

Selective Mutism

Definition:

Selective mutism (SM) is a psychiatric condition often caused by extreme shyness or anxiety of speaking in certain speaking situations. Children with SM are capable of talking, and often talk at home and around familiar people.

Description:

Individuals with SM are capable of speaking, but their shyness/anxiety of speaking in certain situations stops them from talking (e.g., at school, around unfamiliar people). Many people are shy at times; however, those with SM demonstrate extreme shyness. Many children with SM will talk at home when around family members or around familiar people. Sometimes SM co-exists with an expressive language disorder or bilingual language background which may cause a child to be anxious of speaking and embarrassment of speaking.

Characteristics:

- Extreme shyness with unknown people and in situations where the individual is expected to speak.
- Requires more time to warm up to people than most children
- Will often speak at home around family and around familiar people
- Makes limited eye contact

Causes:

- SM is thought to be caused by extreme shyness or anxiety in speaking situations. Shyness is considered to be a genetic trait.
- SM can be caused by anxiety related to an expressive language disorder or a bilingual language background

Diagnosing and Treating This Disorder:

A trained professional who has experience working with selective mutism (such as a psychologist or a counselor) can diagnose selective mutism. This professional will collect information about the individual's developmental history, family history, behavioral concerns, medical history, and potential stressors in the individual's environment. Treatment of SM works on getting to the root of the individual's anxiety and works on changing behaviors. If the individual's anxiety is thought to be caused by a communication impairment (speech or language impairment), he or she should also be evaluated by a speech-language pathologist. Although a speech-language pathologist may be involved in the treatment of SM, the individual should be seen by the proper professional to address psychological causes of SM. Sometimes medicine to treat anxiety is used. The earlier a child is diagnosed with and treated for SM, the easier it is to change avoidance behaviors.

Resources:

Websites:

- Selective Mutism Group <http://www.selectivemutism.org/>
- PubMed Health <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002513/>

References:

Selective Mutism (n.d.). In *A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia online*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002513/>

Frequently Asked Questions about Selective Mutism. (n.d.). *Selective Mutism Group*. Retrieved from: <http://www.selectivemutism.org/faq>