

An Introduction to Selective Mutism

Before we begin, although this is referred to as 'selective mutism' many autistic people have suggested this does not accurately reflect reality. It is more often the case that there is no control over when they're going to be mute, and it's not something they can necessarily pick and choose or articulate reasons for accurately.

Selective mutism is defined as an anxiety disorder, whereby a person is unable to speak in certain social situations. It is not a case of choosing not too or refusing to speak, they are physically unable to speak. Selective mutism is not the same as being shy. Children who are shy will gain confidence over time, whereas a person who has selective mutism will remain silent.

The reason for this is believed to be because a 'freeze response' is initiated in the person and talking becomes impossible because of this. Selective mutism can be situational therefore, some people may talk in certain environments where they feel comfortable, while others won't speak at all. And this can change- again not necessarily by choice.

Selective mutism is usually identified during childhood, around the ages of 4-6 years. This is due to new demands that come into play, i.e. starting nursery and speaking to teachers. It can last into and throughout adulthood.

Possible causes of selective mutism:

- fear/phobia of talking to certain people
- social factors
- anxiety
- the environment- the situation / place they find themselves in
- the unknown - e.g. not knowing how long the conversation will last, not knowing where the conversation is leading speech and language difficulties
- sensory processing differences- in busy or anxious environments a person may 'shut down'

Some signs of selective mutism include:

- speaking at full volume when with familiar people
- struggling to speak to peers even if they want to
- whispering in social settings
- rarely, if ever, speaking in school
- being unable to ask to go to the bathroom
- using gestures rather than verbal
- appearing blank, frozen or expressionless when anxious
- moving awkwardly or stiffly when nervous or being watched
- finding it difficult to answer the register or say hello/goodbye etc
- reliant on others to speak for them

Diagnosis

To be referred for a diagnosis you can speak to your speech and language therapist (SALT) if you have one or speak to your GP who can refer you. You may also be referred to a mental health professional or educational psychologist.

A diagnosis is given according to specific guidelines, these are:

- they do not speak in specific situations, such as during school lessons or when they can be overheard in public
- they can speak normally in situations where they feel comfortable, such as when they're alone with parents at home, or in their empty classroom or bedroom
- their inability to speak to certain people has lasted for at least one month (two months in a new setting)
- their inability to speak interferes with their ability to function in that setting
- their inability to speak is not better explained by another behavioural, mental or communication disorder

Tips to support a person with selective mutism

- Try and get to the bottom of what is causing the person anxiety: Don't forget that it may be the smallest of things that to you seems insignificant.
- Do not pressurise them to speak or use bribes: This can increase already heightened anxiety levels.
- Be understanding of the person: Be patient and support them to speak in their own time and when they are ready. Ensure everybody around the person also follows this.
- Do not praise the person publicly unless you know the person likes this: This can cause embarrassment.
- Provide alternative ways to communicate and offer reassurance that using these methods is okay. There are many other ways to communicate that don't rely on verbal communication.
- Consider environmental changes to aid feelings of comfort and safety.
- Punishment should never be used as a response to someone not speaking as this will just connect negative feelings to using speech.
- Encourage self-expression through activities such as art, drama and music.
- Introduce role play: This could be with puppets; they may feel more comfortable and confident being another character and speaking through something such as a puppet.
- Make comments rather than asking direct questions e.g. 'I wonder if you did some painting today' rather than 'did you paint today?'

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- Make sure the child knows who to communicate with if they are unwell, feel unsafe or need something

For further information and resources, we would recommend visiting
<https://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/>

