

Frequently Asked Questions.

Does Selective Mutism only start in childhood?

It is often taken for granted that Selective Mutism (SM) begins in early childhood and certainly this is right in most cases. However, it is important to know that this condition can strike at any age. Low profile SM can progress to a more debilitating form.

What is happening to those with SM?

SM has been described as a feeling that someone is choking them or blocking their throat. They want to say the words, but they just cannot get them out. To carry out a conversation a person with SM needs to be in a calm state, but if the brain assesses the situation as unsafe for any perceived reason then the second system, fight or flight, will take over. If fighting or running are not considered likely to lead to survival, then feigning death via the freeze response is the only other option. To support this state, blood pressure drops, muscles weaken, breathing and heart rate will slow and the body will enter the so-called frozen state. The weakened muscles around the face and neck, larynx and pharynx cause the person to not be able to speak as they semi paralyse. It is critical to note that this response is an auto-subconscious response that the person is not in control of.

Can you grow out of SM?

No, you cannot “grow out” of this condition, and in fact the opposite is true. The person/child with SM is more likely to grow into it if they receive no support, and/or lots of pressure to speak.

What may be the long term consequences for someone with SM?

There are many young teens and adults dealing with SM, and in older years this condition is likely to become more debilitating. Those with SM can struggle to find work, study, or make friends, and they can develop other conditions, such as social anxiety, social phobia, panic disorder, agoraphobia, substance abuse, depression, generalised anxiety, etc. They can also develop a condition called Progressive Mutism where the person shuts down in all situations even at home. It is therefore paramount to help those with this condition as early as possible.

Can a person or child overcome SM?

Yes, although this condition has challenges and is often a long journey, it can be overcome. The person with SM can learn to rewire the response to “Freeze,” and if they have developed social anxiety they can learn to manage that too. The success of this is usually very much dependent upon the support given. It is pivotal that the support and intervention is done right and at a pace and comfort level of the person. People with SM are often highly sensitive, perceptive, and intelligent individuals. When a person with SM gets the right help and support they have the space to grow in confidence and their inner strength helps them to slowly break free and learn coping skills that help them to manage and change this auto response. Therefore, the right help and support is vital, and the earlier it is adopted the better.

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What causes SM?

The cause of SM is unknown; however, we do know that it is not a result of trauma or abuse and it is not the person or child being wilful or manipulative. These myths have now been debunked. At VOICE, we believe that SM is due to a person's/child's nervous system which identifies a situation as life-threatening. This is a subconscious assessment which evokes the freeze response. When the person goes into freeze their muscles weaken, heart rate slows, hearing tunes out, blood pressure can drop, and they become detached from the environment. The weakened muscles affect the body, the face and the larynx and pharynx (throat), making smiling and speaking impossible. Even waving, and holding a pen can become challenging.

Can another person cause someone to become selectively mute?

No, this will not happen.

Can trauma or abuse cause SM?

The idea that SM is a result of some trauma or abuse is a myth that has long been refuted. In fact, if a child/person becomes mute because of trauma, this is known as Traumatic Mutism, which is often temporary, and is an entirely different condition.

Is there a SM spectrum?_

It appears Selective Mutism has a spectrum, and likened to many conditions, there can be different levels. For example, Low-Profile Selective Mutism to High-Profile Selective Mutism and at its worse Progressive Mutism, where the person with SM becomes “frozen” in all situations to all people, including those closest to them. Those with low profile SM can often be mistaken as “shy” as they may be able to whisper or talk very softly, and can answer questions with one word answers. They may be able to answer the role with a very quiet “Yes,” or “Here,” and they may be able to say “pass” when it comes to their turn in sharing news. We must remember, however, that SM is NOT “shyness” and many of those who have this condition long to have friends and to be included. They are as devastated as their onlookers when they “freeze” and cannot speak, and this in turn feeds anxiety. If those with Low Profile SM do not receive the support and understanding they need, the SM is likely to become more entrenched and develop into High Profile SM. This means whispering will cease, and communication to those outside the family in certain situations will become less and less.

Can those with SM find other ways to communicate?_

Unfortunately this is a tricky one because SM affects the whole body, not just the voice, through the freeze response. So gesturing can be as challenging as speaking. Pointing, tapping, waving, smiling, holding up signs, nodding, and even writing can be very challenging for those with Selective Mutism, because of the lack of muscle tone.

How else does SM affect the person?

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Often those with Selective Mutism are:

- Perfectionists
- Have a fear of judgement
- Have a fear of displeasing, letting someone down.
- Have sensory sensitivities due to their heightened sensory system, which often includes issues with clothes, foods, bright lights, and sounds
- Struggle to follow instructions and can appear deaf
- Appear to have auditory processing disorder

Why can a person talk in one situation but not another?_

This part of SM is unfortunately what is most often misunderstood or misinterpreted. ‘Selective’ does not mean the person is consciously selecting where they can or cannot speak. Instead it brings us back to understanding the freeze response.

For instance, when the child is in the playground, the subconscious response may be that the situation is safe and the freeze response is not switched on, which enables the child to speak. The muscle tone is not affected so the facial muscles are able to move and allow conversation. They can suddenly be the loudest child on the playground. So, a child who cannot talk to you in the classroom may be able to shout to you across a playground.

Remember, those with SM are NOT choosing to not speak. They are often desperate to communicate. Being frozen is not a nice state to be in, and when the body starts to come out of freeze they can get an influx of adrenaline and cortisol which can make them burst with energy at home.

Do those with SM have meltdowns, and if so, why?_

Oh, yes, and this is where it gets very emotional and hard for the parent – and sometimes confusing. A person with SM can appear to be a little like Jekyll and Hyde. At school, or kindergarten, they are silent, gentle, and perhaps even shy! At home, they may be loud, bossy, chatty, very intelligent and true to their character!

Imagine a pressure cooker. It has been on for five hours and the pressure inside has built to an extreme intensity. The pressure cooker, when on, is silent and mostly unnoticeable. However, when it is time to let the steam out, it whistles and the steam jets from the top, as all that pent up pressure is suddenly released into the environment. This is how it feels for a person with SM. The person has been in the “freeze” response the whole day and been unable to utter a word. That person longs to join in, and to shout out the answers to questions they may know the answers to. They long to show what they can do, and are desperate to play with others.

It is important to note that meltdowns are often a result of pressure, whether intentional or not, built up from the day, and this can be an amazing indicator of perhaps what is not working in the other environment. I am sure you can imagine why consistent communication with the parents or caregivers of a child with Selective Mutism is KEY.

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If you suspect a child has SM, what should you do?_

The first thing to do is to talk to the parent and express your concerns. Print off a flyer and ask them to read it. This will direct them to our website, and a link to a support room on Facebook, which you could also join.

- Remove all pressure to speak from the person.
- Make sure that all staff follow this directive.
- Assign a key leader to the person, someone with whom they can build trust, who is consistent and will greet them every morning and help them with necessities such as finding their lunch box and the toilet, generally keeping an eye on them.
- Read the SM information PDF attached for more tips and advice.

It is paramount that teachers and parents work together. You must communicate often and devise a plan together, listening to the parent as much as they listen to you, as both of you have a role to play in helping the person and their SM. You must work towards creating a safe and warm environment that will help to engage the person/child so they are less likely to trip into 'freeze.' This in turn will help reduce the person's anxiety and worry, and help them feel safe and calm, as when they are happy and relaxed this will help them come out of the freeze response and teach the brain not to trip into it.

Helping the person stay relaxed and feel accepted and understood is one of the best things you can do, and there are many ways you can do this.

Acknowledgements:

Dr Steven Porges and his book, The Polyvagal Theory: Foundations, Emotions, Attachment, Communication and Self-Regulation.

Members of The Space Café - a support room on Facebook for those living with and supporting those with Selective Mutism and Progressive Mutism.

The New Zealand Selective Mutism support room on Facebook.

We recommend you contact VOICE for further advice and support

Thank you for reading

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