

Stammer Fact Sheet

What can be defined as a stammer?

Stammer is a low incidence, high speed speech, language and communication disorder (SCLN). Stammering speech is characterised by prolongations, repetitions of sounds or speech blocks with possible associated facial movements or gestures.

By the time pupils who stammer reach secondary school, the difficulties they experience are more firmly entrenched and are increasingly resistant to change, and fluency may no longer be an attainable goal.

How can a stammer impact a student's college experience?

Characteristics	Possible impact in college
1. Social Communication & Interaction	• Difficulties with verbal communication. • Difficulties with initiating interactions. • Difficulties seeking support, asking questions, or initiating interaction with peers or staff due to low self-esteem and confidence. • Difficulties in socialising or dealing with other students. • Difficulties with non-verbal communication such as use of eye contact. • Difficulties developing and maintaining relationships with peers and staff and adapting to social situations (thinking on the spot, low confidence). • Giving presentations and working in groups can be particularly difficult and stressful for students with a stammer. • Changes in social and daily routine can be stressful, particularly as students first enter college after spending a long period in the same daily routine and social environment of a secondary school. Transition into the college environment can be difficult and very overwhelming. • Students, who are able, with a good vocabulary range, may resort to circumlocution, talking around the subject, so that meaning is hard to discern or offer a monosyllabic reply, rather than talk for any longer period. • Students may excessively use filler words and phrases like 'y'know, right, sort of/kind of', etc. Shrugs or other facial or bodily gestures may be substituted for words or used as if to 'push out' words.

2. Performance in class and exams	• Attendance can vary as a student experiencing a stammer may tend to isolate or avoid a situation where they might be put on the spot in class, asked a question, or contribute to discussion within groups. Varied attendance may also be because of high levels of anxiety that can be associated with speech difficulties. • Students experiencing a stammer may also have a low attention span due to negative thinking or anxieties associated with speech difficulties. • Difficulties with meeting deadlines due to feelings of inadequacy regarding formal presentation or verbal assessments. • Students may be withdrawn and not contribute to sessions as much as they want to. An incorrect answer may be knowingly offered, rather than risk stammering. • Strategies such as coughing, blushing, dropping a book, giggling, pretending not to hear, or even causing distraction to get out of answering, are common. • Students may become overwhelmed when in the following environments: • Small lecture halls/classrooms with fewer people, meaning more focus is on the student. • Silent/quiet environments where characteristics of stammered speech may be more obvious for the student.
Other Characteristics	
	• Students who experience stammered speech are likely to also feel a range of emotions about their verbal communications to include frustration, embarrassment, anger, varying over time depending on context. • These feelings can also be associated with behaviour in class such as attention seeking, challenging, or disruptive, or their opposite, withdrawn and passive. • Students may avoid modules of interest within which they perform especially well, due to an assessment pattern that relies on verbal fluency. • Motivation and interest levels can vary due to effects of illness or medication. • Can find it difficult to rationalise and separate anxious/negative thoughts from reality.

How can you support students with a stammer?

1. Student-Centred Approach:

- If you are in doubt about how to support a student at any time, **ask the student** – they are the experts of their own needs!
- Create a space for students to **feel comfortable approaching you** (e.g. provide contact and student office hour details etc.).
- Implement any [classroom](#) and [exam](#) accommodations which were determined at the **student's Needs Assessment**.
- Keep yourself informed and up-to-date with your Programme's, and the University's, [Responding to Distress Students](#), and the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy](#).

2. Communication:

- Ask **one question at a time** and give them time to answer.
- Negotiate with the student **strategies that are helpful** for him, in advance of beginning the lectures or practical workshops.
- Consider agreeing with a student **a signal** that can be used to communicate with academic staff if wishing to contribute to class.
- Find out a **preference in contribution** if everyone in class is required to input (e.g. would student prefer to contribute first, last).
- If necessary, offer **alternative methods of contact**, e.g. email.
- If a student looks anxious, **use non-verbal communication**, take a seat, soften voice, open hands, etc., create a more comfortable environment for the student.
- Be aware that they **may find it difficult making eye contact** if particularly anxious.
- Be aware of the **environment you are in** (is it quiet/surrounded by others?).
- Be **watchful for possible bullying** from other students.
- Inform students about **college supports** (e.g. Maths Support Centre, Writing Support Centre, UCD Access and Lifelong Learning Centre, Student Counselling Service).
- **Contacting students** to provide them with the work they have missed or just with some encouraging words can alleviate their anxiety about returning to class after a period of absence.
- **Encourage** students to return to class if they have been absent.

3. Teaching and Learning:

- Be guided by [Universal Design principles](#) when designing coursework.
- Some students may be very uncomfortable with giving presentations. **Offering to listen to the presentation privately or allowing the student to complete an alternative assessment** can be very helpful.
- Allow for **extra or less time** for presentations and consider removing time pressures by specifying the general number of words.
- Allow for and encourage the use of **visual aids** to support the student to be able to draw upon and relieve pressure or focus on student when presenting.
- If necessary, allow the student to **change working groups** if he/she wishes to allow them to work with a supportive friend.
- Think about **group presentations** in place of individual presentations and ensure all members of the group are supportive of the student experiencing stammer.
- Use a **graded approach** to individual presentations, building confidence step by step, permitting the student initially to perform in front of just a few peers or academic staff in small-group seminars around a table rather than a full stand-up presentation. Over time extend group size, length of presentation, type of audience etc.
- **Remove 'fluency'** element from assessment criteria.
- **Provide slides/notes before class.** This can help students to focus on the material being presented. This is also helpful to those students who may not be able to attend class due to the difficulties they are experiencing.
- **Group work** can also be particularly difficult:
 - **Guide all students about how to effectively communicate** within a group.
 - Give students a **template which allows them to complete all steps** of the group work.
 - Spend some time with the groups to ensure they **start in a structured manner** and **are understanding of each student's difficulties**.

To find out more about stammering:

- www.stammeringireland.ie
- www.stammering.ie
- www.mentalhealthireland.ie