

Episode 27 “Overcoming” SM

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’ll be talking about how this past year has gone since our daughter has “overcome” Selective Mutism and what the term “overcome” means to me. Let’s get started.

Welcome to episode 27 of the Selective Mutism HELP Home Educational Learning Program podcast. My name is Kelly, and I am a parent of a child who had struggled with Selective Mutism for half her life. Being that I am a parent and am still working towards becoming a certified professional, this podcast is for informational purposes only. In February of 2022, almost 4 years since our daughter was diagnosed with Selective Mutism, we felt she was ready to wean off her anti-anxiety medication and see if all the hard work she had been putting in had paid off. We had tried weaning her off medication before which didn’t go well, so we weren’t sure what would happen this time. We weaned her off slowly over a 4 week period of time and gave her a vitamin and mineral supplement during the process as well. We made sure to tell her teacher what was going on so they could keep an eye on how things were going in school and to let us know if she began regressing.

To our excitement, she didn’t show any signs of regressing! As I reflect on this past year and think about our vacations to see family, our daughter meeting new people in our neighborhood, her starting a new school year, and starting new sports, I can picture her smiling and answering questions from people she hadn’t seen in a long time or people she had just met. I can hear her laughing with her friends and telling them the plan for the day. I think about the silly videos her and her friends put together. All of these thoughts bring a smile to my face and a tear to my eye. Has she done it? Has she overcome Selective Mutism?

To me, she has. So what does it mean to me when I say that she has overcome Selective Mutism? To me it means that when she goes to school, I know she will be able to talk to her friends easily. I know that if she has a substitute teacher, she is going to be able to participate and communicate verbally with that teacher. I know that when we get together with family for the holidays, she is going to be able to make eye contact and answer questions that people ask her. I know that if she is at a friend’s house and someone isn’t being kind to her, she is going to tell the parents or stand up for herself. If you would have asked me 5 years ago if I thought she would ever be able to do any of those things, I would have said no. Her future seemed so bleak, so lonely, and so unknown. It was hard to imagine this scared, fearful little girl would ever have a chance to sleepover at a friend’s house or cheer and scream for her flag football teammates. But now we can see all of these amazing moments happening without the need for medication, without the need for interventions, without the need for pep talks or reward charts. She has done it!

Does this mean she doesn’t have anxiety anymore? No. She will probably always have some form of generalized anxiety, but I don’t think it will manifest into SM. Does this mean she will initiate conversation with everyone she meets? Absolutely not. I don’t initiate conversation with everyone I meet – it isn’t necessary. I feel that she is able to initiate when it makes sense

to her. Does this mean she is the loudest in the room? Not always. She still has a quiet speaking voice, especially when meeting someone for the first time. Does this mean she can answer every type of question from anyone? Not always. She may not be able to answer an open-ended question right away from someone she just met. For example, a few weeks ago we were fortunate to meet in-person with one of my parent coaching clients. Our daughter had just gotten done with gymnastics and we met up with my client at a doughnut shop. The mom we met with asked my daughter "What kind of dance are you in?" since she was wearing a leotard and a pair of shorts. My daughter looked at me and I was able to read her mind – it was saying "She asked me what kind of dance I'm in, but I'm not in dance, I'm in gymnastics, so what do I say to her?" I used a technique we used time and time again which was turn the open-ended question into a forced choice question. So I asked my daughter "are you in dance or gymnastics" and without hesitation she answered gymnastics. To someone analyzing that interaction under a microscope could argue that she hasn't overcome SM because she wasn't able to answer the question. But, her being unable to answer that question in that moment didn't cause her to shut down. It didn't cause her to not answer the question when it was asked in a different way. I, being the person who worked hard right alongside her, could recognize where the inability to answer was coming from and gave her the opportunity to use her voice. So, I guess maybe we've both overcome Selective Mutism. I have overcome the need to rescue her, I have overcome the feeling of guilt, the feeling of hopelessness, the feeling of despair. I have overcome the fear that she would never live a normal life. I have overcome the feeling of panic when she didn't answer someone right away. We've overcome so much.

We still have some work ahead of us. Things are always changing, just like any child as they get older, and we have to adapt and support her when things happen. We had a great conversation the other night. Earlier in the evening we were playing hangman with an adolescent client of mine and it was my daughter's turn to think of a word for my client to guess letters to spell out the word. She had a really hard time picking a word. This was an opportunity to explain to my client that sometimes when someone has anxiety and they have to choose something, it can be hard to pick. It could be that their mind may be worried about picking the "wrong" thing – in this case the wrong word for Hangman. That night as we were lying in bed talking, my daughter said "well, I have anxiety, like you said, so that's why I can't do some things." I said "everybody has anxiety, it's what we allow that anxiety to do to us that matters. You don't have to let your anxiety control you, you can learn to control your anxiety." She had this wonderful "Ah-ha" moment and I could feel a sense of relief lift off her.

As you think about your own child, or about yourself, and are saying there is no way they will or I will ever overcome SM, think about what overcoming means to you. Does overcoming SM mean that you have to be the loudest person in the room or be able to talk to a stranger at any moment or raise your hand to answer every question a teacher asks you or volunteer to do a project at work? I don't think it does. Find what overcoming means to you. Does it mean you can respond when someone asks you a question without shutting down? Does it mean you can ask for directions if you're lost or need to find an item in a store? Does it mean being able to have meaningful relationships with people that matter to you and being able to show them who you really are? In my eyes you can be a "quiet" person and still overcome SM. You can be reserved in big groups and still overcome SM. You can live with anxiety – we all do! You can overcome your SM!

Recording these podcasts has been such an amazing experience for me. I was hesitant when my husband suggested I do this as I didn't know how it would be received. I could have let my own anxiety stand in the way of me taking this on, but I didn't. I pushed through and it has been one of the best experiences of my life. Thank you to each and every one of you who have listened to some or all of my podcasts. Thank you to those that have sent me messages after listening. Thank you to those that have trusted me to guide you along your particular journey. It saddens me to say this, but this will be my last podcast specific to SM. I will be putting more time into understanding how we can help those with SM change from the inside out. How can we find safety within our own skin to be able to find safety in the outside world? My hope is to start doing research into a different treatment modality to give those with SM an evidence-based, proven way to help them reach inner safety which will give them a better opportunity to communicate with those outside of their safe space. If you are interested in learning about what I'll be working on, make sure you follow me on Facebook by searching for Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. or join the SM Help Community of Support private group on Facebook. You can also email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com This isn't goodbye, I am still here for you and I will continue doing everything I can to give every person the safety to communicate. Take care.