The Jump: A powerful new technique to get out of blocks and overcome fear of stuttering

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Introduction

In order to be free from the fear of stuttering, it is essential that you learn a method that you can rely on to get you through blocks when they occur. In order for a method to be reliable in the long term, we need to be sure that it doesn't constitute a subtle form of avoidance, because, if it does, it will ultimately increase the fear of stuttering and so will ultimately let us down. The jump is just such a reliable method. It is fundamentally different to most other fluency-enhancing techniques insofar as it emphatically does not entail any form of avoidance. Quite the opposite! When you have learned the jump, every block that arises presents an opportunity to strengthen your confidence that blocks really are not an obstacle to communication and are not something that you need to avoid. You learn to welcome such blocks.

So what does the jump entail?
Well, basically, it entails allowing blocks to occur, stopping, and then omitting (or, in other words, "jumping over") the sound that you are blocking on, and then simply continuing on with the next sound. The jump does not constitute a form of avoidance because when using it you always try to say each sound once. Only after you find yourself unable to say a sound should you then jump over it. So, effectively you try to say each and every sound once – but only once. Unlike many other more conventional fluency-enhancing techniques, if you don't succeed at articulating a sound on your first attempt, with the jump you don't go back and try it again. You keep moving forward.

Let me emphasise this main point again... When using the jump, you don't avoid blocks. As a consequence, some blocks will happen. When blocks do happen you jump over them and carry on.

By "don't avoid blocks", I mean, when you get the premonition that a block is about to happen, just carry on as if you had never had that premonition. This is probably the hardest part of the technique. The feeling it produces, when you first try to do it, is probably a bit similar to the feeling you would get when you are driving a car and suddenly realise you are about to have a crash. The intuitive thing to do is to slam on the brakes. But, for the jump to work, it is essential that when you get that premonition that a block is on its way, you must not slow down! But don't speed up either! Just simply carry on at the speed you normally would, even if it means that you "crash" into a block.

If you successfully ignore the premonition that you will block, there are three things that might then happen... First possibility is that the premonition turns out to be wrong and you don't block after all – in which case you can simply carry on. The second possibility is that the premonition turns out to be right and you do indeed block. If this happens, as soon as you notice that you are blocking, STOP. Let go completely, work out what is the sound immediately after the sound you are blocking on. Then, once you've worked it out, try to carry on from that next sound. For example, if I am trying to say my name: Paul. I might find myself blocking on the /P/. I might block right at the beginning of it, in which case I can't open my lips and no sound comes out of my mouth at all. Or alternatively I might find myself unable to join the /P/ to the rest of the word... /aul/. Whatever the case, as soon as I become aware that I have got stuck in either of these ways, I simply let go and, for a moment, stop trying to say anything. Then I continue with the rest of the word... So, for example, I would continue on by just saying /aul/ on its own, completely disjointed from the /P/. From a listener's perspective, he might hear me say something that sounds like /P....aul/, with a gap between the initial /P/ and the rest of the word. Of course, it will sound a bit disjointed and is obviously disfluent. But the disfluency only lasts as long as it takes me to work out how to continue on. In most cases, this will only be a fraction of a second. Also, in most cases, what ultimately comes out is quite easy for the listener to understand.

The third possibility when I have the premonition that I am about to block is: I don't block, but I'm not completely fluent either. My utterance seems abnormally effortful and I can feel the tension in my articulations. It feels like a potential stutter is lurking there in the background. Don't worry about this feeling. Just carry on regardless. It will either get stronger as you carry on talking... in which case sooner or later you will block – and you can then use the jump. Or, alternatively, as you carry on talking the feeling (of tension and of being on the verge of stuttering) will subside. Either outcome is OK. Having said that, it is important to distinguish between the sort of effortful speech that results because your muscles are a bit tense or because you are needing to speak up in order to be heard over the background noise (which is OK), and the sort of tension that arises because you are actually blocking and trying to push through the block. Even when you are not trying to use the jump, it is never a good idea to use force to push through a block. Indeed, to bring the stutter under control, one of first rules you need to apply to yourself is "never use force to push through a block".

Dealing with issues that arise: Some questions and answers...

What if, after jumping over the sound I can't say, I then get stuck on the next sound?
Well, if this happens, then jump again – onto the next sound and, if necessary, keep jumping till you get to the end of the word or phrase. So, for example, if I'm trying to say Paul, and after finding myself getting stuck on the /P/, I also then get stuck on the /aul/, the next thing to try is just the /l/ on its own. Clearly, there comes a point where, if you need to jump a lot, what you are trying to say becomes so disjointed that people will be unable to understand you. If this happens, see the paragraph below.

What if, after jumping, people don't understand me?
One of the biggest barriers to people using the jump is that they are concerned that if they jump, listeners will not understand what they are trying to say. Although it is indeed sometimes true that people won't understand, the reality is that people do understand more often than we might expect.

Part of the reason for this is that listeners are very good at guessing what we are about to say, and more often than not, the context in which we are speaking provides them with more than enough clues to enable them to guess correctly. So, it is important to start with the default presumption that the listener probably will understand what you are saying even if you do jump.

If – and only if – it subsequently becomes clear that the listener really has not understood you, then, once you get to the end of the word or phrase, you will need to go over it again. The second time round, don't try to jump again. Instead, you can employ a more traditional fluency shaping technique, just to get you through it fluently enough for people to understand. Or, if that is not possible or doesn't work, you may have to resort to a different mode of communication – like writing it down. However, the key thing is, always try the jump first time around. Even if you fail to get the message across with the jump, you are still strengthening the habit of non-avoidance. And so, whether or not you get the message across, you are successfully reducing the tendency to block in future. I will discuss an alternative fluency-shaping approach (called "orchestral speech") as well as some more traditional fluency-shaping approaches that can be used when the jump fails, in a subsequent chapter.

If while speaking, I anticipate a block, is it OK to jump over the anticipated block before it actually happens?

No, this is not OK. Jumping over blocks before they occur is effectively a form of avoidance and, as such, although this practice will get you through the anticipated block, it will not help you to overcome your fear of blocking. Indeed, quite the opposite... it will reinforce the tendency to anticipate more blocks in the future. It is only by allowing the anticipated blocks to happen that we can learn to overcome the fear of blocking. Furthermore, if we avoid anticipated blocks we will never know whether we really would have blocked where we anticipated had we not avoided it.

In the past my therapist taught me to slow down if I anticipate a block. So does this mean it is OK if I slow down before I use the jump?

No, it's not OK. If you slow down when anticipating a block, the jump won't bring any lasting benefit. So you have to be very strict with yourself about this. If you're not very strict, then you are just wasting your time. This is a difficult issue, not least because many other forms of stuttering therapy (including the use of "preparatory sets" in Van Riper's approach) actively encourage clients to slow down before anticipated blocks, and many forms of therapy encourage clients to pause and wait until they feel confident that they will not block before carrying on speaking. From the perspective of the jump, slowing down before an anticipated block, or pausing and waiting until you feel confident you will not block are both NOT OK. Both constitute subtle forms of avoidance and both will reinforce the tendency to fear blocking. So, you have to decide. If you are going to try the jump, you have to do it 100% correctly, and this may mean discontinuing doing some of the earlier forms of therapy you have been taught. It is vitally important that you are 100% strict with yourself with this. In my experience with clients so far, continuing to slow down or pause before anticipated blocks is the main reason for them not benefitting employing from the jump. I have found that this is a very difficult message to get across, because often, by slowing down or pausing before an anticipated block, clients find that they can continue to the end of what they are trying to say without blocking. However, what such clients (and also many therapists) fail to realise is that when they do this, they are reinforcing the tendency to block in the future.

I tried the jump and it felt "wrong" or "silly". Also, people gave me funny looks when I missed sounds out, especially if what I said didn't make sense as a result.

Yes, this can happen and people might give us funny looks, especially if we are obviously missing sounds out that are necessary in order to be understood. However, if we do the jump properly right from the start, our tendency to block will rapidly decrease and our communicative effectiveness will rapidly increase, so within a few days we will find that it no longer feels wrong or silly and anyway, we really don't need to do it very often. So the temporary embarrassment is a price worth paying. So don't let people's reactions put you off the practice.

You may find that, no matter how hard you try, the fear of negative listener responses is so great that you simply cannot bring yourself to do the jump, or when you do try to do it you are overcome with anxiety. Fear of negative listener responses may be well founded and may stem from having experienced very real negative listener responses in the past. If this is the case, it is important to address this issue first. If past negative experiences are a major factor, then Mindfulness and CBT or other cognitive approaches may help in overcoming them. If people you currently interact with in your daily life respond negatively to your speech then don't use it with them. Instead, to begin with, only use the jump with people who you trust to respond positively. It may help if you explain to them exactly what you are doing, so that they understand. Then, as you feel more at ease using the jump with people you trust to respond positively, you may find it easier to experiment with using it with people who are not helpful. Even if you only develop the practice of using the jump with some people, the benefits (in terms of a reduced likelihood of blocking) will generalise to speaking situations where you don't use it.

Do I need to jump every time I block in order for the technique to work?

No you don't need to. Indeed, you will almost certainly find that you often forget to use the technique, or only realise after it is too late that you could have used it. So don't worry about using it all the time. However, if you do realise in time that you can use the jump... do use it! Because, every time you knowingly avoid using it, you strengthen the habit of not using it and the whole thing becomes more difficult.

I manage to use it in some situations, but in other situations I panic and lose control. What should I do?

Don't worry too much about this. Just be very consistent with your use of it in situations where you don't panic and lose control. Then gradually, there will be carry-over to the more difficult situations. If you do find you've lost control, stop at the earliest opportunity and give yourself a proper break to regain your composure.

There are some situations where using the jump simply doesn't work and there are also some people I simply can't use the jump with. What should I do in those situations?

There are indeed some situations for which the Jump is inappropriate. Like for example, when speaking into voice recognition software or saying a telephone number, name, or address. Similarly, the jump may not be the best technique to use in an emergency where it is important to maximize the likelihood that you will be correctly understood first time round. In such situations it may be better to use a fluency shaping technique like orchestral (or even syllabic) speech. Luckily, these situations are relatively few and far between.

Also, as mentioned in a previous comment, some listeners are easier to use the jump with than others. So, if you experience real difficulty using it with certain people, don't worry too much about this. Just make sure that you use it as consistently as possible with the people you can use it with.

How quickly should I feel the benefits of the jump?

If you are using the jump properly, you should find that you more or less immediately stop producing secondary symptoms of stuttering. Blocks will still occur, but they should only be of short duration and should result in minimal disruption to communication. So, depending on how severe your symptoms previously were, you may well notice a substantial improvement immediately, and this improvement should be sustainable from that point onwards. However, it will take some time (weeks or months) before you will develop a robust feeling of confidence in your new fluency.

How does the jump work?

First of all, jumping over sounds you find yourself blocking on enables you to keep moving forward at a reasonable rate and with a minimum of secondary symptoms. It generally feels and sounds better (from both the speaker's and the listener's perspective) than stuttering, and despite the fact that some sounds get missed out, jumping generally increases the likelihood that people will understand what you are trying to say. This increase in the likelihood of being understood leads to a reduction in your fear of communication failure and ultimately also leads to a reduction in the fear of stuttering. And as your fear of stuttering reduces, the tendency to block also reduces.

Secondly, using the Jump helps you (and indeed requires you) to be less idealistic and more pragmatic in your approach to speaking and communication. It involves a shift in emphasis whereby the most important thing is simply getting your message across as quickly and effortlessly as possible. It doesn't matter whether or not it is perfectly articulated. The jump helps you to affect this shift inasmuch as it provides you with repeated experiences that simply giving up and abandoning sounds that won't come out generally increases the likelihood that you will successfully get your message across. Consequently its use reinforces a less perfectionistic approach to articulation; which again, reduces the fear of stuttering and the tendency to block.

Note that, in order to jump over a block, you need to first allow the block to occur. Once you have blocked on a sound, you can then immediately abandon it and move on. By requiring you to immediately abandon and jump over the sound you are blocking on, the Jump involves a form of non-avoidance (of blocks) that results in a minimum of stuttering symptoms. In this way, non-avoidance becomes a much less daunting prospect.

It is important to remember that the Jump does not work in all situations. There will always be some situations where people fail to understand what you are saying because you have jumped over a key sound. In such situations, it is important to then be pragmatic and to get your message across in another way. As far as reasonably possible, always try to use the Jump first. That way, you will at least have ensured that you have not avoided the block.