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## Challenging Anxious SM Thoughts

February 2026

Dear Selective Mutism Community,

Our thoughts are powerful and can have a strong impact on our emotional and behavioral responses in challenging situations. Individuals with anxiety often fall into characteristic “thinking traps” in which they tend to both overestimate the likelihood of something bad happening (e.g., thinking a negative outcome is much more likely than it really is) and overestimate the consequences of a negative event occurring (e.g., assuming it will be really, really terrible). Simultaneously, individuals with anxiety often underestimate their ability to successfully cope with stressful situations. As a result, anxious thoughts, which are often unrealistic and unhelpful, can directly trigger avoidant behavior and heighten emotional distress.

While the types of anxious thoughts experienced by individuals with SM can be quite varied, research indicates that worries related to saying the wrong thing or making a mistake, being laughed at or negatively judged, receiving too much attention for speaking, and being awkward or doing something embarrassing are common. Therefore, learning to think more flexibly, and to challenge anxious, unhelpful thoughts (and to replace them with more realistic, coping thoughts), can be an important addition to one’s “toolbox” for managing and overcoming SM. Using the steps below, parents can gently guide their children in generating alternative ways of viewing anxiety provoking situations. Adults also can apply the same strategies to their own fears and worries!

### **Step 1: Identify Fears**

Start by helping your child to articulate their fears about speaking. This is often easier said than done, as it can be hard to identify and verbalize fears! Some children may simply respond “I don’t know” or may say things like, “I’m not scared of talking, I just don’t like it.” Others may be able to share thoughts like, “Everyone will make a big deal if I start talking,” or “It will be embarrassing, especially if I make a mistake.”

## **Step 2: Express Empathy**

It is important to validate your child's concerns while helping them to think about the situation from other perspectives. For example, you may respond "I wouldn't like it if everyone looked at me either. I can understand why that makes you feel scared to raise your hand in class."

## **Step 3: Socratic Questioning**

Using a method called Socratic questioning, you can help your child think about their fears with more flexibility. Some questions you can use as a guide include:

- What are the facts about this situation?
- What else (besides the thing you are worried about) could happen?
- What happened when you've been in this situation in the past?
- What has happened to other people in this situation?
- What is the worst case scenario in this situation?
- What is the most likely outcome of this situation?
- If something scary does happen, who can help you? Will you be able to get through it?
- What advice would you give a friend in this situation?

You can tailor these questions to your child's specific fears and developmental level, prompting them to more realistically assess things like the likelihood of something bad happening (e.g., "I understand why you'd be really upset if the whole class laughed at you for reading AND you have so many nice kids in your class. How likely do you think it is that they'd all actually laugh?") and its consequences (e.g., "You're right, it might feel embarrassing if you stuttered while you answered a question AND if that happened, how likely do you think it would be that everyone noticed and remembered it?").

## **Step 4: Helpful Thoughts**

Based upon your child's answers to the questions you ask, help them come up with 1 or 2 helpful thoughts that you can encourage them to focus on when engaging in an anxiety provoking situation. For example, they might tell themselves, "People won't really be paying attention to me, so they won't notice my answer," or "Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, it is okay if I don't always say the right thing." More general coping thoughts like, "I've done hard things before, I can do this too" and "Even though I'm scared, I can be brave," can also be useful. Referencing past successes can be a particularly powerful way to strengthen helpful thoughts and encourage kids to believe in their ability to overcome challenges. It can be helpful to have your child write these thoughts down so they can refer to back to them. This might be in a note on their phone, in a special notebook, or on an index card that they can keep in their desk at school.

Remember, learning to think flexibly and to challenge anxious thoughts is a skill. Like all skills, it can take time and practice to perfect. Don't expect your child's anxiety to disappear with just one conversation, but by repeatedly supporting your child in identifying helpful thoughts, you'll gradually help them learn to recognize, and ultimately avoid, anxiety-provoking "thinking traps."

Sincerely,

Rachel Merson, Psy.D.

SMA Board of Directors, Past President

# SMA CE Opportunities & Upcoming Events

## **SMA Educator Webcourses**

Our self-paced Educator webcourses aim to equip educators and other school professionals with the knowledge and tools needed to effectively support students with Selective Mutism (SM) in the school setting. Participants will learn about SM symptoms, how SM can impact students at school, and evidence-based assessment and intervention strategies. Caregivers are also able to sign up their child's teacher or educational staff person by creating an account for their educator and purchasing the course for them. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

## **SMA Virtual Parent Support Group - Upcoming dates**

Members from across the country will come together to share stories, offer advice and connect with other parents who understand both the challenges and rewards of raising a child with SM.

**Wednesday, February 25, 2026, 8:00-9:00pm Eastern**

**Wednesday, March 25, 2026, 8:00-9:00pm Eastern**

**Wednesday, April 22, 2026, 8:00-9:00pm Eastern**

## **Recorded Webinars - CE Credit Available**

### **Talking Matters: Consideration for Testing When Evaluating Children With Selective**

#### **Mutism**

In this webinar recording, Drs. Busman and Catanzaro talk about testing and the differences between psychoeducational testing and neuropsychological testing. They discuss some of the reasons that testing is pursued and some of the barriers when considering testing for children with a diagnosis of selective mutism. They will offer tips and strategies that caregivers can use when fading in evaluators and also when advocating for evaluators with experience testing children with SM. Self-paced course, 1 hour continuing education available.

### **Beyond Talking - Targeting Exposures for the Bathroom and Eating**

Using the bathroom and eating are two areas that many children with SM struggle with. While for some children, the anxiety has to do with the talking related to these activities (e.g. asking to use the bathroom or asking for help opening food items), many children struggle with the activities themselves. Join Rachel Busman and Eleanor Ezell in a discussion about these two common concerns and learn tips and strategies around targeting them specifically when designing and implementing exposures. This talk is appropriate for professionals, parents and educators.

### **Speaking Up: School-Based Exposures for Selective Mutism**

This webinar will emphasize intervention strategies when directly implementing school-based exposures for children with selective mutism. This session will specifically focus on both developing and implementing exposure practices in school environments. The session will provide participants with a) tools for gathering data about a child's current speaking comforts in the school environment, b) planning forms to help school teams develop concrete intervention plans, c) examples of creative school-based exposure practices at 3 levels of communication (i.e., nonverbal, communicating with a few individuals in the building, higher level speaking), d) ideas for efficient progress monitoring, and e) problem-solving through common barriers within exposure practice. Participants will leave with concrete recommendations and resources to successfully support exposure practice for children with selective mutism as they build their comfort to communicate in school settings.

SMA webinars, webcourses and the annual conference are brought to you by the Selective Mutism Association and are made possible by a generous grant from the Gordon and Marilyn Macklin Foundation, Inc.



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