

Reflections regarding
The American Institute for Stuttering

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When I first stepped into the American Institute for Stuttering (AIS), only three short weeks ago, I was completely unaware of the personal journey I was embarking on....both as a student of speech and a student of life. I thought I would learn techniques, exercises, therapy targets, and methods along with some of the psychological reactions to stuttering. However, what I learned in the confines of our AIS room, truly surpasses anything I could have ever imagined.

The AIS intensive program is not strictly a “stuttering treatment” protocol. It is a life altering experience, focusing much on human nature and the human aspect of life itself. While part of the focus is on fluency training, much time is spent analyzing expectations, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. It is remarkable that this training teaches the clinicians just as much as it teaches the clients. It is a program that fosters personal development, emotional growth, and maturity. I have gained so much, on both a professional and personal level.

On a professional level, the integrated approach employed at the AIS includes a combination of stuttering modification and fluency shaping techniques. In this way, the AIS offers the opportunity to bridge acceptance with change. Though it is often a dichotomy and many believe that true acceptance warrants no need to change, the AIS provides the ability to merge these two schools of thought. Combining the two techniques by maintaining the acceptance of “stuttery moments” while attempting to increase fluency, is a novel twist of the AIS. It incorporates acceptance of stuttering, changing of attitudes and emotions, techniques to stutter more easily, and speaking fluently through speech muscle retraining. In this way, a holistic, or whole person approach is employed which targets both the physical and psychological aspects of the disorder.

Stuttering modification focuses on facilitating the desensitization and acceptance of stuttering. Clients are engaged in activities of self advertising, conducting stuttering surveys, educating individuals about the cause and etiology of stuttering, and utilizing voluntary pseudo-stuttering. These activities successfully liberate the clients to speak freely and comfortably with increased confidence despite their dysfluencies.

Another powerful tool used to analyze the overt and covert aspects of stuttering is having the clients draw the stuttering iceberg. Although at times, only the dysfluencies of an individual are evident, it is apparent that the dysfluencies are only the tip of the iceberg and so much more rests beneath the surface on a psychological, emotional, and mental level. As such, the clients are asked to draw their own personal iceberg, with the overt stuttering behaviors at the surface and all of the avoidances and emotions related to stuttering hidden beneath the surface. Looking at the clients’ drawings provides insight regarding the impact of stuttering on the clients’ lives.

In another activity conducted both at the initial and final stages of the program, the clients are instructed to draw a picture of what their stuttering feels like. This provides the clients with a visual image of their changed perspectives regarding stuttering as a result of the intensive program. One client painted a stirring image of an individual with a huge brick wall in his mouth to represent the block he feels when speaking. At the end of the program, the client drew a similar image, however, he depicted a smiling mouth expelling brick by brick, representing that he felt he had significantly conquered the wall of silence.

It was an enlightening experience to listen to the clients' own perceptions of their growth and appreciation. Meeting other "stutter buddies" appears to have had a tremendous impact on the lives of the clients during the program. It is supportive and comforting to find that the stutterer is not alone in his/her fears, nor is he/she alone in his/her challenge. Apparently, the clients are able to more easily accept themselves and face the challenge, given the support and encouragement of their peers who experience similar emotions.

Once the clients reach a considerable level of acceptance of their stuttering toward the end of week one, they continue to learn several management and fluency shaping techniques. Clients and clinicians are introduced and instructed to practice using a variety of techniques to increase fluency, including pull-outs, prolongations, and do-overs. In addition, clients and clinicians are taught to utilize a four step breathing process and voluntarily vibrate the vocal folds to create a gentle-strong-gentle vocal fold vibration.

At the AIS, clients are taught and encouraged to educate others regarding the true nature and etiology of stuttering. While stuttering is certainly genetic, it is described as a neurological and physiological disorder. As such, the core of stuttering begins at the level of the vocal folds, which receive the signals from the brain at the wrong time and therefore get stuck, resulting in a lack of coordination in the muscular speech system. This clear and understandable explanation of stuttering lends itself to focused work on the core issues. Thus, muscle retraining is warranted, which includes a combination of breathing and vocal fold exercises to imitate the normal and natural speech and voice mechanism. Although these exercises are tedious fluency shaping techniques, they are far less rigorous than the original fluency shaping method. Having the clients practice and experiment with each technique is a wonderful means of empowering the clients to choose the technique with which they are most comfortable and which they feel provides them with the most control and management. Thus, the program is individualized and man-tailored to each client.

As a clinician, the experience of training together with the clients provides a twofold benefit. First, clinicians are fortunate to hear the inner voice of each client, to listen to them openly recount their challenges, fears, and dreams, and thus understand an individual stutterer's perspective of life. Hearing firsthand how much stuttering has been a barrier in the clients' lives by dictating the courses they choose, the foods they eat, the avoidances, and the anxiety, offers the clinicians tremendous understanding and insight that could never be captured in any text book or written article. The innermost emotions of each client leave an indelible impact on each participating clinician.

The second benefit of joint training is the advantage of actively taking part in each stuttering exercise and activity, thereby providing a true hands-on learning experience. As a fluent speaker, one actually begins to feel the discomfort of stuttering. While clients self-advertise, it is a powerful experience for clinicians to challenge themselves to self-advertize, as well. Putting oneself in the same position as the client for a bit, allows one to identify and relate to the client's fears and frustrations. The Scott Yaruss activity of writing under pressure, yet being judged on the pressured writing sample, further demonstrates the emotions and feelings of anxiety and avoidance that are present when a stutterer is in the speaking situation. Finally, learning to utilize the techniques is far more challenging than it seems at first. At times, the

clients were more advanced in their ability to control and manage their vocal fold vibrations than the clinicians were. Changing the way one speaks is a challenging task and as a fluent speaker, it is enlightening to encounter the frustration of the challenge. Much like the clients, the clinicians are also required to maintain breathing and speaking at a rate of 3 syllables per breath using a gentle-strong-gentle vocal fold vibratory pattern. Joint participation fosters a deeper understanding of the immense concentration and constant focus that vocal fold work and management techniques require.

On a more personal note, the AIS program focuses on attitudinal shifts and modifying one's self perceptions and priorities. It is this state of mind that transcends all of life. It is the techniques of incorporating positive self-talk, letting go of the gremlins, relaxation, meditation, acceptance, affirmations, and believing in and loving oneself, that all merge together to allow for each client and clinician to become more self-aware and thereafter implement necessary changes in life. As the group encouraged one another, joked, laughed, cried, clapped, and cheered each other on...the power of attitudes and beliefs shifted and affected every facet of life. As each individual learned to incorporate positive self-talk, each began to believe in his/her own vision and aspiration, and the group vocabulary changed. Activities were viewed as challenging activities rather than difficult exercises. The atmosphere was permeated with whispering messages of "I can" rather than "I can't."

The positive energy in the room at the AIS and the total love and acceptance demonstrated by all group members, are part and parcel of Catherine Montgomery's special touch and unique quality. After the first day, an extraordinary bond was already fostered among both the clients and clinicians. The unique personal approach, the inspirational readings, and the general atmosphere at the AIS are the impetus for the growth and change that takes place over the course of the three week program.

The powerful exercises of having the clients listen to their own affirmations, dissecting the advantages and disadvantages of both stuttering and fluency, as well as sharing compliments about each individual were all poignant moments that touched the hearts of both the clients and clinicians alike. It is the genuine care and concern that was palpable at those moments that linger on long after the intensive three week program has ended.

One of the most inspiring aspects of the program is watching the courage and growth of the individuals who stutter. One client admitted that she had never before faced the extent to which stuttering had been affecting her life. The program gave her the tools to safely face her pain and deal with the ramifications head on. She ended the program with emphatic gratitude for the gift of speech, despite her significant dysfluencies. Hearing an individual stammerer who is thankful for something that has taken such a toll on her life is evidence of the transformation in her attitude toward her dysfluencies. She had achieved true acceptance of herself and her dysfluencies, in addition to the variety of techniques that she had mastered to manage and control her speech. She stated that she learned that life is 10% facts and 90% one's reaction to the facts. She therefore promised that stuttering would no longer control her life as she now feels she has the ability to control her stuttering, particularly, her reactions to her stuttering. It was with relief and joy that she admitted that stuttering is only a part, and not the whole of who she is. As a

clinician, these are empowering ideas that provide a renewed sense of motivation to facilitate individuals with fluency disorders.

It is this awe-inspiring message that can be carried into the future. The field of speech language pathology is not about pointing out the client's weaknesses or pathologies. It is not about fixing a client that is broken. It is about empowering clients to believe in themselves and believe in their ability to have a brighter and better future. Speech language pathology is about providing clients with various tools to help themselves. It is about teaching management strategies so clients develop their own sense of growth and accomplishment. It is gentle guidance with belief in the clients' abilities so that they can build their own visions and aspirations for their future.

Several other life lessons that will be carried into the future include the goal to strive for "Realistic expectations with limitless possibilities." This motto allows one to continuously aspire to reach greater heights while making the necessary adjustments and utilizing multiple routes and pathways to reach ultimate success. It is in this way that individuals remain levelheaded and practical throughout the learning and growing process. The Option Question of: "Is there anything you are afraid would happen if. . . ." has also promoted the ability to let go of fears, control, guilt, etc. It facilitates individuals to refocus and recognize why they are holding onto negative attitudes and beliefs. One can then move onto letting go of this negativity, for after all, much like the Chinese finger traps, "The more one resists, the more it persists," and one cannot let go of the negativity with resistance and force. It is imperative that one learn to let go gently and smoothly ease out of the negativity. This eventually fosters change, growth, and ultimate positivity and happiness.

Another wonderful lesson discovered at the AIS is the power of listening. Perhaps the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to just listen. When people are talking there is no need to do anything but receive them, internalize their words, and care about what they are saying. In this way, a loving silence has more power to heal and connect than the most well-intentioned words. Words sometimes actually minimize another's pain. It may be impossible for a clinician to fully understand or relate to a client's pain. However, giving the client his/her deserved attention and simply listening may be one of the greatest gifts that one can give another, especially when it is given from the heart. Saying something simple like "I am so sorry," and meaning it, at the end of a client's solid cry is often the most effective way to communicate acknowledgement, care, and empathy. What an important lesson to learn at the start of my career!

Finally, the AIS allows for the process of life called transformation and metamorphosis. We all began like fresh little caterpillars all shy and introverted. It wasn't long, though, before our emotions, expectations, and deep-rooted feelings were all aired out. Together we created a little cocoon in this warm and loving environment. As we encouraged each other, each one of us crawled out of that cocoon just a little bit more. Inside our little cocoon, we all felt safe. There was nothing too dangerous to reveal; any stuttering was acceptable. We were all intrinsically interested in one another and stuttering just didn't matter. But the process of change is not complete if we remain stuck in the cocoon. So we ventured outside. The clients did their advertising in public, with others whom they were far less comfortable with. We stuck our little

heads out of the cocoon to make sure we'd be ready to emerge when the time was ripe. It was hard at first. The air seemed so frigid and biting. But we soon got comfortable and it was amazing that what originally seemed so dangerous and daunting was actually no deal at all. Making a phone call is easy compared to train advertising!! Yes, at the end of the three week program it was time for the butterflies to emerge. We were all ready to fly. We had all achieved those wings. We were all ready to explore the world. And we all soared through the sky with our newfound freedom and liberation. Yes, change is difficult for all of us. Old habits, whether positive or negative, are always more comfortable. But change is growth and growth is beauty. After all.....without change there would be no butterflies!

In conclusion, the AIS has given me far more than I could have hoped for on both a professional and personal level. For years, I have believed that the world is a circle of giving. As I grew up, however, I learned that I can never actually give back exactly what I have received, much like I can never repay my teachers by teaching them in return. Thus, the world is a circle in a different form. It is a circle because it is a never-ending chain. The AIS has impacted my life in a significant way. When I use the skills I have learned here to impact others, I will be adding a link to the ongoing circle of giving. Each time I reach out to another, whether it be to teach fluency management or positive self-talk, I will be perpetuating and passing on the gifts you have given me. May many clients and clinicians continue to benefit from this incredible program. Thank you for a most enriching and memorable experience!