

SLP Spotlight – Uri Schneider

In this latest piece by NSA Spotlight Writer Jamie Wolff, Jamie sits down with SLP Uri Schneider to bridge the gap between speech professionals and people who stutter.



Hi there. Nice to see you again.

I want to introduce you to Uri Schneider (if you don't know him already). Uri, M.A. CCC-SLP is a partner in Schneider Speech, Instructor at University of California Riverside, father of four, and runner. He is recognized as a highly-skilled clinician, engaging educator, and trainer.

Uri is known for his broad range of professional experience, his passionate commitment to people and the profession, and his hallmark characteristics of creativity, sensitivity, and positive spirit.

I reached out to Uri for an interview because I wanted to help bridge the gap between speech therapy and people who stutter. I had the pleasure of sitting down with him and learning more about his passion for the work he does.

Tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do.

We're still figuring it out, and I think that's an important thing: things are dynamic and they evolve. Hopefully we leave the encounter different than we came in, bringing genuine curiosity as to who each person is, what makes them tick, what strengths and weaknesses they bring beyond stuttering - beyond speech for that matter.

What's your approach?

Have a toolbelt, so that in the right situation, you can pull out the right tool. If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail - and that works until a lightbulb shows up. In stuttering therapy, that's the experience of too many people on both ends. We need to be much more dynamic and versatile, and I think we're moving in that direction.

You touched on two ideas. First, the value of a one-size-fits-none approach. Second, having a beginner's mind by approaching clients without assumptions and meeting them where they are. Everyone has a different experience, a different relationship with their stutter, different goals, different language they use...Can you talk more about that?

We need names for things, that's how we relate to things. But by no means should a "name" suggest that it's a homogenous entity. There are people who stutter - and some use the word "covert" - for them, it's a mild physical condition, but a very significant emotional and psychological experience inside, for keeping cover. But their experience is very different than someone who has a very strong physical trait that's pretty consistent day to day. They couldn't hide it to save the world.

Also, different things matter at different stages of life. When you're in 9th grade, you don't want to be different. In 12th grade, you don't want to be the same as anybody. The idea of "I'm an individual, I stutter, I have stuttering pride, love me for who I am" is often much harder to sell to a 9th grader.

Every engagement is a novel experience - there's no one quite like this person. I mean, if you can use your face to pay a bill, there's something unique about the structure of each and every face. If you can use your fingerprint to unlock your phone, there's something unique about each and every person's fingerprint. Your speech and your voice is no different! You have a voice signature. And if you have a voice signature, then you're going to have a unique stuttering signature.

For us, it's like a kitchen with a limited number of ingredients and spices. You're using the same set of spices, but somehow you can make a lot of different dishes out of that same kitchen. Each one has its own subtlety. It's about picking up on the subtlety and being curious and unassuming - collecting the dots before connecting the dots.

We don't treat stuttering: we treat *people*. We help people transcend their stutter or somehow move forward - to be able to do more of the things they really want to be doing and become more of who they really are. In some cases, that means working to make the stutter more mild. In other cases, that means dealing with it as it is while getting past some of the habits and patterns currently used to cope with it.

It's more like coaching or therapy, versus the medical model, which it can be misconstrued as or feel like. When I was in speech therapy, I remember feeling like my stuttering was a problem to solve, to "get over". But using a counseling lens is much more empowering.

We have to have the conversation in the first few meetings about what matters to this person. Think of the iceberg analogy shared by Joseph Sheehan: the physical stuff is on top, visible to the eyes and ears, while a mass of thoughts, feeling, adaptations and more is beneath the surface is - out of sight. Now, beneath the surface, you've got stuff that's positive. You may have great confidence, courage, you may have great wordsmithing abilities. You can have many positive attributes and valuable resources that no one can see. We believe you can leverage those in your way forward with stuttering!

In every speech therapy encounter, we touch both the physical, spoken words and the exploration of the inner-world of thoughts and feelings - the top and bottom of the iceberg. For some people, the balance is 80/20, and for others it's the opposite. That's something we figure out together.

How can we use language to empower and support people?

Most people use really judgmental language when it comes to stuttering. So, sometimes we shift the language, just to show that there's no inherent value or judgment. Less stuttering doesn't mean "good", and more stuttering doesn't mean "bad". Plus, those words don't tell me anything.

What we try to do is find language that works for the person. If it's a kid, you might make a dictionary - words like "sticky", or "bumpy", or "pushy", or "blocky". All those words are descriptive. They're not judgmental.

The experience of being a communicator, and happiness, and feeling like you're expressing yourself is much greater than fluency. There's a trade-off sometimes. You may get great fluency that looks great on the outside, but it comes at a great expense - like walking a balance beam between two very tall buildings. You're not really speaking freely: you're just as wound up as you might have been before, if not more. But, at the same time, what's hard at the beginning can become easy, and that speaks to what skills are taught. So we try to be flexible and accommodating to the person who stutters, offering real choices and opening doors of opportunity.

I'd love to return to the voice signature. To quote your website, "Our voice is our acoustic signature." How does that tie to your mission at Schneider Speech?

These are the things we bake into everything we do:

Everyone has a right and a freedom to communicate and be heard.

We empower people to be independent. We don't want this to be a relationship where you depend on us to tell you what to do. We may have a lot of knowledge and experience, but we're here to serve you. At the end of the day, you have what you need, and we're looking to you to tell us what you want.

Efficiency.

It's really important to consider people's time, costs...leveraging technology and using systems that allow people to check in between visits.

Have systems, but make sure they're personalized.

It has to be functional. It has to be real life. So many people have gone to therapy, and - even if it was a positive experience - they felt guilty that they couldn't do it outside, like it was their fault. It has to be a shared goal and responsibility that whatever we do, it translates in ways that are meaningful for that person in day to day life.

Metrics.

Being able to talk about progress and help people reshape their stories is super important. It's not helpful if the therapist says, "You got better," but you don't feel that way - and, vice versa, if the therapist doesn't understand what made a difference to you. Because it's through that conversation that we know how to take the next step.

To close, do you have any anti-advice? Are there any themes or broad approaches that you've found don't help, even if it might seem like they would?

It's never good to put life on hold to resolve the stuttering...as in, "I'll go try out for that thing once I sort this out..."

Don't try to push back the feelings if you think it's a thing. I think that the fear a lot of people have is that by giving it air, you're giving it legs. On the contrary! I like the analogy of a potato in a drawer: if you open the drawer and look at the potato, it's still a potato. If you close the drawer, don't look at for a year, and then open it up, it's not a potato anymore. It's like a monster.

Don't think that learning strategies means that you have to abandon everything old that's worked until now. And then, from the therapist's point of view, don't think that there's a silver bullet for every situation. No strategy is going to work everywhere, all the time. But if it gives you something to add to your toolbelt, fantastic!

Very often, the people we work with continue to have some degree of stuttering in a default kind of way, but they have the ability to dress up when they want to, when it's worth it or it matters - and it becomes easy to slide into and out of that. It doesn't mean they become monolingual in that new way. It's more like bilingual, or adding a new gear to the bike: you can shift into it easily, but you might not want to be there all the time. The strategies add an element of, "Yeah, I'm fluent - I'm more fluent - but it costs. And it costs something that I don't value in that situation." It's not all or nothing.



Jamie (aka James) is a New York creative arts therapist - turned personal trainer - turned health coach and curriculum developer. As a person who stutters, Jamie has never let her stutter hold her back, instead saying: 'When it comes to making decisions and taking risks, if anything, my stutter pushes me to succeed'. As a writer Jamie believes that stories matter; the stories we share and the stories we tell ourselves - they matter.

Interested in more pieces from our Spotlight Writer, Jamie? Sign up on our mailing list to have them delivered straight to your inbox!