

I am a stuttering doctor.

And I hope to make an essential contribution to society.

Yoshikazu Kikuchi

I am a stuttering doctor.

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Mr. Zensei Sakata

Instructor of Speech and Hearing Sciences and Speech-Language-Hearing Therapist  
National Rehabilitation Center for Persons with Disabilities

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## Foreword

### Hey! It's okay if you stutter.

In March 1999, on the day of the announcement of my third entrance exam for medical school, it was raining. But I was too impatient to wait for the express delivery of the letter telling me whether I had passed or failed. I needed to find out the results right away no matter what.

Having failed the last year as well as the year before, I knew too well that what I was trying to do wasn't easy. Although I had scored an A in my trial exam I had taken at my cram school last year, the result was dismal.

Still, I kept thinking, "I studied hard this past year. My life will be set as long as I could enter med school..."

So I went to see the examination results for myself, taking two hours to reach Hakata from Shimonoseki. When I arrived in front of the university's bulletin board it was a little past 10AM, the time the announcement was scheduled to be made. I immediately heard shouts of joy and saw some students being tossed into the air. Plowing through the teeming crowd, I searched for the notice that read, "Faculty of Medicine." My number was "1114." That was ten years ago but I remember that number—the examinee's seat number—very well. It remains vivid in my mind's eye to this day.

"Darn it! My umbrella's in the way. I can't see the numbers well," I muttered to myself, folding the umbrella and stepping forward to check the numbers in order. I couldn't care less about getting wet in the rain anymore.

"1099"

"1104"

"1109"

"1113"

"1114"

"1118"

Wait! Was it there? I could hardly believe my eyes.

I glanced at my examination ticket and reconfirmed the number: "1114."

"Yes! It's there! I declared this over and over again in my heart. But I quietly left the scene anyway, feeling too timid to be tossed into the air. I was sincerely happy to have achieved my aim of passing the exam. My joy was amplified when I announced to my parents over the phone, "I passed!"

But gaining admission into medical school was just the beginning.

I had at long last reached the beginning of my path towards achieving what I had made up my mind about when I was in the seventh grade—something I couldn't disclose to anyone.

If all you heard for tens of seconds when you picked up the phone was someone's nasal breathing, you'd say, "Hello? hello? hello? hello?...Stop making prank calls!" and hang up.

"Ki Ki Ki Ki Ki Kikuchi desu (This is Kikuchi)."

I have what's known as a *domori-byo* (stuttering illness), which is a speech impediment characterized by the behavior of repeating the first sound or syllable of an utterance. But since the word *domori* is a discriminatory term, this condition is generally referred to as "repetitive speech disorder."

However there is a speech disorder that society at large—no, even the individual afflicted with this type of speech disorder—fails to recognize. And that is what is known as a "block-type speech disorder" (stammer)—a condition characterized by the inability to utter a word at the time you

wish to utter it. It's as if your throat gets locked, imprisoning your voice. For example, even when you wish to simply say over the phone, "This is Kikuchi. Is mister so and so there?" all you end up doing is becoming silent.

The first letter of the word you want to utter fails to come out readily. This absolutely exacerbates the problem.

As I recall, the phone call I just gave as an example was one I made to a friend in his house when I was in the seventh grade.

"Hello? hello? hello? hello?"

Pressed with such a harried tone of voice, I fell more and more silent, failing more and more in my attempt to speak. In the end, my friend's older sister hung up on me, telling me in a clearly displeased voice, "Stop making prank calls!" Couldn't blame her, really. But I was nonetheless exhausted, mired in a sense of futility, self-denial and an inferiority complex.

Why do words stop coming out when I'm on the phone?

Why do I lose my voice even during oral book reading sessions at school?

Why is it that sometimes I can speak well, and at other times I can't?

To find clues to my answers, I resolved to go to medical school and eight years later I did just that.

It was only after being admitted there that I found out there were other types of speech impediments in addition to stuttering: the stammer and the prolongation. But the topic of speech disorders was discussed in class for only a mere five minutes. At medical school they didn't teach any solutions to the problem of stammering or stuttering as I had imagined.

In effect, dysphemia, the technical term for stuttering



or stammering, is an illness that physicians have given up on. Courses related to it are pediatrics, otolaryngology, neurology, psychosomatic medicine, and psychiatry. While dysphemia is a well-known disorder that has been known throughout the ages, physicians specializing in this area are rare within Japan. This is because the root cause is unclear and there is no known treatment to cure the disorder (no oral medicine, injection drug or surgery). The frequency of a stutter or stammer is inconsistent, varying by the time and place, and studying the symptoms is problematic because we are unable to recognize abnormalities through conventional means of inspection (CT, MRI, and physiological tests). Another reason for the lack of professional attention is the fact that the disorder isn't fatal, or in other words, even if someone is suffering from a stammer or a stutter, he or she can go on living one way or another.

I wished to somehow break this status quo and so I specialized in otolaryngology (the study of ear, nose, and throat diseases) and have been researching the condition of stammering and stuttering for three years now.

Even today there are people who thoughtlessly say, "You must cure your speech impediment" or "You must work hard to cure your speech impediment" or "The reason why your speech impediment isn't cured is because you're not doing enough, your efforts are lacking."

No one ever tried to reassure me and say anything like, "Stammering or stuttering isn't a bad thing" or "It's all right to stutter or stammer."

These aren't just my thoughts. They're also the thoughts of a great number of people with speech disorders who have been trying to work out a solution to the problem since more than thirty years ago. They are convictions that arose from their experiences of living with speech disorders. I naturally agree

with them, and I can't tell you how comforting their words are to me, how much they help put my mind at ease. My thinking is that a speech impediment ceases to be a defect or a handicap once the afflicted person and those around him or her begin to actually feel that there's nothing wrong in stuttering or stammering.

I wrote this book not out of any desire to achieve some vague goal related to "helping society deepen its understanding about speech disorders," but to promote understanding to the people who live with the afflicted. I hope this book will be read by all who have a relationship with such people, such as schoolteachers, friends, colleagues, bosses, lovers, and wives, not to mention those with afflicted children under their care, such as parents and grandparents, elocution teachers, speech-language-hearing therapists, and doctors.

But above all I'd like this book to be read by people who think—just as I used to think—that "stuttering or stammering is a bad thing," and are overcome—just as I used to be—with the desire to "keep quiet about the stutter or stammer."

I hope this book will serve to contribute even just a little towards resolving the distress caused by speech disorders.

# Chapter 1 The first time I became aware

*Kindergarten through elementary school*

## **Why do words get stuck?**

I was born into this world in June 1978 as the second son of three brothers. Father belonged to a tribe of relocating salarymen, as it were, and Mother was a full-time housewife. So you can see, we were an ordinary family. I've wondered about when I actually began to stutter, but I can't give you a clear answer.

This is because a speech disorder is divided into two periods: the period when you are unaware of having the condition, known as Preliminary Dysphemia, and the period when you are aware of having the condition, known as Secondary Dysphemia. So when I'm asked the question, "When did your second phase begin?" I'm still unable to arrive at an accurate answer.

Among stutterers and stammerers, some of them clearly remember when they began to have the condition. For example, some remember that they suddenly began when they were delivering a speech at school or when their friends began to make fun of them by mimicking their stutter.

Even in my case I clearly remember the fact that I used to hate talking in public.

When I was in kindergarten, my family moved to Hiroshima from Yamaguchi due to my father's job. On the first day of attendance at my new kindergarten the teacher had us all stand on a raised platform and introduce ourselves. What I do remember about that incident is that my mind drew a complete blank. Although I don't quite remember whether I was stuttering or whether I was able to introduce myself without any problem, what I do remember is having a very unpleasant feeling. I don't clearly remember whether I used to stutter in that kindergarten, but I do remember grumbling about not wanting to take part in a play on Parent's Day.

Here's another interesting thing that happened. My family was invited to a relative's wedding and we three brothers were practicing a song as an act for the event's planned entertainment. I had a lot of fun singing while practicing at home. But come wedding day, when our turn came and we were called onto the stage to sing, I became fretful and said, "No! No!" The people around us gave up, saying things like, "There's no need to force him to sing if he doesn't want to."

The singing act was cancelled. In retrospect, I believe I may have been recalling the many times until then that I must have failed when I had tried to vocalize in public, and so I must have been experiencing an adverse reaction to the prospect of embarrassing myself again.

I don't recall being made fun of by my friends or parents during my kindergarten days, nor do I recall any attempts made to correct my manner of speaking during that time. While vague memories of feeling terrible about speaking in public remain, I think any psychological problems associated with my stutter were still few back then.

There was one time when I was in the first grade I had asked my father, "Why do my words get stuck?" Rather than wishing to be told what the cause was, I believe I was just simply questioning why it was that I seemed to be the only one stuttering when everyone else around me was talking smoothly.

My father said in response, "Even Daddy's words get stuck." I recall feeling very relieved, thinking, "I'm not alone...I'm glad Father's just like me too." I was without a doubt feeling relaxed and satisfied. Since then I've never asked the question, "Why do my words get stuck?"

My father is the youngest among three siblings and he is the only one afflicted with a stutter. I feared that my

stuttering was hereditary, but neither my older nor younger brother has the problem, and neither do my grandparents for that matter.

Although I have never seen my father stutter, I had the chance to hear from my mother about the time when he began working.

"Since he was on duty as a teller, he apparently had a tough time whenever he had to call out a customer's name or whenever he was on the phone. And on days when his stuttering was really bad it seems he used to ask his colleague seated next to him to call out the names or make phone calls on his behalf."

Today he talks a lot in a loud voice, and compared to the time when he was young, his stutter has lightened so much that you hardly notice it anymore.