

Episode 17 – A Message for Teens and Young Adults with Selective Mutism

Hello and welcome to the Selective Mutism HELP, Home Educational Learning Program, Podcast, my name is Kelly, and I will be your host. This podcast aims to give you the help you need to support the person in your life affected by Selective Mutism. In this episode I wanted to send a message to all the teens and young adults that have been on their own journey of overcoming their SM. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 17 of the Selective Mutism HELP Home Educational Learning Program podcast. My name is Kelly, and I am a parent of a child with Selective Mutism. Being that I am a parent and not a medical professional, this podcast is for informational purposes only. Recently I've had some parents of teens and young adults with Selective Mutism reach out to me for support. The concerns have been the same – the teen or young adult won't accept any help. These parents feel stuck and are worried for their child's future. My heart goes out to them, but most of all, my heart breaks for the teens and young adults that have been struggling with their SM since they were little. To the teens and young adults that are listening, I'm sorry for all that you have been through. I'm sorry for those around you in your younger years not knowing about SM for one reason or another and not being able to support you the way you should have been supported. Unfortunately, SM isn't as well-known as some of the other diagnoses out there which is no fault of yours. I'm sorry people just assumed you were shy. I'm sorry for the kids who were in your face asking you why you don't talk. I'm sorry for the bullies who may have done mean things to you in order to get you to make a sound. I'm sorry you couldn't tell your teacher just how smart you were and may have been held back a grade because they had no idea how to accommodate you. I'm sorry you may not have gotten the job you wanted or won over your crush because they couldn't see you for the person you really are.

I want to tell you that Selective Mutism does not define you. You are strong, you are courageous, you are funny, and smart, and a beautiful person inside and out. But, for some reason you have a very protective amygdala. Your brain is doing everything it can to protect you and one thing it is trying to protect you from is talking to others. I'm not going to lie or sugar coat it, it sucks. As a parent it was extremely difficult to see our daughter's whole self change on a dime the second someone unfamiliar came over or she stepped foot into school. I hated that I couldn't get to the part of the brain that was causing all of this to happen and make it instantly change.

Let me tell you a little more about the amygdala. This is the part of the brain that is housed in the "old-part" of the brain, you may here it referred to as the reptilian brain. It's been a part of the brain since the time of the cavemen. It is the part of the brain that told them to run away from saber tooth tigers so they wouldn't get eaten. As time passed and there were no more saber tooth tigers to run away from, the amygdala still needed to protect us. Apparently it feels the need to protect some of us from talking with others. When a new person enters your environment, it sends a signal to the rest your body that you are in danger. It causes your heart to race to pump more blood to your muscles so you can run, it slows down your digestion causing stomach aches, it fogs your brain so you can't think of an answer to a question that is asked. It does all of this because it thinks you are in danger. But, I'm sure you are well aware that you really aren't in danger. So here you are logically understanding that you aren't in danger, but the old-part of the brain overrides any logical thinking that is going on and completely takes over. As this has occurred day after day, year after year, you get accustomed

to listening to the amygdala and doing what it says. It says “don’t move, don’t say a word, you are in danger, look away, wait it out, eventually they will leave or someone will answer for you, trust me.” And you listen because you don’t know what the alternative is going to be.

There is an alternative. You can defeat your amygdala. Will it be easy? Nope. Will it be an extremely uncomfortable process? Unfortunately, yes. Will it be worth it in the end to show people the real you? To achieve your goals and to be your best self? Absolutely! So where do you start? You may be thinking I’m going to say “just go talk to someone!” but that is not it at all. You have to start doing some self-reflecting. Figure out the ways you can currently communicate in the various situations of your life. When you order fast food, do order from an app, go in to order at a kiosk, order through the drive thru, or order at the counter? At school are you able to nod your head to yes/no questions your teachers ask, can you answer a question if given a choice, will you volunteer an answer if you know for sure you are right? When relatives come over do you retreat to your room? Do you share the same space with them, but not engage with them? Will you play a game or eat with them? Will you nod your head or answer a choice question from them? Once you have a starting point, figure out the ultimate goal and makes steps to achieve it. Many professionals will use the image of a ladder. Each rung of the ladder is a step towards the top and at the top is your goal.

As an example, let’s break down ordering food from McDonald’s. You’ve probably learned by now that apps like Door Dash, Grub Hub, or Uber Eats can easily get you the food you want without having to have interact with anyone. What do you think this is doing to your amygdala? I can tell you that it is strengthening it. It is thinking it is protecting you from all potential harm by ordering from an app. Just because it feels “right” doesn’t mean it is right for you as a person. Let’s find ways to work up our ladder with the end goal being able to order from a counter. You’ve already mastered ordering from an app and having the delivery driver leave it at your door. For the first step of the ladder, try physically taking the food from the delivery person. Taking something from someone is a form of communication. You could also work on eye contact while taking it from them. Now, if eye contact is too hard, which is can be when your amygdala is telling you not to, look at their hands, then maybe their shoulders, then their chin, then nose, then between their eyes, then finally into their eyes. You could do this all at one interaction or break it up into different opportunities with each delivery. As long as you try it and prove to yourself you did it, that’s what matters. Take every small victory as a huge win. Now, when you start feeling comfortable taking things from the delivery driver and are making great eye contact, the next step would be to go to a McDonald’s and order from a kiosk. Think of it as one big app. You are still ordering from a machine, but now you are in a restaurant. This could fire up your amygdala and it may tell you not to because “what if you accidentally bump into someone and they expect you to say sorry? What if you see someone from school and they come over to talk to you? What if they are out of your favorite item and you have to come up with a different choice on the spot?” It’s a lot. The amygdala will try all sorts of nasty tricks to try to keep you safe. But, you can control those thoughts. You could come up with best case, worst case, and most likely case for each scenario. When you start allowing your new brain, your mammalian brain, or the pre-frontal cortex to do the thinking, the amygdala relaxes a little bit. It will give you the opportunity to try. When you go, order your food, and get your food from the person at the counter, your amygdala will realize you were safe the whole time and those “what-if” questions will go away. Now, when you’ve mastered ordering from the kiosk, next try ordering through the drive-thru. Practice before you go. Rehearse in the mirror, say your order over and over again as you drive there. Keep saying it

out loud as you are waiting for your turn. The more you practice, the more the brain is going to know which words to use even if you start to feel nervous. Take a deep breath as you drive up to the intercom and say your order. Then smile, you did it! Take that amygdala! Keep doing this way of ordering until you feel comfortable. Then, you will be at the last step of your ladder which is ordering at the counter. Just like you practiced saying your order over and over again to prepare for ordering in the drive thru, do it again to prepare for ordering with an actual person. Practice with your friends, practice with your parents, practice to the stranger in the car next to you – they won't know what you are doing, but you will be strengthening your brain. Just as you did in the drive thru, take a deep breath before ordering. Then, say the same words you've been practicing, trust yourself and your brain to do it. Take a moment to congratulate yourself! Share your experience with someone who understands this huge accomplishment! You can email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com or join one of the supportive SM Facebook groups – I'll leave links in the episode notes.

You've probably also learned by now that McDonald's isn't the healthiest fast food restaurant so ordering from there that many times to practice beating your amygdala at their own game may have some unwanted affects. But, that is just an example. There are a lot of fast food places, restaurants, and coffee shops that opportunities to order via a kiosk or drive thru. Another option would be that you order something small each time you go, it doesn't have to be a huge meal, just an opportunity to practice.

The main take away I'd like for you to have based on the example, is knowing there is always a way to break down communication. Communication isn't just being able to speak to someone. That the final objective and not the place to start. By self evaluating and self reflecting you will be able to see where you can start. But the biggest part of this, is starting. The more you avoid the different ways to communicate, the more the amygdala is going to be strengthened and the less likely you think you're going to be able to do something uncomfortable. Many professionals will tell you, get comfortable being uncomfortable. The tightness in your throat or cramping in your stomach, isn't permanent. You can get through it if you try. Again, you aren't at fault for any of this, but you can make the change. You can achieve your goals one small step at a time.

If you are interested in learning how to break down the different types of communication or need advice on how to navigate a certain situation, please reach out to me. If I can't help you, I'll do my best to point you in the direction of someone who can. I'm here for you whether you want to email back and forth, message back and forth, or do a zoom call. However, you want to be supported in working up the communication ladder, I'll be here for you with no judgement, no forcing you to do something you aren't ready for. I'll be here as a guide, a cheerleader, and a friend. My email is smhelp2020@gmail.com or you can reach out to me via Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn.

I also wanted to give you a discount on a past Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Online Summit. In the Fall of 2021 I hosted a summit all about helping teens and young adults with SM. There were 9 interviews with both professionals that work with teens and young adults as well as actual people that have worked towards overcoming their Selective Mutism. Because I want you to have this resource, I am offering my biggest discount yet. You'll save 50% off the price of lifetime access to the entire Fall 2021 Summit with the coupon code `podcast17`. For less than \$40, you'll have access to information from top professionals around the world to give information that pertains directly to you. I hope you take advantage of this offer and please reach out to me at anytime. Take care.