

Wise Words from a Stuttering Salesman

by James J. Costanzo



Author Costanzo... self-help books aid in overcoming handicaps.

W. Clement Stone
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It started when I was 10 years old; I was labeled a stutterer. From that point on, I did just that—I stuttered, and I did it well.

Everyone accepted the problem as part of my personality. That is, everyone but me. I wanted to speak clearly—to say my name and address or what I wanted for lunch—without sweating and gasping to blurt out semiaudible words.

Throughout grade school, high school and college, I did fine scholastically and got along well with friends. I excelled in sports, music, art—anything that meant I didn't have to speak. I had fun, but a cloud hung over me—the stuttering cloud.

I played in a band during college and for a few years after, but I saw the time approaching when I'd have to get a job with a more promising future. I decided I wanted to be a salesman. When I was young, the experience that had had the most lasting impression on me was shining shoes to earn money to buy a baseball mitt. I had built a shoe-shine box in woodworking class and had painted two prices on it—15 cents for a regular shine and 25 cents for a special one. I gave my customers a choice, and, looking back, it was then I began my selling career.

My big break in sales came in the '60s, when a friend offered me a job selling photocopy equipment on straight commission. Who else would hire a stuttering salesman but a company that could put him on a straight-commission basis?

I was optimistic about the job. I figured that if I jumped into the middle of a sales situation, I would force myself to fight my way through it.

I believe if anyone sets his mind to ac-

complish something, it is possible to do so—and I am proof of that. I am a believer in the philosophy of having a Positive Mental Attitude. I'm sure my motivation and will to succeed have come about because of it.

While working at my first sales job, I learned how to use word substitution and other techniques to disguise my stuttering problem. It wasn't the best thing to do, but when you can't talk, you will try almost anything. Sometimes, I would call business associates and be unable to say my name. The switchboard operator who answered would hang up. That made me mad! I would redial, and before the phone was picked up, I would begin saying my name. For stutterers, taking a running start seems to help. There are all types of tricks that can be employed.

It's best for a stutterer to be able to look directly into the eyes of the person to whom he is talking. This makes it a one-on-one speaking situation. Often, to break the ice, I would begin a sales call by telling the customer I stuttered—if he didn't already know.

Some people would be uncomfortable with my stuttering, and so they didn't like looking at me. But I would say to myself, "It's OK if you don't look at me. I know I may look funny stuttering, but I don't care. You may have a handicap that I don't have—we are all handicapped to a certain extent. But if we keep in mind that everyone has a problem, then all of us are equal."

This reasoning kept me going. I was determined to become the best stuttering salesman around, and I did.

Today, I am a manufacturers' representative in Westmont, Illinois, selling materials-handling equipment. I'm still a straight-

commission salesman (a dying breed), I enjoy a handsome income, and I have a solid rapport with my associates and customers. I stutter occasionally, but I've overcome a problem that is not easily beaten.

Anyone can lick a difficult problem if he takes advantage of the many fine self-help books and articles available or seeks professional advice, if his handicap requires that kind of attention. There is no need to sit around idle and let fear determine the future.

Often, I have wanted to tell this to others who, because of a handicap or fear, are afraid to try to succeed in a certain field because they think they cannot. If they focus 100 percent of their efforts on being successful, I'm positive they will be.

My story may sound like a true confession, but I was inspired to write it after reading a 1978 article in *Success Unlimited* on W. Clement Stone. It told of his humble beginnings—being left fatherless at an early age, selling newspapers on the South Side of Chicago, overcoming obstacles to which many would have succumbed. But he was determined to succeed, and he did. And so can we, if we try.

Triumphs don't come easily. They take extra effort. But they are rewarding once they are achieved. By working harder than others, you can succeed in spite of handicaps. In a way, it's a shame people with talent and no handicaps take it for granted.

Although I stutter at intervals, I accept it and am not ashamed. Anyone with a handicap can turn it into an advantage. And, as W. Clement Stone said, "Where there is nothing to lose by trying and a great deal to gain if successful, by all means, try!" □