

# FIGURES OF SPEECH: A SPOTLIGHT ON CAL STUDENTS WHO STUTTER

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**M**y second week at Berkeley, I introduced myself to a stranger and lingered for a few seconds on the S that begins my name. I was promptly met with a hearty laugh and an incredulous “Did you just forget your own name?” As a Person Who Stutters (PWS), this wasn’t my first rodeo. Like always, I responded with the standard canned laughter and immediate change of subject.

Navigating introductions is just one of the many challenges PWS face, and on a college campus, meeting new people is a constant. No two introductions are alike. Sometimes I slide (Sssssophia), sometimes I repeat (S-S-Sophia), and sometimes I’m totally fluent. But even more unpredictable than my speech is the response of my listener. When I stutter, I am usually met with looks of confusion, concern, or discomfort, which points to a larger issue: most people probably have no idea what stuttering really is, much less what it can look and sound like.

Stereotypes are crumbling all around us, and marginalized groups are becoming unprecedentedly visible. Groups that experience oppression and discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, religion, and immigration status frequently use media and politics to advocate for their fundamental rights and share their lived experiences. But the disabled community, which includes PWS, is almost entirely absent from the larger discourse of inclusion and education.

Three million people in the United States stutter. Stuttering can look and sound many different ways; it can be characterized by prolongations, repetitions, filler words, or blocks of sound. It’s not caused by uncertainty, nerves, or shyness, though these feelings can exacerbate it. Some PWS, like me, are comfortable stuttering openly (as another PWS once told me that I stutter “honestly”). However, many PWS stutter covertly and may disguise disfluencies

with a range of techniques. Often, PWS will substitute words that are easier to say for words they know might be more difficult, or pretend to forget the answer to a question they actually know (I can’t count the times I’ve pretended not to know my major). Many of these techniques of hiding disfluency are undetectable to the untrained ear, so for many people who stutter covertly, theirs is a largely invisible disability.

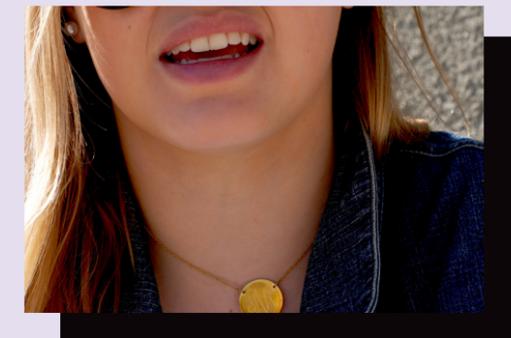
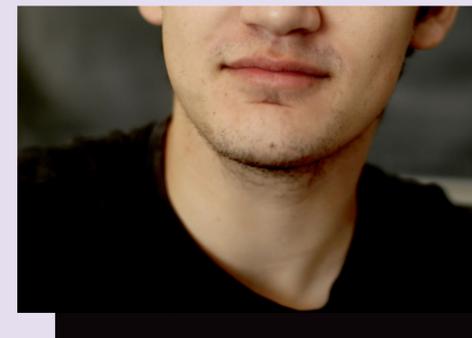
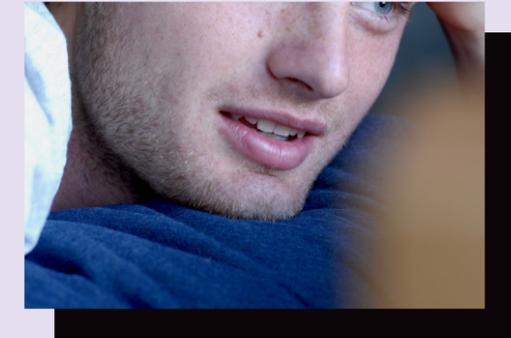
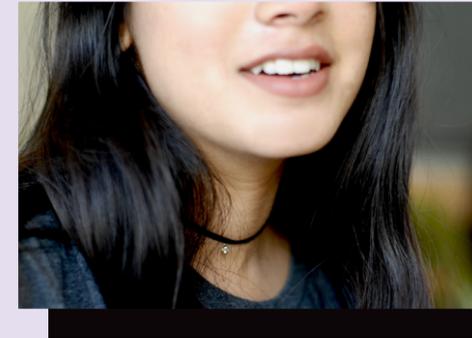
But many PWS, including myself, sometimes wonder, *is stuttering really a disability?* Is my stutter a disorder of speech or simply a difference in speech? The Berkeley Disabled Students’ Program includes “speech impairments” like stuttering as a disabilities that are supported through the program. They offer special accommodations for students with speech impairments once they submit a form from their speech therapist. I recently joined the DSP, and I now can access certain accommodations that relieve much of the anxiety that can come from compulsory participation in discussion or required oral presentations.

Speech disorders, like many disabilities, are often a source of discrimination. According to a 2014 study published in *Work, Employment and Society*, job applicants who stutter in their interviews are more likely to be immediately rejected. A simple Google search will yield countless forums asking users if they would “date someone who stutters,” and most are filled with negative responses. In 2011, a professor at the County College of Morris asked a student who stuttered not to speak in class because he was “infringing on other students’ time.” These everyday run-ins with prejudice are deeply embedded in the lives of those who stutter. I spoke to two other Cal students who stutter—Steve\*, a fourth-year Applied Math major, and Jonathan\*, a first-year Computer Science major—to shed some light on the challenges and the diversity of experiences among PWS. Both Steve and Jonathan feel it is important to share

their stories and give a voice to other students who stutter at Cal. Jonathan is particularly happy to share his experiences because he feels “increasing awareness of the issue as a whole is super important.”

Like most PWS, Steve and Jonathan started stuttering as children. Both of them attended speech therapy for many years. Steve’s recalls his experience in speech therapy as “stressful,” while Jonathan feels it “made a big difference” in his life and his speech, so much so that he “still carries the lessons” he learned from his speech therapist today. After attending speech therapy, Steve tried other strategies. He has experimented with different medications to minimize his stuttering and has found medication to be a useful tool. “If I didn’t have the medications,” he says, “I wouldn’t accept [my stutter]. If my stuttering was more severe I wouldn’t accept it; I’d just be sad.” There is no cure for stuttering, so PWS may treat their stuttering with therapy or medication, or they may choose not to treat it at all. For some PWS, the obsession with being fluent and having perfect speech can be profoundly damaging. For others, the constant desire to improve their speech can be motivating. In my experience, I’ve found that the desire to improve your speech can coexist with self-acceptance.

But self-acceptance can only do so much; facilitating acceptance within the Berkeley community and beyond is essential. Most people who don’t stutter learn about PWS from the depictions they see in media; therefore, delegitimizing the harmful stereotypes and caricatures of PWS, like Billy Bibbit or Porky the Pig, is crucial to forge empathy and establish our humanity. In addition, we must eradicate the association between stuttering and a host of negative traits. Both Steve and Jonathan are familiar with the hurtful ways PWS are perceived and the inaccurate traits that are ascribed to us. Steve believes PWS are stereotyped as “less intelligent, less capable, and less



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social,” while Jonathan feels they’re seen as “nervous wrecks” or “shy.”

The Berkeley Chapter of the National Student Speech, Language, and Hearing Association (NSSLHA) once worked to challenge these stereotypes and advance the discourse surrounding speech disorders. Ivy Hoang, a third year cognitive science major and disability studies minor, describes the NSSLHA as a “club aimed at helping students who are interested in speech and communicative disorders and those pursuing a career in speech and language pathology at Berkeley.” However, the NSSLHA was recently dissolved due to a lack of interest, abruptly eliminating the opportunity for campus-wide education about speech disorders. Without the presence of a Communication Disorders major on campus, communications disorders remain completely invisible at Berkeley. This places tremendous pressure on students who stutter to educate their classmates.

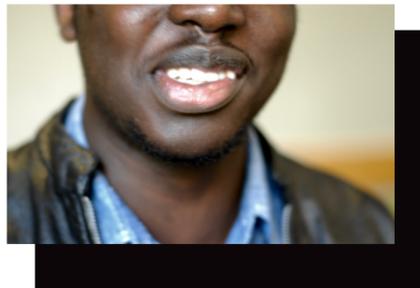
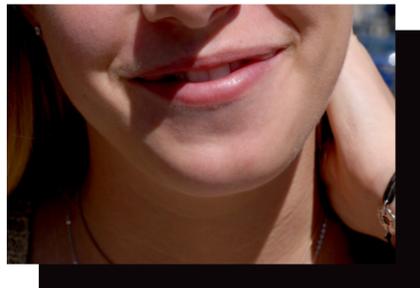
What do Cal students who stutter wish their peers knew about stuttering?

tering to be “not helpful” during summer interviews for internships.

But PWS are not a monolith. Each of us relates to and deals with our speech differently. Returning to the question of disability, many of us feel differently. I am still undecided about whether or not I see stuttering as a disability; above all, I see it as a different way of speaking. However, identifying myself as disabled resolves confusion surrounding my disorder and gives me access to resources I need. Steve and Jonathan both see stuttering as a disability. For Jonathan, stuttering “is as valid a disability as anything else” because it “impairs communication.” Steve also believes it’s a disability because it “inhibits [your] ability to communicate.” But does that make stuttering a *flaw*? Jonathan feels this is a difficult question. “On one hand, it would be healthier if people accepted it as something different, not a flaw,” he says. “[But] it’s a flaw in the sense that it impairs functionality.” I identify stuttering as a characteristic, not a flaw;

not drawing attention to it, he prevents it from defining him. Steve also chooses not to disclose most of the time. Steve says, “I’m not very upfront with [my stutter] because it’s not that bad, and I don’t want people to think I’m stupid. But they’ll always figure it out, ... especially if I’m having a bad day.” Often times the fear of premature judgement keeps PWS from disclosing in conversation, especially due to all of the misconceptions surrounding stuttering.

PWS also identify themselves differently. I call myself a Person Who Stutters because I see my stuttering as something I *do*, not who I am; I am a person first and foremost. Steve calls himself a stutterer, because he feels his “whole life is affected” by his stuttering. Jonathan prefers not to have any label because he doesn’t “want to be defined” by his speech. I try to avoid being defined by my speech by owning the way I speak, disclosing my stutter, and stuttering openly; I firmly believe that those unwilling to wait the extra time to hear what I have to say



“It’s outside a person’s control,” says Jonathan. For Steve, he wants people to know that he has “good days” and “bad days.” On these bad days, “it’s gonna take a little longer to say what I have to say.” But ultimately, with patience from his listener, he’ll say what he needs to. “Stuttering is like walking somewhere,” he says. “You’ll trip, but you’ll eventually get to where you have to be... You’ll always get there, it’ll just take longer to do it.” Most of all, Steve wishes his peers knew that “stuttering isn’t consistent.” For all PWS, speaking is harder on some days than others, and which days those are falls entirely out of our control. This unpredictability can especially affect us academically and professionally. Steve admits, “I definitely will not raise my hand [in class], and I definitely don’t go [to office hours] as much as I should.” Unsurprisingly, Jonathan found his stut-

flaws are imperfections that can be corrected, and many of us will stutter our whole lives. Acknowledging stuttering as a part of who we are as opposed to a defect in who we are is an important first step towards self-acceptance.

PWS also differ in how we present ourselves. Some PWS disclose that they stutter before every conversation, and some have never disclosed to anyone. I feel comfortable telling people, “Hey, I’m a Person Who Stutters,” and it helps to alleviate anxiety for the rest of the conversation. For example, on the first day of class, I sometimes introduce myself to my classmates by saying “Hi, I’m Sophia, and I’m a Person Who Stutters, so please be patient with me.” But this can be understandably daunting for other PWS. Jonathan has never disclosed because he feels not doing so helps “minimize the impact of stuttering on my life.” By

probably aren’t worth my time anyway. Jonathan agrees: “If who I’m talking to isn’t willing to accept [my stutter], then I’m not interested. People who dislike it are arrogant.”

Nothing about living as a PWS is easy. “Stuttering is hard,” admits Steve. “Accepting it is hard; living with it is hard.” Thriving with a stutter is no easy task, but our struggles shouldn’t diminish the power of our voices. It is up to us *and* our allies to educate others, normalize our experiences, and facilitate conversation between people across the spectrum of fluency. The voices of PWS, disfluent as they may be, deserve to be heard, understood, and valued as assets to the Berkeley community. To those who don’t care to listen, Jonathan doesn’t mince words: “Get rekt.” 🗡️

\*Names have been changed

