

According to estimates by the Stuttering Foundation, there are over 70 million stuttering people around the world (about 1% of the total population). In the United States alone, there are 3 million people with this fluency of speech impairment, including famous actors such as Samuel L. Jackson, Harvey Keitel, and Bruce Willis or the former NBA basketball player and current TV expert Shaquille O'Neal. Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley stuttered as well. Living with stuttering was an experience shared by many famous figures functioning in the public space, but the case of the British Duke Albert, later King George VI, has probably become the best known to the general public.



text: Tomasz Płosa

STUTTERING IS O.K.

His struggle with stuttering, which became the basis of the Oscar-winning film *The King's Speech*, is undoubtedly an uplifting story, but the everyday life of stuttering people is not easy, even if no one requires them to make public appearances as heads of state. We have no data on how many people stutter in Poland, but it is assumed that the situation in our country does not differ from the global average: about 5% of preschool children show symptoms of stuttering. In the majority of them, this impairment disappears before they start school. Chronic stuttering (i.e. stuttering that does not disappear spontaneously) affects about 1% of the population, i.e. school-age children, young people and adults.

Scientists from the University of Silesia, headed by Prof. Katarzyna Węsierska, are conducting pioneer research in the field of Speech Therapy for Individuals with Stuttering Disorders, referred to, mostly in Polish research, as Balbutologopedics, a sub-discipline of Speech Therapy. It deals with the diagnosis and therapy of speech fluency disorders, including, among others, stuttering and cluttering. Their research interests also include the influence of speech disorders on the quality of speech therapy, on the environment of stuttering people, and on the social perception of stuttering. With regard to the latter aspect, it is also very important to change social attitudes towards this phenomenon.

In the scientific community itself, there is no general consensus on the etiology of speech disorders, but currently the vast majority of researchers and speech therapists believe that stuttering is a result of complex interactions between many factors. It is perceived as a neurophysiological disorder with a strong genetic component.

– We still have a lot of work to do in the field of Speech Therapy for Individuals with Stuttering Disorders in Poland, especially in terms of changing social attitudes towards people affected by this problem, Prof. Katarzyna Węsierska admits. – But we are acting consistently, and I think we have made significant progress in this matter.

The need to disseminate knowledge about stuttering or cluttering has been confirmed by research carried out in recent years under the project IPATHA (The International Project of Attitudes Toward Human Attributes) among various social groups, including students, graduates of humanities and social studies, teachers, students, speech therapists, and people associated with religion (priests, clerics, and catechists). Although Poland does not differ significantly from the world average, it should be remembered that this average consists of very good indicators in Western European countries, Canada, or Australia and much less favorable ones, e.g. in African countries. The

most adequate level of awareness is shown, not surprisingly, by students of speech therapy and teachers. It is worrying that in Poland we do not have too much confidence of specialists in speech fluency disorders, and knowledge about the etiology of the lack of fluency in speaking is still relatively poorly established.

The scientific activity of experts in Speech Therapy for Individuals with Stuttering Disorders from the University of Silesia is connected with working on changes in attitudes towards speech fluency disorders, manifested among others in the organization of workshops for stuttering children and their parents. For the time being, the INTERACT project is in its pilot stage, the aim of which is to modify attitudes towards speech disorders in preschool children – the first results are more than promising. Another important initiative is the recent LogoLAB grant “Dialog without barriers.” Its aim is to improve the quality of speech therapy with regard to chronic stuttering (in older children, adolescents, and adults), and it will include a website designed as a reliable source of knowledge about stuttering and a textbook for educating speech therapists in this field (eminent specialists from many countries participate in its development). The scientific results will be made available to all interested parties in an *open access* form.

Prof. Katarzyna Węsierska and her collaborators take part in international research, in cooperation with scientists from Czechia, Slovakia, Norway, Lebanon, and USA. Their aim is to create a set of good practices to support stuttering people, both children and adults, in communication, with the assumption that these guidelines should be useful for the general public. The results of these studies have already been partially described and published (for the time being in relation to adults), and thus it was possible to create a catalog of basic “hints” (cf. the adjacent infographics), available, for the time being, in eight language versions: English, Arabic, Czech, French, Polish, Dutch, Slovak, and Bemba, which is used in Zambia and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (a Russian version is being developed).

– We are aware that for some people these indications are quite obvious, and that there is nothing new or revealing about them. I agree, since these are the golden rules of good communication, and each of us wants to be listened to with attention, empathy, and without being judged. Nevertheless, we all know that it doesn't work that way on a daily basis, and people struggling with fluency of speech experience additional difficulties. They really need to be treated like any other person who maybe needs just a little more time and patience. That is why we have to work towards treating stuttering as an atypicality or difference and not a defect. In other words, we want to convince both fluent speakers and people with an impaired fluency of speech that stuttering is a phenomenon experienced by some of us, but it does not have to define them or exert a destructive influence on their quality of life, Katarzyna Węsierska explains.

SUPPORT ABC

Show commitment

by trying to maintain natural eye contact!

Be patient,

and give me enough time to think and express myself!

Your acceptance is important to me;
try not to judge, show empathy!

Support me as a human being by showing kindness,
a sense of humor, and friendliness!

Show peace of mind as much as you can,
behave naturally, be yourself, and concentrate on
what I'm saying, not on how I'm saying it!

Be flexible about adjusting your behavior
and try to respond to my needs!

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