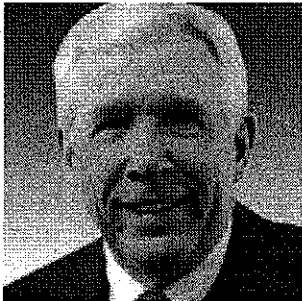

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Presence TeleCare Interviews Congressman Frank Wolf

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Last week we had the pleasure of interviewing Congressman Frank Wolf of Virginia, who has overcome severe stuttering problems to become one of the most respected members of the [House of Representatives](#). We have posted our entire interview below and have also included a video of Frank discussing his experience stuttering.

Presence TeleCare: Frank thanks for agreeing to speak with us. We would like to start out by asking about your experience with stuttering throughout your life and how you worked to overcome it.

Congressman Wolf: I took every [speech](#) therapy class I could find. I took one at [George Washington University](#). I took one at [Penn State University](#). I just took every speech therapy course I possibly could. I encouraged myself to get up and say something when I had something to say in class. There is a tendency of individuals who stutter to shy away from speaking. [Stuttering](#) individuals can hide or shutdown their speech as a normal response to not being able to speak fluently. So there isn't any magic bullet or treatment that stopped the stuttering. A lot of things caused my stuttering, when you're tired, you can stutter, when you're on the phone, you stutter. Can you ever say you stop stuttering? I don't think you ever stop stuttering. I don't know. But you get to the point where it doesn't hamper you or restrict you. I guess, the last point I would make is that stuttering was probably a good thing, for had I not stuttered I wouldn't be where I am today.

Presence TeleCare: In dealing with your stutter, when did you first truly become comfortable speaking in public?

Congressman Wolf: Oh never.

Presence TeleCare: Never?

Congressman Wolf: Even now. That's not necessarily a bad thing. If you feel that you're just going to do very well in your speech or presentation than you're almost insulting the audience. I feel that nervousness is not really a bad thing, it's almost respect for the audience that you want to do well. But when have I fully overcome it? I would have to say never.

Presence TeleCare: A few of the people we have spoken to relate stuttering almost to an addiction in the sense that you never really fully get over. It's something that is always there.

Congressman Wolf: I don't know if I would relate it to an addiction but rather a handicap. For me it's one that I am thankful at birth that I had because if not, I wouldn't have had the drive and conviction to run for congress. Clearly if you really stutter, like on telephones, I don't like telephones because they cause me to stutter. I don't know if you ever get over that. I don't think I would relate it to an addiction though. If somebody has one physical handicap and someone has a different handicap in order to overcome it, you just have to talk and deal with it. You have to force yourself to weigh-in whereas the normal habit can be to shut off and not participate. Even when you're not participating and simply looking at the teacher you may not want to maintain eye contact so you hope that the teacher won't call on you. I would always force myself, not to speak when I didn't have anything to say, but not to be afraid of speaking. Sometimes when you are afraid that's almost always the time you'll have to speak. If you stutter, you stutter.

Presence TeleCare: Do you have any conscious techniques to use in order to minimize the impact of your stutter in your speech?

Congressman Wolf: No, I really don't. I think subconsciously you learn, like if I know when I am coming to a stuttering block sometimes, you wouldn't know it but you may think I am just kind of thinking. I am just sort of saying the word twice when I am thinking about it. I did anything and everything that was appropriate and forced myself to get out and say things when I thought I should say them. In one of my classes, the professor stopped calling on me because I made him nervous as a result of my stuttering. Afterward I talked to him and said from now on just call on me and stay with me and give me the opportunity to try to finish this. Speaking in that class went a long way to improve my speech. You cannot hide it.

Presence TeleCare: Other than this professor in college, were there any people in your life who affected you in overcoming your stutter.

Congressman Wolf: No, not really. There isn't anyone who gave me the holy grail to solve the problem. You just have to stay with it.

Presence TeleCare: One of our co-founders, Clay Whitehead, had a severe speech disorder and phonological issues growing up. He says what worked for him was just hard-work, memorization and practice. There truly is no secret.

Congressman Wolf: I agree. There is no secret. No secret style or formula. It doesn't work that way.

Presence TeleCare: You constantly mention that your stutter is what drove you to become the man you are today, as a successful congressman in Virginia. Do you believe your experience stuttering affected how you live your life, how you judge different people or how you approach different situations?

Congressman Wolf: I don't know that it's changed the way I lived my life. I lost the first two times I ran for office. I lost in 1976 and 1978 and very few people ever get to run three times. So I think the drive and the determination that I have from the ridicule of stuttering turned out to be very useful. That sort of toughened me up quite a bit whereby I was able to withstand the ridicule and get up and run again. It's just taking speech therapy courses and getting up and speaking if you have something to say. You can't be afraid to stutter, sometimes you get that stuttering block particularly on long words but you have to get through it. It's about doing what you want to do and think you ought to do and not using stuttering as an excuse for doing something.

Presence TeleCare: That's great advice. Like I mentioned before, our blog is read by many people struggling with their own speech disorders so I was wondering if you have any messages for them.

Congressman Wolf: I would have to say stay with it. I stuttered pretty badly so stay with it. Again, it all depends on how you look at it. When I was twelve I don't think I would have ever picked up the telephone given my stutter but here I am at my age now and I consider it to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. It's the hide and seek response. If you can seek out and deal with the disorder, it can be like a pole in a pole vault that gives you an extra push but if you are one that hides it can be a great burden. It all depends on how you approach it. There isn't any solution that this will get you this with determined percentages of recovery. It's about staying and dealing with it and not feeling like you're a victim in allowing it to hold you back.

I believe that this disability was really an uncommon gift. Clearly had I not stuttered, I wouldn't be in Congress and if it's good thing that I am in congress than it's a gift. I believe I have done a good job here working on human rights issues, religious freedom, helping the poor and so forth. The fact that I am here, is an uncommon gift from God that I have tried to take and fashion and not let myself be beaten by it but rather conquer it. That would be the message that I would give anybody, use it for a positive. Don't let it be something that holds you back.