

The Warrington Stammering Support Group

In the second in our series profiling self-help groups around the UK, members from the Warrington group tell us what they get up to, but first, **Yinka Dolan** explains how running it has been a rewarding experience.

I used to be a covert stammerer, hiding it by switching words and avoiding situations I couldn't deal with. I found this tactic exhausting but it wasn't until my early 30s that I decided to do something about it. I had speech therapy at Warrington Hospital with the great Louise Wright, who helped me deal with my feelings around stammering. I attended many courses and read everything I could about stammering. I then attended the North Cheshire Speakers Club to improve my confidence around public speaking, and after 10 years I felt comfortable with who I was as a person who stammers. I started the Warrington support group six and a half years ago to help others who stammer, and it has gone from strength to strength. It re-enforces to me the importance of positive thinking.

We meet monthly at the Halliwell Jones Stadium, home to Warrington Wolves Rugby Ground, in a really great room which is a large dining area with lots of space. We have approximately 15 members, with eight to 12 attending regularly, and the meetings are fairly informal and relaxed.

Meetings usually start with a relaxation session, with an exercise that alternates between tensing and relaxing muscles – this helps members get used to any tension in their bodies and relax more easily. During this, I ask them to think of a time when they were completely relaxed, and try to imagine themselves there now. This gets everyone ready to do speaking circles, where we go round the room taking it in turns to talk about what we have been doing for the last month, any highs or lows we may have encountered, and what we have been working on with regards to improving our speech.

Tackling fear

I emphasise to the group that we are trying to reduce the fears associated with stammering, by practising feared words and situations. By reducing fears, fluency increases naturally. We do topic sessions, where members get to speak for one minute on a subject chosen at random. Firstly, each member introduces themselves; having to say our names is one of the most feared situations, so this is good practise to do in a safe environment.

I personally get a lot of enjoyment out of running the group; seeing members improve month after month and tackle their fears makes me feel really proud of their hard work and commitment. There have been many highlights, the best was when we were able to go the BSA Conference in Lincoln last year as a group, funded by the Coal Fields Trust. We had such a great time; meeting other people who stammer is so important, as many think they are the only ones who stammer, so to



Joan Wood, Diane Whalley, David Williams, Yinka Dolan and Jenny Kenrick

make new friends was truly wonderful.

I was also lucky enough to get a grant enabling the group to go on a neuro-linguistic programming course. Many members said this was a turning point that changed the way they felt about their stammer and themselves, teaching them that they should be proud of their achievements. We also received a grant that enabled us to attend a Starfish Project course. Three of our members have recently secured employment, one of them after having been out of work for 10 years.

I occasionally still stammer but what has changed so much is my attitude towards stammering; it's not something I'm ashamed of anymore and I don't beat myself up about it. I'm kind to myself and try and make sure I rest and relax. I love speaking now (even on the phone) but I still push myself to do certain things I fear. I felt fearful before doing a workshop about the support group at the 'Please let's talk about stammering' event in Manchester recently, but I told myself to think of it as a normal support group meeting with friends, and I immediately relaxed and was able to enjoy it. Every area should have a support group.

I have been attending the support group for a few months now. Since secondary school I have had several types of speech therapy but this was the first time that I openly admitted to others that I stammer. I have had two interviews in the past few months and on both occasions I started off by telling them I stammered. If I didn't then I would have continued to think, 'I must not block,' and used avoidance tactics which I have done for decades.

It hasn't been easy, but the group has given me the confidence to do this by making me realise I'm not on my own and by discussing how other people aren't that concerned that we stammer. It is me who has to cope with my negative feelings, so when I tell them I stammer I am no longer occupied by the constant and exhausting thought that I must not stammer.

Carol Mayo

Being a member of the Warrington group has helped me to understand my speech and be much more comfortable in my own skin. Meeting fellow stammerers allows me to talk to people who really understand how I feel and share experiences of difficult speech situations and strategies on how to improve. Talking in a group was something I avoided at work, but with practice in front of a supportive audience, I am now enjoying participating in lively discussions.



Paul Roberts

I have been attending Yinka's group for about four years now. During this time I have met many new friends. Activities undertaken in the group have helped me when going for job interviews and I am happy to say that I started a new job at a nearby hospital in September. I now have the confidence to stand up and give a small speech or presentation, knowing it will go well. I look forward to the meetings every month and the work we all put into it, such as role play, where we practice things like ordering food in a restaurant or a round of drinks in a pub; telephone techniques and interview situations. The main thing for me is that I don't feel anxious about my stammer like I used to. I know I stammer less than before I attended the group because I am much more confident and push myself every day. May the group continue for many years to come. Thank you Yinka!



Joan Wood

Yinka works extremely hard for the group and is a great leader and mentor. She has an extensive knowledge and experience of many aspects of stammering therapies and seems to have access to an endless supply of interesting speakers who frequently visit the group, such as Speech and Language Therapists, members from the North Cheshire Speakers Club, a life coach, and researcher Paul Brocklehurst, who did a talk on perfectionism and stammering.



I first came about six years ago, after attending a Starfish course, to practise the technique. The group is very welcoming, supportive and interesting, and is a very enjoyable and beneficial couple of hours spent each month.

Joan Thompson



At the BSA Lincoln Conference

I am 54 years old and have stammered all my life. I have had speech therapy and now feel I can tackle the world. The group helps me to gain confidence, meet friends who have the same problem, and share our experiences. I am now able to go to a computer class, where I have become a mentor. This is all thanks to speech therapy and the Warrington group.

Lesley Wilton



I am a 39 year-old full-time mother of three and have never had any speech therapy; it was hoped that if my stammer was ignored it would go away. Unfortunately this wasn't the case. Just over a year ago and struggling with my speech, I decided to attend Yinka's support group, and since then it has improved immensely. Earlier today I volunteered to assist my daughter's teacher on a trip to the library, and whilst there had to read books aloud to the children, which, thanks to the Starfish technique we learnt, was no problem! I still struggle with my speech from time to time but with the help of great friends I have made at the group, I am confident my speech will continue improving.



Diane Whalley

I don't stammer myself, but I am applying to study speech and language therapy, so initially I contacted Yinka to ask if I could go along to the support group to gain an insight into the feelings of individuals who stammer and the support that is available for them. She kindly agreed and I have been attending ever since – that was nearly a year ago!



The Warrington group is a genuinely lovely, caring and fun-loving group of people. I really enjoy spending time with them. Yinka leads the group in a relaxed and informal way, making sure that every member is included and their individual needs are met. You can tell how much she cares about everyone and does what she can to support them. They all do! It is lovely to see the group support each other, have a laugh and grow in confidence together. I feel like I have learnt a lot about stammering from attending the meetings and I am grateful that such a special group welcomes me as a part of it.

Jenny Kenrick

The Warrington Stammering Support Group meets on the last Wednesday of each month. For more information, visit www.warringtonstammeringsupportgroup.org.uk. To find out if there's a group near you, or for resources for starting a group, go to www.stammering.org/shgs.html.

Warrington
Stammering
SUPPORT GROUP