

My Tongue Thrust Therapy

By Virginia Tyree

I am a 35-year old adult who is currently in speech therapy for my tongue thrust disorder and the resultant lisp. I am also a student studying speech therapy at Portland State University.

I have created an animated video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkvRzLPVZBU%20>) to give a personal perspective on what it's like being an adult who attends speech therapy three times per week. My orofacial myofunctional disorder (tongue thrust) causes me to swallow using a forward pushing motion instead of a normal swallowing pattern towards the back of the throat. This has resulted in an open bite, which has caused difficulty with my ability to eat.

I have lingual braces in order to correct the damage to my bite, and I have plans to install a fixed palatal crib (tongue crib) in order to help to retrain my tongue to a new swallowing pattern. I also have a significant lisp. I go to speech therapy in order to address all of the issues associated with my tongue thrust, swallowing disorder, and speech impairment.

In the video I walk viewers through exercises we do in speech therapy to correct my tongue thrust disorder. These include "cohesive bolus", "new swallows", and "sip-slurps". I also highlight my therapy process for my lisp. This includes the following progression: making sounds in isolation, word level sounds with CVC and CV configuration, word-initial and word-medial sounds, nonsense words, more complex word formations, and high-frequency words with carrier phrases.

More importantly, I explain the everyday implications of what it means to be an adult living with a tongue thrust disorder and a lisp. I speak to the everyday embarrassment that comes from both living with these disorders and from trying to change them. I highlight coping techniques I have used for years to hide my problem, and I speak on the themes of identity, shame, fatigue, and ultimately motivation via both my support network and my own inner strength. This video is a mix of my personal perspective, interwoven with technical information. The end result is a clear glimpse of daily life as an adult speech therapy patient.

As stated above, I also have a lisp. I have had it all of my life. It used to be much more pronounced when I was young. I think it has self-corrected slightly with age, but it is definitely still quite noticeable. It embarrasses me, but I never really thought I would be able to get rid of it and I just resigned myself to living with it. I was reading a book by one of my favorite authors, David Sedaris, entitled *Me Talk Pretty* one day. It is a book about him growing up with a lisp. He talked about how he went to great lengths to avoid saying certain words, avoid being in certain situations where he would have to say those embarrassing sounds. Wow! It was like a light went on in my head. I realized I do the same thing!

I also had learned to avoid certain words and phrases. For example, here is a typical conversation. Oh, you want me to come meet your new puppy? Yes, of course! Oops. I mean Yep, no problem. (All safe sounds there.) You need me to come now? Yes, I'll be there soon. Oops. I mean Yep, I'll be there right quick. I would even try to influence what my friend would name the puppy so that I would be able to

say it without embarrassment. Don't you dare name your dog Sassafrass! I thought you cared about me!

It sounds silly, but it is true! I have also gotten to be pretty good at distraction. I learned that if there is no way I can avoid saying certain sounds, it is less embarrassing if I talk with my hands, talk really quickly, look away when I have to say the 'S', dance, etc. This is actually the reason I made this animated video in the first place, because it helped me get through giving a presentation in front of my class when I knew they would be distracted with avatars and shiny graphics instead of staring directly at me while I was talking.

Here's another example. There was this cute guy. Pretty cute, right? Uh oh. Seth?! Oh no. Well, maybe it will be ok. Maybe I'll just call him "boo" or "hon" or something like that. Yeah, it will be ok, I can make this work. And then I realized. But wait. This means I'll have to be Seth's girlfriend. Nope. Unacceptable. Too Bad. Sorry! Bye.

Oh! Who is that?! Teyo Tyree! I like it. I like everything about it, especially his name. There is not an S anywhere!! We fell in love, he asked me to marry him, I took his name. Virginia Daniel was my old name, which was perfect because I could say it, but Virginia Tyree is great, that works well too. We can have little Teyo Tyree juniors and little Ginny Tyree juniors and I won't have to be embarrassed saying any of our names ever. Yep! I was very happy about that.

So, Teyo started noticing that all of my favorite foods happened to be soft and mushy. Rice bowls, Indian food, soft Thai noodles. And I never wanted to eat pizza or sandwiches. Especially in public. He realized it's because I had trouble biting through the bread. I would actually even rip up my food into lots of tiny little pieces in order to be able to eat them. I hated eating in public, because I felt gross, and I never put together why. Even around our close friends. Friends I've known for my whole life. I would still get anxious if we were going to go eat somewhere that would be difficult for me to eat.

I finally decided to go get help for my teeth and it hit me! Oh yeah! Speech therapy! It can help me with both of my problems. My eating difficulties and my talking difficulties. This is going to be fantastic. I can't wait.

I found a wonderful clinic in downtown Portland, the Parkwood Clinic. They are wonderful. I see three different speech therapists three times a week in small, 15-minute intervals. I learn different techniques from all three of them and they collaborate. For instance, Ashley Rose (of course her name is Ashley Rose, right?) will really help me with my swallowing and I'll collaborate with Kegan Corrado about ways I can make modifications when it just gets too hard, and we all work as a team. I feel really lucky to have found these professionals. I highly recommend them!

I want to give you examples of what we do in clinic. First, we do swallowing and oral motor exercises. I have to chew up food and make a bolus, which is a cohesive food ball. Stick my tongue out and show it to the therapist. At first I found this to be **humiliating**. Ashley is a very good sport because she will actually eat and stick her tongue out too!

Then we practice my new swallow. I trace my tongue along the ridge of my mouth in order to transport my bolus to the back of my throat. The first few times were horrible. I felt like I was going to choke. I've got the hang of it now, but it is still really difficult to remember to use my new way of swallowing. I am 35 years old. Trying to change the way I swallow is incredibly difficult. It feels like someone is asking me to change the way I blink. It's so hard to change this pattern.

Ok next we do sip-slurps. This is where I take a tiny sip of water, cup it in my tongue against my alveolar-ridge, and keep it from spilling out. Then I push the water down my throat without closing my mouth or tongue thrusting. (slurp) This is hard for me. But it's getting easier.

Next we do speech therapy. We start with just the 's' sound in isolation, then we move to initial 's' words and one-syllable words in blends like 'see', 'cell', and 'sleep'. These are CV and CVC configurations. Very basic to begin with. Then we move to medial 's' words, with complex word structures. Two-syllable words such as messy, pencil, blossom. I repeat my words while Ashley grades me, and as you can hear in the video, I'm not perfect at them yet. I have good days and I have bad days. Once I reach a certain percentage of correct reproductions, we move to a new skill set.

So it is obvious that I have a problem with my 's' sounds. But I also have a problem with my 'z' sounds. The tongue needs to be in the same position, approaching the alveolar ridge in order to produce the 's' sound and the 'z' sound. The only difference is that the 's' is not voiced and the 'z' is voiced (which means that the vocal folds vibrate). We repeat the exercises using 'z' sounds in the words instead of 's'.

Next we move on to phrases and sentences. For these we use high frequency words and phrases. These are phrases I encounter frequently in my every day life. We added carrier phrases, which is a way to transform the words/names into sentences.

- This is Allison, my personal trainer.
- I see my hair stylist, Caprice.
- I stream Stella's music.
- Scott Schneider loves ice cream.
- I eat pizza with Ms. De La Cruz.

So, I was getting the hang of speech therapy. Going three times a week, meeting goals, taking on new goals. Then Ashley dropped a bomb. She told me I was making such good progress with my 's' and 'z' sounds that now we could start working on my 't' sounds as well.

What? What do you mean I have trouble with 't' sounds? My husband's name is Teyo Tyree. My name is Virginia Tyree. You mean, I can't say my husband's name correctly? I can't even say my own name correctly?

I was devastated. I lost it. I started sobbing. I just felt like I was working so hard and that I couldn't possibly do any more than I was already doing and it just felt UNFAIR that I couldn't say t's correctly either. I thought 't' was a safe sound for me. Now I find out at 35 years old that I have actually been saying t's wrong too? I was so distraught.

Ashley handled it wonderfully. She calmed me down and sympathized with what a huge impact this revelation had on my life. I know it might seem silly to some people, but it is a really big deal to me. You know, I'm not a little kid. I'm a grown woman and I have built up very intricate constructs within my life to avoid saying certain sounds or sounding foolish. To me, this revelation made me feel more exposed and vulnerable than anything else had up to this point.

I told Ashley I just couldn't move forward that I couldn't actually make the new 't' sound. That I would resign myself to being a failure. She decided we should back up a little bit, and slow things down. She asked me to make an 'n' sound--nnnnnnn. No problem! Then she said, that since I can make the 'n' sound it proves that I have the capacity to make the new 't' sound, since the sound is made at the same place on my alveolar ridge. She suggested that we create some nonsense words that would help reinforce my correct 'n' placement and help to facilitate new way placement of the 's', 'z', and 't' sounds.

These nonsense words are helping me build technique and more importantly build up my self-confidence again.

- todozo
- nuduzu
- tadasa
- nidisi

I am still working on these; they are really hard for me. It is very hard for me to say them without pauses. They are still very effortful at this point; but, steadily they are getting a bit easier each session. I have hope again.

Hope is very important. Sometimes it feels too hard. I feel very alone. I feel like I'm trapped, like I'll never be free of my speech impediment or old way of swallowing. I feel so self-conscious. Like on the street people are laughing at me or making fun of me, or in restaurants that people are glaring at me. I know they probably aren't, but it just feels that way sometimes.

In quiet moments alone, when I'm tired and I don't want to drive downtown again for speech therapy and I reflect, I start wondering about whether learning a new way to speak is eroding my identity. I am 35 years old. I have been talking this way all of my life.

Family and dear friends love the way I talk; they say it's part of my charm. If I want to change the way I talk, does it mean I don't love myself? Because that's not true. Also, I have a southern accent. I love it. It is diminishing the longer I live in the Pacific Northwest, but it is almost completely absent when I am correctly pronouncing words the new way. Of course, in order to correctly pronounce the words I have to talk in a slow-robotic voice.

I'm at a weird juncture now where I am hyper-aware that the way I talk is not the best I am able to do, but the best I am able to do occurs at **such a slow pace** that it is impossible to carry on normal conversation that way. Typically I speak very quickly, that's part of my identity too. In hindsight, I am quite sure that I developed such a rapid talking pace in order to camouflage my speech impediment.

But then, I remember why I started doing this in the first place. It's not just to change my speech sounds. It's because I have a lot more life to live, hopefully, and I want to be able to eat. And if I don't get rid of my tongue thrust pattern then this is going to continue to be a problem. And I don't want to have braces forever, and I want to be able to chew my food and bite through sandwiches. If I keep doing this, it will make my life better; I just have to keep at it. There's no other option except admitting defeat.

I am not a quitter. I want to be a champion. I have found the best speech therapists ever, I am in school learning all about speech therapy at PSU, my friends and family are being super supportive. I've shared my story with my classmates and the response has been overwhelmingly supportive. I'm not going to be able to change this alone.

I need the support of my community. And they are absolutely giving it! So I wake up every day and chew my food and use my new swallow to eat breakfast. I keep on practicing my sip-slurps, I am getting less and less water on myself every day!