

Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people who stammer



Bristol Speech and
Language Therapy
Research Unit

In collaboration with



STAMMA

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many changes to our behaviour and communication. Whilst these changes affect us all in different ways, the specific effects on people with communication disabilities are not known. This study addresses the impact of COVID-19 related lifestyle changes on the communication of people who stammer. From the findings, we have generated guidance and recommendations to better support people who stammer during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and to plan for future events of this type.

Project aims

1. To explore the experience of people who stammer since the start of the pandemic.
2. To investigate changes in contact with STAMMA (also known as British Stammering Association) support services.
3. To investigate changes in Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) provision for people who stammer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What we did

We used three different approaches to address the study aims:

Exploring experiences of people who stammer: We co-designed a survey with a group of people who stammer and speech and language therapists, exploring the experiences of adults who stammer, living in the UK. The survey, which focussed on mask-wearing and video-calls, was open for 4 weeks.



Assessing change in contact with STAMMA support services: We analysed data provided by STAMMA (formerly British Stammering Association), a national charity providing information, resources and support to

people who stammer and those close to them. STAMMA shared data about the contacts made with their phone, webchat, and email support services in the 75-week period from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020) and also for the 75 weeks before the pandemic started.

Assessing change in contact with



SLT services: We used data from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists outcomes database (ROOT) to investigate how episodes of care for children and adults who stammer were affected during the pandemic. We compared ROOT data for a 59-week period prior to March 2020 (pre-COVID-19) to a 59-week period during the pandemic.

Involving stakeholders

- We engaged a panel of people who stammer and specialist speech and language therapists to develop and refine our survey.
- We presented the survey results and our preliminary recommendations at an online consultation meeting, which was open to people who stammer, employers, educational professionals, health professionals and other interested parties.
- Feedback from the consultation was integrated into this report, which was also shared at the RCSLT (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists) conference 2021.

What we found

1. Increased challenges and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Stammering, avoidance, and anxiety have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- The majority (62%) of survey respondents reported an increase in their stammering.
- 82% reported an increase in general anxiety
- 59% reported an increase in anxiety related to stammering.
- 49% found it easier to use avoidance strategies

Video-calling for work, education or social purposes has been used much more than before the pandemic (81% of our survey respondents reported an increase).

“It’s hard to read social cues, and so you are either a) silent or b) talking over others”

Most people who stammer found **face-to-face interaction** more anxiety provoking (55%) and challenging (47%) during the pandemic.

Most people find using video-calls increases anxiety (65%) and makes communication more difficult (63%) compared to face-to face interaction.

Responses were varied regarding **participation** in video-calls; women and younger people reported decreased participation whilst older people and men were less affected.

Survey comments regarding video calls reflected benefits as well as difficulties:



“In my own controlled environment so I am relaxed. Almost harder to be embarrassed 'virtually' if I do stammer....”

Wearing a face mask increases anxiety for a large proportion (46%), compared to interacting without a mask on.



Women reported increased anxiety at higher rates when face-to-face (72%) and wearing a mask (61%).

Respondents who had a more overt pattern of stammering also reported increased anxiety when wearing a mask at higher rates (54%).

Survey comments regarding mask-wearing reflected benefits as well as difficulties:

"I use a breathing technique to manage my stammer and a mask is unhelpful for this. I've found my stammer has been worse while

wearing a mask. I think it also makes it harder for the listener to see when I'm stammering which can lead to an increase in confusion or a lack of empathy, compared to when my face is visible."

"Actually [mask-wearing] makes speaking easier, I feel less exposed"

"I have still found this difficult especially when wearing a mask. However, I have found it easier as people aren't seeing the facial expressions that come with having a stammer"

2. The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is more significant for some groups

Women who stammer were more likely to:

- experience increased general anxiety, and stammer-related anxiety
- decrease participation during video-calls
- feel more anxious in face-to face interactions
- feel more anxious when wearing a face mask

Younger people (aged 18-34) were more likely to:

- experience increased stammering
- experience increased stammer-related anxiety
- decrease participation during video-calls

People who stammer more overtly experienced higher rates of anxiety when interacting wearing a face mask.

3. Contacts with STAMMA support services

Support service contacts increased by 43% overall. Support requests increased, in particular from parents of children who stammer.

There was a significant change in the types of support requested during the pandemic. There was an increase in requests for support or information concerning:

- Education
- Emotional support
- Speech and Language Therapy
- Benefits (although this remained a very small proportion)

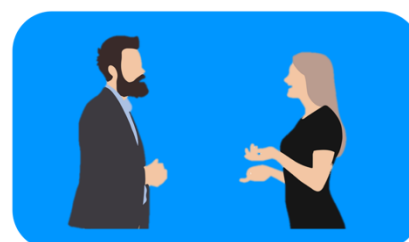


4. Provision of Speech and Language Therapy (SLT)

Provision of SLT for people who stammer decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when SLT was available, it was as effective as before the pandemic.

The number of SLT episodes (courses of therapy) logged on the ROOT database significantly reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic from 74 to 31 (a 58% decrease).

- This could be due to redeployment of speech and language therapists to other clinical responsibilities during the pandemic.
- The reduced logging of sessions may not only reflect change in the number of SLT sessions completed, but also in less consistency in logging sessions due to increased demands on time.



The duration of an episode of SLT (the time period over which SLT took place) also decreased during the pandemic, a 46% decrease from 28 to 15 weeks. No information was available, however, about the number or spacing of sessions during each episode of care.

Improvement in therapy outcomes was as large for SLT sessions completed during the COVID-19 pandemic as for sessions completed before the pandemic.

5. What has helped during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- The majority (60%) of survey respondents reported that the only strategy they use to support communication is self-disclosure of stammering.
- When video calling, difficulties arise when there is increased time pressure, when it is not clear when someone has finished speaking, and when call participants talk over each other. Survey respondents reported that it helps to have some control over the call, for other participants to use hands up function to reduce interruptions, and to use the chat function when speaking is difficult.
- Survey respondents commented that the pandemic has affected the social and communication skills of people who do not stammer, due to reduced or remote contact with others. This seems to have increased awareness and understanding of communication differences, including stammering.
- The pandemic increased the provision of online SLT sessions. We asked survey respondents whether this made a difference to their engagement with SLT:
 - 24% reported that they would be less likely to access help from a speech and language therapist.
 - 37% reported that they would be more likely to do so.
 - 39% reported that it would make no difference to whether they accessed SLT.

Our Conclusions

1. Most people who stammer have experienced an increase in stammering and in anxiety during the pandemic.
2. Changes in our interactions, such as using face masks and video calls, have increased anxiety and reduced participation, in particular for women and younger people.
3. Contacts to STAMMA support services have increased overall:
 - particularly around education concerns, emotional support and accessing SLT
 - particularly from parents of younger children
4. Fewer episodes of SLT intervention were recorded during COVID-19, and the length of interventions was shorter.
5. When SLT intervention was provided, it was as effective as SLT offered before the pandemic.
6. Professionals (including employers, teachers and speech and language therapists) have contacted STAMMA less for support.
7. Strategies to manage the challenges of COVID-19 have included telling others about their stammer to increase awareness and empathy, and encouraging use of visuals (e.g., raising a hand) and chat functions in video-calls.
8. The increased awareness of communication, and of mental health, during COVID-19 has helped support the increased understanding of challenges faced by people who stammer.

Our Recommendations

- ✓ Work and education settings should support reasonable adjustments for people who stammer when remote working, where this continues in the longer-term, to reduce the negative impacts on participation and mental health.
- ✓ Support offered should take account of individual needs and recognise the impacts on specific groups such as women and younger people.
- ✓ Increased awareness of good communication practice, particularly in remote working, will be helpful for people who stammer as well as people who do not. Considering the structure and 'etiquette' of video-call interactions will likely benefit anyone who uses video-calls for work or social reasons.

- ✓ Specialist SLT services have a key role to play in reducing the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people who stammer. Services require adequate funding and staffing to meet this need.

When planning future SLT provision for people who stammer, Clinical Commissioning Groups should consider the increased need related to the:

- well-known relationship between stammering and social anxiety.
- increased concern about early communication development in pre-school years.

- ✓ Charities like STAMMA are key in providing information and resources about stammering. They also represent a community, who offer invaluable peer support for people who stammer and expertise in raising awareness and educating others about stammering.

The need for support during and transitioning out of the pandemic is clear from the increased demand on STAMMA support services. Funding for this continued work is essential.

- ✓ A more comprehensive examination of access to SLT during COVID-19 (for example, an audit of stammering services referrals and attendance) is recommended.

Identifying areas of increased inequity accessing SLT, and considering the factors driving this trend, will be important to ensure that all people who stammer are able to receive the necessary support to mitigate the effects of living through the pandemic.

- ✓ The period of transition out of the pandemic is an important opportunity to capitalise on the increased general awareness of the impacts of communication barriers, anxiety, and social isolation.

Stakeholders (SLT services, charities working with people who stammer, employers, educational institutions, researchers etc) can work in partnership to further promote awareness and understanding of stammering



North Bristol
NHS Trust