

**Commentary on Cho:
Long-Term Effects of Selective Mutism Need Not Be
Detrimental**

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By now you have all heard from one source or another about the tragedy at Virginia Tech, in which an isolated young man now nationally known as Cho, murdered thirty-one victims in a mass shooting prior to killing himself, leaving us all wondering, why? Ironically, Cho also referred to himself as a 'question mark,' perhaps a symbol of being misunderstood both by himself and others.

We may never know the answer to the question, however, this did not keep the nation from speculating about what might have been going on in the mind of the gunman, described as a loner, who spoke no more than a couple of words to his roommates and classmates, a young man with flat affect, depressed mood, and unresponsive in social settings. Although Cho's symptoms are atypical, some sources suggested that Cho may have suffered from selective mutism. In fact, an article published in the [The Wall Street Journal](#) this month has announced that Cho indeed suffered from and received school accommodations for selective mutism. As Board Secretary of SMG~CAN, and perhaps more importantly, a former sufferer of selective mutism during childhood and adolescence, I felt it was both a professional and personal obligation to not ignore this issue, and attempt to assuage any fears about the long-term effects of selective mutism that this incident may have caused.

There is very limited research addressing the long-term effects of untreated cases of selective mutism and related anxiety disorders. What we do know, is that the effects of untreated anxiety can be quite detrimental. Selective mutism, typically identified in childhood, is characterized by an inability to speak in select social settings despite being able to speak in other settings. Selective mutism, or SM for short, is associated with anxiety, and often, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder and other anxiety disorders are present along with SM. Persistent cases of anxiety disorders have been associated with development of depression, substance abuse and avoidant personality

disorder although long-term studies specific to SM do not currently exist. Early detection and treatment is key to avoid the development of such problems. The mission of SMG~CAN is to promote awareness and appropriate treatment, for with the proper diagnosis and treatment, children and adolescents with SM have not only overcome the disorder right before our eyes, but they have gone on to thrive in accomplishment and live long and happy lives.

The Virginia Tech incident is an isolated case and we should not fear that violence and suicide are the fate of all untreated cases of selective mutism. No one can say for certain whether SM was part of Cho's pathology. However, this case does help us to understand that we must detect early warning signs such as selective mutism, anxiety and depression to prevent further tragedies like this one from occurring. No one should have to suffer in silence for an endless period of time, as treatments for selective mutism, as well as for anxiety and depression, are quite successful. It is far more common for outspoken and acting-out individuals to be referred for mental health treatment, but those who present more quietly are also in need of services. Depression and anxiety are two of the most common psychiatric problems, yet, depressed and anxious individuals often have difficulty accessing services on their own. The quiet, isolated individuals need our help.

Cho, unfortunately, did not receive such help. It saddened me to read about how the many warning signs, the many silent pleas for help were ignored. He was described as "mentally ill and in need of hospitalization, presenting as an imminent danger to himself and others as a result of mental illness" and "suicidal" in 2005, and was the author of intimidating and disturbing poetry and violent plays that caused concern amongst both teachers and students, and presented with depression and odd behaviors. Depression is sometimes described as aggression turned inward and this might help to explain why Cho's pain was inflicted in such violent ways. He, unfortunately, did not see another way out of his misery.

Silence certainly hurts, but it does not promote one to kill. My heart goes out to Cho who was clearly suffering a severe mental illness. No one can diagnose a deceased individual, or furthermore, fully understand what brought Cho to commit this atrocious act of violence. From his writings and the comments by those who knew him, it is evident that he needed help but unfortunately, could not access it. It brought me chills reading excerpts from his writings, " I die . . . to inspire

generations of the weak and the defenseless people . . ." for if only Cho knew that there is so much empowerment that comes with overcoming a seemingly hopeless problem.

I am one of the lucky ones to know firsthand that silence does not have to last forever, in fact, speaking out, advocating for understanding of selective mutism, becoming a treating professional, and most importantly, a confident and content young adult were all fueled by my own process of overcoming selective mutism. After a childhood of silence, feeling misunderstood everyday, somehow I was able to find my voice as an adolescent and have discovered my mission: to use my voice to help others who at present cannot use their own. I often speak about my experience to inspire others that it is never too late to overcome this, and as impossible as it may appear, it feels like such a miracle to overcome. However, I could not have had such a positive experience had I not been "heard" above my silence. It took the recognition of compassionate people around me to guide me to my success. I would have not sought help on my own as, during the darkest times, it seemed there was no one to turn to. I was wrong.

As an adult, I now know there is a whole network to turn to: the Selective Mutism Group~Childhood Anxiety Network. Since I discovered this organization in 2002, I have not turned my back on the support and the passion that makes this organization successful in helping many achieve hope and success in overcoming SM. After reading the recent article in the Wall Street Journal, I took it upon myself to "speak up" and wrote to the author to educate him about what SM is and what it is not. I suggested that he contact our organization to learn more and encouraged him to help educate the public about the condition of SM. It is my sincere hope that you will use our organization to educate yourself about selective mutism, network with others either experiencing or knowledgeable about selective mutism, find a treating professional, and to realize that you do not have to be alone in trying to get past the silence. If you are so compelled, you may also want to read the WSJ's article by clicking on the link above and perhaps also write to the author to share your comments. We at SMG~CAN have come together to share resources and support one another. Collectively, we are a powerful voice. Together, we can overcome this. Let me hold your hand and show you the way.

Sincerely,

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Board Secretary

Selective Mutism Group~Childhood Anxiety Network

For information on selective mutism and related anxiety disorders,
please visit:

[The SMG~CAN website](#)

and [The Anxiety Disorders Association of America website](#)