

About Selective Mutism (SM)

Selective Mutism (SM) is a condition that comes under anxiety in the Diagnostics Statistical Mental Health Manual (DSM-5, 2013). It is not a choice. For unknown reasons, those with Selective Mutism when in certain settings, or around certain people go into an automatic subconscious “Freeze” response. When triggered, the person with SM freezes, usually becoming stone-faced, unable to make eye-contact, and can temporarily lose hearing so they may miss instructions. The “freeze” response causes the muscles in the face and around the larynx and pharynx (throat) to paralyze, making it impossible for the person/child with SM to talk while they are in ‘freeze’.

The person with SM wants to talk, but cannot. The longer SM goes unnoticed and unsupported, the more entrenched it usually becomes. The person does not understand why they are unable to talk. They can feel trapped in their silence and often feel misunderstood, confused and troubled.

Parents are most often the last people to realise there is an issue with their child, because at home they are chatty, fun, and confident people. SM is *selective*, meaning it all depends upon the persons freeze response on any given day in any given situation.

SM is a condition that can wave up and down, for example, what the person may be able to do on Monday they may not be able to repeat on Tuesday. It is important to understand this is caused by a subconscious reaction within the person, and is in no way a conscious choice.

Eye-contact is a powerful part of communication, and for those with SM who are incredibly perceptive, it can be challenging to maintain. Limiting your eye-contact and communicating non-directly can be an effective way to help the person feel safe and to be able to speak.

Those with SM can struggle with non-verbal communication as well as verbal. Often those with SM are perfectionists and have sensory sensitivities. These can become magnified under increased the anxiety which can come hand in hand with SM. A person of SM may find it just as difficult to hold up a card, their hand, make nonverbal gestures, even writing and drawing, as they do talking. The ‘freeze’ response affects the whole body and all the senses.

It is important to note that the pleasantries are often the hardest words for those with SM to say! Please, Thank you, Yes, No, Good-Morning, Good-bye etc, are all expected words. The key is to take all pressure off the person to speak.

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Working with a young person who has Selective Mutism

At VOICE, our philosophy is to take the pressure off the voice, build trust, and create calming and warming environments. Once the person feels comfortable and safe, their voice can emerge. Please remember that **no two people with SM are the same.** What one person may be able to do, another may not.

It is important to realise that the student in your care with SM not only has to learn academically, but also must **learn how to cope in social situations with a condition that makes them 'freeze'**. Supporting this person and learning about their condition working with them and their parents, and seeking outside support such as a psychologist, therapist, RTLB who has experience in SM will not only help them academically, but will also help secure their future to be a brighter one.

The effort and care you put in is likely to go a long way toward changing this person's long term outcome from a daunting one to a positive one filled with hope and promise.

With this in mind, we hope the information that follows will help you to understand SM, and give you some practical tips to put into place when working with young people with SM in the classroom.

Welcome the person into your class

Avert eye contact and take notes of your body language, making sure you are relaxed, comfortable and approachable. It is important not to draw attention to the person with SM, and not to put the person with SM in the spotlight.

Arrange to have a private moment with the person and their parent/s, so you can let them know that **you understand they find it hard to talk and that there is no pressure for them to do so.** Tell them that you know they will eventually talk in their own time, when they can, and it does not matter how long that takes, that it is okay. **Explain to them that together you will find your own way to communicate when you need to,** and that their parent can always mediate for them if there are ever any concerns. Stress that their concerns will always be listened to. When you do this, do not ask questions, and do not expect a response back or even eye contact. This conversation is going to be incredibly anxiety provoking to that person, but it is necessary and will make a big difference to them, so **keep it short and sweet, but clear.**

The person you are working with is a young person who is aware of their struggles. **The selective mutism is likely to be quite entrenched, as they have been dealing with it for a long time,** and it is going to take time to build trust with them and a good bond. They will be conscious and worried about what is happening to them, which unfortunately serves to create anxiety, and that can feed their SM. **The key is to do all you can to make them feel as comfortable and secure as possible.**

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It is possible that certain approaches can worsen symptoms of SM. It is therefore important not to put pressure on the person to speak or even communicate non-verbally. **Instead, the key is to take attention off their talking.** It is important to learn how to communicate with them indirectly; humour and open questions that are non-direct with options are good.

It is advisable that all staff in the school/college environment must be made aware of this person and their SM, and must follow the same course of action. It is crucial that everyone is on the same page. **Regular meetings with the parents and staff are encouraged, and a good plan should be put in place that everyone including the person with SM agrees to and feels comfortable with.**

How friends can help.

Friends are important, and can play a big part in helping the person who has SM to get through each school/college day. If the person with SM has a friend that they can talk or whisper to, then it will make a big difference to encourage and support this friendship. **It is important to give the person with SM as much support and security as possible, so having someone they know and can communicate with in their class is invaluable.** Please do not separate them because you fear the person with SM will become too reliant on them, and not find their own feet and voice. Separating them will make things more difficult for them.

Things to be aware of

Remember that the “Freeze” response is an unconscious neurological response. When it is triggered the whole person’s/child’s body can become stiff and awkward. It is not necessarily only verbal communication that is affected by SM. Those with SM may also struggle with writing and trying to communicate non-verbally, such as smiling, waving, or pointing.

Avoid face to face discussions, as that can feel more like an interrogation - it is better to sit side by side instead, or to talk to the person while doing something close by, without making eye contact.

If a person with Selective Mutism can whisper, please allow them to do so.

The vocal chords are restricted, and that is why the voice cannot come out louder. Usually, given time without pressure, the person will feel safe and the muscles will then start to operate again and the voice will be able to emerge naturally.

Give allowances where things are particularly difficult for that person, such as sport. Selective Mutism is a condition and when working with conditions, certain allowances are essential and should never be viewed as a privilege. If allowances are not made for a person with SM the condition can worsen.

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Always give the person with SM the same respect and opportunities as others in the class. It is paramount that they are treated the same as much as they can be. They should always be included and wanted, and they should always be given opportunities to speak, just know when to move on if you see them ‘freeze’.

Those with SM are highly intelligent individuals and creative too. Tapping into their interests, focusing on what they can do, and praising their academic achievements will build that person’s self-esteem and self-belief. However, it is important to understand that expressing yourself can be very difficult. Often those with SM fear making mistakes, letting you down, being judged and even writing can prove challenging. Some people with SM can thrive academically in schools while others look like they are behind and struggling. SM can mask that person’s true capabilities.

A person with SM can also have some sensory sensitivities such as bright lights and noise. When in ‘freeze’ the person can be rigid and uncomfortable. The best thing for them in this situation is to give them an opportunity to go to a quiet place where they can be calm. An option here is to give them an important quiet job, perhaps with another person that they trust. Simple efforts like this will help that person feel valued by you and this will help you build that trust and bond.

A person with SM can appear deaf and struggle to follow instructions. When they go into ‘freeze’ they tune out of the environment. When this happens, the person can struggle to follow conversation, tune into what is being said, and to follow instructions. So, they may appear lost, and confused.

Never assume that a lack of answer (verbal or written) means the same thing as lack of knowledge. You may not be able to assess the person accurately on the work based in school, so work outside the box. Keep good communication with the parents as the work they produce at home can be outstandingly different to the work in the classroom. Be aware that this can even vary from class to class, and teacher to teacher.

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