

Stammering Self-Empowerment Programme (SSEP)

Progress report for Year 1 (September 2013)

On 17th September 2013 the SSEP completed its first year of providing therapy for people who stammer.

In total, 10 people completed the course during the first year. Most did so in groups of 2. So far, half of these clients have also attended subsequent courses as a refresher.

When we first started, we offered the course one day a week, spread over 3 weeks – i.e. 3 full days in total. However, it soon became clear that the gaps between course-days were too long. After experimenting with a number of alternatives, we have now condensed the course into one week and it now takes place over 5 consecutive days. This appears to be more satisfactory.

Progress made by clients who have completed the course.

Self reports

Prior to beginning the course, all participants completed an OASES (Yaruss & Quesal, 2006) questionnaire, in which they provided responses to 100 questions about their current experience of stammering. This questionnaire is particularly suitable for measuring progress made during therapy because, in addition to asking participants to self-rate their current level of fluency in a range of different speaking situations, it also asks them to provide information about their perceptions and understanding of the disorder; their emotional, behavioural, and cognitive reactions to it; the functional communication difficulties it causes, and its impact on their quality of life.

Approximately one week after completing the course, participants were asked to complete a second OASES questionnaire. Then, approximately 1 year later, we ask them to fill it in again. Then, once again at approximately 2 years later.

It has long been recognised that people attending intensive stammering therapy courses frequently experience a sort of “honeymoon effect” during therapy, where they experience immediate substantial improvements to their level of fluency. Such sudden increases in fluency may appear very impressive. However, more often than not, they are not sustained, and clients usually subsequently experience partial or total relapse. Because of this honeymoon effect, we are cautious about making any claims about the effectiveness of our therapy on the basis of short-term assessments (i.e. immediately before compared to immediately after the course). The most reliable indications of the effectiveness of therapy are from the one year follow-up self-assessments. Currently, only 4 people have reached this stage. However, we will post more results as they become available.

Our own impressions of the effectiveness of the 2012-2013 SSEP intensive courses

There are two main components to the SSEP courses: Theory (about the nature, causes and management of stammering) and Practice (including training in two fluency enhancing techniques).

Strengths

So far, in follow-up interviews, all of the participants have expressed positive feelings about the course, and the overall improvements in their OASES charts have generally reflected this. In particular, participants' comments during post-course interviews have confirmed that they came out of the course with a significantly improved understanding of the nature of stammering – including the factors that predispose to it, how secondary symptoms develop, and the various ways in which they can potentially bring both the (primary and secondary) symptoms under control. Feedback from the majority of participants has also clarified that they found this understanding extremely helpful and also therapeutic - especially insofar as it helped reduce feelings of inadequacy and helplessness and consequently also reduced the tendency to avoid words, people, and situations where stammering may occur.

The OASES self-rating scales data available so far also suggest that almost all participants have experienced significant reductions in the frequency and severity of overt stammering symptoms, although all have continued to stammer to some extent. However, as mentioned above, the key test of the programme is whether or not these benefits are still retained twelve months (and 24 months) after completing it. The initial indications are that benefits are retained, but we need much more data before being able to claim this with any certainty.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the participants who have benefitted most appear to be those who have approached the therapy with a desire to learn more about stammering, rather than simply a desire to follow a fluency-enhancing recipe. It seems that participants with covert stammers and mild external symptoms have benefitted just as much as some of the participants with severe external symptoms.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 52 years. And It was pleasing to note that the extent that they benefitted did not seem to depend on their age.

Weaknesses

Teaching the fluency-enhancing techniques proved more difficult than we had originally anticipated. Most participants experienced success employing orchestral speech. However, follow-up interviews and meetings with people who have completed the course have suggested that relatively few of the clients have really succeeded in mastering The Jump. Participants' failure to master The Jump has meant that they have tended to try to use orchestral speech in situations where it is not appropriate (for example, in ongoing conversations), and therefore have failed to develop the easy carefree approach to conversational speech that The Jump would enable. That said, it is noteworthy that all participants appear to have developed a much stronger tendency to keep moving forward when they experience difficulty (rather than keep stopping and going back).

There are a number of possible reasons why clients have failed to master The Jump. A recurrent difficulty that we faced was that, in order to learn it, participants need to experience some stammering. However, most clients stopped producing overt symptoms of stammering on the first

day of the course, and although their new-found fluency was very pleasing to them at the time, it constituted a real obstacle to practicing The Jump during the duration of the course, and gaining sufficient experience of using it. We had initially hoped that clients would learn to employ it in real life speaking situations after the “honeymoon effect” had worn off, but this seems not to have happened to the extent that we had hoped. We are currently looking into ways of changing the course to ensure that participants master the jump properly before leaving.

Recent changes and improvements to the course

Over the past year, the main changes we have incorporated into the course have been the extension of its length – to 5 consecutive days – and the provision of much more time dedicated to learning and practicing The Jump. Participants who attended the earlier version of the course have been invited to come for refreshers to help ensure that they too get the benefit of these changes. (Of course, all former participants are welcome to participate, free of charge, in future courses). Further changes planned for this coming year are a greater focus on the potential of mindfulness practice – both from a theoretical as well as a practical perspective. We are also working, in conjunction with the Manchester Stammering Support Group, on the development of a telephone (and Skype) support network.

A major obstacle to the progress of the Programme has been difficultly persuading participants to attend the course in the first place. This is not because of its cost, as initially we were offering the course for free, and even then, we encountered the same difficulty. Our hope is that, as we develop more of a track record, more participants will be motivated to attend. However, in order to avoid possibly misleading the public, it will remain our policy not to post videos and testimonials from participants who have just completed the course, as these are likely to reflect temporary gains that may not be sustained in the long-term. It is our hope that the continuing programme of public talks and conference presentations will raise awareness of the course and its potential. And we are grateful for the ongoing help of the British Stammering Association, with the dissemination of our advertising leaflets.

[Click here for Progress report for Year 2 \(September 2013 - September 2014\)](#)