Overcoming the secret shame of stuttering
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Words wouldn't come out of Osman Quereshi's mouth without a fight.

Like carbonated bubbles in a stoppered bottle, his words were often corked up inside him by a stutter. Fearing humiliation, he was easily rendered speechless by a teacher's question or every stutterer's nightmare, a classroom read-aloud exercise.

"It made me completely socially withdrawn," said Quereshi, whose family moved to South Florida from India when he was 4.

He didn't stutter in his native Urdu, he said, only in English, which he began learning in kindergarten while also struggling to adapt to American culture.

In school, stuttering can be a ticket to a lunch table for one. During his school years, Quereshi had few friends but an aching desire for the easy fluency of the popular kids he envied.

"I always wanted to be more outgoing, the person who was the center of attention in a conversation. That never happened to me. Because I always tried to hide my stutter by not talking, it made others think I was unfriendly and socially awkward," said the Boca Raton resident, 29, who finally sought therapy after graduating from medical school.

An often misunderstood disorder, stuttering is getting more attention because of The King's Speech, which some critics are calling the best movie of the year.

In the film, the future King George VI, known to his family as "Bertie," is crippled by stuttering, called stammering in England. His brother, the Duke of Windsor, has abdicated the throne to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson. On the eve of World War II, the new king must rally his people behind the declaration of war on Germany with a crucial radio speech.

The terrified king, sympathetically played by Colin Firth, can barely utter a sound. The movie chronicles his attempts to overcome his stutter with help from an eccentric speech therapist, played by Geoffrey Rush.

Stuttering is misunderstood because it's so rare, according to the National Stuttering Association. Only about 1 percent of the world's population suffers from the malady, which often runs in families.
Once thought to be a mental disorder, stuttering is now understood as a neurological problem that doesn't affect intelligence or physical abilities.

There is no cure, according to the NSA, but sufferers can learn to manage their stutter with therapy. Modern techniques are far different than the 1930's methods portrayed in the movie, said Dale Williams, a speech pathologist, Florida Atlantic University professor and a stutterer.

No longer do therapists force their patients to speak with mouthfuls of marbles or shout nursery rhymes - or swear words - as the king is made to do in the film.

What hasn't changed in 60 years are the feelings of shame and helplessness stutterers feel. In Williams' book, Stuttering Recovery: Personal and Empirical Perspectives, he relates excruciating childhood memories of being beaten up, teased, even laughed at by a teacher before learning to manage his stutter in adulthood.

Quereshi had just graduated from a Caribbean medical school when he decided he'd had enough - of the Porky Pig jokes, the fear of attending parties and the inability to sometimes even pronounce his own name. He asked Williams for help.

"All my life, I've been running away from it. I finally found the courage to speak up," said Quereshi, currently a medical researcher at the University of Miami.

Williams advocates therapy called stuttering modification, that includes desensitizing a stutterer to triggers, such as the anxiety a stutterer would feel at having to make introductions at a party or give a work presentation.

Part of Quereshi's therapy required him to go up to strangers and strike up a conversation. Where he once approached certain words as if they might bite - and often substituted those with similar but not exactly the same meanings, which led to confusion and misunderstandings - Quereshi forced himself to try even the most difficult consonants.

Confronting a stutter is often the moment when speech begins to improve, Williams said.

"I always thought that was the cruelest irony. The stutter doesn't start going away until you stop caring about whether it goes away," said Williams.

He describes the necessary attitude adjustment - "Where once stuttering controlled my life, now I'm going to control my stuttering" - that also demands acceptance from listeners.

"I'm going to say what I'm going to say and it's your job to listen," Williams said.

Williams has high hopes that The King's Speech will do for stuttering what Rain Man did for autism - provoke a national conversation that promotes tolerance and understanding. And above all, eliminates the teasing that makes stuttering a childhood torture.

"It's not a little thing," said Williams. "To the person who grew up with it, it's a big, big thing."