

# BAYLIFE

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## SPEAKING FREELY

A new support group helps stutterers talk about the speech problem and find ways to reduce its effects on their lifestyle.

By PHILIP MORGAN  
pmorgan@tampatrib.com

**TAMPA** — Mick Constantinou first felt the sting of ridicule in third grade. As he tried to recite a poem in class, his stuttering drew laughter from the boy behind him.

"I could feel this anger and all this aggression just lestering up in me, and I turned around and hit him, [knocked him] out of his chair."

He remembers everything about the incident 32 years ago, including the boy's name.

Speech pathologist Janet Skotko of the Voice Institute in Tampa says that's one remarkable thing about her adult clients who stutter. Most have near perfect recall of that first teasing.

People who stutter, whether it's just a repetition of the first sound of a word or difficulty getting the word out, comprise about 1 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Stuttering Foundation of America.

In a new support group Skotko has formed, stutterers and their loved ones talk about teasing, the fear of talking on the telephone and going for job interviews and the many other ways the speech problem inter-



Tribune photo by VICTOR JUNCO

**A device that echoes speech is based on the idea that most people don't stutter when talking in unison with others.**

fers with life.

They also talk about ways to minimize the problem.

"One person said he'd never been with a room of stutterers, [where he felt] free to stutter, not struggle with it, fight with it. It just felt good," Skotko says.

### Remarkable Progress

Constantinou, 40, an executive at Danka in St. Petersburg, says he talked more than anyone else during the first sup-



Tribune photo by BRUCE HOSKING

**Mick Constantinou, left, says his co-workers, such as Eric Efav, have noticed the change in his speech and offered support. Constantinou has made strides by working with a speech pathologist.**

port group meeting in December. But he believes he encouraged others there because of the remarkable progress he has made in less than a year of therapy.

Using a combination of anti-anxiety medicine and relaxation techniques, plus knowing which situations make the problem worse, Constantinou has learned to control his stuttering most of the time.

Eddie Gomez, 38, a lifelong stutterer, says he can't predict when he'll stutter. It can happen when he's calm or when he's nervous, he says.

"The group, I think, is going to help me learn where that comes from."

Nancy Montgomery, whose 7-year-old son stutters, says the group meeting allowed her to better understand Adam's feelings.

Constantinou, for example, talked about how he used to get angry when he stuttered and how he has learned to defuse that.

"You could see he was having difficulty at times," Montgomery says, "but he wasn't letting it get to him, as he says he used to."

Adam, too, gets mad at himself, which intensifies the problem, she says. Sometimes he can't get out any words.

Constantinou underwent therapy years ago, but it didn't help. Last spring, he began working with Skotko and discovered research has illuminated some of the mystery.

Stuttering once was thought to be a psychological problem. But in the past three years, scientists have isolated a gene that may be responsible. Scans show unusual electrical impulses in the brain when stutterers talk.

Psychological forces aggravate the problem, Skotko says

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Ear device, therapy bring results.

## STUTTERING HELP

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adding that different solutions work for different people.

Some people have achieved amazing results with a device that fits in the ear and echoes the stutterer's speech. Developed by researchers at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., the SpeechEasy is based on the observation that most stutterers speak fluently when they're speaking in unison with others — such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Skotko says clients often find stuttering decreases when they shift their focus from the words they are using to the message they are delivering.

### Conquering Fears Head-On

Constantinou says he long ago recognized his stuttering was worse at times and almost nonexistent other times, but he didn't know why.

He worked through some problems on his own. Though he avoided talking on the phone during his teen years, he finally decided he would have



Tribune photo by VICTOR JUNCO

**Speech pathologist Janet Skotko of the Voice Institute in Tampa works with Eddie Gomez, 38, as he tries out a SpeechEasy device. The machine fits in the ear and is designed to control stuttering.**

to get used to it. He did.

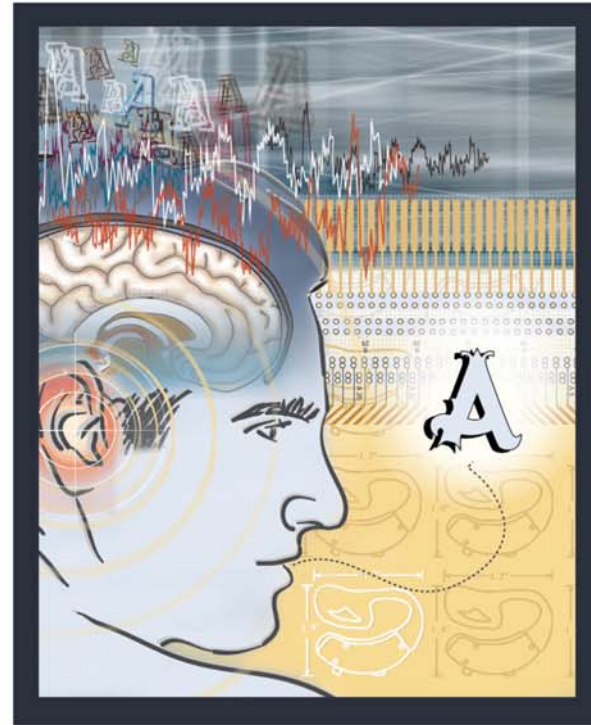
He didn't ask a girl out on a date until college, then could only ask face to face. One woman confessed to him that his stuttering embarrassed her. "That was devastating."

Yet, when he started dating the woman who would become his wife, it was months before she even knew he stuttered. That was because he was comfortable with her, he says. Married 10 years, he and his

wife, Shannon, have twins.

Therapy has taught him that the underlying "baggage" of stuttering — the lifetime of fears and embarrassment — aggravates the problem. Constantinou knows that being

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### STUTTERING AID

The Tampa Bay Stuttering Support and Experiential Group meets the first Wednesday of each month. For more information, call the Voice Institute at (813) 228-8244. For more information on the SpeechEasy machine, go to [www.StutterFreeLLC.com](http://www.StutterFreeLLC.com)



**Mick Constantinou, 40, a Danka executive, says he encouraged others who stutter at a support group in Tampa.**

anxious, fearful or overly excited can increase the stuttering.

The biggest help, though, may have been his decision to attack the problem head-on. He likens it to the method used by a motivational speaker, who overcame his fear of heights by becoming a skydiver.

Last September, for the first time in seven years at Danka, he made a presentation to a large group of co-workers. He promised himself he would go through with it no matter what. He would not cut it short; he would not avoid words he wanted to use.

"I already knew what it felt like to be afraid. I wanted to know what it felt like to be successful against the fear."

As he concentrated on the message and his audience, the wall of fear vanished. The speech went smoothly, and the reaction was profound. A se-

nior vice president complimented him. Since, many co-workers have commented on the change they've noticed.

"I didn't feel like I was speaking to a wall. I was speaking to everybody in the room. It was exhilarating."

Reporter Philip Morgan can be reached at (813) 259-7609.