

Speech to Speech Benefits Me

By: Andy Fitzenrider

I am Andy Fitzenrider, and I stutter. I have been told that I began stuttering around age two. I am 46 years old. For more than four decades, I have experienced fluent speech and situations where I struggled and stuttered severely. To get control of my stuttering I have taken different speech therapies. One speech therapist focused on speaking fluently. Another therapist's goal was to become more comfortable stuttering, while not avoiding feared words and situations.

For me, the telephone has always been a source of frustration, pain and fear. I believe this is because the person I am calling cannot see me or read my body language, so all I have is my voice. There have been times when I experienced a longer moment of stuttering and my listener would hang up, telling me later he or she thought I was a prank caller or that the call had dropped. Other people have laughed when I was desperately trying to say hello. For a long time I would only call people who knew me well, who I knew wouldn't hang up. I relied on family and friends to make calls for me, to get me past the operator when I made a collect call or had to say my name.

Several years ago a friend sent me an article about Speech to Speech, a free, completely confidential telephone relay service for people with various speech disorders. No special equipment is needed, as many users have Cerebral Palsy or other disability that affects their ability to type on a TTY (telecommunications device for the deaf and hard of hearing) machine.

My prayers were answered when I discovered this service. Here's how it works. I inform the trained (and very patient) communication assistant that I stutter and ask him or her to tell my listener that I need a little extra time to speak. There is no time limit on calls made. I have found when I feel no sense of time pressure, when I have advertised my stuttering and made my listener aware of it, applying the skills learned in therapy becomes much easier and I'm able to have a more fluent conversation.

Stuttering has been described as what I do when I try not to stutter. I fight with it. I struggle with it. This only makes the moment more severe, as opposed to staying with it, being aware of it, touching it, almost playing with it.

In addition, the Speech to Speech communication assistant will help in spelling especially troublesome words. I now feel I can make telephone calls to strangers

independently, so I can get my ideas across and my needs met. There is no feeling more empowering than knowing I can do this for myself.

Having this wonderful service available gives me peace of mind. I believe there are many potential users out there who are just not aware of it. It could make a real difference for them too, so it has become my passion to reach out and break down barriers between fluent speakers and those of us who speak differently. We are all worthy of being able to communicate effectively and being heard, independently. Speech to Speech is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week by calling 711 anywhere in the United States. In some states it is also available in Spanish. A visually enhanced version, where the communication assistant can see the caller, is now available in some areas.

Speech to Speech is a federally mandated program and all states are required to provide this service. Sprint and Hamilton Relay are the only providers of this service.

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More information can be found at www.speechtospeech.org.