

HOW I CURED MY STAMMER

Matt Draper's teenage years were blighted by bullying over his severe stammer. BARBARA LANTIN finds out how his life was transformed by a tiny implant that fits inside the ear

MATT DRAPER came home from school one afternoon when he was 14 and told his parents he was never going back. He could no longer stand being ridiculed because of his stammer.

"Primary school wasn't too bad but at secondary school I would hear other people talking about me loudly behind my back and laughing when I tried to say something," says Matt, now 26. "In the end it became easier not to talk than to have somebody laugh at me."

His mother Trudy, a magistrate who works in the family joinery business on the Isle of Wight, adds: "Children can be very unkind. Matt once wrote a story about a boy who was very popular - the very thing that he was not. It was so sad."

Matt moved to a boarding school where he was much happier but his stammer continued to blight social situations. "He saw it as a real affliction," says Trudy. "Even when he was older, people failed to see the kind, caring, loving young man that Matt is because his stammer got in

the way. He was almost a hidden person."

Today, although he still has a noticeable stammer, Matt's speech and confidence have been greatly improved by a tiny new device that he wears inside his ear like a hearing aid. The SpeechEasy was developed in America by Dr Joseph Kalnowski - himself a severe stammerer - and launched in the UK this year.

It works by creating a "choral effect", so the wearers hear their own voice with a time delay and a pitch shift. When people with a stammer sing or speak in unison with others, their speech is usually clearer. It is thought this is because the production of speech in a "chorus" situation - as opposed to spontaneous speech - is controlled by a different neurological process.

SpeechEasy creates the illusion that another person is speaking in unison with the wearer, so altering the way the brain initiates speech and making it more fluent.

RESearch published in the Journal of Fluency Disorders last year showed that most people show some improvement in their stammer when wearing

a SpeechEasy but the amount varies enormously between individuals.

"This kind of device may be useful for some but it is by no means a miracle cure for stammering," cautions Frances Cook, a speech and language therapist and manager of the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children in London.

Audiologist Johanna Nicholson, who has fitted about 40 SpeechEasy devices, says: "You can usually tell right away if it is going to work. Then you see not only improvements in people's fluency but also in their general wellbeing. Their shoulders drop and they smile. As they train themselves to listen to the device, their speech gets better over time." Norwich PhD student Heidi

King was the first person in the UK to use a SpeechEasy - she had her earpiece fitted in New York last year. Since then she has restarted a job that she stopped due to her stammer, won two awards for public speaking and given live radio interviews.

Trudy Draper believes the earpiece that Matt has worn

since April has made a huge difference. "Despite years of sometimes fantastic speech

therapy, his stammer really held him back. Now he puts across all the points he wants to instead of giving up. He never stops talking.

"Recently, he had to attend court for a hearing about access to his five-year-old

daughter. In the past I would have gone and spoken for him because he would have been so anxious that he would not have been able to get a word out. This time he went alone, did all the talking and gained the access he wanted."

Matt says the device has made a big difference to one-to-one conversations, although social gatherings are still a struggle.

"From the first hour I had it, it really helped. It's a strange sensation hearing my own voice in my ear as if somebody else is talking and I find I need to concentrate really hard to get the best out of it, which can be a strain sometimes. But I could not have a phone conversation if I was not wearing it. I'd say it has improved my speech by about 50 per cent."

His mother adds: "He's like everybody else now, which is what he has always wanted."

● *SpeechEasy costs £3,050 and is available on a 30-day trial basis. Visit www.medisy.co.uk*

FACTS ABOUT STAMMERING

● Around one in 20 children under five go through a stammering phase and up to a quarter of these are at risk of a chronic stammer. The condition affects one per cent of the UK adult population - about 460,000 people. Men are three times more likely to stammer than women.

● The causes are not fully understood but brain imaging studies have shown significant differences between the brain activity of people who stammer and those of fluent speakers.



GOOD TO TALK: Matt says SpeechEasy has made a difference

● Those with a family history of stammering are more likely to be affected. Stress, tiredness and illness can make the problem worse, as can certain situations such as talking on the phone or to a roomful of people.

● Treatment is usually speech and language therapy, most effective in children under five. Many courses, devices and computer software packages claim to help people with a stammer. A speech and language therapist can advise on their usefulness.

● For further information, contact the British Stammering Association on 0845 603 2001/020 8983 1003/ www.stammering.org