



End mental health  
discrimination

# Spotlight on...

**Creating inclusive working  
environments for people  
with communication anxiety  
and selective mutism**

**This document has been created in collaboration with a See Me volunteer who has lived experience of selective mutism and communication anxiety. We want to show our appreciation for their input and leadership in the creation of this resource.**

Understanding and supporting employees with a variety of experiences and needs is key to creating a workplace environment which is inclusive of mental health and free from mental health stigma and discrimination, including those who experience anxiety disorders such as communication anxiety and selective mutism.

Knowing what support employees need is paramount to employee wellbeing. To do this, open communication is essential. It's okay to ask individuals how they would like to share their feedback at various points of their employment pathway, from recruitment all the way to exiting employment.

Asking what would work for them and what support they would need to have in place will give employers and line managers the best chance to engage them meaningfully and safely, creating the conditions for people to perform at their best. It also allows people to bring their full self to work, including their talent, knowledge, skills and abilities.



**Anxiety management can help individuals to engage in communication, small steps at a time. Employers can really make a difference, creating supportive and inclusive organisational cultures, processes and systems where people experiencing social communication anxiety and selective mutism can feel supported to engage in a way that works for them and at their pace.**

**This resource aims to aid employers' understanding of selective mutism and social community anxiety and provide them with advice on supporting employees experiencing these conditions in the workplace.**

People start to communicate from a very early age, way before babies start to create syllables and words. The ability to communicate is monitored as part of children's development, and something most people see as something you can learn or do easily, rather than as a challenge, or something people could really struggle with.

If you can speak to and engage with others during nursery, primary and secondary school, further or higher education, or in your first job, it's often assumed that verbal communication will always come easily and be accessible, or a skill that everyone can master over time.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for some people. Complex inherited and environmental factors, including trauma, can lead to people experiencing social anxieties and fears that interfere with their ability to communicate. This includes selective mutism.

**Selective mutism** is not just shyness; it is a diagnosable anxiety condition that prevents a person from speaking in certain social settings such as at school, work, or in their community – those with selective mutism speak fluently in some situations (e.g. at home with family) but remain consistently silent in others. People with selective mutism are often paralysed with fear or shut down completely when unable to communicate; they may have a blank expression, or appear 'frozen' when expected to speak.

**"Maybe people could understand things better if you were always mute and couldn't talk at all, but when you have selective mutism this can be seen by others as a choice, rather than an inability to speak in that particular situation; but nobody chooses to have a problem that makes things difficult for them."**

See Me volunteer

Perhaps a way to understand this is to think about something we're very fearful of or a phobia like spheksophobia, fear of wasps; when we come near a wasp, anxiety increases and all you might want to do is run away from it. Unlike common anxiety reactions such as fight or flight, selective mutism can be understood as a freeze response to protect the person when their brain perceives a life-threatening danger, a bit like a deer standing still in the headlights of an approaching car on the road.

**"You want to speak but it doesn't happen and then you get forced to reply and you say 'I don't know' and you're told you're not interested or enthusiastic enough."**

See Me volunteer

# The stigma of selective mutism

**When employers are not educated about selective mutism, they may unintentionally stigmatise and/or discriminate against people, or create activities that could increase anxiety. If the affected person is not supported in the workplace their work performance may decline, and they might never be able to show their full potential.**

People with social communication anxiety and selective mutism may also experience self-stigma and may perceive themselves as a burden on others or not able to complete certain aspects of the role. It is important to work with people on their strengths and on what support is needed to ensure they can be supported and tackle some of this internalised stigma.

People with selective mutism may be more at risk of social isolation and it is important to consider how to make team building and bonding opportunities accessible. Employers should ensure there is no bullying or any other problematic group dynamics going on amongst colleagues. The inability to talk in certain situations should not be seen as 'the silent treatment' or taken personally and this should be discussed with colleagues if any issues arise.

If an employer supports a person who experiences selective mutism appropriately, these issues can be minimised. This equality, equity and inclusion in the workplace can support everyone to show their full potential.

All people should be supported to find their voice in a positive and supportive work environment, allowing them to work more efficiently, make friends with colleagues, become more confident and assertive, and feel they belong.





## How can employers help?

**It is important not to assume that a person will or should be able to talk in all situations. If an employee has disclosed they have selective mutism and social communication anxiety, engage with them in a way that works for them (e.g. chat, written format, pre-recorded video) about what steps can be put in place to support them. Ask if there are particular scenarios that trigger the anxiety/mutism so that these can be avoided where possible.**

It can be hard for people struggling with social communication anxiety and selective mutism to get into employment. Nowadays, most jobs require some level of communication, as well as interpersonal and public speaking skills. People experiencing social communication anxiety and selective mutism often self-stigmatise and experience feelings of shame about their inability to communicate with ease in some social settings. They might be fearful to disclose this and, therefore, might not apply for jobs they'd be highly skilled at or, when in a job, might be at risk of not getting the support they need to perform at their best and achieve their full potential in the role or organisation.

Be mindful that 'communication skills' can be understood, read or perceived differently by people. People who struggle with social communication anxiety and selective mutism might be put off by language such as 'excellent communication skills', 'proficient in communication' or 'experienced communicator'. This might be a barrier also for some people, particularly young people and people with disabilities relating to physical and/or mental health. It is therefore important to consider how important this skill is for the role advertised, and how best to phrase this in the job description so that talented candidates aren't put off by it. Think too about inclusive ways to assess ability during the recruitment process.

Consider other ways of communication than verbally face-to-face, such as e-mail or web chat, particularly for client-facing roles. Appreciating that direct communication with clients or customers is key to a lot of roles in an organisation, anxiety surrounding social communication and speaking can add unnecessary pressure for many people.

Asking people who experience social communication anxiety and selective mutism to speak in group meetings can be very difficult because they may struggle with responding or 'freeze', and they may not start speaking without being prompted. It can be helpful to allow them to record themselves talking at home, and then play the recording in front of a group of people.

Similarly, having phone conversations where answers to questions must be provided in the moment can be difficult for some – the fear of saying the wrong thing or having their voice heard by strangers can make them feel self-conscious and this can be paralyzing.

If an employee has disclosed they experience communication anxiety and selective mutism, consider which aspects of the role require direct verbal contact and which could be achieved through other forms of communication. Consider ways of anxiety support and other reasonable adjustments, such as regular breaks for a short walk, therapy pets, and work with the individual to identify what types of support might be helpful for them.

For more information on reasonable adjustments, see our [Spotlight On resource on reasonable adjustments](#).

Make sure to check in with your employee at regular points during their employment from interview, to in their role, and when leaving the organisation. You should have conversations about if the support in place is working for them. We have some tips about how support could be provided at different stages of the employment process.



# How can employers help?

## Give information in advance

Sharing interview questions in advance so the candidate can work out an answer and get the best chance to prepare. Allow them to bring notes/annotations, and provide enough time for them to answer the questions, without feeling rushed. If interviewing digitally, providing the questions in the chat box to refer back to could be helpful. Doing this for all candidates, whether they have disclosed or not, can help address 'interview nerves', ensure interviewees have a positive interview experience, and get the best from interviews.

## The format

Interview panels where there are more than one person interviewing can be difficult for some candidates to manage because of their social communication anxiety and selective mutism. Consider whether more than one person is required, and if it is, create an environment where the candidate can face one person at a time (i.e. not having all interviewers in a line in front of them). If more than one person must be present, consider inviting the candidate to pre-record their answers to questions and play these back to the panel. Another alternative could be to ask the interviewee to write down / type their answers in a different room before facing the interview panel, so interviewers can go through them – repeating this process with any follow-up questions they may have. If the interview is online, having the camera and microphone on for the interviewer that is speaking and off for everyone else in the panel can help too.

There are recruitment exercises where candidates are put in groups to carry out tasks (e.g. role play) or discuss points. Consider how people struggling with social communication anxiety and selective mutism might feel and react in those situations. They might struggle to

contribute when other stronger, louder voices dominate the conversation. Wherever possible, group exercises should be facilitated, and facilitators should be briefed and instructed to ensure everyone can contribute. Facilitators could provide direct prompts to answer questions to the person when candidates struggle with initiating speech, or utilise a planned turn-taking order. It may also be useful to provide any instructions in advance so that people have time to prepare.

## Setting

Consider whether the interview needs to be in a formal setting (e.g. meeting room), or would be held in a more relaxing environment (e.g. walkthrough the office, sitting in a coffee shop, performing crafts like colouring, etc.).

Avoid assessments and assessment centres wherever possible; these put people under a lot of pressure. If these are required, consider what support can be put in place and what information can be provided in advance.

## Consider your questions

Closed questions, that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no' or by using simple head gestures like nodding or shaking the head, are easier to answer for people who struggle with social communication anxiety and selective mutism, taking one question at a time. Providing multiple-answer choices with the question can also encourage the candidate to talk; for example, 'Would you like A or B or something else?' This will require interviewers to do preparatory work to know exactly what they would like candidates to share; they can use the application documents and CV to guide this process.

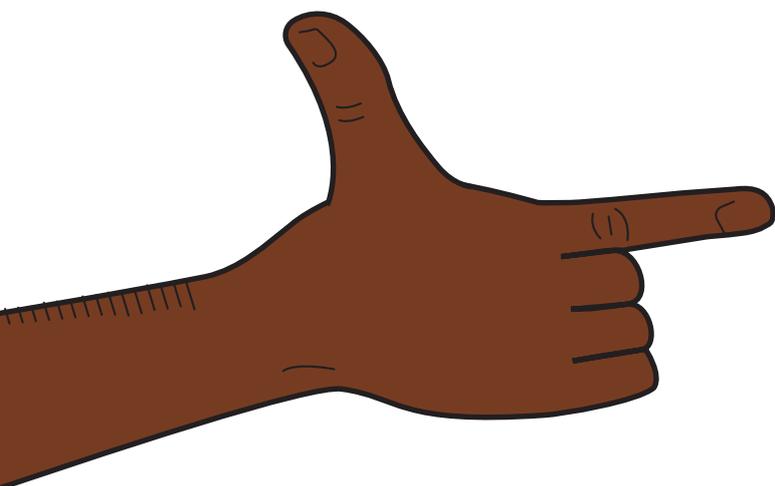
Rather than using an open-ended question, such as, 'Tell us how you would go about X', break it down into different sub-questions.

For example, setting out the specific role (as per the job description), and then asking them one question at a time to explore an aspect of that role. Should the candidate struggle to respond, where possible go back to a closed question and use answer choices, while giving the candidate a few seconds time to think, or allow written communication.

## Training and awareness

It is important to consider what training might be helpful for people involved in recruitment, particularly interviewing, to ensure that people struggling with social communication anxiety and selective mutism are not disadvantaged. Training, learning and development of key individuals should include:

- Awareness raising of social communication anxiety and selective mutism
- How assumptions, biases and misunderstandings of the condition can impact on people's experience of recruitment, and the barriers stigma can create for candidates experiencing these conditions
- Practical strategies they can put in place to minimise negative impact and unfair disadvantages
- What support, including reasonable adjustments, can be put in place when facing clients/customers, e.g. in shops within retail and hospitality industries.



Remember that they might be the right candidate for the job; however, anxiety surrounding the interview process, which is a moment in the lifetime of the employee, can get in the way of them being able to perform at their best.

Avoid saying things like, "You are/seem very quiet," or, "Do you not have anything you'd like to say?" as this can be embarrassing and may make speaking more difficult for them. Bear in mind that people who experience social communication anxiety and selective mutism can be self-conscious of that. Instead, interviewers should use kind and compassionate language and be mindful of their own assumptions, biases and misunderstandings. For example, someone presenting themselves as 'quiet' might be perceived as 'uninterested', which certainly might not be the case – people invest time and effort to apply for jobs and prepare for and attend interviews.

## Post-interview considerations

Hearing about the outcome of an interview on the phone can create anxiety for some people. Informing candidates of the outcome by e-mail is easier for people that struggle with social communication anxiety and selective mutism to digest, and respond to.

When providing feedback about the interview performance, avoid referencing to 'assertiveness', 'communication style' or 'presenting as quiet', as this is likely to have a long-lasting negative impact on people that experience social communication anxiety and selective mutism. Instead, focus your feedback on what evidence they provided, or didn't.

# Considerations for in-work

## Induction

It is good practice for employers to provide a robust induction for new starts, to welcome them into the organisation and help them settle into the role and the workplace. Something that can help with this process is 'buddying up' the new start with a peer.

Rather than setting up face-to-face or virtual meetings, an e-mail introduction is a good way for people experiencing social communication anxiety and selective mutism to establish the start of a relationship with their buddy (and other colleagues, partners and clients more generally), using e-mail as a way to communicate in the first instance, and developing the relationship over time. Some people might take longer than others to feel comfortable meeting in person or online, particularly when working in large organisations, or for those working remotely or in a hybrid model.

## Line management

Supportive line management creates comfortable and safe spaces for direct reports to disclose any mental health and/or physical health conditions and support needs at work. Disclosure of mental health problems or mental illness, including social communication anxiety and selective mutism, can help line managers and supervisors open a conversation about reasonable adjustments, which is a legal requirement for employers under the Equality Act (2010). For more information on how to create conditions for safe disclosure explore our [Spotlight On disclosure resource](#).

However, disclosure doesn't always happen; in fact, according to research and learning from See Me, some workplace conversations and conditions make disclosure increasingly difficult.

**One participant from the Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study (2022) stated:**

**"I am a supervisor in retail. My manager has been very judgemental of one of our sales assistant's mental health struggles, and as a result I haven't told anyone about my specific diagnosis/symptoms."**

It is important for all employers to create safe and welcoming environments where everyone feels able to disclose their needs and get the support needed to stay in or return to work and carry out their role and responsibilities to the best of their abilities.

Line managers should approach conversations with direct reports that may not be actively displaying engagement in meetings or conversations, with curiosity and an open mind, avoiding making assumptions or reaching conclusions, and certainly should not be guided by what other colleagues say. Use it instead as data to help complete the whole picture. It is important to remember that self-stigma and feelings of embarrassment and shame can get in the way of people speaking and interacting with others. It can leave them feeling frustrated and undervalued, particularly if little is being done to help them feel included in discussions following a disclosure of communication anxiety and selective mutism.

Line managers and supervisors of people that experience social communication anxiety and selective mutism should share any questions or points for discussion they may have in advance of meetings, along with clear instructions around what they need so direct reports don't have to ask many follow-up questions.

It is important to give people enough time to answer any questions. Something that can help with this is to summarise the questions and paraphrasing, to give people time to think of an answer. There might be periods of silence during conversations, particularly when direct reports consider their answers to questions – this is okay. Line managers and supervisors should feel comfortable with this, and avoid looking impatient or as if that is an inconvenience for them.

When it comes to documentation for performance reviews, support and supervision meetings and appraisals, offer and provide

direct reports the opportunity to highlight what they would like to focus on, write down answers, etc. Having templates with clear instructions on what information to add and enough time to add notes in advance of meetings helps employees evidence progress towards performance objectives, reflect on how things are going, and set out what support they might need from their line manager, colleagues and/or the organisation more widely, without feeling pressure.

Overall, it is important to work with your employees to explore what works for their needs and makes them feel comfortable at work, and accommodate this where possible.

## Social activities

**Taking part in social activities with colleagues at work can be overwhelming for many people as there is often an expectation to speak, interact and engage in discussion. This overwhelming feeling is certainly true for individuals that struggle with social communication anxiety and selective mutism. There are some things that can be done to better engage people:**

- Agree with the individual what they might want to say to colleagues about attending social events with the team or others in the organisation. Ensure they know there is no expectation about the person taking part, making it completely voluntary. If this is not possible and you require their attendance, it is important that the individual is briefed on what the purpose of the session is, what they can expect, and discuss any support they might need.
- Think 'inclusion'; inviting all employees to take part doesn't necessarily mean they can or feel able to take part. Take notice of individuals or groups that do not tend to participate and reach out to get their feedback. It might well be that they don't have time or interest, but it could be that they are facing barriers to engagement that can be easily addressed by the organisation.
- Be aware of peer pressure to attend social events, and any potential bullying/harassment or micro-aggressions people might experience if they don't take part.
- Make sure plans for social activities are communicated to all employees in advance, but particularly to people with communication anxiety and selective mutism, to ensure they are ready for them. If there is an expectation that conversations will take place (e.g. Time to Talk Day campaign), make sure conversation prompts or questions are shared in advance in writing so people can prepare their thoughts/answers. It is also important to ensure safeguarding is in place for social activities to minimise risk of any harm and create empowering conditions for everyone to take part in a way that works for them.

# Key resources and reading

See Me has a wealth of information and advice on tackling mental health stigma and discrimination in the workplace available online.

- **See Me Resources and Packs**  
[www.seemescotland.org/workplace/resources](http://www.seemescotland.org/workplace/resources)
- **See Me in Work Programme**  
[www.seemescotland.org/workplace/employers/see-me-in-work](http://www.seemescotland.org/workplace/employers/see-me-in-work)
- **Supporting a Mentally Healthy Workplace**  
[www.healthyworkinglives.scot/workplace-guidance/supporting-a-mentally-healthy-workplace/](http://www.healthyworkinglives.scot/workplace-guidance/supporting-a-mentally-healthy-workplace/)





**Find out how See Me in Work can help  
your organisation at:**

**[www.seemescotland.org](http://www.seemescotland.org)**

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