



Frequently asked questions about Selective Mutism

About Selective Mutism (SM)

Selective Mutism (SM) is a condition that is **driven by anxiety**, as acknowledged in the Diagnostics Statistical Mental Health Manual Edition 5. (DSM-5, published 2013). It is a condition that is neither a choice, nor a behaviour. **The anxiety increases in select settings or around select people**, triggering the Fight, Flight and Freeze response. When triggered, the SM sufferer Freezes, becoming stone-faced, unable to make eye-contact, and can even lose temporary hearing so they may miss instructions. **The anxiety causes the SM sufferer's vocal chords to actually paralyse, making it impossible for them to talk until their anxiety is reduced.**

The sufferer of SM **wants** to talk, but **can't**. The longer SM goes un-noticed and unsupported, the more entrenched it usually becomes, and the sufferer often learns avoidance behaviour's as a strategy to reduce their own anxiety. Most of the time, the sufferers themselves **do not understand why they are unable to talk**. They can feel trapped in their silence and often feel **misunderstood, confused and troubled**.

SM occurs when the **sufferer's anxiety levels are high**, normally outside the home environment. parents are most often the last people to realise there is an issue with their child, because at home sufferers of SM can be chatty, fun and confident people. SM is *selective*, meaning it all **depends upon the sufferer's anxiety levels on any given day in any given situation**.

SM is a condition that can wave up and down, for example, what the sufferer may be able to do on Monday they may not be able to repeat on Tuesday. **Eye-contact is very difficult for SM sufferers to maintain**, in fact if you talk to a sufferer whilst limiting eye contact, even with your back turned, you are probably more likely to get a response!

People with SM **can struggle with non verbal communication** as well as verbal! Often sufferers of SM are **perfectionists**, and also suffer from **Sensory Processing Disorder** which seems to magnify under the increased anxiety. A sufferer of SM may find it just as difficult to hold up a card, their hand, make non verbal gestures, even writing and drawing as they do talking.

It is important to note that the **pleasantries are often the hardest words for SM sufferers to say!** Please, Thank you, Yes, No, Good-Morning, Good-bye etc, are all expected words, and **expectations can create anxiety**. The key here is **to take all pressure off of the sufferer to speak**.

Working with a young person who has Selective Mutism.

At VOICE, our philosophy is to take the pressure off the voice, reduce the anxiety, build the trust, and gradually start to ease the sufferer into more speaking situations. Once the anxiety is lowered, the voice can emerge. Please remember that **no two sufferers of SM are the same.** What one sufferer maybe able to do, another may not. It all depends on their anxiety triggers and levels.

It is important to realise that the student in your care with SM not only has to learn academically, but also has to **learn how to cope in social situations with a condition that makes them literally freeze.** Supporting this person and learning about their condition, working with them and their parents, and seeking outside support such as an RTLB or SLT who has experience in SM will not only help them academically, but it 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 note of your body language, making sure you are relaxed, comfortable and approachable. It's 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 doesn't matter how long that takes, that it's 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's 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's going to take time to build trust with them and a good bond. They will be conscious and worried about what's happening to them, which unfortunately serves to increase their anxiety, and therefore their SM. **The key is to do all you can to reduce the anxiety, making them feel as comfortable and secure as possible.**

It's 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 of their talking.** It's important to learn how to communicate with them indirectly - humour and open questions that are non-direct with options are good. **The Sliding In Technique**

There is technique called “sliding in” which has helped many people with SM to increase their comfort zones. **This is a form of gradual exposure, and it can be tailored to any age person.** It works by creating small steps that are manageable for the person, and increasing them as the person becomes more confident and able. This must be done at their pace, and every step with their consent, and with the parent's direction and input as well.

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 highly recommended, and a good plan should be put in place that everyone including the person with SM agrees 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 of their days at school/college. If the person with SM does have a friend that they can talk or whisper to, then it can make a big difference if this person can aide them. Of course, the friend should be happy with this set up. **It's 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 – this can make things more difficult.

Those with SM want more than anything to talk, and if they have someone they can talk to, this will give them confidence and you can use this key person to slide them into more talking situations.

A quick example of how a friend can be an invaluable aide is in group work. The friend can be paired to do one on one group work, at times, with the person with SM. All going well, you can slowly add in another individual. When communication builds up with a group of 3 then again you can subtly add another person in ... **This is a form of “sliding in,” and it has been proven to work when approached slowly at a pace that does not distress the person with SM.**

Things to be aware of

Remember that the “Freeze” response is a chemical response driven by anxiety, it's not something in the person's control. When it is triggered the whole person's body can become stiff and awkward. It is not necessarily only verbal communication that is affected by SM. For some people, writing and trying to communicate non-verbally, such as smiling, waving or pointing, can be just as challenging.

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

If a person with Selective Mutism can whisper, please allow them to do so. The vocal chords are restricted, and that's why the voice cannot come out louder. Usually, given time without pressure, the anxiety eventually reduces allowing the muscles to relax so the Voice can emerge naturally.

When the person does speak or whisper, attention on the fact can cause regression. Just talk to them normally, responding without any reaction to the fact they are talking.

Give allowances where things are particularly difficult for that person, such as sport or swimming etc. Selective Mutism is a condition, not a behaviour. When working with conditions, certain allowances are essential and should never be viewed as a privilege.

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

Those with SM are incredibly intuitive and sensitive, so if you are feeling anxious or stressed yourself, be sure to make the person know it is not because of them. Anxiety tends to feed anxiety, so the person with SM, without even realising it, can subconsciously pick up your tension and may sense that the teacher is unhappy with them. Unconsciously they come to the conclusion that it may be their fault, thus raising their anxiety and causing their muscles to tense or "Freeze."

We all get anxious sometimes, so just be open and communicate honestly about your feelings.

Those with SM are very often 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's important to understand that expressing yourself can be very difficult. Often those with SM are scared of 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. Over stimulation of the senses can heighten the anxiety, and you may notice the person looking uncomfortable or stiff. The best thing for them in this situation is to give the person an opportunity to go to a quiet place, where there is less stimulation and their anxiety levels can reduce. 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.

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, teacher to teacher. Their academic performance can very much depend on the anxiety levels, and it's important that you are aware of this when assessing their academic level!

This information has been compiled by VOICE for Selective Mutism to inform, support and to give some direction in working with SM.