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Chapter 1: Stand Up Britain

Until the day my first child was born, I viewed Friday 18th October 2002 as the scariest, riskiest, and craziest day of my life. I was backstage with six other acts, all, like me, finalists in *Stand-Up Britain*, television's hunt for the best stand-up comedian in the United Kingdom.

All seven of us shared a variety of concerns common to stand-up: hecklers, running short of good material, forgetting lines, and, of course, rejection from the audience. Along with these worries, however, I had an additional one: I could get horribly stuck on a word.

You see, I have a stutter.

When I was younger, to stutter in front of anyone was very embarrassing. Now I was likely to do so in front of an entire nation. The speech therapy I received in my 20's had stressed the benefits of desensitization to listener reactions. Good thing, because I was about to experience the most desensitizing moment of my life!

When it was my turn—*to go on national TV!*--I remember standing behind a screen at the edge of the stage, waiting for MC Ed Byrne to introduce me. Once he did, I would perform my three minutes in front of a live audience, as well as 2 or 3 million television viewers.

I took some solace in knowing that I had a reasonably funny script, with material tried and tested in about 150 comedy club gigs. And I had survived an initial heat in front of network TV judges, and then a second one before a live audience, which was later televised and judged by a public telephone vote. On top of all that, we'd had a rehearsal earlier that day, which had gone well.

Still, I understood the stakes involved. Stand-up comedy requires laughter (and lots of it) and the rehearsal had been without an audience. What if the crowd gave me the same reaction—silence—that the empty studio had?

About a week before the event, I had contacted my friend Michael Knighton, who ran a comedy course I had attended two years prior. Michael told me that it was important to look as though I were enjoying myself on stage. He also told me to repeatedly visualise the gig going well, because having an optimistic visual approach often leads to positive outcomes. I thought about this advice during the days leading up to the final.

The day of the show was both exciting and tense. I had to arrive at the studio 11 hours before airtime. That's a great deal of time to spend with competitors. Despite the usual comradery that exists among comedians, conversation prior to this event was a bit strained. It was probably fortunate that the time was filled with rehearsal, hair and costume checks, and a comforting chicken and chip meal in the Granada Studios canteen. It was whilst I was eating that I first focused on what I would be doing that night and nearly became sick thinking about it. It's one thing waiting to perform in a comedy club, but quite another anticipating three minutes on live TV with all your family and friends watching, as well as competing for a £7000 prize.

Ninety minutes or so before the show, I remember drinking some lager and thinking it would either make me fall asleep or help my performance. Half an hour later, things started getting manic. Runners were making sure we were all ready and producers were giving last-minute instructions—mostly telling us not to swear excessively (even spelling out which words were most offensive). Then there were final hair and make-up checks. The show was about to start and the atmosphere became electric, with a hyped up studio audience and seven acts nervously waiting in the wings, desperately rehearsing their lines.

I knew I had to walk on stage confidently, without the appearance of anxiety. The lager helped with that. But I also had to tell the jokes. I had performed my routine so often in London comedy clubs that I was confident about remembering the lines. That, of course, was only half the battle. I also had to get the words out of my mouth. As usual, I had written a script full of words I could say fluently. I know this is a form

of avoiding stuttering (i.e., basically the opposite of desensitization), but old habits die hard.

Although I worried about stuttering during my stand-up acts, it was, strangely, never as much of an issue then as during normal conversation. Even today, words that are typically difficult for me to say come out easier when I do comedy. Maybe performing allows me to escape from my internal image of a person who stammers. Or maybe I feel less exposed than when I have to choose words on the fly. That is, I don't have to think as much when the words are scripted, which reduces my risk of stuttering due to the mental indecisiveness[1]. When the material is right, in fact, I almost forget that I am about to walk out in front of a group of strangers and try and make them laugh. I know I'm funny and the audience will soon know it too.

Show Time

In all honesty, when I walked on stage for the televised *Stand Up Britain* final, I was thinking not so much "I know I'm funny and the audience will soon know it too" but, rather, "This had better work!" Fortunately, the opening joke—*I went to my hairdresser and asked, "What have you got for my hair?" He said, "Extreme sympathy"*—received a good laugh from the audience. Many comedians say the first laugh is the most important one, as you then can judge how energetic and responsive the audience will be to the rest of the performance. With that in mind, I relaxed a bit.

Less than a minute into the set, the first stutter appeared, a tense repetition that happened right on the punch line. This was followed a few seconds later by a prolonged /w/ (also on the most important word of the joke). I was prepared for this, having written some stuttering material. My hope was that the audience would accept this new feature, stay relaxed, and not be turned off by it. I didn't want people to think that I was stuttering due to nerves or that I was faking it for a cheap laugh.

"I've got a slight stutter," I said. "Not a great start, *especially when you've only got three minutes on live TV!*"

Fortunately, the audience liked that line. Then I told them good night, "not because I am about to leave, but because I'm going to run out of time at the end so I had better say that now." This joke also got a big laugh.

I was pleasantly surprised how positively the audience reacted to the mention of my stutter. Given how I routinely avoid words that might trigger it, I found myself in the unique position of being open about my stutter at a time I had hoped to hide it.

Based on the applause at the completion of my routine, I did pretty well that night. I didn't win, but I believe I came across as someone who was relaxed, funny, and enjoying his three minutes of live TV. I also believe that I showed the viewers at home that someone with a stutter can perform well in the final of a national stand-up comedy competition!

Chapter 2: Introducing Stuttering

Jaik introduces the topic of stuttering with two key phrases, "horribly stuck on a word" and "very embarrassing." Although there is no uniform definition of stuttering, nearly all include speaking disruptions in the forms of prolonged or repeated speech units and/or tense hesitations (e.g., Logan, 2014; Prasse & Kikano, 2008)—the "horribly stuck" part. For people who stutter, however, the disorder is far more than breakdowns of speech. As we will see, it is also filled with anxiety[1] and emotions, including, yes, embarrassment (to name but a few additional components).

The traits that normally define stuttering are:

- *Part-word repetitions*
    - Sound repetitions (buh-buh-buh-ball)
    - Syllable repetitions (may-may-may-may-maybe)

- *Prolongations* (mmmmmine)
- *Tense hesitations* (My name is…Jaik)

Typically, these disfluencies are associated with above average duration[2] and tension. That is, with stuttering, there tends to be noticeable struggle to produce some speech sounds.

A question that often arises during explanations of stuttering is: Don't these disfluencies happen to everybody? The answer, of course, is yes. However, they can still be used to define the disorder because of fundamental differences in how and when they occur.

- The stuttering disfluencies defined above are observed almost ten times as often with children who stutter than with those who do not (Ambrose & Yairi, 1999; Logan & LaSalle, 1999; Yairi, 1997).

- Stuttering disfluencies make up about three-quarters of the total disfluency of children diagnosed as stuttering; for non-stuttering children, the majority of breakdowns are interjections ("um," "ah," "you know," "like") and revisions ("Let's—we are all going") (Yairi, 1997).

- The repetitions of non-stuttering speakers typically include 1-2 iterations—most often one, based on the average of 1.13 found by Yairi and Ambrose (2005). Sounds or syllables are usually repeated 2 to 5 times in children identified as stuttering (Van Riper, 1982).

- The iterations of stuttering children are produced more quickly than those of their non-stuttering peers (Throneberg & Yairi, 1994).

It is important to remember that there are numerous exceptions to these data. For example, it is not a given that the core disfluencies of repetitions, prolongations, and hesitations will be the primary speech characteristics of all people diagnosed with stuttering (Einarsdóttir & Ingham, 2005). Moreover, they are not even required for a speech sample to be judged as stuttered. To this point, Hegde and Hartman (1979) found that excessive single-unit repetitions or interjections are identified as stuttering by common listeners. Taking these findings into account, it appears that attempts to define stuttering by its primary characteristics may not completely capture what listeners reflexively identify as stuttered speech when they hear it.

In addition to the core disfluencies, most definitions (e.g., Prasse & Kikano, 2008; World Health Organization, 2010) make mention of *secondary* (or *associated*) *behaviors*, which consist of actions designed to avoid or escape stuttering. Jaik mentioned his use of these behaviors (specifically, substituting easier words for those difficult to say) and they will be addressed in greater detail later in this chapter. I mention them now to make the point that the visible portion of stuttering is actually quite small relative to the entire disorder. Nearly everyone who stutters has heard the iceberg analogy (Sheehan, 1997) characterizing stuttering as an impairment that exists primarily below the surface. There is certainly truth to that idea. Think about it: Who has the bigger problem—Jaik, who gets stuck repeatedly while performing

successful comedy routines, or the person who stutters far less often, yet avoids life aspirations that involve speaking?

Along with the stuttering disfluencies and behaviors secondary to them, there are characteristics that are often associated with the disorder. Examples include *word repetitions* and *phrase repetitions*. That is to say, words and phrases are repeated more often by people who stutter than those who do not (Ambrose & Yairi, 1999; LaSalle & Conture, 1995), yet these speech discontinuities are rarely used to define stuttering. Although one syllable words can be viewed as another type of syllable repetition, repetitions of multiple syllables (be they words or phrases) are more difficult to explain. The reasons they are not typically listed as defining behaviors are that:

> 1) Although they occur more frequently in the speech of those who stutter, their overall frequency is nevertheless so small that their impact on speech is considered negligible (Yairi, 1997),
>
> 2) Listeners tend not to identify these disfluencies as stuttering (Williams & Kent, 1958; Zebrowski & Conture, 1989), and
>
> 3) They are sometimes used as secondary behaviors. To wit, if Jaik feared stuttering on his name (a common occurrence with people who stutter), he might utilize voluntary phrase repetitions to "launch" himself past the feared word: "My name is, my name is, my name is, my name is Jaik." In such an instance, the problem word—*Jaik*—is the only one *not* repeated, yet it is the source of the disfluency.

Some stuttering trends are based on oral reading. For example, *adaptation* is the tendency for stuttering to decrease across successive readings of the same passage (Max & Baldwin, 2010). The average decrease in frequency of words stuttered is about 50% over five readings, after which the frequency more or less plateaus (Johnson et al., 1967). *Consistency* is the tendency for an individual to stutter on the same words on successive readings of the same passage (Johnson & Knott, 1937). Average consistency ranges from 40 to over 70% (Bloodstein, 1960; Neelley & Timmons, 1967), although for a given individual it can be anywhere from 0 to 100%.

Can adaptation and consistency coexist? Asked differently, how can a speaker stutter less while stuttering on the same words? In short, although the number of disfluencies decreases, those that remain tend to be words stuttered in a previous reading.

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