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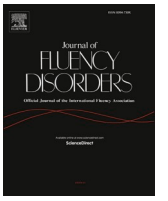

The good, the bad, and the ugly: Unpacking the pros and cons associated with change for adults who stutter

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the current study was to document the pros and cons that adults who stutter may consider when deciding to change how they live with stuttering.
Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 adults who stutter and 12 speech-language pathologists who specialize in stuttering therapy. Participants were asked to identify and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making a change to how they live with stuttering. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate multilevel themes.
Results: Meaningful units were extracted from interview transcripts to develop 37 discrete pros and 15 discrete cons. The pros of change clustered into five organizing themes: enriching one's social relationships, feeling better in social interactions, developing a healthier sense of self, gaining autonomy, and communicating easier. The cons of change clustered into three organizing themes: experiencing discomfort, expending resources, and recognizing that some things may not change.
Conclusion: This study documented *why* adults who stutter may or may not seek change. Identifying the pros and cons of behavior change is an important step in understanding why some clients who stutter are ambivalent about, or resistant to, the therapeutic process.

People set out to change various habits and behaviors over their lifetimes. These range from simple behaviors such as shopping with reusable grocery bags and flossing regularly, to more complex behaviors such as losing weight and managing stress. How successful someone is at initiating and maintaining behavior change over time depends on a variety of highly personal factors (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984)—both internal (e.g., their thoughts and feelings about the behavior, their physical abilities) and external (e.g., the structure of the environment, their support network). One such internal factor that has been shown to be a robust predictor of change readiness and maintenance is a cognitive phenomenon known as *decisional balance*, which is how important someone finds the pros and cons of changing (Prochaska et al., 1994). When they think the pros of changing outweigh the cons, they are likely to commit to changing because they readily see the benefits of doing so. On the contrary, when they think the cons of changing outweigh the pros, they are likely to resist change because they see very little benefit in doing so. People who stutter likely go through similar processes of weighing the pros and cons as they consider what to change (if anything) and how to do it (Manning & DiLollo, 2018; Rodgers et al., 2021; Zebrowski et al., 2021). In this paper, we explore those pros and cons of changing that adults who stutter may face as they decide what to do about how they live with stuttering. These perspectives were elicited from the "experts"—adults who stutter and speech-language pathologists who specialize in stuttering.

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The behaviors that constitute positive behavior change in the stuttering experience are multidimensional. In therapeutic work with clients who stutter, behavior change tends to be measured by the achievement of long-term outcomes. Historically, these have measured overt speaking characteristics such as decreased percentage of words stuttered, decreased self-rated stuttering severity, decreased duration of stuttering moments, and increased speech naturalness (Karimi et al., 2018; Mallick et al., 2021). In recent years, there have been increased efforts to document outcomes across multiple domains in stuttering therapy for preschoolers (e.g., Druker et al., 2020; Millard et al., 2018), children/adolescents (e.g., Byrd et al., 2018; Cooke & Millard, 2018), and adults (e.g., Connery et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2016; Sønsterud et al., 2020). Across these studies, in addition to changes in speech/stuttering behaviors, outcomes have focused on improving personal reactions to stuttering, increasing life participation, and modifying environmental factors. In our prior work, we have documented the actions that adults who stutter can take to achieve positive outcomes in how they live with stuttering. This includes: (1) noticing and adjusting physical behaviors involved in speaking, to the extent that it is personally important to do so; (2) developing neutral or positive thoughts and feelings about stuttering; and (3) participating more fully in social and professional activities, even if the person stutters or thinks they might stutter (Rodgers & Gerlach-Houck, 2022).

Clinicians who provide individualized stuttering therapy should consider which domains or behaviors of change are most personally relevant for individual clients, as that can inform what the client is most ready to address. One such framework is inspired by the *transtheoretical model* of behavior change. The transtheoretical model originated in the fields of behavioral health and health psychology in the 1980s as a way of integrating numerous empirical and theoretical accounts of how people change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). The core of the transtheoretical model is a temporal dimension of change readiness known as the *stages of change.* There are five stages of change that people tend to move through dynamically: (1) Precontemplation (they are not at all thinking about changing), (2) Contemplation (they are thinking about changing in the near future), (3) Preparation (they are planning on changing in the immediate future), (4) Action (they are actively changing), and (5) Maintenance (they are consolidating change and preventing regression). Several cognitive processes predict individuals' stage placement and movement, and the transtheoretical model spotlights three of them: decisional balance, situational self-efficacy, and processes of change. *Decisional balance* is the relative importance of the pros and cons of the target behavior; this is the focus of the current paper. *Situational self-efficacy* is how confident the person is in their ability to engage in the new behavior even in challenging situations or following setback. The *processes of change* are cognitive and behavioral experiences that support movement across the stages. There is considerable evidence that these three cognitive processes function differently at each of the five stages of change (Hall & Rossi, 2008). For instance, people who are not yet ready to change tend to think the cons of changing far outweigh the pros, and are likely not confident that they can change the behavior in challenging situations. On the contrary, people who are ready to change (or have been changing) tend to think the pros of changing outweigh the cons, and they are likely feeling more confident in their ability to change. This is important because it helps clinicians and researchers understand *why* a client is at a certain point in their change journey, and *how* they can move forward. As such, understanding these processes and how they facilitate or inhibit change is critical for clinicians as they support behavior change in speech and language therapy.

Application of the transtheoretical model to populations with communication disorders is in its infancy and garnering enthusiasm. The majority of existing applications have focused on audiological rehabilitation, (e.g., Babeu et al., 2004; Eckberg et al., 2016, Laplante-Lévesque et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2016), voice therapy (van Leer et al., 2008), and dysphagia management (Krekeler et al., 2020). Applications to the area of stuttering began with expert opinion and preliminary studies (Floyd et al., 2007; Manning, 2006; Turnbull, 2000), but recent efforts have been made to scale up this work and create valid measures to assess change readiness in adolescents who stutter (Rodgers et al., 2021; Zebrowski et al., 2021). Using an iterative process with mixed methodology, Zebrowski and colleagues (2021) interviewed adolescents who stutter and stuttering specialists to develop a comprehensive pool of pros and cons that adolescents who stutter may face when managing stuttering. A total of 62 items were developed, and a national sample of 173 adolescents who stutter rated these items on a five-point Likert-scale, where *1* = not at all important to me and *5* = extremely important to me. Results of the exploratory factor analysis reduced the scale to 16 reliable, unique items (eight pros and eight cons) such as, "You would feel better about yourself, "You would talk more," "You might not be able to change the way you speak," and "Your speech would sound weird and unnatural to you." Consistent with previous applications of the transtheoretical framework, the *importance of the pros* of managing stuttering significantly predicted stage placement for adolescents who stutter (Rodgers et al., 2021).

This prior work provides preliminary evidence that the personal importance of the pros and cons of change, or decisional balance, is an important factor in understanding stutterers' motivation to change. However, this prior work focused on adolescents who stutter whose personal, social, and academic lives are different than those of adults. Thus, the extent that adolescents' perspectives are relevant to adults who stutter is unclear. Without this information, our field has limited perspective on the complex decision-making that adults who stutter work through as they consider what to change, how to do it, and why. While clinicians likely readily see the pros of changing, those who also appreciate the potential drawbacks that their clients anticipate or experience are better equipped to help those clients resolve their ambivalence about change and create a treatment plan that is tailored to their client's values and preferences (Behrman, 2006).

The purpose of the present study was to document the pros and cons that adults who stutter may consider when deciding to change how they live with stuttering. This collection of pros and cons will contribute to future work wherein we develop transtheoretical-based measures to assess readiness to change in adults who stutter, similar to what we documented for adolescents who stutter (Rodgers et al., 2021). However, the data herein are rich enough to stand alone by illuminating the myriad personal and social benefits and drawbacks of behavior change. This perspective has critical implications for clinical practice because it may help SLPs understand why some clients who stutter (or those who present with other communication differences and disorders) are ambivalent or resistant to change. Although informed by our previous work with adolescents who stutter, the current study was exploratory and not hypothesis driven.

Methods

The Institutional Review Boards at the authors' institutions approved all study procedures.

Participants

Key informants included 11 adults who stutter and 12 SLPs who self-reported specializing in stuttering therapy. Five of these SLPs identified as people who stutter. We used purposeful sampling to maximize the variety of experiences and perspectives among participants. Specifically, we recruited adults who stutter with a wide range of experiences with stuttering therapy, and SLPs with diverse clinical approaches. The authors' professional contacts served as the primary recruitment source, including colleagues with substantial clinical experience with stuttering and individuals associated with local chapters of the National Stuttering Association. To be included in the study, participants had to report that they were at least 21 years old, English speaking, and currently living in the United States. Additionally, adults who stutter must have reported that they identify as a person who stutters, and SLPs must have identified as having considerable experience with adult clients who stutter. We used pragmatic saturation to make judgements related to obtaining an adequate sample size (Low, 2019). To do so, we used interpretive judgement to discontinue recruitment when the pool of data had enough depth and diversity to thoroughly explore the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The adults who stutter included two females and nine males between the ages of 24 and 78 years ($M = 49.45$, $Med = 40$, $SD = 19.86$). One participant identified as Asian and the rest identified as White. The SLPs ranged from 32 to 77 years old ($M = 51.45$, $Med = 56$, $SD = 16.05$), including seven females and five males. One SLP was Black, and the rest were White. Two SLPs were working towards their board-certified specialization in fluency disorders (BCS-F) and six were certified as BCS-F specialists at the time of the interviews. The remaining four SLPs self-identified as specialists in stuttering and reported they worked primarily or exclusively with clients who stutter. Table 1 contains additional information about key informants.

Procedures

Interviews were scheduled once participants indicated interest in participating. Prior to the interview, participants were emailed a

Table 1
Demographics of Key Informants.

Pseudonym	Status[1]	Gender	Educational Degree	Occupation	Years in Speech Tx	Years in Self-Help	Stuttering Severity[2]
Alex	AWS	M	Graduate	Engineer	10	12	5.88
Elizabeth	AWS	F	Undergrad	University admissions	4	4	3.00
George	AWS	M	Undergrad	CPA	1	0	4.00
Gym rat	AWS	M	Undergrad	Retired	3	0	1.63
JC	AWS	M	Undergrad	Retired	10	7	2.88
Jeff	AWS	M	Undergrad	Law student	0.5	0	4.13
Megan	AWS	F	Graduate	Proofreader	2	4	6.50
Merv	AWS	M	Graduate	Analyst	3	10	2.63
Oliver	AWS	M	Undergrad	Stats analyst, manager	8	3	3.38
Retired CPA	AWS	M	Undergrad	Retired	3	5	3.88
Thor	AWS	M	Technical	Medical technologist	15	5	6.63
				Clinic Setting	**Years Working with AWS**	**Tx Approaches[3]**	
Alice	SLP	F	Master's	Private; School	17	ARTS, CBT, FS, SM	
Bear	SLPWS	M	PhD	University	45	ARTS, SM	
Bill	SLPWS	M	PhD	Private; University	8	ARTS, SM	
Janet Van Dyne	SLP	F	Master's	Private	7	ARTS, CBT, FS, SM	
Liz	SLPWS	F	Master's	Private	7	ARTS, CBT, SM	
Lynn	SLP	F	PhD	Outpatient	30	ARTS, CBT	
Matthew	SLPWS	M	PhD	University	16	ARTS, CBT, SM, FS	
Namaste	SLPWS	F	Master's	Private	33	ARTS, CBT, FS, SM	
Pete	SLP	F	Master's	Private	20	CBT, FS, SM,	
Runny Babbit	SLP	M	Master's	Private	20	ARTS, CBT, FS, SM	
UK71	SLP	M	PhD	Private	45	ARTS, CBT, FS, SM	
Violet	SLP	F	Master's	Private; University	35	ARTS, CBT	

Note.
[1]AWS = adult who stutters, SLP = speech-language pathologist, SLPWS = speech-language pathologist who stutters
[2]Self-reported stuttering severity on a 1–9 rating scale (*1* = no stuttering, *9* = extremely severe stuttering).
[3]ARTS= avoidance reduction therapy for stuttering, CBT = cognitive behavioral therapy approaches (e.g., ACT, CBT, mindfulness), FS = fluency shaping, SM = stuttering modification.

Qualtrics survey link to provide consent and demographic information. The majority of interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, but four interviews were conducted in-person with individuals who were local. One of the authors facilitated each interview. Zoom's record feature was used to record virtual interviews. For in-person interviews, a Sony HDR-CX405 camcorder with a Saramonic lavalier microphone was attached to participants' shirts to record. One of two trained research assistants transcribed each interview recording verbatim. The interview guide included the following questions:

1. Why might an adult who stutters choose to make a positive change to their stuttering? What are the benefits/pros of making a positive change to stuttering?
2. How could making a positive change to stuttering benefit an adult who stutters? How could it benefit their family, friends, or society?
3. Would other people approve of an adult making a positive change to stuttering? Who? How would they show their approval?
4. Why might an adult who stutters choose not to actively make a positive change to stuttering? What are the downsides/cons of making a positive change to stuttering?
5. How would actively making a change to stuttering affect an adult who stutters negatively or make their life more difficult?

Although the interview guide provided some structure to the conversation, we followed each participant's lead so long as what they shared pertained to the topic of interest. We asked for additional information as needed with neutral probes such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "What do you mean by that?" Conversations continued until participants appeared to have shared all pros and cons of making a change that came to mind. The questions in this interview guide were part of a broader interview focused on understanding readiness to change in adults who stutter. Thus, interviews included other questions relevant to the topic of facilitating change that is beyond the scope of the current study and only the data corresponding to the prompts listed above are reported in this paper. The full interviews ranged from 32.57 and 83.01 min with adults who stutter (M = 42.70, Med = 39.68, SD = 15.35) and 36.30–73.17 min with SLPs (M = 48.46, Med = 47.75, SD = 9.62). Participants were compensated with a $15 e-gift card. To protect participant anonymity in reporting, they each selected their own pseudonym.

Data analysis

Guidelines for developing behavioral health questionnaires involve including the target population and experts (in this case, adults who stutter and SLPs who specialize in stuttering therapy, respectively; Terwee et al., 2007). Accordingly, data from adults who stutter, SLPs, and SLPs who stutter were considered together rather than separately—similar to the approach used by Connery et al. (2021) and Zebrowski et al. (2021). Merging data across groups allowed us to develop and present a unified understanding of the pros and cons of change—one that is consistent with the collaborative nature of treatment planning that ought to occur in stuttering therapy.

We used Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) multi-step protocol for conducting reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data, with additional procedures from Attride-Stirling (2001) applied thematic analysis approach to develop multi-level themes including basic, organizing, and global themes. *Basic themes* are discrete pros and cons provided directly by the participants during the interview. Basic themes are low-level and narrowly focused, and take on meaning when considered within the context of other similar basic themes. Clusters of related basic themes form mid-level *organizing themes*, which illuminate trends in the data. Related organizing themes are then grouped to form high-level *global themes*, which reflect an overall assertion or summary of the data. Both reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) and applied thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) are guided by constructivism and allow for inductive, exploratory analysis to account for both semantic and latent meaning.

Both authors qualitatively analyzed the transcripts using NVivo 12 Plus software (QSR, 2020). First, the authors reviewed the transcripts and the second author extracted meaningful units, or units of data relevant to the research questions. Then, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), both authors independently assigned one or more codes to each meaningful unit. Codes with related meaning were clustered to create basic themes, which described discrete pros and cons of making a change to stuttering. After each author developed their own basic themes, we met to compare and reach consensus on a final list of basic themes. Then, separately, the authors revisited the shared list of basic themes and collated them to create mid-level organizing themes that were subordinate to the two high-level global themes: pros and cons of making a change to stuttering. The authors met once more to discuss and reach consensus on organizing themes and distribution of basic themes. At this meeting, theme names and descriptions were agreed upon prior to sending the themes to participants for member checking and then writing the results.

We incorporated two strategies to promote credibility of findings. First, we used investigator triangulation, which involves including more than one researcher in the data analysis process to reduce the influence of bias and increase richness of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Denzin, 2007; Mathison, 1988). Second, we incorporated member checking procedures, which involved soliciting feedback from all key informants on the organizing themes. We emailed participants and asked them to rate the extent they agreed that the organizing themes represented the pros and cons of making change to stuttering using a 10-point Likert scale (*1* = strongly disagree, to *10* = strongly agree*)*. Feedback was received from 21 of 23 participants (91.3 %). Agreement ratings for the pros averaged 9.48 (Med = 10, SD = 0.81, $range$ = 8–10) and for the cons averaged 8.33 (Med = 8, SD = 1.85, $range$ = 5–10). Participants were also invited to share open-ended feedback about the themes. Ten participants provided comments in addition to their quantitative ratings. Some participants commented on which pros and cons they found to be most important, while others named pros and cons that were already accounted for in basic themes not present in the list of organizing themes that they received. In other comments, some participants grappled with the extent the cons may or may not affect the change process. That is, they commented not just on if the pros and cons exist (which is what we sought to evaluate via member checking), but how personally important or relevant they

think they are. This is a point we circle back to in the Discussion section. Ultimately, member checking feedback did not warrant alteration of themes.

Results

Using reflexive thematic analysis, we developed two global themes—one capturing the pros of making a positive change to stuttering and one capturing the cons. Importantly, we define making a positive change to stuttering as a set of three composite behaviors,

Table 2
Global, organizing, and basic themes describing pros and cons of change.

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Pros	Enrich one's social relationships	– Have better relationships with others
		– Find it easier to date and connect with romantic partners
		– Be a better friend
		– Be better understood by others
		– Feel less lonely or isolated
		– Be more talkative
		– Accept social invitations more often
		– Have more substantive conversations
		– Talk on the phone more
		– Contribute more to my family
		– Contribute more to my community
		– Be less of a burden on my family
		– Be perceived in a more positive way
		– Be more enjoyable to be around
		– Be a positive role model to others
		– Contribute more at work
		– Be seen as more competent by my coworkers and employers
	Feel better in social interactions	– Feel less frustrated about stuttering
		– Feel less embarrassed about stuttering
		– Spend less time thinking about stuttering
		– Enjoy talking more
		– Feel like a successful communicator
		– Say what I want to say without caring if I stutter
		– Feel more comfortable in new situations
		– Care less about how listeners react when I stutter
	Develop a healthier sense of self	– Like myself more
		– Improve my mental health
		– Feel more hopeful about my life
		– Feel more authentic
		– Feel like stuttering is just one part of who I am
	Gain autonomy	– Feel like I could make choices about how I talk
		– Make life decisions without considering stuttering as much
		– Do things that I previously avoided
		– Advocate for myself more
	Communicate easier	– Talk in an easier, less effortful way
		– Reduce my secondary behaviors
		– Feel better physically
Cons	Experience discomfort	– Feel uncomfortable trying new things (e.g., stuttering openly)
		– Not be able to hide my stuttering as much
		– Have to face the fact that I am a person who stutters
		– Have to explain my stuttering to others
		– Be expected to talk more once talking became easier
		– Not be able to use stuttering as an excuse for avoiding things anymore
	Expend resources	– Spend a lot of time working on it
		– Spend money to get help
		– Use a lot of mental effort
		– Have to stay motivated to work on it for a long time
		– Have to try hard not to fall back into old habits
	Some things won't change	– Try things that may not always work
		– Feel bad if I failed at making positive changes along the way
		– Feel frustrated if I potentially still stutter sometimes
		– Still have to deal with negative listener reactions

including: (1) adjusting physical speaking behaviors to the extent that it is personally important to do so; (2) developing neutral or positive thoughts and feelings about stuttering; and (3) participating more fully in social and professional activities, regardless of stuttering (Rodgers & Gerlach-Houck, 2022). Table 2 displays the basic and organizing themes that contributed to each of the two global themes. In the following sections, we describe these multi-level themes in greater detail. We distinguish participants using the following acronyms: AWS for adult who stutters, SLP for speech-language pathologist, and SLPWS for speech-language pathologist who stutters.

Global theme 1: pros of making a positive change to stuttering

The authors developed 37 low-level basic themes of the pros of change, which clustered into five mid-level organizing themes. Organizing themes are presented below in descending order based on the number of supporting basic themes, with the organizing theme with the most supporting basic themes presented first.

Organizing theme 1a: enrich one's social relationships

Seventeen basic themes supported the organizing theme of enriching one's social relationships. More than half of these basic themes related broadly to increasing connection and intimacy within relationships. Participants discussed that having better relationships with others could be an advantage of change. Bear (SLPWS) gave the example: "the partner, the relative, or [whoever], perceives the person who stutters as being more open…so things can be talked about that maybe wouldn't have been talked about otherwise. The partner feels definitely more connected." Other participants discussed the benefit of having stronger friendships and romantic relationships. Namaste (SLPWS) said, "that person may become more vulnerable, which may lead to a more intimate relationship." Megan (AWS) shared that making a change to how she lived with stuttering helped her become more emotionally connected to her husband. Participants discussed the benefit of being better understood on an emotional level, like when Alice (SLP) said that others can "appreciate what people who stutter go through. It only serves to educate others and to open up their awareness of stuttering so that they can learn and understand more about it."

The increase in social connection could result in reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness. Alex (AWS) shared that people who stutter can feel "isolated from a lot of relatively normal interactions;" thus, an advantage of change could be living "a more connected life." Other advantages of change related to social connection include "talking more" (Thor; AWS) and accepting more social invitations. Pete (SLP) described it as being "simply more communicative, just engaging more." Merv (AWS) related to this sentiment, sharing that his personal journey involved interacting "more with the world than [he] had previously." Participants discussed that a benefit of change would be not only talking more frequently, but also having more substantive conversations and using more modalities (e.g., the phone). Jeff (AWS) provided an example of how the desire to communicate with greater depth continues to motivate him: "it'd be nice to be able to communicate with [my grandmother] in a way that's more substantive, and I could tell her about my school experience or a job I'm applying for."

Making a positive change to stuttering could also benefit the extent that individuals feel they can contribute to their family and community. Participants discussed that a pro of change could be feeling as though stuttering is less of a burden on family. Janet Van Dyne (SLP) shared that adults who stutter may find relief when they notice their family is "happy to see [them] thriving more." Liz (SLPWS) said, "they're willing to help in different family need-based situations—whether that's taking a family member to a doctor's appointment and they can advocate for that family member, or babysitting, or being proactive." Contributing more could result in being viewed more positively by others, which was described as another benefit of change: "I know I'm perceived completely differently now than I would have been [if I hadn't made a change]" (Merv, AWS). Participants expressed that adults who stutter who are making a positive change may be perceived as more enjoyable to be around. In Liz's words (SLPWS): "they're enjoying life and enjoying communication" and others notice. The opportunity to be a role model to others was another advantage. Namaste (SLPWS) said, "As a parent, that person will be able to help their children talk about problems and cope with problems because they are coping in a healthy way with [stuttering]."

Two basic themes fell within the domain of professional life benefits. Adults who stutter may value the ability to contribute more at work and reap the benefits of doing so: "certainly their job performance improves, and therefore their rewards at work, like maybe raises or something like that, would increase" (Bear, SLPWS). Janet Van Dyne (SLP) discussed how people who are making positive changes may be more likely to take promotions, lead meetings, and approach tasks that involve communicating with others. They may also relish being viewed as more competent by co-workers and employers: "[coworkers] would learn a lot more about that person, would be able to develop a stronger personal relationship, business relationship—because communication is everything" (Alice, SLP).

Organizing theme 1b: feel better in social interactions

Eight basic themes comprised the organizing theme of feeling better in social interactions. Three of the basic themes related to thinking more productively or self-compassionately during social interactions. Participants reported the benefits of decreased frustration and embarrassment in social situations. Similarly, spending less time thinking about stuttering during social interactions was described as an advantage: "it feels nice to be able to put all of my thoughts just into the conversation, instead of worrying about how it's gonna sound" (Megan, AWS). Matthew (SLPWS) shared that no longer being "all worked up and worried about their stuttering" could allow adults who stutter to be more present during social interactions. Namaste (SLPWS) described this benefit as being "free" and less "occupied by [thoughts such as] 'Can I say that? Can I not? What's that person thinking of me?'".

Other pros of making change were that adults could enjoy talking more and experience greater success as communicators. Pete (SLP) shared that "they would begin to feel more confident" and as though they were a "better communicator." UK71 (SLP) said they might be "able to interact more effectively with family members and partners and co-workers." Matthew (SLPWS) discussed how feeling joy and success in communication could take the form of "owning the space that you're in. And using gestures, using body language, having a confident voice, eye contact, showing emotion in your face."

Another basic theme was that adults could say what they want to say regardless of stuttering: "when I'm going into a new situation for the most part, now, I don't worry if I'm going to stutter ahead of time" (Megan, AWS). Gym Rat (AWS) echoed a similar sentiment: "I don't worry about it—even if there [are disfluencies]. See, they used to bother me horribly, but now it really doesn't." UK71 (SLP) agreed that a potential benefit of making change is that clients can become "more outgoing than [they] used to be." Violet (SLP) shared that saying what they want to say regardless of stuttering can lead to "more spontaneity" and "achieving [their] potential in so many areas."

Feeling more comfortable in new situations was another basic theme: "when there's low stress, the stuttering is not as much of a problem anyway" (JC, AWS). Oliver (AWS) described his personal experience with increasing comfort as, "I'm able to do more things that I may have been afraid to do previously, or may have avoided, or may have not even tried to put myself in." He added that feeling comfortable in a variety of situations "makes everything less scary." For Megan (AWS), increased comfort stemmed from feeling as though she no longer had "to hide anything." George (AWS) had a similar experience: "stuttering can be kind of a private thing as you don't want anyone else to know, for who knows why. But once you can get that out there, that kind of eliminates pressure [and] that fear."

Caring less about listener reactions was the final basic theme related to feeling better in social interactions. Oliver (AWS) described it as, "worrying less about what other people are going to think of my speech," and Namaste (SLPWS) said caring less involves being unafraid of "judgement from others." Elizabeth (AWS) and Oliver (AWS) discussed personal benefits from learning to stay in a positive mindset after a listener reaction and gently correcting people when they do not respond to stuttering in helpful ways.

Organizing theme 1c: develop a healthier sense of self

Five basic themes contributed to the organizing theme of developing a healthier sense of self. Three of the five basic themes pertained to feeling better about oneself or the future. Participants described that adults who stutter would like themselves more if they were making a positive change. Retired CPA (AWS) said "you'd feel better about yourself," and Bear (SLPWS) stated there would be "more happiness with the self." Several participants also mentioned that improved mental health, particularly reduced anxiety and depression, could be an advantage of making change. Participants discussed that feeling more hopeful would be another advantage of making change: "You start talking, and it opens doors" (Gym Rat, AWS). Violet (SLP) echoed the same sentiment, stating "it's almost as if life gets broadened." Janet Van Dyne (SLP) shared that important people in the person's life might notice and feel relieved about this improvement as well: "the [person's] partner is very happy to see that the person who stutters is less anxious."

The final two basic themes pertained to identifying with stuttering in new ways. Several participants shared the benefit of feeling more authentic: "being the stutterer that you are and enacting the role of your true self is incredibly empowering and builds self-esteem" (Violet, SLP). Namaste (SLPWS) said that adults who stutter "want to feel accepted for who they are. The benefit for an adult who stutters is to feel as though they can be who they are internally." For Matthew (SLPWS), being authentic would mean feeling more "free to just be who they are and not worry so much about the speech." Runny Babbit (SLP) described it as a "vision and a visceral feeling that I can be better, I can do better, I can experience things better—more fully—I can just be more fully me." Lynne (SLP), Bear (SLPWS), and Janet Van Dyne (SLP) mentioned that important people in their lives might notice and benefit from the person's increased authenticity as well. Matthew (SLPWS) summed this up when he said, "we, meaning society and other people, get the benefit of knowing who they are—seeing what's inside of them."

Participants also described the benefit of believing that stuttering is just one part of who a person is. Runny Babbit (SLP) described it as the person feeling as though "identity is [not] hinged on their speaking fluency, [but rather] other aspects and facets of who they are." Matthew (SLPWS) said that making a positive change could allow "people's personalities and their selves to just come through."

Organizing theme 1d: gain autonomy

Four basic themes comprised the organizing theme of gaining autonomy. Participants described having more choices as to how one communicates as a potential pro of change. Matthew (SLPWS) shared that it can feel good for adults who stutter to "have a personal sense of control over the way [they] talk." UK71 (SLP) agreed, stating that the "sense of accomplishment" of adjusting how one speaks can be highly motivating. Some participants described that, for adults who stutter, learning that they can change the way they talk can lead to hopeful feelings for change in other domains of life: "If you can change your speech, then maybe there's some other things you can change about yourself" (Gym Rat, AWS). Making life decisions without considering stuttering as much was another advantage of making a positive change. Runny Babbit (SLP) said:

> One feels more on the horse rather than being taken for a ride on the horse, I've got some sense of the terrain…I have some sense of what's going on here. And I choose to be up here, and I'm going where I want to go.

Several participants described the benefit of doing things that had previously been avoided. Violet (SLP) reflected, "You realize 'You know what? I can do that.' You start expanding the 'I cans' in your life. Because you've spent your whole life with 'I cant's.'" Participants provided specific examples of what adults who stutter might be doing if they were avoiding less, including talking on the

phone more, taking on leadership positions, and having more conversations. They described that, by avoiding less, adults who stutter could be "contributing more" (Pete, SLP), "seeking out opportunities" (Liz, SLPWS), and feeling as though doors were "opening" (George, AWS).

Finally, participants described an increase in self-advocacy as a pro of making change. Liz said (SLPWS):

> There's a layer of self-advocacy. I think as one feels like some changes are happening and feels more confident, that they learn more about stuttering and kind of take ownership over it…And then that advocacy sort of thing can help them in a number of ways—can help them dispute some of their beliefs that [weren't helpful to them in the past].

Organizing theme 1e: communicate easier

Three basic themes were included in the organizing theme of communicating easier. Participants discussed that being able to speak in an easier, less effortful way would be one advantage of making a positive change to stuttering. Alice (SLP) said that easier communication could look like having "a free-flowing conversation," and Alex (AWS) said communication would feel more "automatic, spontaneous, and enjoyable." For JC (AWS) and others, reducing secondary characteristics or struggle behaviors associated with stuttering was another way to promote ease. Bill (SLPWS) said, "if he or she is wrapped up in fighting their stuttering every time they go to communicate, they're probably not communicating as much or as often as they would otherwise."

Feeling better physically was another basic theme related to easier communication. Namaste (SLPWS) said "there are benefits [to making change to stuttering] throughout the physical body." Lynne (SLP) provided the following examples of feeling better physically:

> They're not holding their chest as tight. They'll say, 'Well, my shoulders are down for the first time…Now my throat doesn't hurt at the end of the day,' and like, 'Wow, I didn't have a headache after I gave that speech for the first time.'

Global theme 2: cons of making a positive change to stuttering

The authors developed 15 low-level basic themes representing discrete cons of change, which clustered into three mid-level organizing themes.

Organizing theme 2a: experience discomfort

The organizing theme of experiencing discomfort included six basic themes. One of these basic themes related to the discomfort inherent in trying new things within and outside of the therapy room: "The unknown is very scary" (Violet, SLP). Participants emphasized that trying new things requires adults who stutter to put themselves "out there" (Megan, AWS), "take risks" (Bear, SLPWS), and be "vulnerable" (Runny Babbit, SLP). Alex (AWS) said:

> [Trying new things] is risky business, okay? There's some real risk associated with putting yourself out there. There's some ridicule and some shame.In order to make a positive change we have to be willing to take some risks…If you do risky things enough times what happens? Eventually sooner or later you get hurt.

Three basic themes pertained to the discomfort that can stem from confronting stuttering. Choosing not to hide stuttering as much was one such source of discomfort. Violet (SLP) expressed that some adults who stutter must confront the barrier of losing their ability to hide after living covertly for so long. This rang true for Megan (AWS), who shared "I was worried how people were going to view me…Maybe people would think [stuttering openly] meant that I wasn't intelligent, or I think at the very, very worst like couldn't hold a job or be a parent." This was something Merv (AWS) related to as well: "I don't like to show weakness; in my mind, it's still a weakness." Pete (SLP) discussed how choosing to be increasingly open about stuttering could introduce new difficulties: "the fear of being not accepted, if they've kept their stuttering covert…there is a fear of being open about it and facing less than positive reactions."

Another source of discomfort stemmed from facing the identity of being a person who stutters. Pete (SLP) shared that people new to making change may experience discomfort from starting "to be seen more as a person who stutters." She elaborated:

> It is stressful in the beginning, especially, to make change and [adults who stutter] define themselves in a certain way. And so a therapist is trying to help them change, because they're asking for change, but that would mean some degree of stress of putting themselves out there.

Participants also described discomfort in explaining stuttering to others, if they choose to do that: "One unintended consequence [of making a positive change] is that they may have to explain more that they're a person who stutters (Matthew, SLPWS). He described that having "to educate others all the time" can feel burdensome.

The remaining two basic themes pertained to experiencing discomfort as a result of adjusting to new expectations from oneself and others. Participants expressed that adults who stutter may be expected to talk more as talking becomes easier, which could be daunting: "With success comes the opportunity for more success. And that requires more change and more discomfort" (Janet Van Dyne, SLP). Liz (SLPWS) described that there could be "pressure to speak with greater ease, pressure to take on some of the feared roles or situations—because one has done it once, that should be fine." For some, new success means fewer reasons to continue justifying avoiding difficult speaking situations. George (AWS) described it as "pressure to be a little more outgoing or, you know, introduce myself to people. And if I don't, then it's kind of like, you can view it as a setback or a missed opportunity."

Organizing theme 2b: expend resources

Five basic themes comprised the organizing theme of expending resources. In these basic themes, participants described that making a change requires time, money, and effort—resources with often limited capacity. Participants described therapy as a "long-term commitment" (Alice, SLP), "a nonlinear process" (Lynne, SLP), and something that occurs "over the course of a lifetime" (Namaste, SLPWS). Pete (SLP) emphasized that the time commitment involves time spent in sessions as well as regular practice between sessions. Oliver (AWS) shared he was not aware of the amount of time making change would require when he first started therapy: "I was thinking that I would go there, that one hour a week would be enough to see change. And then I was not seeing any progress." Similarly for George, realizing "how hard and how long the road" to change would be was a difficult adjustment. Namaste (SLPWS) discussed how the time commitment can be particularly difficult for adults because they often get "caught up in the busyness of life" and face pressures to spend their time elsewhere.

The financial cost of therapy was described as another burden of seeking change. Pete (SLP) discussed that although insurance can sometimes help, adults who stutter often cover the costs of therapy, whether that be a recurring co-payment or paying in full out of pocket.

Several participants described the sustained mental, emotional, and physical effort as a con of making change: simply put, "it's a lot of work" (Megan, AWS). Runny Babbit (SLP) discussed how opening up about stuttering can drain cognitive and emotional resources: "There's some exhaustion, there's some emotional and physical calories that have been spent that don't show up on your activity tracker." Alex (AWS) summed up the long-term process of change as "hard, it's really hard."

Organizing theme 2c: some things may not change

This organizing theme included four basic themes related to difficulty of coming to terms with the idea that some parts of stuttering may not change. Participants described that it can be frustrating to "try techniques that may or may not always work" (Pete, SLP). Lynne (SLP) discussed that it can be particularly discouraging when changes are not durable outside the therapy room. Oliver (AWS) and other participants discussed how it can be challenging to cope with feelings of failure throughout the change process. He described that adults who stutter may struggle with thoughts such as, "Why am I doing this? Why am I wasting my time? I am never going to be able to change." Elizabeth (AWS) discussed how it can be frustrating to come to terms with the fact that stuttering likely won't go away entirely: "People can get very frustrated if they're not like everybody [else]."

Finally, participants expressed that it can be difficult for adults who stutter to accept that they may still encounter negative listener reactions during and after the process of making a positive change. Matthew (SLPWS) said, "if you're openly stuttering and you're talking more without fear, you have to probably deal with listener reactions more than you did before." He added that this can be particularly discouraging because adults who stutter then "have to wait until maybe a week later to come back to therapy" and talk about what happened.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to document the pros and cons that adults who stutter may consider when deciding to change how they live with stuttering. We interviewed key stakeholders, including adults who stutter and SLPs who specialize in stuttering, to develop a rich understanding of the potential advantages and disadvantages of change for adults who stutter. We identified 37 discrete pros of making a change to living with stuttering, which clustered into five themes: enriching one's social relationships, feeling better in social interactions, developing a healthier sense of self, gaining autonomy, and communicating easier. We also identified 15 discrete cons of change, which clustered into three themes: experiencing discomfort, expending resources, and recognizing that some things may not change. This is not to say that all adults who stutter are affected by all 52 pros and cons. In this study, we examined the myriad reasons *why* adults who stutter may or may not want to make changes to how they live with stuttering, understanding that these pros and cons vary in importance or influence for each individual who stutters. Further, it lays the groundwork for future investigations of complex decision-making processes that underlie readiness to change among adults who stutter.

Unpacking the pros and cons

Deciding to change how one lives with stuttering involves considering what would be good and not so good about the process of change. There are many potential pros of change for adults who stutter; in fact, the stakeholders in this study identified more than twice as many pros of change compared to cons. This follows a similar trend that we reported in our prior work with adolescents who stutter, although not to such a drastic degree, in which we identified 35 pros and 27 cons of change for that population (Zebrowski et al., 2021). Importantly, for adolescents who stutter, the importance of the pros of change were a better predictor of change readiness than the importance of the cons (Rodgers et al., 2021). That is, between the pros and cons of change, the weight of the pros differed across the stages of change more than the cons. This leads us to believe that focusing on the benefits of change can support movement toward action for adolescents who stutter. Our forthcoming work will seek to determine whether this same pattern exists for adults who stutter. Delineating the discrete pros and cons in the current paper is a foundational step in this line of work wherein we are developing scales to measure and understand change readiness for adults who stutter, and to compare these constructs across age groups.

It is a common assumption that people who stutter participate in speech therapy because they want to change the way they speak.

Our data suggest that the desire to communicate easier is one motivating factor in why adults who stutter seek to change, but in fact this was the least robust theme compared to the other four organizing themes. For instance, the organizing theme of communicating easier was supported by three basic themes, whereas enriching one's social relationships was supported by 17. As a group, the stakeholders in this study viewed enriching one's social relationships as the most robust reason for making a change to how one lives with stuttering. This dovetails with findings from Neumann et al. (2019), in which adults who stutter identified social support as an important facilitator of positive change. The emphasis on social relationships reported by adults who stutter supports the utility of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) as a comprehensive framework for clinical decision making with clients who stutter (Tichenor & Yaruss, 2019). The ICF framework indicates that stuttering therapy can and should address participation restrictions (e.g., forming relationships) in addition to the primary impairment of feeling "stuck" while speaking. Our study corroborates that social connection is a primary motivation for change that should be considered and explored among adults who stutter who are considering making a change.

Although the number of discrete cons were fewer compared to pros, they cannot be disregarded or understated because they represent legitimate potential drawbacks for starting and continuing with speech therapy or self-help. For people with multiple marginalized identities, the cons of change may be amplified. For example, the cons of expending time and money may be more significant among people of lower socioeconomic status. Similarly, in the United States, people of color may be less willing to experience the discomfort inherent to change if their SLPs are not culturally responsive. This is of particular relevance given that only 8 % of SLPs in the United States identify as belonging to a racially minoritized group (ASHA, 2022), yet the prevalence of stuttering appears to be comparable across racial and ethnic groups (Yairi & Ambrose, 2013).

It is important to note that the goal of this study was not to describe how important or relevant the pros and cons are to individuals who stutter; that is for each person to consider for themselves, ideally with the guidance of a skilled clinician or other trusted confidante. Rather, our goal was to simply document the pros and cons of changing that may exist. And just as each person will weigh the importance of the pros and cons differently, the pros and cons themselves are complex and likely unique to each individual. Sometimes there can be overlap, or a natural progression, between the pros and cons depending on where a person is in the process of change. A person may feel uncomfortable when they are in the midst of the hard work of change, but experiencing that discomfort could desensitize them to negative feelings associated with change so that they subsequently feel more comfortable with stuttering and change in the future. For instance, learning to self-disclose can feel uncomfortable and awkward at first because it is new but, with practice, can lead to becoming more comfortable and secure with stuttering (Boyle & Gabel, 2020). This highlights the reality that working through the cons, although sometimes painful and uncomfortable, can be important facilitators of change. It can empower adults who stutter and SLPs to know that in the process of change, it is common for things to get harder before they get easier.

Change is hard, but so is staying the same

Most participants touched on the fact that change is difficult. In fact, Alex (AWS) and Liz (SLPWS) quoted the same expression—that people commit to making a change when "the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of making a change." Several participants discussed that even people who are suffering may resist change because the pain of change is unfamiliar. Alex (AWS) said that there is "comfort in the misery that is familiar to us." People may not feel ready to change because they are uncertain and intimidated by what change will entail. That is, adults who stutter may be aware that the ways they currently cope with stuttering negatively impact their well-being. Yet, they may feel that continuing to cope in those ways is a safer option than choosing to be vulnerable and facing the potential threat of failure. Bill (SLPWS) reflected that "the devil you know is preferable to the one you don't." The difficulties that accompany change can be daunting, as change may require individuals to give up coping mechanisms that have protected them in the past, such as concealing stuttering.

Resolving ambivalence to promote change readiness

For clients who are resistant or ambivalent to change, SLPs could help their clients explore the pros and cons of both staying the same and changing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). This type of discussion is rooted in motivational interviewing, which is a counseling approach that involves eliciting and strategically responding to "change talk" from the client (Behrman, 2006; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The acronym DARN, which stands for *D*esire, *A*bility, *R*eason, and *N*eed, can be used to guide motivational interviewing conversations. The clinician can ask clients why they *desire* to make a change, how they think they would be *able* to do it, what *reasons* make them think they should, and why they think change is *needed*. Discussing reasons for change in particular can help clients identify personal pros and cons of change and assess their importance. These conversations can help clients clarify why change is important to them while increasing their confidence in their ability to do so. Readers who want to learn more about motivational interviewing with clients who stutter are encouraged to explore other available resources on the topic (Rodgers, 2022; Zebrowski et al., 2022). Ideally, through this type of ongoing conversation with their clinician, clients who are struggling will reach a point where they recognize, "If you're going to go through challenges, they may as well be productive and lead to an improvement rather than further mire you in misery" (Bill, SLPWS).

Once therapy has started, SLPs can assist clients in sustaining their desire to change by helping them learn to notice and celebrate progress in small steps. Recognizing small steps toward desired change can cause a ripple effect in which success breeds further success (Rodgers et al., 2020). When clients recognize that they are able to overcome hurdles in the process of change, they may begin to realize that they can conquer other barriers and, in turn, the possibilities for change expand.

Limitations and future directions

Results from qualitative research are not meant to be generalized to the broader population. The pros and cons of change described here represent those reported by the individuals who participated in this study. Scaled research is needed to understand the extent that the pros and cons of making change apply to members of the stuttering community at large. Another limitation of the present study is that the sample does not adequately represent experiences of adults who stutter from historically marginalized racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of participants in this study were white, highly educated, and working in professional careers. An important next step of this line of work will involve investigating pros and cons of change from an intersectional approach that accounts for how stuttering interacts with other identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, religion).

Despite these limitations, the present findings describe at least a subset of specific benefits and drawbacks associated with change for adults who stutter. The results of this study will inform our larger project, which aims to develop reliable and valid scales to assess change readiness among adults who stutter using the transtheoretical model of behavior change. In this work, we will use the pros and cons described here to develop a scale that quantifies decisional balance—a person's overall assessment of the importance of the pros and cons—and how that predicts their readiness to make positive changes to how they live with stuttering.

Conclusion

Some people who stutter may be ambivalent about making a change to how they live with stuttering. The process of learning to live well with stuttering can be daunting, time-consuming, and emotionally and mentally taxing. SLPs can support adults who stutter in becoming more ready to do something positive about stuttering by exploring their perceptions of the pros and cons of change. People who are clear about their reasons for wanting to change may be more likely to persist through the parts of the change process that are inevitably uncomfortable. If SLPs are aware of clients' perceptions of barriers to change, they can be responsive to them in therapy to maximize positive change.

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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