

# Is Your Stuttering a Disability?

By Justin Ancheta

## 1. How do you define disability?

- a) An umbrella term covering *impairments*, *activity limitations* and *participation restrictions*. None of which could ever apply to you.
- b) “Tell us more about your experience with asexuality and disability.” You imagine the question coming up in tomorrow’s news interview. You’ve worked with asexuality and queerness to cut out and hammer together a healthier identity for yourself. But you haven’t considered disability to be an identity you had the right to claim. You wonder if you’ve been wrong.
- c) You ask the bus driver if he’s going to Rexdale Boulevard. At the hard “r” sound, a set of locking pliers clamps on your throat. The tightening screw turns until your voice is a raspy wisp of air. Your dry throat and spasming vocal cords transform you into a twitching mass of tissue and bone.

## 2. How has your stuttering been an *impairment* (a problem in body function or structure)?

- a) It’s not like you have reduced hearing or sight. You can still talk “normally” sometimes. You don’t have a chronic illness or need a mobility aid. So maybe it is the product of your imagination.
- b) You remember a PBS science show about stuttering. The medical animation of vibrating vocal cords locking together, slamming shut like angry doors. You hold your hands to your throat, replaying the clip in your mind. Real people don’t talk like that, but occasionally *you* do. There must be something wrong with you.
- c) “Take a look at this,” your friend says, opening his psychology textbook and showing two brain scans. The “normal” is lit up like a Christmas tree. By comparison, the stutterer’s brain was muted—a holiday disappointment. “You can see *here* where the speech centres of the brain are active. In the stutterer’s brain, the activity patterns are...different.” You cross and scratch your arms when you visualize your brain dulled and dimmed out like that.

## 3. How is your stuttering an *activity limitation* (causing difficulty in performing tasks or actions)?

- a) You want to ask, “Do you know where I can find the cinnamon?” But thinking of speaking hardens your throat. You feel the screw turning, your brain dimming. But you open your mouth and hear the speech flow from your throat — fluent and effortless.

- b) In a music shop, you try to ask, “Where can I find the *Sakanaction* CDs?” But your speech arrives dismantled, tumbling in misshapen phonetic chunks. Is it your thoughts or your throat this time? The cashier answers with a demure smile.
- c) The phone cuts to the Canada Revenue agent. “Please tell me your name,” he orders. “J-...Ju...J-...Uh, uh...uhh...” Your body’s voice runs into a brick wall. Head ringing, you glue together fragments of syntax and filler words into language. The agent’s tone sharpens, impatient. “You mean you don’t remember your *name*?”

4. Do you consider your stuttering to be a *participation restriction* (a problem impacting your involvement in life situations)?

- a) It’s not a restriction. On some days fluency is effortless. When your throat stumbles mid-speech, you know those listening will wait for you to finish speaking, without judgment or mockery. You feel able. Not broken.
- b) You struggle in the liminal space of a restricted body that works on the whims of muscle spasms and misfiring neurons. Your speech flows in and out of dysfunction, refusing to conform to your definition of disability.
- c) It is a restriction. But you don’t care. You don’t care how long it takes to say, “Take the stairs towards Bloor Street.” You don’t care how you look, neck bent askew, jaw contorted. You *will* the words out of your grinding throat and into existence. Disregarding external triggers, the universe shrinks down to your vocal cords racing each other to the finish line.

5. How do you feel about your stuttering as a disability?

- a. A disability? Your voice box is Schrödinger’s playground. Put your words inside, seal it shut: Will you or won’t you stutter? You won’t know until you open your mouth. How could you be disabled if your disability is a state of quantum uncertainty?
- b. Your stutter propelled you inward, forging rich new inner worlds defined not by your disfluency but by the written language. The journey was difficult, but you couldn’t imagine who you’d be without this experience.
- c. You fantasized about swallowing razor blade shards or hydrochloric acid to punish your straining throat. You are grateful you never acted on it.

*Record your answers. How many of each answer (a, b, c) did you choose?*

- Mostly (a): The question of whether or not you qualify as disabled lessens in importance compared to the question of how you relate to your stutter. Do you

continue to fight it, or do you embrace it? On more days than expected, you can pass for fluent. But they don't zero out the days you can't.

- Mostly (b): Your stutter is like every other part of you that walks the tightrope between self-love and self-loathing. Gaining normative fluency would be comparable to losing a piece of yourself. Your body would not find a substitute variable for your stutter, the equation would no longer make sense.
- Mostly (c): Some say your stutter is a challenge, *not* a disability. Yet, no one denies the battles of attrition you've been conscripted to fight for your voice. Every social interaction is a whistle commanding you to jump out of the trench and charge into disputed ground, praying your dignity will survive.
- Mostly (a), (b), or (c): There isn't a right or wrong option here. Only the truth that your stutter *belongs* to you. The answer is whatever you need it to be.