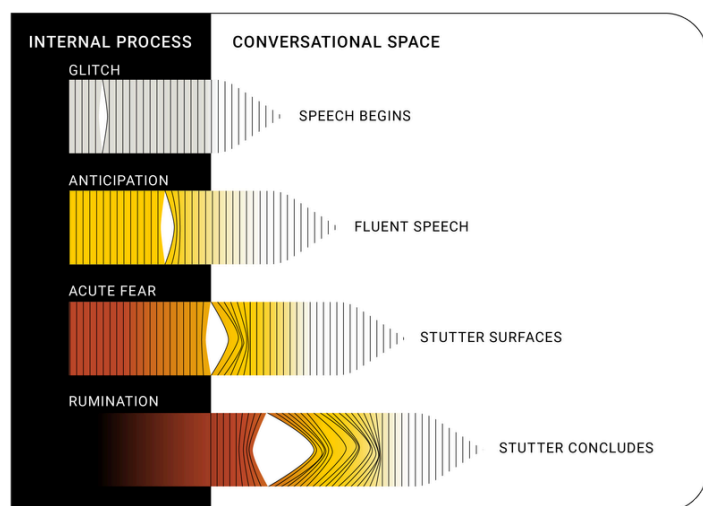


What is a Moment of Stuttering?

Stuttering is a deeply human, layered experience rooted in neurobiology, learning, identity, and the social world. How a speaker experiences a moment of stuttering is shaped by many contexts all at once: the listener in front of them, the behavioral patterns that have built up over years, and the therapeutic journey they may be on.

A Moment of Stuttering Unfolding with Fear

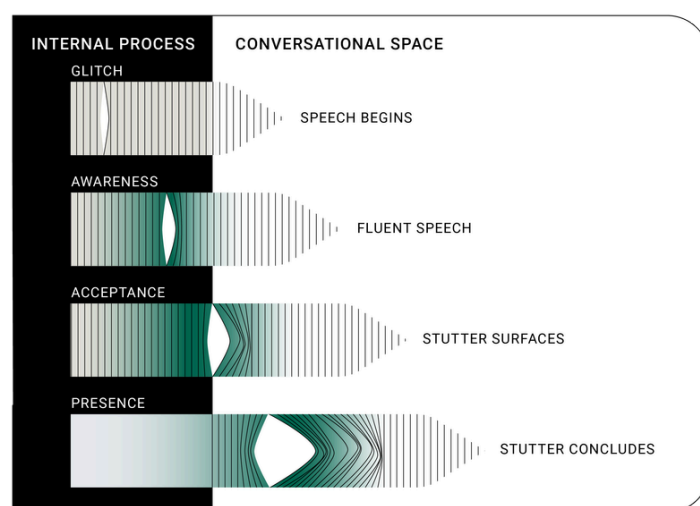


When we speak, the brain quickly turns ideas into planned words, those planned words into motor plans, and those motor plans into mouth movements. For people who stutter, there can be a disruption or “**glitch**” in how the motor plan is made.

When the speaker senses the glitch, they **anticipate** that they will stutter on an upcoming word.¹ This anticipation can trigger **fear** — fear of losing control, fear of physically struggling, fear of the listener judging them.²

Afterwards, the person who stutters may **ruminate** about how hard the interaction was, replaying the moment after it’s over. This internal process can interfere with the person’s ability to stay present in their body, in the conversation, in social connection.³

A Moment of Stuttering Unfolding with Acceptance



When a moment of stuttering unfolds, it can trace a different path. Rather than bracing for an oncoming stutter, a speaker can be **aware** of the familiar feeling of an approaching disfluency, and meet it with **acceptance and curiosity** instead of alarm.⁴ The speaker can embrace the moment of disfluency without struggling, hiding, or rushing away from it. As the stutter passes through, the person who stutters remains **present** in their body, in the conversation, in the social connection.

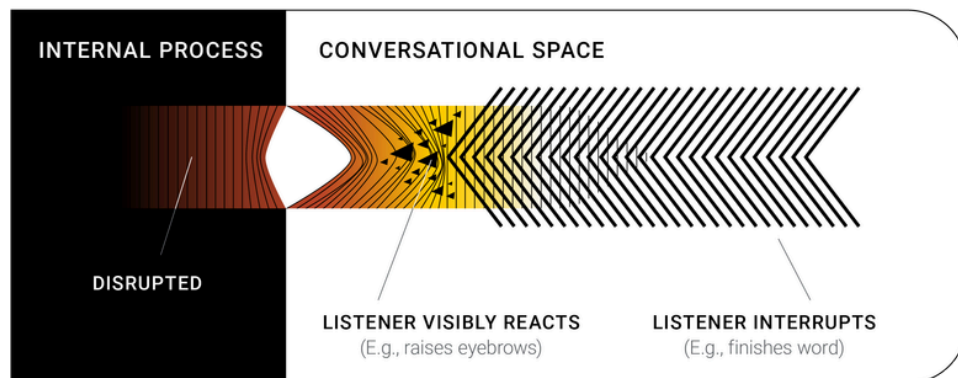
When approached with curiosity and openness, a moment of stuttering can invite the speaker to show up fully as themselves: saying exactly what they want to say in conversations, pursuing relationships and opportunities that are important to them, and authentically connecting with others.⁵

In a fast-paced world that prizes fluency, stuttering introduces something rare: a natural pause that invites both speakers and listeners to slow down and be present with one another in shared humanity. With a mindset shift, what society often frames as a flaw can become an opening toward authenticity, deeper connection, and a more spacious way of being in connection with others.

Stuttering is a Social Experience

Stuttering doesn't happen in a vacuum. When a stutter surfaces, it enters a conversational space that is co-created with the listener. Listeners' reactions shape the moment and the speaker in important ways.

Impatient Listeners Fracture Connection

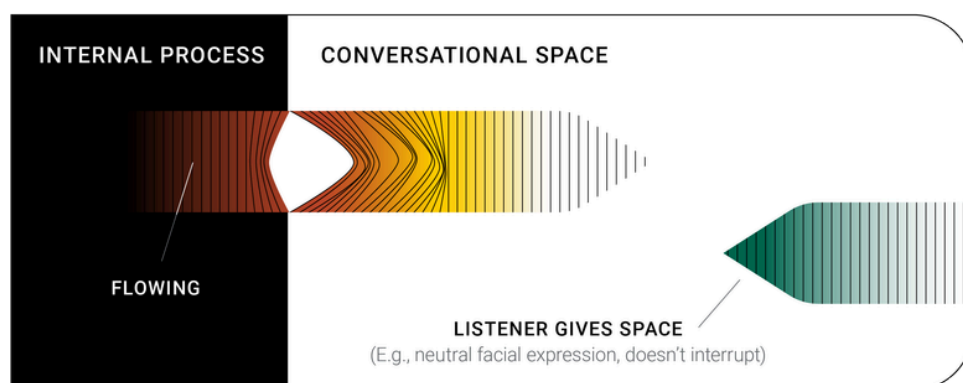


An impatient listener can fracture the moment by **visibly reacting** to the stuttering, **interrupting** by finishing the speaker's word, laughing, or mocking the stuttering. These disruptive reactions send the message: **"The way you talk isn't okay."**

By rupturing the social connection, intrusive listener reactions can pull the speaker out of the present moment and **disrupt** their speech planning, their ability to stay connected, and their desire to keep talking at all.⁶

Repeated experiences with impatient listeners and feeling **devalued** in conversations has an enduring impact on the speaker, chipping away at their self-worth and reinforcing feelings that it's unsafe to stutter.

Patient Listeners Cultivate Connection



A patient listener who simply waits, **holding space** for the stutterer to finish talking, creates a moment of genuine connection. These supportive reactions send the message: **"What you say is meaningful and valuable, no matter how you say it."**

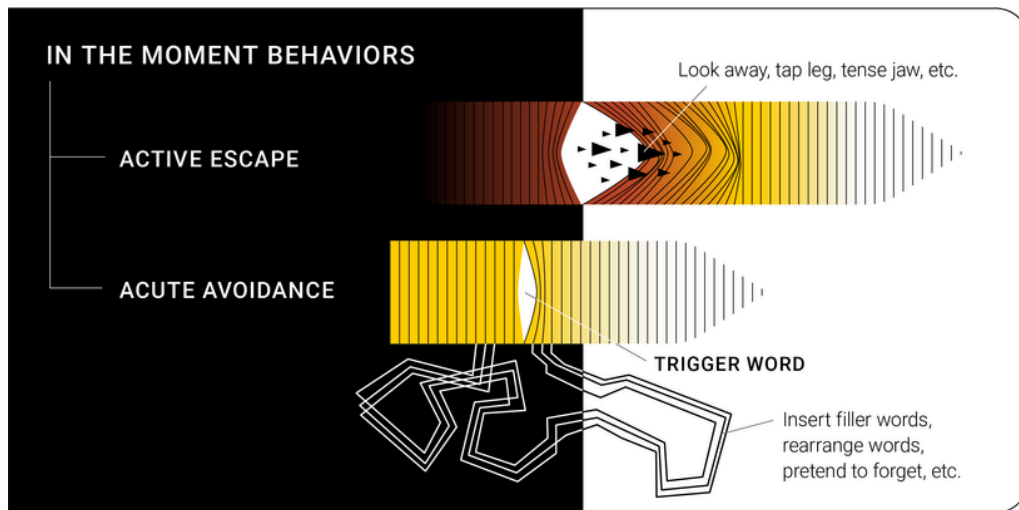
When the listener's response is welcoming and unhurried, the speaker's internal process can keep **flowing** as they stay connected to themselves and the listener. These moments of being truly heard shape how the speaker comes to see themselves, their stuttering, and their place in relationship with others.

Across a lifetime of conversations, the accumulation of listener reactions (**impatient** or **patient**, **dismissive** or **warm**) becomes one of the most powerful influences over how people who stutter learn to live with stuttering.

The Behavioral Patterns that Keep Stutters Sticky

Difficult moments of stuttering and ensuing negative listener reactions can spur deeply-engrained cycles of escape and avoidance behaviors that are used to circumvent the distress of stuttering, both in the moment and long-term.

Momentary Tricks

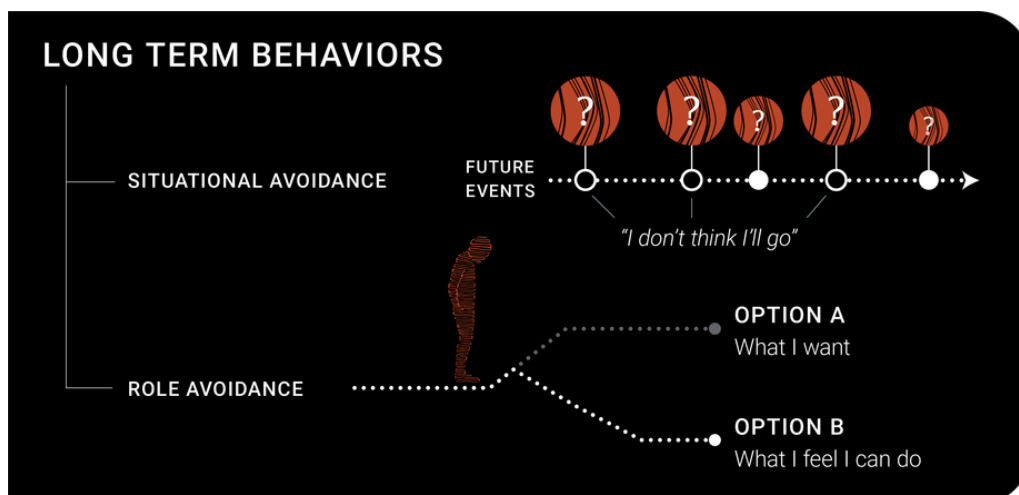


During a moment of stuttering, the speaker might use **escape behaviors** to try to get out of the stutter as quickly as possible.

In anticipation of an impending stutter, they may use **avoidance behaviors** to sidestep the trigger word before it surfaces.⁷

In the short term, these momentary tricks can bring relief because the speaker bypasses the rawness of stuttering. But each time the speaker escapes or avoids a moment of stuttering, it tells the brain that stuttering is something to be feared, making the fear stronger over time.

Longer-term Avoidance



People who stutter can also experience looming anticipation where they think they'll stutter in future situations. This can lead to **situational avoidance**, where the speaker steers clear of entire speaking situations, like leaving the room when people start introducing themselves, emailing instead of calling, or skipping social events.

They may engage in **role avoidance**, trying to pass as a fluent speaker instead of showing up authentically as a person who stutters. They may settle for relationships, careers, and identities that feel safer than pursuing what they truly want.³ Like momentary tricks, longer-term avoidance keeps the fear of stuttering alive; the situations and roles that were never faced never feel safe.

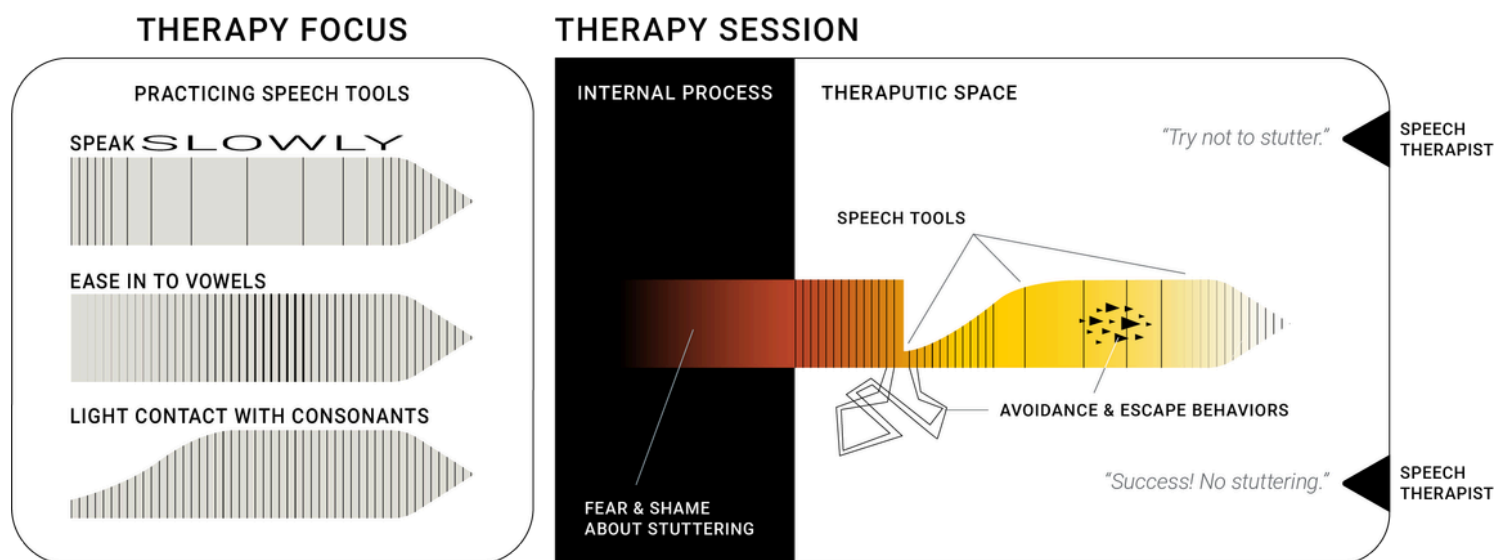
Mitigating escape and avoidance behaviors, both in the moment and over time, is central to supporting people who stutter in building a life that is no longer organized around fear.

Not All Therapies Point in the Same Direction

Speech therapy for stuttering can be motivated by different values, goals, and outcomes. Some approaches lead toward concealment, and others toward authenticity.

Fluency-Focused Approaches

In traditional fluency-focused approaches, the focus of therapy is teaching the person who stutters to use “**speech tools**” – techniques like speaking slowly and easing into sounds. The goal of these speech tools is to make speech **sound smooth or stutter-free** to listeners, even though it doesn’t feel natural to the speaker using them.



While these speech tools may appear to work within the therapy room, they can be difficult to generalize outside the therapy room and maintain over the long term. The effort required can make speakers sound and feel **robotic**, and it pulls their attention away from the person they’re talking to.

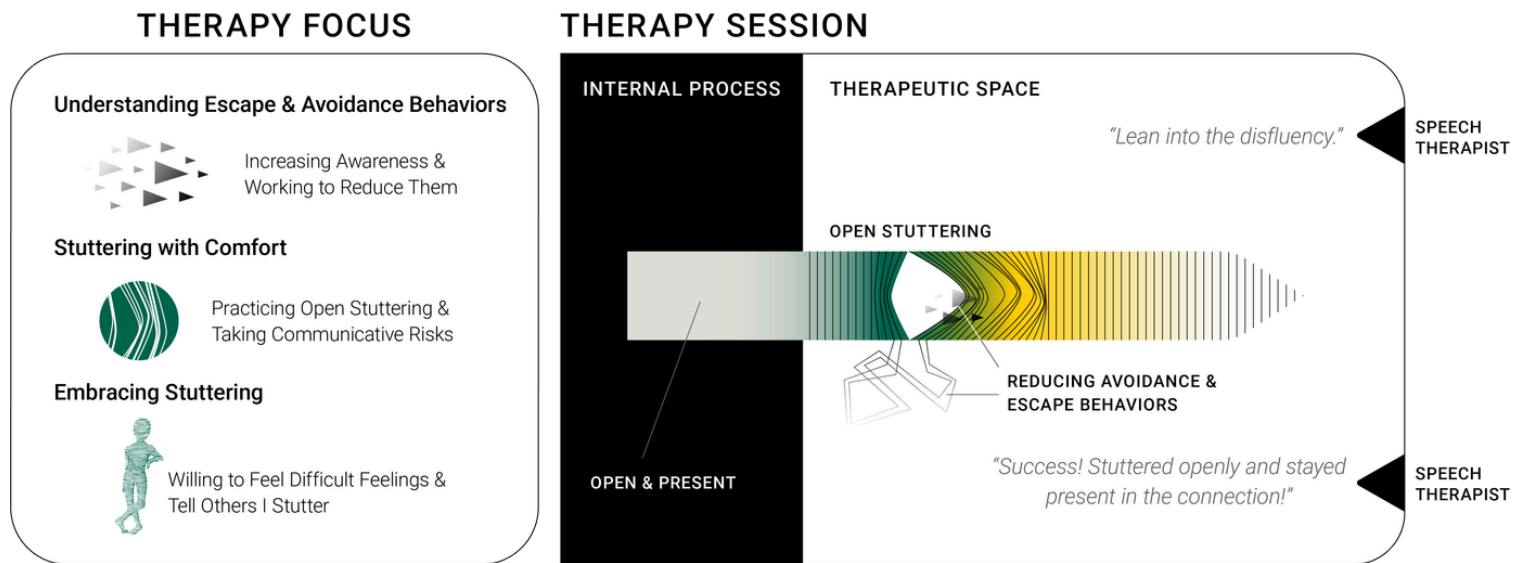
These tools are **concealment strategies in disguise**.⁸ Because the speaker’s internal experience of stuttering and deeply ingrained avoidance and escape behaviors are never addressed, their communication fills with momentary tricks and longer-term avoidance aimed at avoiding stuttering at all costs.

Beneath the surface, fluency-focused approaches take a deeper toll: by treating stuttering as something to be hidden, these approaches tend to **reinforce fear and shame** rather than relieve them.³

Not All Therapies Point in the Same Direction

Avoidance Reduction Therapy for Stuttering (ARTS®)

A contemporary stutter-affirming approach known as Avoidance Reduction Therapy for Stuttering (ARTS®) offers something different. ARTS is grounded in the core belief that **it is okay to stutter**.⁹⁻¹⁰



Through ARTS, people come to **understand their escape and avoidance behaviors** and work toward unlearning those conditioned reactions. In doing so, they safely build up their ability to **stutter more comfortably** and **take communicative risks** by stuttering more openly, first in the safety of the therapy space and building up to more feared situations. In ARTS, stutterers **embrace stuttering** by leaning into moments of stuttering, difficult feelings around stuttering, and their identity as someone who stutters.

A hallmark of progress in ARTS may seem counterintuitive at first: as speakers become more willing to stutter openly, their stuttering may become more visible. In ARTS, this is not seen as a setback, but rather as a sign of success that hiding and struggle are fading, while **authenticity is shining through**. This stands in stark contrast to fluency-focused approaches where reduced stuttering frequency is the measure of success.

Because the fluent world can be an impatient place for people who stutter, speakers on a stutter-affirming journey like ARTS often develop self-advocacy skills by asking for what they need, helping the people in their life understand how to show up for them, and finding community with others who get it.

The landscape of stuttering therapy is shifting. A new generation of clinicians and researchers are moving away from the goal of performing fluency and toward something more meaningful: supporting people who stutter in living fully, communicating freely, and showing up authentically in the world.

References

1. Jackson, E. S., Dravida, S., Zhang, X., Noah, J. A., Gracco, V., & Hirsch, J. (2022). Activation in right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex underlies stuttering anticipation. *Neurobiology of Language*, 3(3), 469-494.
2. Tichenor, S. E., & Yaruss, J. S. (2019). Stuttering as defined by adults who stutter. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 62(12), 4356-4369.
3. Anderson, C., Goldstein-Schuff, C., & Rodgers, N. H. (2026). Organizing life around stuttering: A qualitative examination of stuttering through the lens of complex trauma. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 35(2), 600-620.
4. Constantino, C. D. (2023). Fostering positive stuttering identities using stutter-affirming therapy. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 54(1), 42-62.
5. Boyle, M. P., Beita-Ell, C., & Milewski, K. M. (2019). Finding the good in the challenge: Benefit finding among adults who stutter. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 4(6), 1316-1326.
6. Tichenor, S., & Yaruss, J. S. (2018). A phenomenological analysis of the experience of stuttering. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 27(3S), 1180-1194.
7. Jackson, E. S., Rodgers, N. H., & Rodgers, D. B. (2019). An exploratory factor analysis of action responses to stuttering anticipation. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 60, 1-10.
8. Gerlach-Houck, H., Kubart, K., & Cage, E. (2023). Concealing stuttering at school: "When you can't fix it... the only alternative is to hide it". *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 54(1), 96-113.
9. Sisskin, V. (2018). Avoidance Reduction Therapy for Stuttering (ARTS®). In B. J. Amster & E. R. Klein (Eds). *More than fluency: The social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of stuttering* (pp. 157-186). Plural Publishing.
10. Sisskin, V., Brow, N., Goldstein, B., Goldstein-Schuff, C., Shaw, K., & Wertz, J. (2026). Avoidance Reduction Therapy for Stuttering: Case spotlights through an ARTS lens. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 11(2), 340-355.