Speech conditions

Best practice guidelines

Recommended supplement: Social model of disability

Definitions

The term '**speech conditions**' encompasses many disabilities, conditions, and symptoms.

There are three basic types of speech condition: **articulation disorders** (omissions, substitutions, and distortions); **fluency disorders** (stuttering and cluttering); and **voice disorders** (problems with the quality or use of one's voice, 'characterized by abnormal production and/or absences of vocal quality, pitch, loudness, resonance, and/or duration') (Project Ideal 2021).

Some more common speech conditions include: stuttering, apraxia, cluttering, lisping, dysarthria, speech delay, and aphasia.

Causes

The cause of speech conditions are frequently not discovered, but can include hearing loss, brain injury, physical impairments (such as cleft lip or palate), neurological disorders, intellectual disabilities, drug abuse, vocal abuse or misuse, mental strain, and bullying (NICHCY 2011).

Acceptable terminology shifts depending on the condition, the cause, and the individual person. Depending on the context, 'condition', 'disorder', 'impairment', and/or 'disability' may all be inappropriate word choices. With specific conditions, look to the community around the disability for proper language; with specific people, talk to them about the proper language to use when referring to them. The results of this research should supersede any language the medical community uses.

A **Speech-language Pathologist (SLP)**, also known as a speech therapist, is a medical professional who works to diagnose and treat speech, language, and communicative disorders in children and adults. SLPs are important because they facilitate **speech therapy**, an ongoing process that many people with speech conditions will undergo. Formerly, the goal for speech therapy was speech fluency, but that often led to

feelings of failure for those who never attain speech fluency. More recently, goals have shifted to focus on working on useful and functional communication, self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and self-acceptance—particularly with adults.

Communication as an act of bravery

For anyone with a speech condition, making a conscious choice to take a more difficult path—despite the potential for discrimination or struggle—requires bravery. For example, when someone has a speech condition like stuttering or lisping, some words are easier to say than others. Often, the words they wish to use aren't easy to employ. It is important to give people with speech conditions the time and space required to take these brave steps without interrupting.

Grappling with a speech condition is difficult enough without abled people making it worse with discrimination. Kids who stutter have intentionally given the wrong answer to questions to avoid words that are difficult for them to say, and in doing so avoid humiliation. Being commanded to 'spit it out' or 'speak clearly' when already stressed and embarrassed only hurts us. Ridiculing someone for trying to communicate is despicable; it tells them that not only were they wrong to try being heard, but that they should never try it again.

You need to extend this respect to those without diagnoses too; undiagnosed conditions are not yours to judge, and it's not any more okay to ridicule someone who doesn't have a condition and 'just sounds funny'. Passing judgment because someone sounds different than you're used to is othering and reinforces the stereotype that fluent speech is the best or only way to effectively communicate. Social humiliation can even pressure disabled people into entirely avoiding words that cause disfluency, leading to a situation where there may be no outward signs of a speech condition, but internally the individual is expending extreme mental and emotional effort to avoid any difficult words and patterns.

Workplace support

Left unchecked, the default workplace environment will be ableist. Moreover, the usual method of change—wait for someone to complain—is foundationally ableist. For that system of progression to advance your environment past ableism requires the following sequence:

- A disabled person must be in your environment. An ableist or non-accessible workplace will not be usable by a disabled person.

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- A disabled person feels safe enough to/is willing to out themselves in your environment.

- That disabled person goes through the emotional and mental labor to engender a shift in policy and behavior.

- Those with power in the environment actually listen and enact change effectively.

- This process repeats for every category of disability relevant to your workplace.

This default approach is inefficient, easily stifled by bad actors, and shoulders disabled people with the labor of fixing someone else's harmfully crafted system.

What's needed is a proactively crafted environment designed for acceptance and accommodation; not just of speech conditions, but disability in general. With a constant effort to improve itself. For speech conditions that means a culture of patience and respect with a breadth of communication avenues and tools. Some necessary tools might include an option for text-only input or picture exchange communication, translators or interpreters, or the use of speech-generating devices or other communication aids.

Adapting to the specific needs of your team members will require specific measures tailored for that individual, and they should be given the lead in determining their own needs. It also means intolerance for shaming and taunts and procedures for followup should such misbehavior occur. It means examining the issues you have present in hiring, respect, and communication and addressing them, because as stated: left unchecked a workplace environment will default to ableism.

Adapting workplace culture to be suitable for people with disabilities can also mean changing how places and events are structured. Some questions to consider for restructuring events and workplaces to be more speech condition-friendly might include:

- What limitations is the individual facing?
- How are meetings, roundtables, and open forums set up and run?
- What particular job tasks are problematic?
- What accommodations are available to reduce these problems?
  - Are they being used?
- Has the individual been consulted about their necessary accommodations?
- Do supervisors or coworkers need additional training?

- Do workplace events allow for full and equal participation from every team member?
  - If not, what changes are necessary?
- Is there a turn-taking procedure?
  - Who determines turn order and length?
  - Who enforces turn order and length?
- Is there time for people to input their response into a speech device and be delivered to the group before their turn is over?
- How are phone calls directed?
- Is an interpreter or translator available for the event?
- Are technological aids available?

Remember: your individual team mates will have individual needs and requests. Be prepared to adapt to each situation separately.

Representation in media

Speech conditions are often used in media similarly to accents, relying on stereotypes as a shorthand for a particular personality. For example, a stutter might be used to convey that a character is shy, or a lisp might be used to make a character seem childish. This is not inherently problematic, but because speech conditions are rarely given to confident or mature characters, this creates harmful stereotypes that falsely equate those speech conditions with those character traits.

Before creating a character with a speech condition, research tropes and stereotypes for whatever conditions you're writing for so you can mindfully avoid playing into these harmful patterns, or even subvert them with nuance and care. Playing into these tropes on occasion would be acceptable in a world where more complex representation was mainstream, but for now, that is not our reality.

The most important rule for representing disabled people is to talk to them. If you want to avoid inflicting harm, while creating a realistic portrayal and a compelling character? Hire a consultant with the same disability—or, better yet, have them write the character to start with.

Resources

Do2Learn: Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)
https://do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/SpeechLanguageImpairment_Strategies.html

Strategies for helping students/children with speech conditions.

Job Accommodation Network: Speech-Language Impairment
https://askjan.org/disabilities/Speech-Language-Impairment.cfm
Variation in speech conditions and related needs.

Speech Disorder: Augmentative and Alternative Communication
http://www.speechdisorder.co.uk/Augmentative-and-Alternative-Communication.html
Information about different types of speech aids a person might use.

References

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