

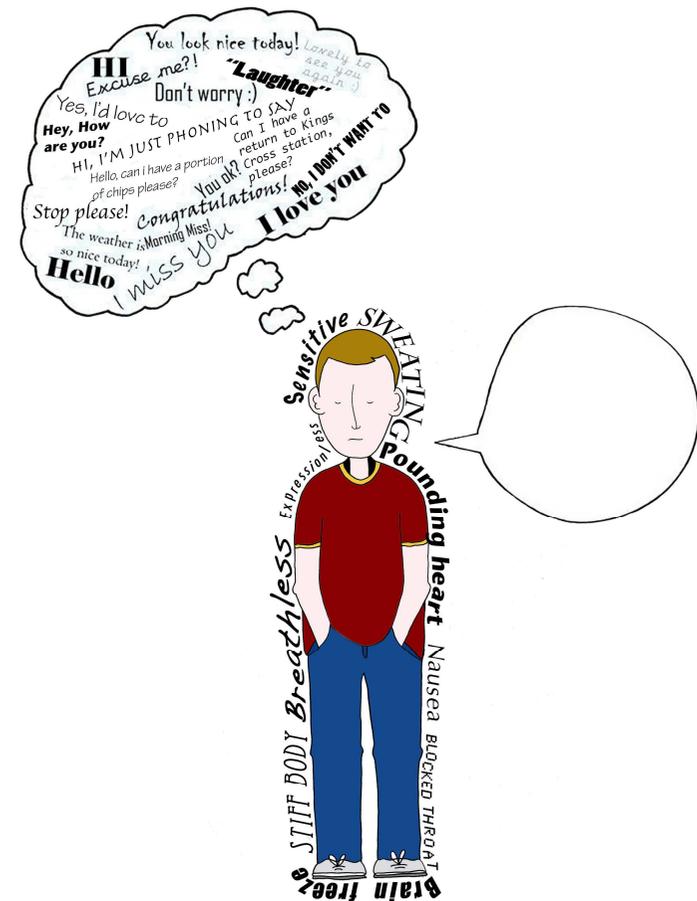
Further reading:

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual,
by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens
Speechmark Publishing, Milton Keynes

First Steps Out Of Anxiety,
by Dr Kate Middleton,
Lion Books, Oxford

Many thanks to Lizzie Helps and Matt Thompson for
their artwork

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When the words won't come out

A booklet about selective mutism
for teenagers and adults

Please read this booklet if you can speak in some situations but not others and if *any* of the following are true:

- you feel physically frozen or paralysed when you try to talk
- you want help to speak more freely
- it's easier not to talk
- you have given up hope of talking without anxiety
- you are sick of people trying to 'help'
- you believe things are fine as they are
- you feel let down by professionals in health or education services
- you want to know more about selective mutism

You may have struggled with talking for many years. This can affect the choices you make and your ability to influence others and be the person you really are. You may have reached the point where you are desperate for help or ready to give up. Either way, it's impossible for you to make an informed decision about what to do next until you understand what you are dealing with.

This booklet summarises what selective mutism (SM) is, how it messes with your mind, how it can be overcome and the most important change you can make TODAY.

What is SM?

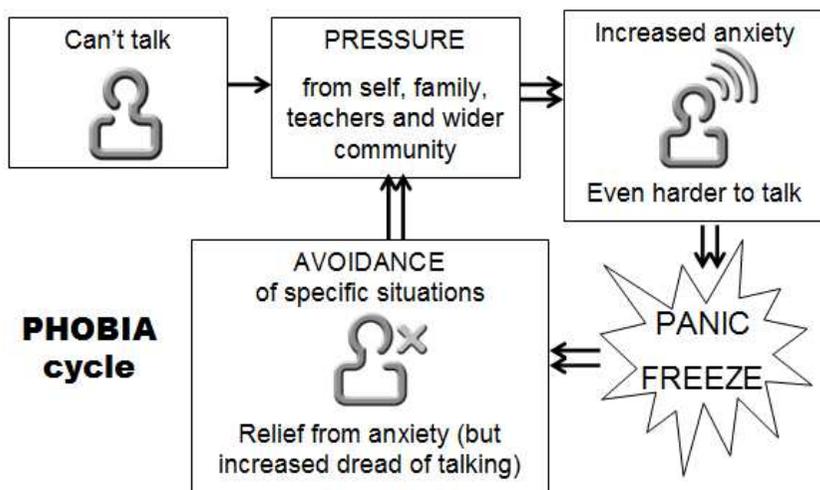
SM is a condition where individuals are able to talk freely in situations where they are relaxed and relatively free of anxiety, but become frozen and unable to speak in other situations. This may be accompanied by all the signs of extreme anxiety – racing heart, muscular tension, tight chest and throat, difficulty breathing... or a dull feeling of nothingness because you know you won't be able to speak, so what's the point of even trying?

SM is often described as a fear of speaking and you may identify with intense feelings of dread or panic at the thought of having to speak to certain people. Or you may say you're not afraid of *speaking*; you're afraid of looking an idiot when you can't speak and terrified you won't be able to speak when you need to.

It all boils down to the same thing. SM is an anxiety disorder and people with SM have developed a phobia of talking to, or being overheard by, certain people.

Normally when people have phobias, their families and the general public are sympathetic and don't force them to do the things they have a phobia about. It may seem odd - after all, some phobias are pretty weird, like phobias of buttons, kittens or bananas - but we realise that the person is not *refusing* to board a plane or eat bananas or whatever. They just cannot, under any circumstances, physically make themselves do it. It's not a choice; if they had any choice at all, they'd choose not to have the stupid phobia.

So the main obstacle for you is that most people have no idea that SM is a phobia and do all the things that make phobias *worse*. They put all sorts of pressure on you to speak and make you feel really bad about not speaking (as if you didn't feel bad enough already).



Sadly, the longer you live with SM, the more it threatens to alter your self-image. You're an intelligent person; you know things don't happen without a reason. So, in the absence of any other explanation, you start to believe what other people are saying about you; that you are shy, different, rude, difficult, stubborn or not worth the bother. These are simply the opinions of individuals who *got it wrong*.

Had they known the truth, they would have used different words: guarded, scared, hurt, determined, focused, a survivor.

Even if you reject the opinion of others, you may create your own reasons to justify your fear; you hate your voice, you can't think quickly enough, you are poor at conversation. (By the way, *everyone* hates the sound of their own voice, and *no-one* can think quickly or communicate well when they are anxious!).

Inevitably, other people are affected by your silence. Many assume you don't want to talk; they do not know how to approach you; they worry about doing the wrong thing. And so... they ignore you. That can have a devastating effect. Unless you are one of the lucky people who have always felt secure in their family's unconditional love and the social acceptance of friends, you may come to the wrong conclusion and think that other people find you stupid or dull, unlikeable or unattractive, or a misfit.

And perhaps the greatest untruth of all... Nagging away at you is the feeling that *you ought to be doing better*. But no-one arranged for you to have the equivalent of swimming lessons or extra Maths, so how were you supposed to improve?

Over the years, all this can amount to a hefty burden of confusion, resentment, guilt, shame and isolation which chips away at your self-esteem, intensifies your negative associations with communication and distorts your perception of yourself and others.

In short, you've already had to deal with far more than most people you grew up with. You are stronger than

you think. None of this is your fault – life isn't always fair and you have been extremely unlucky to miss out on the support and understanding which is now available to young children with SM. You are as unique, likeable and valuable as everyone else. And the good news is, phobias can be cured! *At any age!*

How do phobias start?

You know how a particular smell or piece of music can trigger past memories and sensations? Powerful feelings are commonly linked to something in the environment, and that environmental trigger can generate the same feelings years later. It's different for everyone, but in the case of SM, there will have been a time in your childhood when feelings of extreme distress, despair or panic became associated with being expected to talk; e.g. you desperately wanted your parents and a stranger tried to comfort you; or you were told off by a teacher. You may have been too young at the time to talk back, or you may have been too ill or alarmed to talk (the 'freeze' response).

Since then, similar people have acted as a trigger, so that when they try to talk to you, the same ghastly feelings have flooded back with the sensation of being unable to speak. Even though these feelings are recalled from the *past*, people with phobias experience the *current* situation as unbearably threatening, and do all they can to avoid re-living those childhood sensations. You may have discovered for example, that if you stay indoors all day and never answer the phone you will be spared those feelings. This is the

ultimate price you pay. Through sheer bad luck and sub-conscious association, SM has made you a prisoner in your personal comfort zone.

The key to your freedom...

...lies in understanding how your brain works.



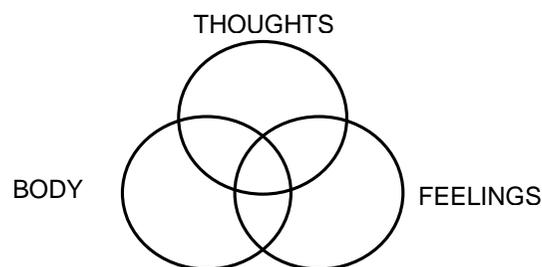
The **amygdala** controls our automatic fear reflex. Its role is to keep us safe and alert. It prepares our bodies to cope with danger by triggering the release of stress hormones which cause *physical reactions* such as increased heart rate, rapid shallow breathing, rush of blood to arms and legs, sweating and muscular tension.

The **limbic system** interprets physical and chemical changes in our bodies and labels them as *emotions* or *feelings*.

The **frontal cortex** is where rational, conscious *thought* takes place. One of the effects of stress is 'brain freeze'. It's impossible to think rationally and our minds go blank.

These three areas are closely interlinked and influence

each other without us realising it. It can be very hard to separate thoughts, feelings and physical sensations in order to know what are real and what are illusions.



For example, you may find your heart racing and feel nervous or afraid, but it could be coffee, energy drinks or nicotine that increased your heart rate, rather than stress. Or you might be good at driving but think so much about what people will say if you fail your test that you are too tense to put the car in gear – unhelpful thoughts like this have a way of coming true!

And in the case of selective mutism, the conviction that you cannot speak to certain people triggers the amygdala's *Fight-Flight-Freeze* reaction - your body goes into overdrive and you feel as if you are in great danger; it truly is the most horrible sensation. You have three options: *attack* (we usually save that for those closest to us!); *escape* (no wonder you do all you can to avoid feeling like this); or *freeze*. Your body stiffens, your throat closes up, you're stopped in your tracks.

Your feelings are REAL, but the threat to you is IMAGINARY. That doesn't mean you're going mad –

it's just how phobias work.

How to switch off your amygdala...

Anyone who's got over a phobia will know that once the amygdala is switched off, it's like something has lifted. You're *free* and the same trigger no longer has any effect. There are several proven ways to achieve this:

- **Graded exposure.** By facing your fear in tiny, *bearable* steps, your automatic brain learns through repeated experience that there is no need to sound the alarm. You plan the steps and stay in control.
- **A fresh start.** By anchoring your fears to specific people (e.g. people in your last school or job) rather than people in general, it is possible to feel comfortable around strangers and move to a new environment with a clean slate.
- **Complete relaxation.** It's impossible to feel stressed and relaxed at the same time. So when you are distracted by enjoyable activities which demand physical release and concentration, you are less likely to be plagued by unhelpful thoughts. Your body will relax; you'll breathe more deeply; you'll laugh; you'll say something without thinking. When this happens try to stay calm; stay in control; keep the words flowing... Tell yourself it's safe to talk.

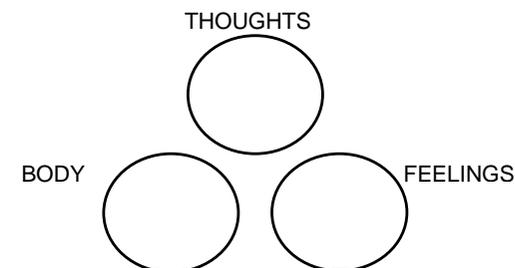
What else will help?

We can make the link between THOUGHTS, BODY and FEELINGS work to our advantage:

- When you smile, even a fake smile, your brain releases feel-good chemicals making both you and those around you feel better. Do it often!
- Tension produces anxiety so regularly check your body for tightness and rigidity. Try to unclench your muscles, go floppy, sink back into the chair, relax...
- Slow deep calming breaths will slow down your heart-rate and make you feel calmer (try it in the dentist's chair!)
- Exercise, eat healthily and get enough sleep.
- Summon up positive memories and emotions from the past, your happiest, proudest, strongest moments. Relive them for a few minutes and things that usually worry you seem less important.
- Act and *look* confident and you will start to *feel* confident. It's not the other way round!
- Recognise that your negative associations with speaking are memories and beliefs from the *past*. They belong to a small innocent person, not the older, wiser person you are now.
- Whenever you can, practice humming quietly with your lips together – feel the vibration in your throat which means your vocal cords are relaxed. If you feel your throat tighten, loosen it by breathing out with a hum. As you hum, you release your voice.

The most important change you can make TODAY

Take your time to re-read this booklet, then use your conscious brain to start to separate and override the automatic cycle of thoughts, sensations and feelings:



- Rather than focus on the emotions of fear, dread or panic, tune into your body and notice what is *happening*. e.g. 'My heart is racing; my shoulders are raised and tense; my rib-cage is rigid; my throat muscles are tightening; I'm holding my breath'.
- Tell yourself that your body is producing unpleasant physical sensations, but you can handle it; they weren't triggered by a real threat. The sensations will subside if you take slow deep calming breaths and repeat '*This will pass; my fear is imaginary*'.
- Note and challenge unhelpful thoughts; are they true? Or have they come from years of inaccurate information and sub-conscious association? You have done nothing wrong; you have as many good qualities and talents as the next person; it is OK to make mistakes; people are more interested in their own lives and insecurities than yours.

Of course it isn't easy to make any of the changes in this booklet without support and they will take time. But just *believing* they are possible is the best start you can make. Finding a friend, relative, mentor or professional who is willing to help you take things further is a close second...

Get them to read this booklet too and then you won't need to explain it all.