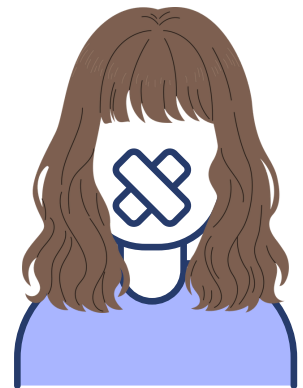


A guide to selective mutism

What is selective mutism?

Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety based mental health condition. It usually begins in childhood, but with early intervention, the prognosis for recovery is good. However, in some cases, it may persist into adulthood. It is sometimes referred to as situational mutism. Selective and situation mean the same thing, but because the individual does not have control over it, 'selective' mutism can be an unhelpful label. It is very situation-based.



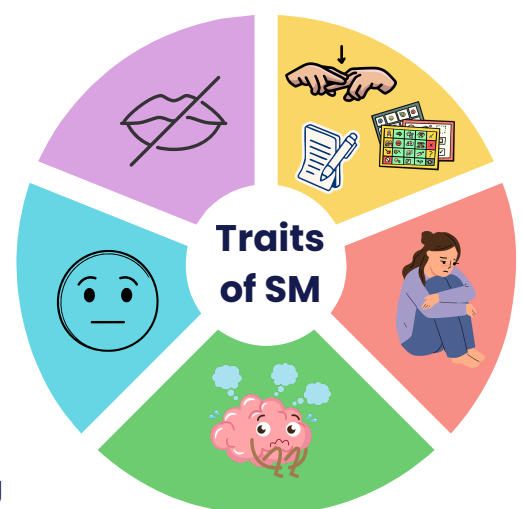
People with SM can speak fluently in some situations but remain silent in others. They may have a blank expression or appear 'frozen' when expected to speak. It is important to understand that they want to speak, but find themselves physically unable to do so due to their anxiety.

Those with less severe forms of SM may become confident enough to communicate through gestures, such as shaking or nodding their head to agree or disagree with what's being said. However, with more severe SM, they may shy away from using alternative forms of communication, for fear of being pressured into talking.

It is estimated that SM affects around 1 in 140 children. It's more common in girls and children who have recently migrated from their country of birth. SM can occur alongside autism, but there's no evidence to suggest that one causes the other.

Traits of selective mutism

- Speaks freely in comfortable situations, but can be non-verbal or minimally verbal in specific social situations
- Mutism can fluctuate depending on where they are and who they are interacting with. It can vary from day to day.
- Shows anxiety in other areas, such as social anxiety and separation anxiety.
- May rely on nonverbal communication.
- Appears as shy and withdrawn
- May be lonely, as starting conversations and making friends is very difficult
- Have speech or language delays
- Have difficulty using the bathroom or eating when not at home (eg. at school)
- Have a low mood or seems disinterested in daily life
- May have muscle tension and poor coordination
- Seeks reassurance from those close to them



- SM may interfere with educational or occupational achievement.
- Can appear rude for not answering questions or greeting someone, and by avoiding eye contact
- May have a blank expression when feeling anxious

How to support in your unit

People with SM often find it hard to pursue hobbies and interests because of the expectations to talk, but that shouldn't prevent them from being accepted and being able to have a go. They just need the right people around to support and encourage them.

- Complete an adjustment plan, communication passport and wellbeing plan after speaking with the member/family
- Check in regularly with parents/guardians as to how things are going. Their child will be able to speak to them at home and they can then relay information to you.
- Find out their preferred method of communication. This may be using gestures, pictorial symbols or written communication. A visual timetable may help.
- Give them time to acclimatise to the new group or setting, and allow a parent/carer to stay with them for a few sessions. They may also just want to watch before taking part.
- When introducing yourself, let them know that you understand they find it hard to speak sometimes, but that's OK with you and you look forward to hearing their voice when they are ready. If other children comment and ask why X doesn't speak, tell them they can speak, and when they are comfortable, they will do so.
- Treat them the same way as everyone else. Include them in conversations and give them opportunities to interact in non-verbal ways.
- Try to learn to interpret their body language, as this can tell you a lot about how they are feeling.
- Never pressurise them to speak or insist on eye contact, as this will only make their anxiety worse.
- Communication may be easier in a 1:1 conversation rather than a group.
- Try using closed questions that only need Yes/No answers, so they can respond with gestures.
- If they do verbalises at some point, don't draw attention to it, just carry on as if it is the most normal thing in the world!
- Be extra vigilant of peer-to-peer interactions and watch out for any signs of possible bullying or exclusion.
- Access further support if needed

Remember you can get help with the costs for inclusive materials and resources. This may be available from your country, region, or with the accessible guiding grant from HQ.

Useful contacts

selectivemutism.org.uk/

SMiRA

Selective Mutism
Information & Research
Association

