

# Living with a stammer

A stammer never goes away but you can learn to control it. This week, **Margaret Hawkins** hears one reader's inspiring story

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**T**emplemore man Michael Ryan (53) has had a stammer since childhood but has gone on to do things that, at one time, he would not have imagined possible – like being elected a town councillor and mayor of his home town.

Married with two sons, Michael was reared on a farm but his career has been in hardware sales for many years, employed first by O'Doherty's in Templemore and now Centenary Stores in Thurles.

Working behind a counter is not the easiest job for someone with a stammer, Michael admits.

"All I needed was a chance to prove myself with my stammer, and I'm thankful that I got that," he says.

"My bosses were very good to me. I would always have had an interest in hardware, particularly the agricultural side, and I've been in hardware ever since. With a stammer, you can have a good speaking day or a bad one, but I take what I get. I'm open about my stammer now and I don't care what people think anymore. I'm at a good spot where I can cope well with it, but



Even going to the grocery shop or answering the phone were big deals for me. I was living in absolute fear and the lack of confidence was there as a result



it wasn't always like that."

Michael says that his school days were difficult.

"I did go through bullying because of it and I remember feeling embarrassed myself and thinking that I was embarrassing other people like teachers too – you're getting red and they're getting red – as they waited for me to get an answer out.

"Even going to the grocery shop or answering the phone were big deals for me. I was living in absolute fear and the lack of confidence was there as a result.

"In secondary school I was always interested in debating but I'd only be a sub on the team because of my stammer. The problem is that some people thought you had an intellectual disability because you had a stammer, but I knew I was well capable of formulating arguments for debates. It's just that opening my mouth was the stumbling block. It was a big battle and hard on my parents too."

While Michael did have some

speech therapy as a child, it wasn't regular enough to help.

## 90% PSYCHOLOGICAL

A stammer is fear-based, he says.

"It's 90% psychological and 10% physical. Your speech and how you feel is all interlinked."

Luckily Michael has always had music to lift his spirits.

"It helped me, big time. I've been involved in bands since my father bought me an accordion at eight years of age. I have found that, over the years, playing music was a release. If I had a bad day I could get behind the keyboard and get rid of stuff. It was a way of expressing myself."

Michael spent two years in a seminary but returned home to farm in 1983 when his parents became ill. While he had made some progress with his stammer, he found that he regressed when he came home.

"I slipped back in speech and confidence. Farming can be a lonely life as you're on your own a lot, but at least

I was taking part in pantos and plays, though I didn't have speaking parts.

"I met my wife, Frances, in 1996 when I was involved in *Riders To The Sea*. I was playing the part of the dead son and lying in a coffin – an example of the kind of parts I had – but the relationship took off from there. Frances could see beyond the stammer."

However, he was very dependent on his wife for years afterwards, he says, asking her to answer the phone for him, for example.

Life changed for the better for Michael in 2004 after he watched a television programme about the McGuire Programme.

"The stammer was getting me down at that stage and I was trying to cover it up all the time with tricks, like asking for a burger even though I wanted sausages because I found it hard to say S words like sausage. My name – Michael – was also hard to say too, but if someone introduced me I was grand."

An intensive course followed where

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## » HealthBytes

### NATIONAL STAMMERING AWARENESS DAY 2015 WAS ON 17 OCTOBER

If you have a stammer, or someone close to you does, the Irish Stammering Association recommends that you make contact with a local speech and language therapist in your local HSE health office first. Waiting lists may vary but stammering is often prioritised, the ISA says.

Making contact and requesting therapy is important, they say, as it leads to a stronger case for improved services throughout the country. More voices talking about stammering will give strength to people of all ages who stammer.

### OTHER ADVICE:

- Beware of anyone offering a cure or quick fix.
- Bear in mind that different approaches work for different people.
- There is hope. Your stammering, and your thoughts about it can change.

### ANOTHER PERSON'S EXPERIENCE OF JOINING AN ISA SUPPORT GROUP:

"Before I came to the ISA support group I never said the word stammer, let alone openly discussed it with anyone. It's much better to have it out in the open. Talking always helps. Now I can't stop telling

people about my stammer and how I am dealing with it step by step. And that's thanks to the support group where we can all stammer to our hearts' content and be proud to do so without judgement and be helped along week by week."

### USEFUL WEBSITES

See [www.stammeringireland.ie](http://www.stammeringireland.ie) for details of support group meetings around the country. Telephone (01) 8724405

- [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)
- [www.iasltp.com](http://www.iasltp.com) for a list of speech and language therapists who practice privately.



he learned to face his fears around words and use special exercises to control his breath. In time, Michael became a course instructor himself, ultimately doing many radio interviews and speaking in schools about stammering.

#### NEVER GOES AWAY BUT YOU CAN CONTROL IT

"I was happy and confident and getting control of my stammer," he says. "If I had a bad day I disclosed (admitted) that I was having a bad day, accepted it and moved on. A stammer never goes away. It's how you control it. It's been a new lease of life being able to do that. Years ago, in bands, I wouldn't say a word. Now I can introduce a song and crack a joke – something I wouldn't have been able to do before."

In 2009, Michael became a town councillor and also joined the support organisation, the Irish Stammering Association (ISA), to reach out to other people with stammers. He is now chairperson of the association.

"Through politics I've had to talk to all sorts of people and I can do that now with confidence. Learning to control your stammer takes discipline. A lot of stammerers want a quick fix and you can't blame them for that because they're sick and tired of getting blocked and all. There is lots of help out there. The McGuire Programme is a private programme but there are HSE courses as well as private speech therapists out there too.

"The ISA doesn't recommend any particular kind of therapy but it does provide information on bonafide research about stammering."

Some people haven't done courses at all, he says, but still manage.

"Once you can function as a person and be yourself – that's the bottom line. Even after all these years I do some costal (diaphragmatic) breathing every morning I wake up. It's just to get focused and warm up my chest and diaphragm. It gets my breath going and me into the groove of the speaking day because every day is a speaking day.

"Now I accept that I have a stammer, I am grateful for what I have and I help who I can." **CL**

## Heartburn awareness week

Ireland's inaugural Heartburn Awareness Week (19-25 October), highlights an ailment that affects 51% of the population.

The awareness week, launched by Dr Ciara Kelly and Lisa Fitzpatrick, is an initiative to encourage heartburn sufferers to consult with their pharmacist on their symptoms. Currently, 46% of heartburn sufferers have not discussed their symptoms with a health care practitioner.

Heartburn is caused by the reflux or backflow of gastric acid from the stomach into the oesophagus. It occurs when the lower oesophageal sphincter does not close tightly,

allowing acid to escape out of the stomach into the oesophagus. Unlike the stomach, the oesophagus does not have a protective lining, so is sensitive to the acid which burns the walls of the oesophagus, causing that feeling.

Typical heartburn symptoms include a painful, burning feeling behind the breastbone which may be accompanied by an acidic taste in the back of the throat. According to the Heartburn Awareness Week survey, 53% of people feel that heartburn has a negative impact on their lifestyle, with 31% disclosing that heartburn disturbs their sleep and 24%

having to limit their food choices.

Dr Ciara Kelly MD explains: "Heartburn is generally not a cause for major concern as most of us experience it at some point. However, frequent heartburn, which occurs two or more times a week, should not be taken lightly ... my recommendation is to discuss your symptoms with your pharmacist or GP to ensure you are benefitting from the appropriate treatment."

Dr Kelly warns: "Heartburn is a progressive disease and can worsen if not treated properly.

## WORDS OF LIFE

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans ch. 6 v 23.

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