

## **Title: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality of life in people who stutter**

The presentation intends to share preliminary findings of a survey study exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality of life in people who stutter. The presentation will start with a discussion of how the pandemic affects people with communication disorders. The focus then will shift to discussing mental health, communication, and quality of life in people who stutter and how the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the existing challenges for people who stutter.

Since its outbreak in December 2019, the coronavirus disease (COVID -19) has impacted global health and wellbeing; and since March 2020 most countries imposed shelter in place / stay at home policies. Studies have reported that the pandemic have impacted the quality of life and mental health in individuals across the globe; the pandemic lead to uncertainties, socioeconomic impacts such as economic recession and partial to complete lockdowns. These events collectively triggered a myriad of mental health symptoms including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress in general population (Xiang et al, 2020).

Studies also reported that this health care crisis disproportionately impacted people with communication disorders due to the pandemic related changes in social interaction and communication modality. Key communication barriers for individuals with communication-based disorders during the pandemic were including but not limited to (1) limited time or support by overworked healthcare employees, (2) universal masking policies and face shields , and (3) reliance on remote video visits which are prone to technological difficulties and loss of environmental cues(Moreland et al., 2021).

Given the multidimensional nature of stuttering, the authors hypothesized that people who stutter (PWS) might be negatively impacted by the pandemic related changes in social interaction and communication. Studies report heightened anxiety concerning verbal engagements, low verbal self-inefficacy, and correlating depression are almost always inherent issues for PWS (Bray et al., 2003). According to Craig et al. (2009), PWS with increased levels of severity may have a higher risk of poor emotional functioning. Given negative impact of stuttering on emotional wellbeing and mental health, this group is likely to be more vulnerable to poor quality of life and communication inequities. In September 2020, the American Speech Language and Hearing Association recognized communication challenges for PWS suggested tips to avoid miscommunication (ASHA, 2020). However till date , no data exists about how the pandemic impacted PWS and their ability to communicate with these changes in place. Through our exploratory study we hope to facilitate trauma informed service delivery for PWS.

### Method:

Using the Qualtrics web based public survey platform we collected data from people who stutter in collaboration with the National Stuttering Association via social media platform using snowball sampling. The survey contains questions about demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, employment), the diagnosis of stuttering, history of treatment and support received, and experience of COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on stuttering, as well as changes in support during the pandemic .In addition the participants also completed the PHQ-9 questionnaire. Two open-ended questions about positive and negative changes in their

stuttering were also included to gather qualitative data. Participants (n=601) electronically signed informed consents. After removing invalid and incomplete responses, 474 valid data was included in the analysis. The participants reported a stuttering severity from mild to severe; and were in the age range of 18-74 years. The preliminary findings showed that 77.78 % of the participants suffered from depression that were in the rages of moderate to severe. The participants either did not see an SLP for their speech, and those who were still able to meet with their SLPs for managing their stuttering. Among those who responded 31.86% of the participants were less likely to disclose their stuttering during virtual meetings; 22.7% responded that wearing a face covering like a mask negatively impacted their stuttering; while 26.4% individuals reported that their self-perceived quality of life was diminished due to the pandemic.

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