

# rehabINK Podcast

## Episode 8: Career Spotlight: Speech Language Pathologist (Early Career Edition)

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

field, speech language pathology, people, clinicians, slp, profession, research, adults, swallowing, speech, speech language pathologists, speech language pathologist, pediatrics, bit, children, hear, clients, compassion, language, communication disorders

### SPEAKERS

Anna Huynh, Umna Islam

#### **Anna Huynh** 00:14

Hello and welcome back to the rehabINK Podcast. This is a Spotlight Series where we will be interviewing allied health professionals in different stages of their careers. My name is Anna, and I am a PhD student studying speech language pathology at the Rehabilitation Sciences Institute at the University of Toronto. I'm also someone who stutters so sometimes I might sound a little bit choppy. As a speech language pathologist, or a SLP, we are often asked who we are and what we do. We will be spotlighting SLP in today's episode. Hopefully our listeners today can take away a few things about the important role that SLPs play in health care. Today, I'm joined by Umna Islam, who is a speech language pathologist and a recent graduate of the University of Toronto's Master of Health Science program in speech language pathology. Thank you so much Umna for taking the time to chat.

#### **Umna Islam** 01:19

Hi, Anna, thanks for having me.

#### **Anna Huynh** 01:20

Would you like to introduce yourself?

#### **Umna Islam** 01:23

My name is Umna Islam. I'm a speech language pathologist at Lahore Children's Center in Pakistan. In my day-to-day practice, I work with children with communication disorders that includes those on the autism spectrum, motor speech disorders, and feeding. I regularly share my knowledge with different parents and do a lot of parent training and family training, but outside of my work, I'm also the project manager of heretospeak.org, where I work to improve speech, language, and hearing services worldwide.

**Anna Huynh 01:55**

Alright, so let's get into it. So, if you were to use five words or less, can you describe what speech language pathology, or SLP, is to our audience?

**Umna Islam 02:06**

Sure, five words or less. So it's a bit tricky considering that speech language pathology is a very broad field, um, but honestly, if I was to really break it down, the words I would be using is communication, swallowing, language development, and a very, very important one would be compassion.

**Anna Huynh 02:26**

Awesome. Can you expand a little bit on why you chose these words?

**Umna Islam 02:32**

Yeah, so communication really encompasses a lot of what we do and majority of what we do, which is in how we are speaking, how we are forming our words, the language that we use. Swallowing is another part of it that a lot of people actually don't know and I can dive a bit more deeper into it for SLPs. It's a huge portion of our field, work with those individuals who have had swallowing difficulties, due to any reason, whether that's an injury or whether that's for birth, neurologically, and language development, because we really work with children, either on the spectrum or those who are developing any form of disorders. And then the last one was that was compassion was because I think that's a trait that really, really drives us to then focus on everything else that I mentioned earlier. We need that compassion in order to treat our clients or our patients with whatever they come to us, and really rely on us to help them communicate their best.

**Anna Huynh 03:36**

Great, thank you. I think something that says a lot about the profession as a whole is how compassionate we are. Because when we consider what we do as a profession, it means a lot to people, different communication disorders or differences, when we are willing to listen. And this is so important, because people oftentimes who have communication disorders, such as people like myself, we don't get the time of day, unfortunately, to say what we want to say. So having someone who's willing to listen and is able to put themselves kind of on the other side is really helpful. I'm so happy to be a part of this profession. Can you tell us a little bit more about what exactly is speech pathology or SLP - what kinds of things do we do?

**Umna Islam 04:30**

If I was to really give a breakdown and a proper definition of it, just to help our listeners understand a bit better, Speech Language Pathologists work to prevent, assess, diagnose, treat, speech, language communication, cognitive communication, swallowing disorders throughout the lifespan. So we're talking pediatrics, at birth all the way to adults, geriatrics as well. So it's really really like I said in the beginning, really broad field that targets a lot of different populations with a lot of different needs in and around communication and swallowing. So we help those who maybe have somebody who might be stuttering, we help those who maybe have a voice issue. We help those who maybe are having difficulty with hearing and that affects their speech. We help those who maybe have difficulty with composing their language and their sentence structure together and are not able to verbalize so we

have different means for them to communicate, using what we call an AAC device, which is an alternative and augmentative device communication system for them to communicate their needs nonverbally. So it's not just about, you know, being able to talk and use your words, but there's so many different ways for us to communicate that we don't realize, and we our profession, is there right on the frontlines to help those children, adults, teens, the elderly, be able to voice themselves out loud.

**Anna Huynh 06:06**

Speech Language Pathologists definitely work across the lifespan from as young as one years old, or even newborn infants, to follow through or 90 or 100, and some years old. Given how broad of a field SLP is and what we do in our scope of practice, how did you decide that you want to go into SLP?

**Umna Islam 06:32**

Yeah, great question. And honestly, it's nothing that super like I've always wanted to do it since I was a kid. I was a very studious student in high school. So once I got into university, I went to McMaster University in Hamilton. When I started, I really just, you know, took a backseat of "Look, you know what now I'm going to relax. I worked hard I got in.". And the couple first couple of years in my Bachelor's, were really trying to figure myself out not doing too much just focusing on the subjects I had, but not really thinking about the future. But in my last two years when it really hit home when I was like, "Okay, this is what am I going to do after? I will be graduating in a year and a half.". So I really scrambled and I started just volunteering. I volunteered across the board, from hospitals to clinics, and daycares different centers. And I actually ended up landing a volunteer position at a clinic over in Oakville. And it was the most wonderful volunteer experience of my time. And I've really, really enjoyed it, it was a multidisciplinary clinic that housed occupational therapy, speech, language, behavior, and several others. And that is when I truly found speech language pathology. And you know, when you dive into something, and you know it's meant to be, you really, really enjoy it. And once you sort of make your mind to it, I ended up meeting people around me who, who are also doing the same thing, knew about it. And I was like, "Wow, was I the only one who didn't know this really existed!". And in that really short amount of time, because I loved it so much, I just took a leap of faith and I started focusing on that made it my goal, and before I knew it, I was at University of Toronto, starting a Master's.

**Anna Huynh 08:31**

Awesome, I think from all the people I've spoken to more or less stumble into the field of SLP. It's a little bit of like, love of love at first sight-ish. For me, personally, it's a little bit similar and different at the same time. I had speech therapy as a teenager at the time. And I think as I kind of learned more about what the profession did, and, and, as I made a goal to back to the community, I kind of learned more about how broad of a field SLP was and I also fell in love with all aspects of it. And even now, to this day, I'm still very passionate about speech language pathology in very different ways. So I think that's very heartwarming to hear each person's kind of story.

**Umna Islam 09:22**

Yeah. But I find that you know, it's the field is amazing, but it's also those who are in the field. So when I started volunteering, I think every speech language pathologist I met, the clinician, and they themselves were so warming and welcoming and willing to teach. And that compassion aspect I spoke about earlier

was very present, evident in almost all of them and I think that also gravitated me towards this field even more.

**Anna Huynh 09:55**

Yes, I think I've met so many kind speech pathologists in my short-ish, but long-ish experience, since I was a teenager. I still remember one of the SLPs I saw back then, as a teenager, he was retiring, and he realized that, that I was graduating from high school. So he had offered to provide me with free services for a couple months. And I think that just speaks to how compassionate again, people are in the field. What's kind of, a common misconception that people might have about SLPs?

**Umna Islam 10:36**

Yeah, there's a lot, there's a lot. And I think it really just has to do with the lack of knowledge that I think everybody has around this field. And so one of them is that I hear it a lot when I say I'm a speech language pathologists. So they, in return, say, "Oh, so you just treat people who have a lisp.". So that's just what their mindset is, mindset is that, you know, we're just working on the lisp, and there's that's it, we don't have much work to do, we don't have much meaning in our profession, and our work. Or even another one that I get, and I actually got that a lot when I moved here to Pakistan was that "Oh, you're an English teacher.". So that one was also a huge one because it's, I think teaching is a great field, but as much as we teach, yes, language and communication, we are not English teachers.

**Anna Huynh 11:35**

Yes, definitely, I think I've heard both of those in some way or another. I think something that I've tried to do is leverage off of people's concept of SLP. And say, "Yes, and also we do, you know, all these other things related to help stroke and like swallowing, and all these other things.", that people don't necessarily realize that speech language pathologists work with swallowing. And that's actually a really huge part of our profession, especially when you're working with adults. Can you kind of tell me one thing you'd like to change about the SLP profession, given there's like, so much?

**Umna Islam 12:21**

Yeah, so from what I think we'd sort of answer all that would be, I'd love to just change, I think, our public image, and I think I'd love to just raise more awareness about what we do. So things like podcasts like these are just wonderful, because we're able to get out there and talk about our SLP profession, which has a lot to offer. And if I could just erase that stigma and that negativity, and that the image that some people have built, unfortunately, about that, you know, we only do this or we only do that, and we're not very helpful, or, you know, there's not much difference, we could probably just do it at home, that's another really big one that we get to that would really be something I wish I could change. And I know that's something that will happen with time, just more awareness.

**Anna Huynh 13:13**

Yeah, for sure. And I think it's great that you're so active and kind of promoting the profession and so great that the rehabINK podcast is able to kind of promote Rehabilitation Sciences, or allied health professions as a whole, because I think most people don't realize that such professions exist, until they themselves, or someone close to them needs the service. Speaking of people needing this service, it can kind of definitely range between, you know, really young children, teenagers, to adults, to older

adults, and that's something that is commonly asked in our program, I know, whether someone is attention tested in working with children or adults. So aside from kind of, like, obvious differences like age, was there preference that you had prior to entering the program, and has that kind of changed since you kind of started working?

**Umna Islam 14:18**

Yeah, I think so. So I'd always seen myself as somebody who would work with the adult population. And I really enjoyed that and clinical placements to, not to say I didn't enjoy the younger ones as well. I did that I just sort of felt like that would be the more perfect fit for me. But ironically, and interestingly, since I've graduated, I've had been consistently working in the pediatrics the most, and truly, I think that was a great thing that happened because I love it. I think it is something that suits my skills, a lot better than I think would in the adults. Not to say that it's not something I wouldn't like to walk into little later down the road, but for now I'm quite content with the fact that I've stuck with pediatrics.

**Anna Huynh 15:09**

Right, so you kind of foster a love for children. Can you tell us a little bit about what's different about practicing working with children compared to adults? And have you found certain skills hard transferable between the two?

**Umna Islam 15:27**

Definitely, skills are definitely transferable. I think, overall, when we're talking about what we're doing, we're really just helping with that communication aspect or that swallowing aspect. So the skills really stayed, the maintain, the same. But I think what changes between the two are definitely obviously our strategies, our goals, and just sort of taking that client or patient and working with those client centered goals, right, we always focus on that patient, and we make those goals and strategies according to them. So I think that's what really differs. Because when you think about it, when you have an adult client, they are most likely coming in, perhaps they had a brain injury, perhaps they have a stroke. So maybe they're coming in with something with aphasia, which is the difficulty to communicate after you've had an injury to your brain. Or they might be coming in for swallowing. But regardless of which one it is, you are essentially helping that adult relearn something they had previously. But when you have a child who's coming in, perhaps they're a child for maybe two or two and a half, and they're a late talker, then you're helping them learn a new skill on how they're going to use their words. So that aspect is very different. And I've worked in both in the past, so I find that adults, they can be a bit more motivated naturally, so that's the nice part of it. For the children, it's really the opposite and no idea what they're doing and why they're there but I think that's also the really fun part of it because that's when you get to use your own creativity, that's when you get to play and have fun, and you actually get to show them how powerful their words are. And I think that is a wonderful aspect that I have grown to just love. And also I find, there's such a big difference when it comes to families and their loved ones. When you have a child and you have their mom or dad bring them in, there is just such a big difference, you have parents just jumping in wanting to learn, and doing those skills and practicing at home. And of course, when it comes to the elderly, there's so much love and compassion there too but there's just such a big difference because typically their child who brings them in, maybe they're like a grandma does, and grandchildren. And so that aspect, it's really just that patient or client trying to practice themselves and you're working alongside just to help them with what they're functionally able to do in

their realm. So that aspect is, is very, very different, but, but those skills do definitely remain the same and they're definitely transferable between the two. And that's just me talking in the language aspect of it. Like if I talk about the swallowing aspect of it, that's a complete different part of our field. Swallowing, obviously, it's very physiological so that doesn't vary much change of what children do have a different physiological structure. And as you grow older, it does change in your swallowing, but we're looking at pretty much the same thing around at all. Of course, our approach will be different, because it's a child, and compared to that an adult, an adult can talk and tell us a lot more, whereas the child would not be able to so we have to work around that.

**Anna Huynh 18:53**

There's definitely a lot of commonalities in terms of kind of skills that you use and how you approach from like, a general kind of approach to assessment and treatment, all that kind of, and I think something that's very interesting is these days, I work a lot of with adults, and specifically people who have neurodegenerative diseases, so people that have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS, people with Parkinson's disease, that's a very different overall climate as well. And it makes you kind of think about each person come to us with a very different life story. And you really appreciate that as you kind of work with someone and learn their backgrounds and like who's in their families, all that stuff, and that really does translate to children as well and their parents, their grandparents who might be involved. So do you see yourself continuing to work with children in the future, or will you perhaps be looking into working with older adults?

**Umna Islam 20:02**

Something about me is that I am a perfectionist, so knowing that I feel like I see myself staying in with children, until I feel like I've really gotten a good handle on the pediatric population in terms of their speech and language. And once that is done that I always have this itch to learn more and to do more, I can definitely see myself further down the line, then kind of walking into that adult area, and then trying to learn more from that end. I really, really would love to continue with the children, but I think it would be really, really nice to also have that adult aspect of it so you can have like a bit of both. And I think, just recently what really made me so happy and confirmed that like I do really love children, it was just recently we had a little late talker come in, a little toddler who wasn't speaking and she was about just hitting two years. And mom came in the other day and was so ecstatic because she had finally said Mama appropriately to her mother and happiness, that excitement, that gratitude that mother brought in was just so heartwarming for me. And when that happened, I was like this is definitely the right field and the right population that I think I'm in for sure. So I definitely want to continue with the child population but I'd never say no to the geriatric.

**Anna Huynh 21:39**

Nice. I think that also comes back to that concept of how broad speech language pathology is as a field. And it's so easy to kind of who you're interested in kind of each side or each piece of the field, because there's always something else to kind of learn about and continuing education is such a big part of what we do and there's always so much research that's coming out. And just kind of on that thought of research, back in the program, oftentimes, professors would encourage us to kind of consult research, each time we came across a new case or a new problem - have you found yourself kind of looking up research during those situations?

**Umna Islam 22:28**

Yes definitely, I do definitely still look at research and a lot of the time when I have a new case, and I've just lost, about how I should approach this or what what strategy I should be using and what approach I should be using, then I definitely go look at the research. But for me with the research, what I find is that just helps me get in the right direction. So you know, if I want to, let's say I'm thinking about like, recently, I was looking at a child with apraxia of speech and I wanted to look into dynamic temporal tactile cueing was one of the ways that I had heard works really, really well, and I want to just look at the efficacy of it. So I went on to research looked it up, saw that it was effective and then after that, I like to actually go and then see actual clinicians in the field, using that to learn that approach a bit better. So for me, it's more so dive in, look at what's working, see if it's effective, in what populations effective, and then just use that information then to go ahead and do my own little dive in into actual conditions, practical, attempting to use it to learn more.

**Anna Huynh 23:37**

I think professors would be very excited to hear that, considering how much classes placed taking on research to practice. It's exciting to hear that clinicians are referencing and looking into research to see if it's helpful to answer potential clinical questions that you might have about treatment efficacy. And it also points towards how resourceful speech pathologists are in terms of trying to find kind of solutions or trying to be creative as to how to best support their patients or clients that they're working with.

Thinking about research a little bit further, have you noticed any type of gaps, possibly in research, and would there be any things that you wish that researchers might do on to support the clinicians on the frontlines?

**Umna Islam 24:32**

So research is great for the numbers, it's great for proving its effectiveness in a very specific population. But what I find that I think it just has to do with the fact that we are fairly new, so there's just a lack of research still, and we you know, on a daily basis, get clients, new cases coming in, and very complex cases coming in with very multi-factorial problems and these children are having that you can't always find in research. So I think that is more of a concern number one, and I think number two that would be good to kind of work on further would be that having a researcher, that's also a clinician, I think it's a huge, huge difference for that practicality part of it. Because if I go through, let's say, 10 research articles, I might find one or two, maximum, two, that are fitting my population. And the thing that I was looking for specifically, and the others, I find are not something I can be practical with in the daily life. Because when we with our specifically, I'm speaking about the pediatrics, we're not using such big machines to test their length of utterance and all that stuff. It's all just right on the spot. What do you hear? What do you see? What are you going to do with this next? Right? So that part of it, I feel like that functional piece of it is a little bit that's also lacking. But other than that, I do think that research has been wonderful in my learning, especially being so far and being in Pakistan. I really like that I can, you know, hop on and get that learning going even through that research.

**Anna Huynh 26:24**

I think that's awesome, how passionate you are about the field as a whole. And that kind of shows how you kind of talk about the profession and to talk about the needs, right? Because that's something that

as, as someone that's pretty involved with research right now, it makes so much sense to kind of have talks with clinicians on the front line, and knowing what their needs are can help to direct what we do, and I think my clinical background, has definitely helped me kind of get that insider understanding. Talks like this also help to move research and clinicians. So we've kind of talked a lot about different things in different ways - based on your experiences so far, what are you like most passionate about in your work?

**Umna Islam 27:16**

My passion is really driven through the families. It's not always just about that client, or that child or that adult coming in, I think it's really taken as a whole. I love having you know, that first assessment, mum and dad walk in with their child, and they're so worried and concerned about the development of their language and where they've come. And you know, in just a couple of months, those faces then turn right back into smiles, and happiness, and contentment, that they finally found something that works. And I love the relationship that we can build with that. A lot of the time, especially since I work more in the private sector, we build those relationships with those families for months on end, and sometimes years on end. So you really get to see that person grow and make those gains that you had first initially said. And I think that's what drives my passion every day at work, to see that happiness and that contentness in our field.

**Anna Huynh 28:25**

I like that phrase that you use - paint a light to the smiles on their faces, essentially. I think the passion that you bring with working towards collaborating with both your patients or clients, the families, the caregivers, and all that efforts, it really shows how much care speech pathology is placed to building relationship and that trust with the people we work with. And it really, and it makes treatment or just the overall process such so much more manageable and more fruitful. And I think that's something I really love about the people in the field. Thinking about the new clinicians that are about to graduate or even people who are looking into pursuing a career in speech language pathology, is there a specific type of advice we can give to them?

**Umna Islam 29:23**

I would say my best advice would be, be dedicated to this profession, because it does require that a lot of dedication and hard work. I would also say really focus on those strong relationships that you're going to build. And if you feel like this, this profession isn't for me, if you ever had that thought in your head creep up, know that it you will fall down multiple times until you really get back up and the first year of those once you've graduated, especially those that are just leaving the program, once you've graduated, it's going to be a little a little bit of a rocky ride but it's only going to be uphill after that. I know that there's something for everyone in this field but I think if there's one thing you can take away from this podcast that we talked about a lot, was that SLP is such a broad field. And it has so much to offer to everyone, clinicians as well as our clients and patients. So there's something for everyone. Definitely.

**Anna Huynh 30:20**

Definitely, I think speech language pathology as a whole is definitely a growing profession. And you can really see that in terms of the people that you meet, whether it's the students that you meet, the

clinicians that you meet, the researchers involved, the patients or clients, whoever it is, there's definitely people that are just looking to grow, and it's a world of possibility and opportunities. And as long as you're willing to look into that and keep that curiosity in you, I think you'll be just fine. Thank you so much for listening. And please subscribe, like and follow us on our social media. You can find the rehabINK podcast on Podbean, Spotify, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts, or on [rehabinkmag.com/podcast](http://rehabinkmag.com/podcast) website. That's our [r-e-h-a-b-i-n-k-m-a-g.com/podcast](http://r-e-h-a-b-i-n-k-m-a-g.com/podcast). Tune in next time and thank you so much for being our guest speaker at the SLP spotlight.

**Umna Islam** 31:30

Thank you for having me.