



Frequently asked questions about Selective Mutism

Does Selective Mutism only start in childhood?

It is often taken for granted that Selective Mutism (SM) begins in early childhood, and though this certainly is apparent in most cases, it's important to know that it is not limited to occurring only in childhood. SM can strike at any age – it is understood that the person carries the predisposition in their genes, meaning it can onset at any time. SM is not triggered by trauma; it is a condition that is driven by anxiety and it all depends where the anxiety levels lie. IF the sufferer has had a mild form of SM without realising, it can progress into another level at a later stage, at any age, even in adulthood.

Can you grow out of Selective Mutism?

No, you cannot “grow” out of this condition, in fact it is the opposite that is true. The sufferer is more likely to grow into it, if no support and help is given. There are many young teens and adults suffering from Selective Mutism, and in older years this condition becomes more deliberating. The sufferer struggles to find work, to study, to make friends, and they can develop other co-morbid conditions such as, panic disorder, agoraphobia, substance abuse, depression, generalised anxiety, etc. It is therefore paramount to help those suffering from this condition as early as possible.

Can a sufferer overcome Selective Mutism?

Yes, though this condition has its challenges and is often a long journey, it can be overcome. The sufferer can learn to manage their anxiety and rewire the response of Fight, Flight, Freeze. The success of this is very much dependent upon the support given, which makes it paramount that it's done right and at a pace the sufferer is able to handle.

The SM sufferer must learn to take the lead - learning about their anxiety, building up their self-esteem, learning to accept and love themselves, and realizing that it's not their fault. People with SM are just highly sensitive and intelligent individuals.

When a sufferer does learn to manage their anxiety and SM, they can effectively rewire their genes, turning off the SM tag so the next generation is unlikely to develop it.

Therefore, the right help and support is necessary, and the earlier it is adopted the better.

VOICE was created by a team of four trustees. We all have something in common, and have been personally touched by SM.

Two of our trustees have suffered at the hand of Selective Mutism, and have strived to overcome this condition. They have both become successful in their career choices and are passionate about helping others.

There is certainly hope for this condition, we just need to learn about anxiety and what it looks like! It is not necessarily the child rocking in the corner, but is more likely the busy quiet one, who you would never guess was anxious for one minute!

What causes Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism is caused by high levels of anxiety, which literally freeze the sufferer's vocal chords in certain situations.

A person cannot cause a sufferer to become Selectively Mute.

If you find you have a child in your class who isn't speaking to you, or (probably) can't speak to many people, you must not take it personally. It is NOT your fault, and the child/sufferer is likely to be as worried and confused about this as perhaps you are. So please do not take it personally. Selective Mutism is a genetic condition, it is not particularly related to "shyness," and is as physical as it is psychological. SM is not a behavioral condition, the sufferer cannot control it, and is NOT choosing not to speak.

The idea that Selective Mutism is a result of some trauma or abuse is a myth that has since been de-bunked. In fact, if a child becomes mute because of trauma, this is known as Traumatic Mutism, which is often temporary, and is an entirely different condition.

It is also important to note that Selective Mutism is a stand-alone condition. It is not a trait of another condition. However, Selective Mutism can be co-morbid with other conditions such as Autism. Sometimes it can be masked by another condition it might be co-existing with, and this can make things tricky, but in general, Selective Mutism is a condition on its own.

What is happening to a sufferer of Selective Mutism?

As noted in the DSM-5 Manual, Selective Mutism is a condition that is driven by anxiety. When in certain situations or facing certain people, the anxiety can subconsciously trigger the "Freeze" part of the Fight, Flight, Freeze response (FFF). When this happens, the Vocal chords tense with the body, making it impossible to speak. Sometimes those with SM can manager a whisper, or a quiet, distorted sound which is due to trying to speak through tensed throat muscles.

The heart starts to pound, the whole-body tenses, often making gestures challenging too. Sometimes this can weaken the bladder, or/and make the person feel physically sick. They will feel sweaty, be unable to make eye contact and literally freeze, like a rabbit in headlights. Their throats will start to ache, some sufferers have described this feeling like someone choking them, or a blockage in their throat. They want to say the words, but they just can't get them out.

It might seem strange to you, that a certain question or environment such as a classroom can trigger fear in a person in this way – after-all, what's so scary about saying 'good morning' on the role, or answering the telephone? Unfortunately, the brain doesn't wait for logic - that comes after, often with intense embarrassment! The FFF response is highly sensitive, and just flicks on, unwarranted in any given situation!

Please see the diagram below to understand how anxiety and the FFF physically and chemically affects the body.

The **Fight** or **Flight** Response



Threat: an attack, harmful event, or threat to survival



Brain: the brain processes the signals- beginning in the amygdala, and then the hypothalamus



ACTH: pituitary gland secretes adrenocorticotropic hormone



Cortisol released

Adrenaline released

Physical Effects



Heart rate increase



Bladder relaxation



Tunnel vision



Shaking



Dilated pupils



Flushed face



Dry mouth



Slowed digestion



Hearing loss

Is there a Selective Mutism Spectrum?

Yes, Selective Mutism does have a spectrum, and like many conditions there can be different levels.

Low-Profile Selective Mutism to High Profile Selective Mutism and at its worse Progressive Mutism, where the sufferer of SM becomes “frozen” in all situations to all people, including those closest to them.

Those with Low-Profile Selective Mutism, can just about function normally within society, but are more at risk of slipping under the radar and being classed as “Shy.” These people/children, can 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.

They will often keep themselves to themselves and avoid initiating conversation. We must remember, however, that Selective Mutism is NOT “shyness” and many of those who suffer from this condition long to have friends and be included. They are as devastated as their onlookers when they “freeze” and can’t speak, and this in turn feeds the anxiety.

It is important to recognise whether the Selective Mutism is Low profile or High profile, as this will help with the sliding in technique, tailored to that individual and their anxiety.

If those who have Low profile SM don’t receive the support and understanding they need, the SM is likely to become more entrenched and high profile. This means whispering will cease, and communication to those outside the family in certain situations will become less and less.

High Profile SM, is the same as Low-Profile, but the sufferer most often won’t be able to respond at all when questioned.

Can those suffering from Selective Mutism find other ways to communicate, perhaps non-verbally?

Unfortunately, this is a tricky one. As anxiety affects the whole body, not just the voice and a person is locked into a “Freeze” state. Gesturing can be as challenging as speaking. Pointing, tapping, waving, smiling, holding up signs, nodding, and even writing can be very challenging blocks for those with Selective Mutism. However, the non-verbal gestures are some of the first things we start working on. It often doesn’t come easy, and this must be understood.

How else does Selective Mutism affect the person? Are there other traits to this condition?

Yes, there are other traits that come with this condition that should be known and thought about, although not all of the following affect all Sufferers of SM. It is important to remember that we are all unique individuals, and the condition affects and appears differently for each person.

Some of the common traits are:

Perfectionism

Fear of judgement

Fear of displeasing, letting someone down.

Sensory issues, with clothing and foods, bright lights, sounds etc.

Picky eaters, an aversion to some food textures and tastes.

Above average intelligence.

Each of these things must be taken into consideration, but helped separately and at the sufferer's pace. The sensory issues can often be magnified by the anxiety levels, and this can create a vicious circle.

How can a sufferer 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 sufferer is consciously "selecting" where they can or cannot speak, or choosing to speak. It is more a reference to the nature of the condition as to where, or when they can speak, and it brings us back to understanding the anxiety and how it triggers the FFF response and drives the SM.

In a playground, the sufferer of SM can become a little more relaxed. It's outside in the open, everyone is busy doing their own thing and not particularly watching the person with anxiety. Their body loosens and they may become excited about playing and joining in. Although they may freeze in this situation, and may find it hard to initiate play, or talk to others directly, they may also be able to join in a game, even shout or laugh loudly. When a sufferer can achieve these things, oh they make best use of it!

They can suddenly be the loudest child in the playground, because they are free! They can release some of that voice and some of that pent-up tension! So, a child who cannot talk to you in the classroom, may be able to shout to you across a playground, or talk loudly to a parent answering you non-directly where they couldn't before. It is vital that we learn where the anxiety zones are, and the ones where they are more relaxed are the ones the sliding in will work best.

Some sufferers of SM can talk one on one, or whisper one on one, but not in a crowd. Some can talk in a crowd, but not one on one. Some can talk to two people at a time, including the parent, but when that becomes three, they shut down. We are all different, and SM therefore affects people differently. Some sufferers can write down their questions and ideas on a whiteboard, while others cannot. It all depends on the sufferer, their level of SM, and the boundaries determined by their anxiety.

Remember, these sufferers 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 anxiety lessons, all that adrenaline pours out!

Do those with Selective Mutism 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 sufferer of SM can appear to be a little like Jekyll and Hyde. At school, or Kindy, 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's been on for five hours, and the pressure inside has built to an extreme intensity. The pressure cooker, when on, is silent as it sits on the side – for the most part mostly unnoticeably. However, when it's time to let the steam out it whistles and the steam jets from the top, as all that pressure is suddenly released.

This is how it is for a sufferer of SM.

A child is silent in class all day, unable to utter a word. That child 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 wanting desperately to play with the others. Selective Mutism can even make the basic needs challenging, for example needing the toilet but not being able to ask, wanting their lunch, but not sure if they can go and get it, and how long they can take to eat it, and not being able to ask.

The child remains quiet, perhaps trying to busy themselves to not be noticed. The anxiety builds inside to such a level that their whole body freezes, their throat muscles tense, and they are not understanding what's happening to them. They feel different, and perhaps even dislike themselves. Some children feel like they are being bad and rude, and perhaps they've even been labeled as such, due to misunderstanding. All these thoughts and feelings and issues get packed in and bottled up, all day, brewing inside, because they are "frozen."

Its home time, the bell rings.

Out the gates and at home, the child can finally be themselves again. They can assert themselves, show their cleverness and talk, *oh talk*, and talk about their day. They can talk about the class, talk about the kids, but they are frustrated, because deep down they reflect on how they couldn't say good morning and the teacher kept asking why, they kept asking themselves why. Often these feelings of frustration can come with anger, they are angry with themselves, emotional and bursting.

The parent gets the pressure cooker that is releasing the steam! Uncontrollable shouting, demanding, controlling the house and siblings, non-stop talking and assertiveness.

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 isn't working in the outer environment. I'm sure you can imagine why consistent communication with the parents or caregivers of a child with Selective Mutism is KEY.

IF you suspect a child has Selective Mutism 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 join also.

Next we recommend you order, "The Selective Mutism Resource Manual," By Maggie Johnson, and contact VOICE for further advise and support.

For the sufferer, take all pressure off speech, and make sure that all staff are aware of SM and take all pressure off as well. Assign a key leader to the child, someone they can build trust with, who is consistent and will greet them every morning and help them with necessities such as finding their lunch box and the toilet, 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 different piece to the puzzle. The parent is often key to helping those with SM learn coping skills and ways to manage their anxiety in all environments, not just Kindy, but out and about and with visitors etc.

You must work towards reducing the anxiety in this child, as when the levels of anxiety drop, this will release the tense throat muscles and teach the body when it's not necessary to trigger the FFF response, thus expanding their comfort zone.

Helping the sufferer reduce their anxiety is one of the best things you can do, and there are many ways you can do this.

- **Research the “Sliding in Technique”** - a proven fading stimulus that will help the sufferer overcome or manage their Selective Mutism.
- Remember; **if it's not working, know when to stop** a strategy and re-visit the drawing board and make a new plan, sometimes the best intentions can create the most pressure!
- **Take off all pressure**, and accept this is possibly going to be a long, challenging journey, but in the end so very rewarding. There is no given time frame for recovery of SM. However, giving the right support and help, you will make a difference and you can change this sufferer's life and future.
- Finally, **be kind to yourself as well** - it's not easy being a teacher, or a parent of a child with SM, and If things get too much or you feel frustrated, admit it, communicate it, look for support. We are here to support you, and we can all crash sometimes, even the best of us do!

You've got this! Knowledge is Power.

Thank you for Reading.