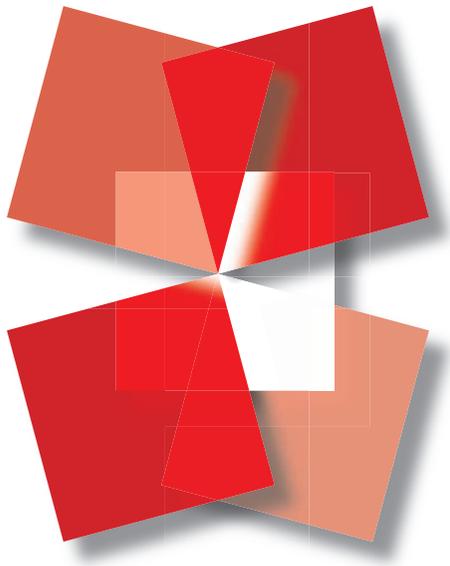


Mastering Blocking and Stuttering

A Cognitive Approach to
Achieving Fluency



Bob G. Bodenhamer, DMin

Edited by Peter Young

Foreword by John C. Harrison

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Chapter One

The Origins of Stuttering

How blocking begins

In every case I have worked with, the roots of the individual's blocking are in childhood. Sometimes however, the actual blocking does not appear until adolescence or even adulthood. People who block usually refer to their non-fluency as *blocking* or *stuttering* (*stammering* in the UK). In itself, this is no problem. It is when they come to believe that blocking is something bad and to be feared that problems arise.

CASE STUDY 1

Susan was very angry with her parents because she believed that if they had not gotten all upset about her childhood problem of learning how to speak, then she would not have started blocking and stuttering. I encouraged Susan to speak with her mother about it. Here is Susan's reply:

Well I did it! I spoke to my mom about my stuttering and it was not bad. I actually feel some peace. It is not complete, but better. I was afraid to talk to her but I did. We talked about stuttering openly but we didn't talk about the touchy-feely stuff. I said I'd been very angry and explained how the work I do sometimes increases my feeling of anger because I think she could have behaved better. I was able to show empathy and to see it through her eyes. I think my parents did try a lot of things and I don't think it was in the vengeful way that I always see. I think the way I chose to see things is definitely holding me back.

My mother was OK with this talk and actually supportive. I told her that I feel she still has feelings of embarrassment about my stuttering and she said, "I don't worry about you, in my eyes you have

made it, you are successful living a life and that's all we wanted for you." That was a shock to hear. Maybe I don't get that I have already arrived in some ways in the work that I have done. I think I have refused to see that. I also realized that I don't want to spend the rest of my life talking about my stuttering – there is more to life. I think I am too attached to my stuttering.

Sometimes I think it is a way to shield myself from my true feelings and relations to people. You are so busy thinking and being obsessed with stuttering that you don't need to think about your feelings, it is a good feeling blocker. John Harrison said it is so much about feelings and not about stuttering. I never understood that before.

Susan's story is typical of People Who Stutter (PWS). Her story illustrates the theme of this book: that stuttering is a learned behavior, and, as such, can be unlearned. However, much speech therapy in the United States addresses the symptoms rather than the cause, the physical components of blocking and stuttering and not the underlying meanings that the person has given to blocking and stuttering.

Childhood experiences

In that the origins of blocking and stuttering arise from emotional hurts experienced during childhood, the PWS is no different from the other people who seek my assistance. They all demonstrate a similar structure of learned negative associations which they are unable to control consciously. Although it is possible that a child has some kind of disfluency as a result of genetic defects, it is more likely that their disfluency is just the normal stumbling with words as the child learns how to speak. However, should a parent or significant other adult think that the child has a speech problem, the child is told that they stutter and off to the speech pathologist they go. This confirms to the child that there is something unacceptable about their speech, and something wrong or unacceptable about *them*.

I have yet to find a person who fell in love with their stuttering. If every time they experience difficulty speaking they think of this as

something bad, then over time this badness becomes a habit, and they generalize that badness to themselves. One question you could ask is “How do you know this is bad? Who told you?” The knowledge that their speech is abnormal usually comes from a parent or significant other person pointing out that there is something wrong with how they speak. (However, I have found a few people who block and stutter who placed the “bad” and “unacceptable” label on themselves without any knowledge of outside influences.)

Susan is a good example of this. She thinks that being dragged to a speech pathologist solidified her perception that she was flawed in some way, and that she had to be “perfect” in speech in order for her mother and father to like her.

Children who block describe non-fluency as something they wish to avoid or control. They may have reached their own conclusion on this, or based it on what adults or their peers have said. In addition, their blocking is connected to the negative emotions which accompanied some earlier painful experiences associated with not being fluent in speech. Many times the PWS will describe their experiences as being traumatic. Having friends mock you, or school teachers embarrassed because of how you speak can also “lock in the block.” Indeed, when a teacher stands a child up before a class and shouts “Spit it out!”, for the child who is trying to talk but can’t, it is trauma.

The precipitating event may not be something terrible or tragic; the child may have interpreted the divorce of the parents, the lack of affection from dad, the lack of emotional support from mom, or any emotional and physical abuse as being painful and threatening. The child does what all children tend to do – they personalize the external problems, assume some degree of responsibility, and then internalize and express the hurt in the muscles used for breathing/speaking. They begin to block.

Blocking is also connected with feelings of helplessness in not being able to speak when required to. This leads to feeling that you are different or strange – something children wish to avoid at all cost. From these childhood experiences the child learns that blocking and stuttering is unacceptable behavior, and grows up fearing

that they will continue to block. The fear itself creates even more blocking and stuttering. Essentially, the PWS “becomes that which they fear most.”

This book includes ways of identifying those painful emotions and suggests means of healing them.

The concept of self

A person’s concept of self grows and changes throughout their lifetime. It is first formalized by their caregivers who named them and began to relate to them as a separate individual. The child needs a firm foundation of how the world works. During their early years they do not critically filter incoming information because they have yet to develop the ability to *think about, reflect on* or *question* their experience. Instead, what they learn in childhood becomes their truth – and that proves both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes the child gets hold of the wrong end of the stick, as it were, when making meaning of their own behaviors, and that meaning may endure. The blocking then persists because the PWS continues to think in a “childish” way: the meaning of their behavior still relates to those early years experiences.

The same is true for practically all emotional problems that adults have. The issues I deal with therapeutically come from thinking patterns the clients learned in childhood. Allowing other people to determine your concept of self is appropriate when you are a young child, but not desirable as you mature. One solution to this problem is to get the PWS to grow up those parts of themselves which are stuck in childhood. The person first needs to practice mentally stepping back so that they may critically examine the beliefs they have carried with them since childhood. They use their adult mind to notice how they have constructed their model of the world, the beliefs that enable them to function, and then to update any which are obsolete.

One of the most debilitating beliefs of a PWS is their claim to know how other people perceive them. Yet they never check the truth or accuracy of such claims. I have discovered with people who block that the typical self-definition they received from others is based

Chapter Five

Working with Stress

States of being

If I were to ask you what state of mind you are presently in, you could probably answer quite readily. Since you are reading this book, you may answer, "I am in a learning state." Or you may say, "I am in a curious state" or even, "I am in a state of confusion." You can usually give a name to the state of mind you are in at any given moment. Because "state" is hard to define precisely, we often use metaphors. We often talk about emotional states as though they are *liquids* which fill us up: "I'm full of admiration" or run dry: "I'm drained of pity". Emotions such as anger boil over, while love flows out.

You are always in some state of mind or emotion (unless you are dead), and this state of mind is in constant flux. Although many states are transitory – moments of exhilaration or dismay – some states may become habitual. What is your "usual" state? Are you generally grumpy, happy, tired, carefree, optimistic or energized ...?

Your state (whether anger, fear, anxiety, love, happiness ...) affects the way you interact with the world and other people. Each state influences the way you see, think, and feel, and thus your ability to communicate with others. Your ability to learn is governed by the particular state you are in at the time. You know from your own experience that if you are feeling bored or tired, or you have to take care of other people's needs, you are not going to be in the best state for paying attention to new information or thinking about how you can develop new ways of doing things.

Your physiological state, measured in terms of general arousal, can vary between coma to "up and at 'em" activity. Physiological and emotional states are related. For example, think of times when you

were angry, anxious, curious, happy, attentive, confused, loving, and so on, and consider, “What does being in this state allow me to do – and not do?” You discover that your options vary a great deal. When you are in a state of high arousal you are more likely to experience certain kinds of emotional state and not others; it is hard to be under great stress and maintain a state of equanimity.

Getting the message

If you are experiencing a stressful state, your options are reduced. If you treat stress as a message from your body to your mind, it informs you that you need to take action to reduce your stress level. However, if the stress is producing fear and that is triggering a blocking response, taking effective action might be difficult. If fear initiates negative thinking, that is going to compound your inability to act appropriately.

Notice the kind of language that PWS use to amplify the blocking:

- “I’m blocking again!!”
- “I hate it when I stutter.”
- “I can’t go on doing this!”
- “If I stutter, they’ll think I’m stupid.”
- “Am I going to go on blocking for the rest of my life?”

I know that it usually isn’t just this simple. Those old horror movies really are grooved into the muscles and run out of conscious awareness. Because they flow deeply, just talking to yourself using positive thinking will not fix them instantly. Yet by habitually talking to yourself in language that is positive and supportive, rather than beating yourself up, can produce remarkable and surprising results. Turning around what you say to yourself will change your behavior, but it will take a little time.

Dealing with stress

The time to learn state management skills, of course, is not during the stress storm. Learning navigation skills when a ship is tossing

and turning in the open sea in the midst of 40 foot waves is a bit late in the game.

Michael Hall (1997)

Generally, when people are stressed, they are not in a good place for learning new strategies for changing their behavior. Under stress, people tend to revert to instinctive or habitual patterns, and these are often of the “fight, flight or freeze” variety. The PWS’s usual response to stress is to freeze – then to start blocking. Therefore, by treating the freezing up as a signal, the PWS knows it is time to engage their *flow* response to this situation instead.

The way to manage your stress is to learn how to avoid sending the “Danger!” message when you encounter threats which are imaginary or irrational. Because the body-mind is hardwired to respond to any kind of threat, this is going to take some doing. It means learning to alter the meanings that you have given to certain events.

Having a conversation with someone is not usually a life threatening experience! You have to find a way to stop reacting as if it were, and to realize that in everyday conversations people are generally supportive and friendly. This means learning to respond more appropriately with your *adult* mind, maintaining state control, going with the flow, rather than reverting to the instinctive flight responses stemming from childhood hurts.

If you perceive a conversation as stressful, that tells you that you need to make some changes. One of those changes involves loving and honoring yourself no matter how you speak. Speaking is just talking. The fact is no one has ever died from blocking.

I asked some of my clients for their response to this idea. One replied:

I think the real fear is that I am NOT going to die. If I died then I would not have to live out the shame and humiliation. I am not in a life threatening situation but I am in a *self-esteem threatening* situation. What is more painful, being totally humiliated or dying? At least dying will end my misery. But being humiliated seems never to end and it is a real threat. That is why it kicks the fight/flight

syndrome into action. Seriously, death is easy compared to living a life of humiliation. Sounds weird but ask any PWS how many times they wished they were dead. It is not the fear of death that activates the fight/flight mechanism it is the *fear of humiliation*. [Italics added]

Therefore start managing stress by raising your self-esteem and stopping thinking so much about other people's opinions of you. When you create new meanings of (reframe) the old triggers that produced blocking, there will be no need to become stressful, and you will be able to enjoy your conversations.

How to achieve relaxed alertness

To avoid the fear and anxiety emotions that set off blocking, the following *Flying Into Calm* pattern shows how you can learn to recognize the bodily symptoms of stress, to accept these as part of the normal functioning of the body, and to use various breathing, stretching and muscle relaxing exercises to achieve a state of calmness.

How can you become truly masterful in coping and handling the demands, challenges, threats, fears, and so on, of communicating at work and at home so that you don't stress out about these things? How can you?

Exercise 5.1: The *Flying Into Calm* Pattern

This is a self-help pattern for overcoming blocking.

Overview

1. Recognize the presence of stress.
2. Notice your strategy for stress
3. Practice *flying into calm*.
4. Find your calm state.

"Through NLP and the strategies in this book I have won the *perfect trifecta*. I have used the strategies to dramatically improve the results I get in therapy, I have helped myself overcome stuttering, and I have enjoyed an explosion in my private practice. Study this book and find solutions for truly resolving stuttering."

**Tim Mackesey, CCC-SLP, BRSFD,
Licensed Speech-Language Pathologist, NLP Master Practitioner**

"At long last, speech language therapists and those who stutter have tools to address the most overlooked component of stuttering—the habits of thought that drive the speech block. The neuro-semantic processes described in this book will help the PWS to build a framework for fluency that can lead to permanent change."

John C. Harrison, National Stuttering Association (America)

"Bodenhamer's thesis that 'blocking is primarily cognitive rather than physiological', its roots in early childhood, is controversial—but his goal, to change the way people who stammer think about themselves and how they relate to others, is not. This text details NLP techniques for addressing stammering and documents fascinating case studies throughout. It is full of illuminating questions and practical exercises to help people who stammer 'reframe' speaking and access natural fluency more easily—an excellent resource for people who stammer and therapists alike."

Jan Anderson, Scottish Development Manager, British Stammering Association

"... a tremendous resource for exploring, understanding and 'unlearning' the habits, beliefs and feelings that create and maintain blocking and stuttering."

**Marjorie Rosenthal Foer, MA, CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist,
Board Recognized Specialist, Mentor, Fluency Disorders**

"A useful book relating NLP to stuttering in an accessible and practical way. The patterns are well conceived and address core stuttering issues. A great resource for NLP trained therapists."

**Rosemarie Hayhow, Speech and Language Therapist—stammering specialist
Debbie Mason, Speech and Language Therapist, NLP Master Practitioner**



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