

Selective Mutism

What is selective mutism?

In short, selective mutism (SM) is a fear of the expectation to speak.

Selective mutism is where your body has a panic response when you try to speak, meaning you are unable to speak, even if you really want to.

It occurs in 'select' situations - while the panic response may occur in a situation such as at work or school, you will find it easier to talk in a different environment such as at home. Most commonly, people with SM are completely comfortable talking at home, but may struggle at school or in other settings.

To get a diagnosis of selective mutism you must 'fail to speak consistently in one or more settings, despite being able to speak comfortably in a different setting for more than one month'. Research shows that about 9.7% of autistic children have selective mutism at any one time.

But selective mutism is not just about talking...

Selective mutism affects more than just talking. People with selective mutism can struggle with:

- Writing
- Making choices
- Sensory issues
- Being the centre of attention
- Going to the toilet
- Eating
- Separation anxiety

And more, depending on how much the phobia affects them.

Why does selective mutism include more than talking? (box on the side?)

Imagine you have a spider phobia. If it becomes really intense, you might become scared of a dark corner of a house *in case* there is a spider there. If it is even more intense than that, you might be scared of going into any house that looks dark *in case* there is a dark corner, *in case* there is a spider in that dark corner! You may have a spider phobia, but this may cause anxiety with going into dark rooms, or going outside because your phobia is so big.

Selective mutism works in the exact same way. While it is a phobia of the expectation to speak, if your phobia is big enough it makes other things difficult *in case* people seeing you do them means they will expect you to speak. Difficulties as a result of this can include:

- Writing
- Making choices
- Sharing opinions
- Showing facial expressions
- Moving your mouth
- Being the centre of attention

- Going to the toilet
- Eating

Expecting someone with SM to talk is the exact same as throwing a spider in the face of someone who has a spider phobia. It will cause intense anxiety and is likely to make their phobia worse. It is very important to not add pressure to speak.

Some people can speak in all situations, but they still have selective mutism - introducing low profile selective mutism

Low profile selective mutism is massively under-recognized, but it is still important to understand so young people with low profile SM get the support they need.

People with low profile selective mutism still have a fear of talking, but it is outweighed by the fear of consequences if they do not speak. People with low profile SM may be able to respond to others, but may be unable to initiate vocal interaction, or share their true feelings or emotions. They can initiate interaction in 'select situations' where they are comfortable.

Low profile selective mutism is one of the reasons why some young people are referred to as 'maskers'. They seem fine at school, but can have meltdowns and appear highly stressed when they return home. Due to their selective mutism, they may be unable to express how they feel during the day, so they cope with their discomfort until they are home and in a safe space.

Research shows that while 9.7% of autistic children have selective mutism, this is at a ratio of 1:4 high profile:low profile selective mutism.

Key concepts:

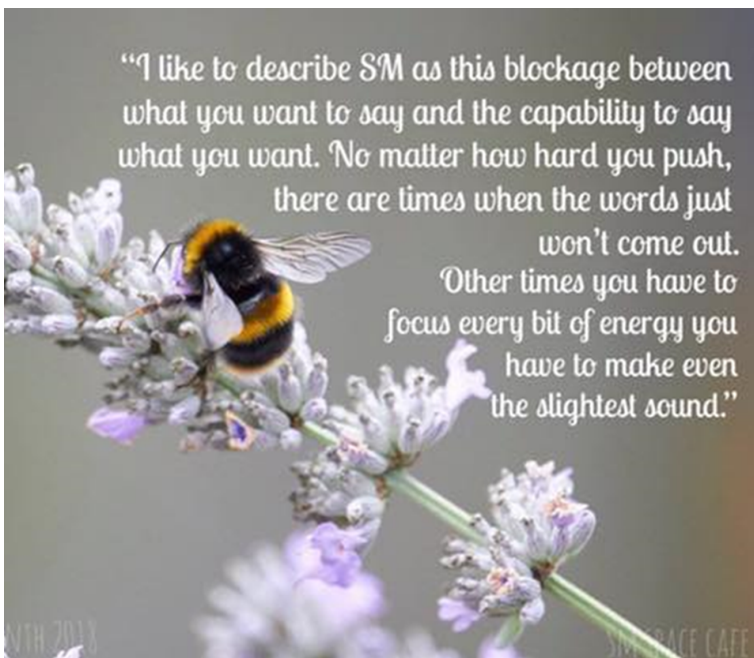
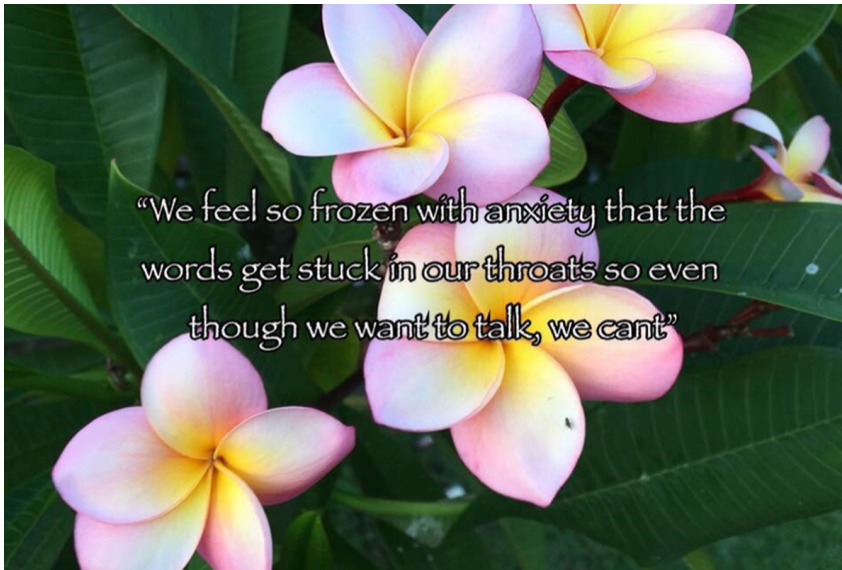
Selective mutism is not a choice

Here is the official definition of selective mutism from the SMiRA website:

“Selective Mutism, sometimes called Situational Mutism, is an anxiety-based mental health disorder which usually commences in early childhood. Those with SM speak fluently in some situations but remain consistently silent in others. They may have a blank expression, or appear 'frozen' when expected to speak.

It is important to understand that those with SM want to speak, but find themselves physically unable to do so due to their anxiety.”

- SMiRA website



Selective mutism has different triggers for everyone

Selective mutism is instinctive and set off by 'triggers', but these triggers are different for each person and there is no choice in what these triggers are (the person may not always know what their own triggers are).

Triggers may be generalised (other children, teachers) or specific (your aunt, a sibling, a school friend, school itself). Most people with SM have a mix of general and specific triggers. These triggers can be made up of people and places.

This means someone could be perfectly comfortable speaking at home, but if someone enters their home who triggers their phobia, they may be unable to speak until they leave.