

Understand.

- Lilly Tapper

Think of your biggest anxiety. Imagine having it everyday. Is it heights? Is it elevators? Is it tests? With Selective Mutism, the anxiety is speaking. Selective Mutism (SM) is a disorder that occurs when people have anxiety about talking in certain public situations, such as at school or with strangers; however, they usually have little difficulty talking at home. This anxiety can cause people to seem “paralyzed” or “shut down” when asked to talk. October is Selective Mutism Awareness Month.

Children with Selective Mutism can go years without talking in school. Signs start to appear in a child at around three or four years of age. SM affects 7 out of every 1,000 people. Some people with SM might use gestures or facial expressions to get away with not being able to communicate verbally. In many classes, students are graded on their participation in class. There are always those kids in class that everyone knows as shy and who do not like to contribute to discussions. Some of these shy kids are actually shy, and some are not. SM is more extreme than just being shy: people are physically incapable of speaking when they are in situations that cause them anxiety. These students are penalized for not being able to speak. This is not right, and it is a reason why awareness of Selective Mutism is so important.

Selective Mutism can be overcome with various forms of treatment, including behavioral therapy. Exposure and positive reinforcement are also used to build confidence and learn to overcome SM in certain situations. If no progress is made in therapy, or the Selective Mutism is severe, medication can be prescribed as a form of treatment. The downside of not receiving treatment for SM is that people can experience years of suffering and miss out on age appropriate activities and growth. Selective Mutism is a disorder that a person will have for life. People can begin to overcome SM, but it will never completely go away. Others may be surprised that a person has SM because they do not seem to show the signs of it later in life. A common myth is that Selective Mutism is a form of autism. SM can be confused with autism because people with both disorders lack eye contact or have a blank expression. Selective Mutism is not on the autism spectrum because Selective Mutism is the inability to speak, while autism is the lack of social communication skills.

In the past, Selective Mutism was known as “Elective Mutism” because it was believed that children chose to be mute and it was caused by bad parenting. Today, experts suspect that SM is caused by genetics. It has been concluded that one or both of a child's parents had some form of anxiety when they were a kid. If you run into a child who can not speak to you, understand that it may not be his or her choice whether to speak or not. The child simply cannot speak, and the words just cannot make it out. The worst thing to do to children with SM is to bribe them or pressure them to speak. The pressure can “shut them down” more. People with SM face their anxiety everyday, and for this they have a lot of bravery.

Every year people celebrate a holiday in October. The tradition is to go up to people's doors and say “Trick or Treat” to receive candy. Imagine what this is like for children with SM on

Halloween. They want to participate in the tradition, but they “shut down” and are unable to speak. There is always that one house that forces its visitors to say, “Trick or Treat,” or they are not allowed to get candy. Keep in mind that people with Selective Mutism do not choose not to speak, they are incapable of it.

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