongations among the core behaviors of stuttering. The students were also clear in their view that secondary behaviors were also features of stuttering by stating that some PWS "close their eyes" or "move parts of their body" during moments of stuttering. Only a few respondents listed affective responses or feelings experienced by the PWS in their descriptions of stuttering behaviors (e.g., 'Become embarrassed'). Based on these findings, it is clear that the students saw repetitions and blocks as constituting the major features of what persons who stutter do when they stutter.

**Table 3.** Participants' listing of behaviors that constitute stuttering.

| <b>Behaviors of People Who Stutter</b>      | <b>Number of Participants</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Repeat words                                | 132                           |
| Repeat sounds                               | 120                           |
| Stop talking/Block/Get 'stuck'              | 108                           |
| Close their eyes                            | 83                            |
| Move parts of their body                    | 53                            |
| Stray off topic/Lose their train of thought | 3                             |
| Become embarrassed                          | 2                             |

### *Opinions on the Causes of Stuttering*

Participants were allowed to provide more than one answer to the question, 'What do you think causes stuttering?' The students' responses were clustered into three categories--psychological causes, organic causes, and other causes. Over one-half of students (i.e., 74) felt that the cause of stuttering was psychological in nature (e.g., nervousness/anxiety, emotional trauma, lack of confidence). Additionally, sixty students believed the origin of stuttering was organic in nature (e.g., neurological/physiological, heredity/genetics, speech motor control problems such as the speaker talking too fast).

### *Would You Date a Person Who Stutters?*

Only three of the college participants in the study (2 females and 1 male) stated that they had dated a PWS. None of the three students were in a dating relationship with a PWS at the time of the survey. Of the three students, two reported that their relationship with a PWS lasted five months. A third student stated that her relationship ended after six months. Only one of these students cited stuttering as a factor in the dissolution of the dating relationship, stating "He was too hung up on the negative aspects of his stuttering and this made the relationship difficult."

Among those students who had not dated a PWS, 38 percent (22 males, 28 females) indicated they would date a PWS, whereas 12 percent of the students (10 females, 6 males) stated they would not date a PWS. The other 50 percent of the participants (34 males, 32 females) responded that they did not know whether or not they would date a PWS.

As a follow up to the question 'Would you date a person who stutters?,' all participants were asked to provide an explanation for their answer. Those factors students cited as influencing their decision to date or not date a PWS are listed in rank-order (from most to least frequent responses) in Table 4 and Table 5. College students who stated that they would not date a person who stutters revealed that their reluctance was related to the possibility of becoming impatient or angry with the PWS's inability to convey their message fluently, concern about being personally embarrassed in front of others by the PWS's stuttering, or experiencing difficulty understanding the PWS's speech during moments of stuttering. Participants responding that they would or might date a PWS reported the deciding factors to be personality characteristics, stuttering severity, physical attractiveness or level of intelligence.

**Table 4.** Factors influencing college students' decision to date or not date a PWS (Rank-ordered from most frequent to least frequent responses). The number of students offering each explanation is reported.

| <i>'NO, I Would Not Date a PWS.'</i> N=16<br>Determining Factors | <i>'YES, I Would a Date PWS.'</i> N=50<br>Determining Factors     |
|--|---|
| Impatience with or Anger at PWS <i>n=13</i>                      | Personality of the PWS <i>n=43</i>                                |
| Potential for Embarrassment <i>n=13</i>                          | Stuttering Severity (Mild O.K.) <i>n=41</i>                       |
| Difficulty Understanding PWS's Speech <i>n=11</i>                | Appearance/Physical Attractiveness <i>n=37</i>                    |
| Would Find the Condition Humorous <i>n=8</i>                     | Level of Intelligence of the PWS <i>n=35</i>                      |
| Would probably not be compatible with a PWS<br><i>n=5</i>        | If love was involved, stuttering would not<br>matter. <i>n=12</i> |

**Table 5.** Explanatory statements from participants who were unsure if they would date a PWS. The number of students offering these explanations is indicated.

| Explanatory Statements N=66  |
|--|
| 'It would depend on his/her personality. If he/she had a great personality, I would likely go out with him/her.' <i>n=66</i> |
| 'If the stuttering was not too severe/extreme.' <i>n=61</i>  |
| 'If he/she were attractive, I might give it a try.' <i>n=58</i>  |
| 'If they were intelligent, I would probably not care about the stuttering.' <i>n=51</i>                                      |
| 'You can't judge a person by the way he/she communicates so, I might give it a chance.' <i>n=12</i>                          |
| 'If I could help him/her with the stuttering.' <i>n=5</i>  |
| 'If they were not hung up on their speech difficulty.' <i>n=2</i>  |

## Discussion

College life represents a time of transition for most students. For some students, college provides them with an opportunity to "remake" themselves and discard their high school image. Others, while in college, will experience their first intense romantic relationship, with the associated joy or "heart break." In the present study of college students, most of whom knew a person who stutters, examination of the question, 'Would you date a person who stutters?' revealed that only 12 percent of students responded that they would not date a person who stutters. Conversely, over one-third of students surveyed stated that they would date a PWS. Half of the college students were uncertain, and would base their decision on the personality, level of stuttering severity, appearance, and intelligence of the PWS.

How might these findings be useful for some college students who stutter who anticipate rejection and, consequently, rarely attempt to get a date? At least three of the factors cited by college students as important in their decision to date a PWS (i.e., personality, stuttering severity, appearance) might be modified by the PWS in conjunction with the clinician as part of the therapeutic process.

Specifically, with regard to personality, the college student who stutters could be encouraged to present himself/herself in a manner which suggests they possess a good self-concept and demonstrate a sense of humor. Bloom and Cooperman (1999) note that although some people are naturally assertive and self-confident, becoming assertive and self-confident can be accomplished by all people. They provide examples of ways PWS can attain self-confidence through group practices, assuming responsibility, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, and learning to look at the positive sides of stuttering. It might also be useful for the college student who stutters to develop or emphasize their sense of humor and judiciously exhibit that facet of their personality when interacting with others (Manning, 2009, p. 30). It has been reported that men and women with a sense of humor are considered more attractive than those who lack a sense of humor (Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997).

The college students in the present study stated that the severity of an individual's stuttering would also influence their decision to date/not date that person. Most students reported that they would feel more comfortable dating a person with 'mild' stuttering. This finding seems to be underscored by Gabel (2006) who reported that individuals who stutter mildly are perceived more positively than those who are severe; additionally, Manning, Burlison, and Thaxton (1999) found that untrained listeners rated a speaker who produced mild levels of stuttering more positively than when he spoke using stuttering modification techniques. Likewise, Susca and Healey (2002) suggested that listeners reported more positive comments about speech samples that contained less frequent instances of stuttering.

The students in the current investigation were not provided an opportunity by the researchers to define, describe, or give an example of stuttering severity. However, we conjecture that in view of students' listing of the behaviors that constitute stuttering, it is likely their definition of stuttering severity was based primarily on overt behaviors such as sound and word repetitions and blocks. Furthermore, it is possible that the students in this study equated amount of stuttering with severity of stuttering. We should also not overlook the possibility that some participants based their views of stuttering severity on images gathered from media portrayals of PWS rather than actual individuals who stutter. Johnson (2008) stated that the portrayals of characters on film and television have often pandered to the public's basic ideas of stuttering and thus have been stereotypical, unrealistic, and at times even derogatory. Still, stuttering severity is determined both by the amount a person stutters and the degree of negative consequence stuttering has on a person's life (Silverman, 1992; Yaruss, 1998).

Guitar (2006) stated that severity reflects an overall impression that listeners may have when they listen to a person who stutters. Listeners can form these impressions of the severity of stuttering exhibited by a person based on factors such as frequency and duration of stuttering (see also Susca & Healey, 2002). As severity of stuttering has been found to be negatively correlated with listener attitudes toward PWS (Collins & Blood, 1988; Dejoy & Jordan, 1988; Gabel, 2006; Panico, Healey, Brouwer, & Susca, 2005; Susca & Healey, 2002; Turnbaugh, Guitar & Hoffman, 1979), addressing it as a therapy goal may yield results for college students who stutter. Additionally, future studies might examine how naïve listeners, in the absence of a definition, actually form their impressions of stuttering severity and how they define 'mild,' 'moderate,' or 'severe' stuttering. That is, are their impressions of stuttering severity based on actual persons who stutter or is some other metric used (e.g., their most vivid recollections of someone they know/knew, met, grew up with, or to whom they were related)?

The literature suggests that stuttering therapy should not focus narrowly on reducing the frequency of stuttering alone; but also more holistically on how well the client communicates and begins to view himself/herself as an agent of change (Gabel, 2006; Plexico, Manning & Levitt, 2009a; 2009b; Susca & Healey, 2002). A holistic approach to reducing stuttering severity in college students could include targeting the overt stuttering behavior itself, modifying the reactions of others to the behavior, and/or modifying the person who stutters' attitude toward stuttering. In addressing reducing the overt stuttering behavior as part of one holistic approach to treatment, Silverman (1992) stated:

“..by helping a client eliminate behaviors that occur during his or her moments of stuttering, you are likely to reduce the negative reactions from listeners to the stuttering and, thereby, reduce the client’s desire to avoid or conceal it. This in turn, should result in a further reduction in stuttering severity (assuming that the desire to conceal stuttering tends to increase its severity) and a further reduction in negative reactions from listeners, and so forth.” (p. 196).

Proactive approaches that college students who stutter can take to modify the reactions of others to their dysfluency include acknowledging or advertising their stuttering. For example, Collins and Blood (1990) reported that women are open to interacting with males who stutter and who acknowledge their stuttering, even if the level of stuttering is severe. Finally, when addressing appearance as a dating consideration, college students who stutter can be encouraged to dress attractively, and be well-groomed.

These are potential treatment outcome goals for many college students who stutter and should be explored by the client and clinician. For example, in our stuttering treatment program for college students, we utilize social communication activities with dating as a topic focus. Within this context, we focus on the positive attributes of the students, and work with them to identify and list reasons why someone might want to date them (e.g., ‘I have a great sense of humor’, ‘I am athletic’, ‘I am intelligent’, ‘I am a caring person’). Simulation activities in which our college clients who stutter role play striking up a conversation with a male or female (we have employed students from the theater department to play the role of the ‘object of interest’ in these activities) and ask the person for a date, have been effective in increasing their confidence level.

In summary it, appears that contrary to the beliefs of some college students who stutter, their peers are conditionally open to the idea of dating a person who stutters. Most of their peers are attracted to those personal qualities that all of us seek in a potential mate and seek compatibility in the areas of personality, pleasant appearance, healthy attitude and intellect. Stuttering does not have to be a barrier to the formation of longstanding romantic relationships as is demonstrated by the reality that many persons who stutter are happily married to persons who do and do not stutter.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questionnaire Items

1. Have you ever met a person who stutters (Not a member of your family)?
  2. If you answered 'yes' to Question # 1, how many persons have you known that stuttered?
  3. Is there anyone in your family who stutters?
  4. If yes, what is the relationship of this family member to you?
  5. Do you stutter?
  6. What happens when a person stutters?
  7. What do you think causes stuttering?
  8. Are you currently dating or have you ever dated a person who stutters?  
  
    \_\_\_No  
    \_\_\_I am currently dating a person who stutters  
    \_\_\_I used to date a person who stutters
  9. If you used to date a person who stutters, how long did the relationship last and why did it end?
  10. Would you date a person who stutters?  
  
    \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No \_\_\_I do not know if you would date a person who stutters
  11. If you answered 'yes' to Question # 10, please indicate why.
  12. If you answered 'no' to Question # 10, please indicate why.
  13. If you answered 'I do not know' to Question # 10, please indicate what factors would influence you to date a person who stutters.
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