

CONTROLLING

MY

STAMMER

Made My Life

Worth Living

by Sheila Denny

CONTROLLING MY STAMMER
MADE MY LIFE WORTH LIVING

SHEILA DENNY

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DENNY

PART ONE

I CAN DO THIS Sheila Denny

“I CAN DO IT” is a simple affirmation but oh so effective when repeated aloud over and over again!

I will never ever forget my first night attending a public speaking group called 'Toastmasters'. I had made an initial enquiry by telephone to the President of the club. I engaged in as little conversation as possible with him as I didn't want him to know I stammer, and now I was following up on my intention to join Toastmasters.

I was so pleased that Pam Mertz, who incidentally is also a member of Toastmasters, invited me to share some of my personal journey about dealing with my stammer on her pod cast. It was a great feeling to share experiences so openly with a woman that I have so much in common with.

My Mentor in the McGuire Programme, which is run by recovering stammerers, recommended Toastmasters (TM) to me. I had joined just 5 months prior to this first evening at TM. My Mentor is also a member of TM and strongly advised me to try it as there was no McGuire Support Group in our region at

that time and he felt it was good for me to continually push out my comfort zones and face my fear of speaking to groups of people.

He also suggested I read a book by Susan Jeffers - 'Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway'.

The first time I read this book, I really didn't get it!

Maybe I wasn't in the right frame of mind at the time but I read it later and got really drawn in. I secretly blame Susan Jeffers for the many adrenaline rushes I have had since due to facing fears of speaking to someone or a speaking situation!

As I drove into my first TM meeting that night, I chanted to myself 'I can do this, I can do this'. I really psyched myself up to walk into that room and say 'Hello' to whoever met me at the door. I knew no one at all, so I had no one to run to and sit beside. I had to stand tall and introduce myself in my new McGuire speaking technique, big costal breath with a deep and breathy tone.

'Hi, I am Sheila Denny'.

It worked and I was so excited and pleased with myself. The first hurdle was over with! I sat around a table in a room full of 25 people, boardroom style, and I was elated that my introduction went well. I was smiling inwardly and plotting my next challenge.

I didn't have to wait long because the Table Topic session started and a gentleman said 'any volunteers'? I found myself putting my hand up because I knew if I waited around and thought about it, I would allow the fear to creep in and I would hold back like I usually do.

My topic was to speak about my favorite film for two minutes. Instantly 'Shrek' came into my mind and I spoke about the green guy for two minutes and I really enjoyed it and thought to myself, "Oh no, the time has gone too fast".

I sat down again and was shouting "YES, YES" in my head, mission accomplished.

Soon the evening drew to a close and they started to announce winners of particular sessions and when they called out my name as a 'winner' for speaking, I thought they made a mistake but, sure enough the President was beckoning me up to receive a trophy presented to me as winner of the table topic session.

I couldn't wait to drive home and tell my family and my mentor that I had won a little trophy for speaking!

I am sure I broke all speed limits that night on the journey home. Everyone was so pleased for me and proud of me. And I felt proud of myself that night.

To this day, I remember those feelings when I feel down. I got very little sleep that night, my mind was racing, remembering everything that happened that night and everyone's facial expressions and I stared at my little trophy for a very very long time that night.

I couldn't wait to go back to the next meeting, I wanted to feel as good about myself again and my speech that I did the night I won the trophy. I have attended many meetings since and won many trophies along the way and the trophies have gotten bigger too. The friends I have made are invaluable. It is quite amazing that a simple affirmation could have helped me so much to face my worst nightmare of speaking to groups of people and enjoying it!

At one of our meetings, a local journalist came to visit us to see what we were all about. She stayed for the whole meeting.

I was especially pleased when she came over to me and asked me about my reasons for joining and how impressed she was that I spoke with deliberate enunciation in a lovely Irish brogue!

It is a super feeling to read very positive comments about yourself and this happened in an article entitled "As accustomed as I am".

The night I chanted "*I can do this*" over and over to

myself was over nine years ago now and I continue to use that affirmation still today.

PART TWO

WOMEN WHO STUTTER

Sheila Denny is the originator, creator and webmaster of the Facebook group called Women Who Stammer. WWS is a group for Women who stammer to chat, discuss and debate, compare and contrast all issues linked with stammering and being a Woman.

Women are the minority in the stammering community, current research claims the ratio is: for every 4 males that stammers there is one female. There's not a lot of history on women who stammer and not a huge amount of research has been done on female PWS alone.

Conversation is encouraged and debates are invited, just so we keep the discussion respectful. In October of 2014 there are nearly 200 participants. New members are very much welcomed, if you are a female who stammers/stutters, click on 'join group' to enter this all female group. The address is: Womenwhostammer@gmail.com

Earlier, Pamela Mertz (a well-known voice in the stuttering community) invited Sheila to be a guest

blogger on her website. As guest blogger, Sheila chose to reflect about what it felt like to her to meet two female stutterers and an aspiring SLP, she had encountered on Facebook, for the first time.

Sheila writes:

I was delighted when Pam asked to me to share my feelings, thoughts and emotions before, during and after meeting three fantastic female face book friends.

It was bizarre and surreal; even though I knew about this meeting for a while, I put it to the back of my mind for a long time for several reasons!

1. Would it really happen? - I guess many of us have talked online to people about meeting up and it did not actually happen, so for us four to meet up from all corners of the world was just awesome. To be honest I had the easy part because they came to my house and I did not have to travel at all.
2. How many times do you hear about the warnings about online friendships becoming real and then someone is murdered? (Yes, I have a wild imagination)
3. I was a little worried about telling my husband about our planned meeting when in fact he was very supportive and said “Great go ahead girl!!!”

I had a crazy week leading up to our meeting. Work was very busy as always and the life of a working Mum is super busy anyway. It was also that dreaded week that so many of us women hate - the PMT week (as called in the UK - it is PMS in the States).

I was not feeling confident at all.

This is an important issue for females who stammer/stutter and it is often glossed over. It affects a woman's confidence, which subsequently affects our speech.

***I am a recovering stammerer with the McGuire Programme for nearly six years now”, although I don't really like that tag and it has been argued that it is a negative tag and can give me “permission” to use bad technique or sometimes I like to say - “I am working hard on my speech’ ** (more on this later)*

As a graduate and primary coach of the McGuire Programme I feel I should have prepared my speaking and speech for this meeting by warming up with costal breathing, using Kinaesthetic, making warm up calls to other McGuire Grads, reading mantras out loud etc.

BUT I am a woman, so I prepared my house for

meeting other females and a light lunch with the help of my darling hubbie!

In my mind, my thoughts were I have no idea what to expect so I am just going to be “me” Sheila Denny not **Sheila Denny, Primary Coach with the McGuire Programme**. This would be a test for me and my online friends, we had all trusted our instinct and liked and admired each other and now we were meeting up for real! HOW EXCITING.

I was nervous about meeting the girls but I have learned over the years how to deal with nerves and kept myself busy that morning. The thoughts of the journey that my girlfriends had to make were preying on my mind. It was a few hours car ride away but not easy when you do it for the first time. What if they get lost and they won't ask for directions because of their stuttering!!

I need not have worried because Lisa had one of those magic boxes in her car that gives you directions every step of the way.

“Holiday traffic” delayed them, not fear about the meeting.

I got a text saying they were 2 minutes away so I immediately put my shoes on to go outside to check which direction they would be coming from and to direct them into my drive. I saw a girlie car coming along and starting waving them into my drive. I

wasn't sure it was them actually because I wasn't wearing my glasses but as they drew closer I could see all the smiling faces of Pam, Lisa and Tone. We seemed to naturally hug each other and say hello and it was so good to see happy faces all around. I welcomed everyone in and made Tea for my now soon to be REAL FRIENDS.

Over the next few hours the conversation naturally flowed between us all, there was no one cutting in or finishing off someone else's words, it was so nice. I was aware I was talking a lot. I think I was excited but I must admit I talk a lot and very fast too so I told the girls "Hey I am talking too fast", and then explained about what I should do to avoid blocking and take it down to three or four words per breath.

I had had no difficulties or blocks with my speech up to then but I knew this would not last. J

We shared an emotional few moments when I told them some of my story that was the pivotal point for me in joining the McGuire Programme (as well as my only child began to stammer).

I was at a meeting and was asked to introduce myself first in front of 35 people which totally threw me as I never get asked to introduce myself first. When I finally got my name out, the Chairman said, "Thank you very much, Michala". MY heart

sank to the floor that day. I felt totally demoralized and I vowed to myself, I must try yet **ANOTHER** form of speech therapy.

Pam carefully asked me some skilled questions about my journey with the McGuire Programme and Toastmasters. I told her what was special and different than any other speech therapy I had had in my lifetime was the **SUPPORT** of the McGuire Programme. It is the best! I was aware that Lisa was at a different stage of the journey than Pam and I were on and made a mental note to reign in my outspoken way of talking about my stammering. I didn't want to frighten Lisa away.

We decided to take a ride out to a coastal town as planned for the tourists and talk about other things besides stammering and have fun in each other's company. After all, there is more to friendship than stammering and being females. We **LIKE** each other. I got to know Tone a bit more too. I was dead impressed with her eloquent use of our English language, which is not Tone's mother tongue.

During this time, I had some difficulty with my speech. I was blocking and gradually started using tricks. It didn't prey on my mind too much, until Pam asked me on the way back, "Do you find that you stutter more around others who stutter?" I answered, "I don't know, maybe I do ... after today".

This was a completely different experience for me being around other stutterers that are not in the McGuire Programme.

It's easier to keep up techniques when everyone around you is another McGuire graduate or when you are around fluent speakers. Then you know you have to make an effort to focus on technique. Now I know it is very easy to slip back into old ways of speaking.....

I thought about this for a while and made more of an effort to focus on the way I spoke when we returned to our house for more TEA!!

The girls left that evening and I felt lonely after they had gone, as this was a very special day. We shared lots with each other so openly and so naturally. And as for me, so *what* if my speaking technique was a bit bumpy towards the end? It definitely wasn't going to affect our friendship or what they thought about me. It's okay to stammer; it's just one part of 'me' and 'you' and 'you' and 'you'.

I am very excited, looking forward to when we next meet up when and wherever it might be. I know it will happen and also how much each of us will have changed.

PART THREE

ARTICLE ABOUT SHEILA DENNY

TITLE OF ARTICLE:

CONTROLLING MY STAMMER MADE MY LIFE WORTH
LIVING

REPRINTED ON THE NEXT TWO PAGES:

Controlling my stammer made my life worth living!

*With the DVD release this week of the Oscar-winning film, **The King's Speech**, highlighting the distress of living with a speech impediment, we hear of one woman's own brave battle to conquer her debilitating stammer...*



Stammering can be crippling but there are ways to move on, as *The King's Speech* shows

“I'd turn up late for meetings so I didn't have to introduce myself...”

Sheila Denny, 46, is married with a 12-year-old son and lives in Norfolk. She spent years hiding her stammer until one day she found a cure while watching Saturday night TV.

At home no one talked about my stammer and I've no idea what caused it – I had brothers and sisters but I was the only one affected and felt ashamed. In school, I just kept my mouth shut. People assumed it was because I was shy, but I found it easier not to speak.

When my parents and friends saw me struggling, they'd finish off my sentences. I didn't mind as it stopped people teasing me. It was only in lessons that I couldn't hide. One English teacher always asked me to recite from textbooks. It was humiliating. I tried speech therapy when I was 12, but it made me feel like a freak so I gave up on it.

I felt sure it would go away when I left

school but it didn't. It was when I tried to get a job that the reality hit me. I was useless at interviews. I really struggled with words beginning with 's', so introducing myself was a nightmare. My sister got me a temporary job as a filing clerk, which was great because I didn't have to speak much.

When I was in my late 20s, I moved to London and managed to get a job as a secretary. I was so excited but my confidence was still low. I began devising all sorts of tactics to hide my stammer, turning up late for meetings so I didn't have to introduce

myself, leaving my desk to pop to the toilet when the phone started ringing to avoid answering. It took its toll on my work. I was made redundant a few years later and vowed never to speak on the phone again.

Instead, I got a job doing data entry. My social life also suffered. I avoided going out for meals because I dreaded having to order food, and only felt comfortable in noisy bars and clubs.

That's where I met my husband, Reggie. For him my stammer was never an issue and he made me feel normal, at last. On

Stammering: the facts

- * 1% (459,000) of UK adults stammer.
- * It's not known what causes it but research suggests that a combination of factors is involved – genetics, types of words, environment, being tired or ill, and having low self-esteem.
- * The McGuire Programme offers an intense four-day course which focuses on deep belly breathing and speaking in situations you fear most. See mcguireprogramme.com for details.
- * For more info, call The British Stammering Association on 020 8983 1003 or visit stammering.org



our wedding day I was terrified I'd stumble over my vows but, amazingly, I spoke with no stammers at all. No one could believe it!

But when I was made redundant for a second time, my speech took a distinct turn for the worse.

Then one Saturday night I switched on the TV and saw Gareth Gates struggling to introduce himself on ITV's *Pop Idol*.

Suddenly, stammering was being talked about – and that's how I heard about the McGuire Programme, a holistic approach to tackling speech impediments, taught by recovering stammerers.

I felt like a new person

It was as if a magic lightbulb had come on. I'd never met anyone else with a stammer before but there I was, surrounded by 100 people who understood exactly what I was going through. We spent four intense days practising a technique called deep belly

breathing, reciting the alphabet and introducing ourselves.

I became quite addicted to meeting new people – finally I felt I could be the outgoing, confident self I'd always wanted to be. I went home a new person and practised the techniques every day, focusing on my breathing and using exaggerated speaking techniques. My husband found it hard to get used to my new way of talking at first, but now he tells me off if he notices I'm not breathing properly.

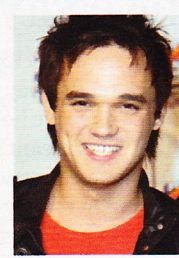
There are still days when my stammer reappears – if I'm tired, hormonal, or ill – but I know how to manage it.

I now assist the McGuire Programme with their training, providing after-care over the phone. It's so rewarding being able to use my experiences to help others. I've

Famous names who also struggled



Emily Blunt: 'I had a really bad stammer when I was seven. A teacher suggested I take part in a school play and I found it liberating. Now it only comes back when I'm nervous.'



Gareth Gates: 'I used to write songs because I just couldn't say what I wanted to. The McGuire Programme taught me a new way of breathing. It's part of who I am, but I'll never let my stammer get in my way.'



Ed Balls MP: 'People who stammer try to avoid certain situations, but in my job you can't. I'm never 100% fluent, but it's OK. Hating it is the major part of the problem.'

* Other famous stammerers include **Jane Seymour, Julia Roberts, Bruce Willis, Marilyn Monroe and Winston Churchill**

also joined a public-speaking group called Toastmasters. *The King's Speech* reminded me of a presentation I made two years ago for a local competition and I actually won! I never in a million years thought I'd be able to conquer my stammer so it was a real testament to how far I'd come. ☺

* To get up close to Colin Firth, turn to page 82...