

Selective Mutism in Our Own Words: Experiences in Childhood and Adulthood

By Carl Sutton and Cheryl Forrester

Reviewed by FINOLA O’NEILL, a retired resource teacher who taught in Scoil Mhuire, Leixlip. She continues to support and guide children, parents and teachers in developing resilience.

Selective mutism (SM) is described in this book as a situational anxiety disorder that renders the sufferer “frozen” and unable to speak in certain situations and with certain people. The authors, Carl Sutton, who himself experiences SM, and his wife, Cheryl Forrester, wrote the book to address the dearth of published literature relating to the experience of living with this anxiety disorder, to highlight successful interventions and to communicate the necessity for early intervention. At a personal level Sutton expresses a hope that writing his story will have a cathartic benefit for him and this same element is clearly present in the stories of many of the contributors.

In a very accessible style the authors present extensive personal accounts of the lived experiences of people with SM and those of their parents, teachers, therapists and caregivers. The early chapters chart the experience of people with SM from early childhood to adulthood and powerfully communicate the debilitating effect of SM on their wellbeing. The contributors provide harrowing insight into the inner struggles, and the authenticity of their voice brings the reader closer to understanding their anxiety. Many describe painful interactions with teachers and health professionals who, with no understanding of SM, misread their extreme anxiety as depression, stubbornness, attention seeking or rudeness. Some describe how they went unnoticed in the classroom, (as was their intention), being regarded as ideal students, compliant, quietly doing their work. Throughout the book parents describe their frustration with the lack of professional understanding, knowledge, support, guidance and in many cases, even basic compassion.

The book challenges some of the myths that surround SM, e.g. the notion that SM spontaneously disappears during childhood, that it is a direct result

of abuse and that it only presents in the school setting. Valuable insights into the dynamic of relationships with SM sufferers, their protectors and aggressors, the triggers and the maintaining factors are conveyed through a variety of contexts. Of particular interest to teachers are the challenges at second level education, where SM impacts on subject choice, work experience and assessment. Most of the contributors to this book were deeply stressed by the second level school environment and were home-schooled with social consequences.

This book is a heartfelt plea from people with SM to raise awareness so that others with the condition don't live in limitation. The intended audience is people with SM, parents, relatives, friends, teachers and health professionals. At times there is a tension between the contributors' need to tell their story and the needs of the reader for clarity and direction. In the chapters relating to the comorbidity of SM and asperger syndrome and learning difficulties, additional input from an educator or psychologist would have benefitted the professional reader.

Despite it being a goal of the author to highlight successful interventions, the structure of the book makes it difficult to access specific information. For example, the accounts of Vivienne and her mother are clear and purposeful and provide step by step advice on a range of related issues but neither the contents list nor the index contain the words "strategy" or "intervention".

This book gives voice to those with SM and awakens an understanding in the reader – a vital first step in recognising SM traits and providing support to the person. Its enduring message is that change is possible and that empathy, sensitivity and kindness must underpin any intervention.

SELECTIVE MUTISM IN OUR OWN WORDS: EXPERIENCES IN CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD by Carl Sutton and Cheryl Forrester is published by Jessica Kingsley, London, Philadelphia, 2015 and costs Stg£14.00.

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