

An open letter to America's Got Talent

It's time to normalize stuttering instead of praising the stigma

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When I first saw Amanda Mammana on America's Got Talent, I was hooked. As a person who stutters, and blocks in a similar way as Amanda, it was surreal seeing someone on national television (and now a viral video with 4M+ views) talking the way I do. At the same time, I had a sickening feeling in my stomach. I felt used, abused, misunderstood, and pitied.

Here's why:

Problem #1: The Title of the Video

The YouTube clip is titled, "**Singer With Speech Impediment Moves the Judges to Tears**"

Stuttering is a difference, not an impediment. Yes, it's hard to stutter, and for some it can certainly feel like an impediment, but that doesn't give society the right to call it an impediment.

Let's substitute speech impediment with some other phrases:

- "Singer With Depression Moves the Judges to Tears"
- "Overweight Singer Moves the Judges to Tears"
- "Short Singer Moves the Judges to Tears"
- "Singer With Deformed Face Moves the Judges to Tears"
- "Immigrant Singer Moves the Judges to Tears"
- "Singer with One Leg Moves the Judges to Tears"

I ask you – why is it necessary to point out that part of the person? Is it really relevant?

The answer is no, it's not relevant at all.

Problem #3: The Microaggressions

A microaggression is defined as “the everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations or those who are marginalized experience in their day-to-day interactions with people.” Even well-intended compliments can be microaggressions and they can significantly impact mental health.

Examples of microaggressions in Amanda's AGT video include:

- **The body language of the judges and audience (jaw drops, eyes bulging, crying, shocked face).**
What exactly were they reacting to? Because she only sang a few notes by the time these reactions occurred, it's safe to assume that they were reacting to the transition from stuttered and struggled speech to fluent and "beautiful" singing.
- **Expressions such as “Oh my gosh that's incredible!”**
What's incredible? If you truly thought that her songwriting and singing ability warrant the word “incredible”, great. I'm not referring to you. But if like me, you thought she was a terrific singer and talented songwriter, but you've heard better singer songwriters, why are we using the word incredible?

At the end of the clip, we have two different experiences happening simultaneously. Amanda is crying for what to me seems like pride and accomplishment. She got the opportunity to do something she never thought she could do – share her talent with a national audience. The audience seems to be reacting to the “inspiring” way she found to “overcome” her stuttering (singing).

Microaggressions disguised as compliments abound in the YouTube comments:

- “It's absolutely remarkable how she escaped her impediment when singing”
- “Don't talk for the rest of your life. Sing for the rest of your life”
- “She reminds me that we all have the ability to overcome adversities. And, we are not defined or governed by conditions that try to limit us. She embodies courage. What an inspiration.”