STRAIGHT TALK ON STUTTERING

Second Edition

STRAIGHT TALK ON STUTTERING

Information, Encouragement, and Counsel for Stutterers, Caregivers, and Speech-Language Clinicians

By

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To the loving memory of my parents, Sarah Ellen and
Lloyd Darl Hulit, and my brother, Mark James Hulit,

And to the sources of my greatest joys and pride,
Pamela, Yvonne, Carmen, Scot, John, Christopher, Lance,
Benjamin, Peyton, and Brianna

PREFACE

This book is not for everyone. It was written for people who stutter and for those who interact with people who stutter, including caregivers, teachers, and speech-language pathologists.

I have tried to write this book in a *reader friendly* manner, and I have tried to make it as practical as possible. Even though it is a reasonably thorough review of what we know about stuttering, there is a heavy emphasis on what I would consider to be *bottom-line conclusions,* not on the details of the theoretical speculations and the research findings that have driven us to these conclusions. I do not pretend that this presentation is free of my own life experiences with stuttering because that would not be true. I am a stutterer. I am a clinician who specializes in the treatment of stuttering. I am a teacher who is passionate about helping others learn about stuttering. These perspectives have heavily influenced how I have written this book. In the pages that follow, I offer my insights, opinions, and advice, but I am careful to indicate that I am addressing the reader, not as a guru of truth, but as a person who has gained some understanding about stuttering through my professional and personal experiences with this disorder.

The second edition of *Straight Talk on Stuttering* is divided into two parts. The first part includes basic information about the disorder. In these chapters, I address common questions people have about stuttering, such as *What is stuttering?, What causes it?, How does it develop?, Can it be prevented?, Are there things parents can do to help a child who is stuttering?, How has stuttering been treated in adults?,* and *Are there things the adult stutterer can do to help himself?* In the first part of this edition, I have included a new chapter entitled *Living with Stuttering.* This chapter includes ten suggestions about living victoriously with stuttering. It is a very personal, stutterer-to-stutterer account of lessons I have learned and want to share with those who have carried stuttering into adolescence and adulthood. The second part of the book is a description of the therapy approach I use with adults and children who stutter. This part includes another new chapter, *Evaluating People Who Stutter.*

In writing this book, I have not avoided the technical language speech-language pathologists use in reference to stuttering, but I have taken great care to make sure that each technical term is adequately explained the first time I use it. In addition, there is a glossary at the end of the book that includes definitions of many of the terms that might be unfamiliar to some readers.

Before beginning the journey through the pages of this book, the reader should know that stuttering is an utterly fascinating communication disorder. Because it is surrounded by so much mystery, so many unanswered questions, and so many myths and misperceptions, it can be a frustrating disorder to study, treat, and endure. I have tried to dispel the myths, correct the misperceptions, answer as many questions as I believe are answerable, and above all else, I have tried to weave a message of *hope* for all people who stutter, a message I believe is absolutely justified.

Lloyd M. Hulit, Ph.D.

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UNDERSTANDING STUTTERING

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

What the World Needs Now

Burt Bacharach is one of the most prolific songwriters of his generation. One of his best known songs is *What the World Needs Now Is Love,* recorded by Jackie DeShannon in 1968. When I wrote the first edition of this book, I thought about the lyrics of this song. When the time came to write the second edition, I decided to include a few of Bacharach's words to make a point about the book you are beginning to read. Actually, after browsing through this first paragraph, you may decide NOT to read the book, but I ask that you at least finish this first chapter before abandoning my message. Consider a few of Bacharach's lyrics: *What the world needs now is love, sweet love . . . Lord, we don't need another mountain . . . There are oceans and rivers enough to cross.* The general idea is that there are many things in life that are overstocked, but there can never be enough love. One could make the argument that what the world does not need is another book about stuttering, and on some level, I would have a difficult time refuting that assertion. There are plenty of books about stuttering–enough to fill a library devoted to this one subject. In the early years of speech-language pathology as a profession, there was more written about stuttering than all other communication disorders combined. That is no longer true, but it is interesting that a disorder affecting only about 1 percent of the world's population at a given time still commands considerable interest.

So why did I write *Straight Talk on Stuttering* in the first place, and why am I writing a second edition? Because while it is true that there are plenty of books about stuttering, this one offers a different view than most. I have written about stuttering from a personal perspective, which is NOT unique, but it is a personal perspective shaped by four decades as a teacher and clinician as well as a lifetime of experience with the disorder itself, and that does separate my presentation from most others.

In order to appreciate what this book has to offer, therefore, it is important that you know I am a stutterer. There was a time in my life when I considered myself a stutterer, first, last, and always. When I was an adolescent, it was difficult for me to place my stuttering in any meaningful personal context because it seemed almost larger than my life. Fortunately, I can now put my stuttering into proper perspective. It is one small part of who I am. More accurately, it is one small part of what I do and has nothing to do with my essential personhood. This perspective has been gained, in large measure, as I have learned to control my stuttering so that it no longer controls me.

One of my qualifications as author of this book, therefore, is that I am a stutterer. I have lived with this disorder most of my life, certainly all of the life I can remember. I want to make it clear, however, that my experience as a stutterer is the least of my qualifications. I am also a clinician, counselor, and a teacher. In these roles, I have learned infinitely more about stuttering than I have as a stutterer. The problem with trying to understand stuttering from the inside is that you see only one point of view, and even that point of view is distorted by the incredibly personal nature of the disorder. Stutterers tend to want others to understand stuttering the way they have experienced it. If every stuttering experience were the same, we would only need one view, one understanding, but stuttering experiences are as vastly different as people are different. There is some common ground, however, and we will best understand the disorder if we look for the common ground stutterers share. I have found some of that common ground in my work as researcher, clinician, and teacher. It is that understanding of stuttering I want to share with you.

Despite the countless books, portions of books, and journal articles written by psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, physicians, physicists, rhetoricians, speech-language pathologists, and by stutterers themselves, despite all the research, all the theorizing and speculation, despite all the analysis and discussion, stuttering remains one of the most misunderstood of communication disorders. Much of the misunderstanding is justified. We have simply not been able to put together many facts about stuttering, which means that much of what we think we know is based on shreds of evidence about which there has been much conjecture. Some of the misunderstanding is not justified. Many writers over the centuries have mistaken their personal biases for *truths* and have written about stuttering as though the puzzle has been solved. No matter what you may have been led to believe, this puzzle has not been solved. There is still infinitely more about stuttering we do not know than we do know. In many important respects, it is as much an enigmatic mystery today as it was 100 years ago.

One of the indisputable facts about stuttering, as I have already noted, is that there are hundreds of books on the subject you could read, but most readers would not find the majority of these books particularly helpful. Many of these books are too theoretical to be of much practical value. Others are so steeped in research data and analysis that the reader loses sight of the essential questions about stuttering because the authors of these books become so absorbed in discussing the strengths and weaknesses of research design and the nuances of statistical interpretation that the essential questions are either ignored or obscured. Many books on stuttering are so obviously biased toward a single theoretical interpretation of the disorder that the reader gains an extremely narrow view of a very complicated, life-pervasive problem. Some authors overreact to some of the problems I have identified here, and in an attempt to make stuttering understandable, they provide descriptions that are entirely too simplistic.

In my work as a clinician and counselor, I have found that adult stutterers and the parents of young stutterers want and need information that is best provided in material that can be read and pondered. I can give a client a great deal of information in a one-hour session, but it is not likely that much of the information I share will be retained for long. There is also the real danger that what I have said will be remembered incompletely and incorrectly. According to the common maxim, *A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.* I have no doubt that this is true, and I am even more convinced that a little knowledge that is warped by failed memory, distorted perception, or incomplete understanding is even more dangerous.

In my work as a teacher of future speech-language clinicians who will work with stutterers, I have become increasingly sensitive to the problems students experience in trying to understand this disorder. They are frustrated by the fact that there are no clear answers to the most basic questions about stuttering. While I am convinced it is professionally inappropriate and irresponsible to provide simplistic answers to complex questions, I am even more convinced that students who are considering the issues surrounding stuttering prior to their first clinical experiences with people who stutter need to understand, in the clearest possible language, what the questions are. They also need to know, in the context of all that has been written about stuttering, what the most responsible answers to these questions seem to be.

I have tried to write a book for stutterers, the parents of stutterers, and for speech-language pathologists in training and in practice that describes stuttering in plain English, an explanation of the disorder that does not go unreasonably beyond what we actually know about stuttering. I have tried to provide practical advice for clients, parents, and clinicians who must deal with stuttering on a daily and personal basis and who are not particularly interested in the great, and often esoteric, debates waged by the experts, debates incidentally that have so far not moved us very close to the *truth* about stuttering.

There is also a very personal reason for my writing this book. I want to convey the message that stuttering is not nearly as funny as it is depicted in cartoons and comedic movies, nor is it necessarily as tragic as some stutterers allow it to be. My stuttering was most devastating when I was in elementary school. It was not the most severe at that time, but it had the most profound influence on my life during those years. Children are especially vulnerable to criticism and teasing when they are 6 to 13 years old, and I was no exception. Children, and even some adults, cannot tolerate being different, and there is no doubt that people who stutter are set apart from people who do not. People are, by their human nature, social and communicative beings. The individual whose ability to talk is limited by any speech or language disorder is penalized in many ways. He may be ostracized, teased, or mocked. He may be perceived as incompetent or stupid, the object of pity or scorn. As is potentially true of anyone with a speech or language disorder, the stutterer loses some of his communicative ability, but he might suffer more than other communicatively disordered people because his disorder can be seen as well as heard, and because it often catches listeners unaware, provokes shock, and sometimes laughter. It should not be difficult to understand how the stutterer comes to feel persecuted and why he might come to think of himself as a stutterer, first, last, and always. Many stutterers do, in fact, allow stuttering to dominate their lives, to define who they are as people, but the key word here is *allow.*

Some years ago, I watched a television interview with a young girl, about nine years old, who was dying of cancer. She was being interviewed because she had an extraordinarily positive attitude for someone who was facing death, and particularly for someone so young. The interviewer wanted to know the source of this attitude. When he posed the question, the little girl reflected for a moment, obviously giving this very serious question the thought it deserved. Her answer became part of my personal perspective on life and on my speech disorder, and I will never forget it. She said that when she first found out she was dying, she was frightened and angry. During every waking hour of those first weeks and months after her diagnosis, she was consumed with terrible thoughts about the cancer that was inside her. As time passed, however, she came to an understanding of her illness that significantly changed her attitude and the quality of the life she had left. It was an insight that was as profound as it was simple. She came to understand that the cancer did not own her. She owned the cancer, and she had control of her life, no matter how short that life might be. Cynics might suggest that this little girl could not have reached this determination without the help of adults. I would submit that it does not matter if this was a self-discovery or a facilitated discovery because it was obvious that she understood the differ-