



SMTalkingCircles

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This document was co-produced by members of the Canterbury branch of SMTalkingCircles, a peer-support group for adults with lived experience of selective mutism. The content was developed and agreed by all, using discussion and voting techniques that ensured that every member's voice was heard, whether they were able to speak or not.

We hope you find it as useful as we have.

Is your selective mutism (SM) holding you back at work or in your educational setting? Do you find it difficult to communicate effectively with your GP and other services? Would you like your supervisor, employer, course tutor, interviewer, health practitioner or link worker to understand your SM?

A carefully worded letter or email could be your best way forward. You can explain SM as it affects you in this particular situation. You can also ask for certain allowances to be made to ensure you have as good an experience as possible. The law calls these allowances 'reasonable adjustments'.

By putting all this in writing, you have a document you can use to protect yourself in case of unfair treatment or discrimination.

There's a template on the next page which you can tailor to fit your circumstances, but first spend a few moments writing down what you want your letter or email to achieve. You can then use these notes to make sure your letter captures what you want to say.

1. What do you want to happen after your letter is received?
2. Which of your skills/talents/positive attributes do you want to be recognised?
3. Is there anything you want to make them understand? Maybe you are worried they might get the wrong impression of you?
4. Is there anything you wanted to say on a previous occasion but couldn't?

TEMPLATE

Here is a template to help you say everything you want to say. Choose the words that suit you and your situation best.

<p>Set the scene</p>	<p>Dear or Hi</p> <p>Thank you very much for the opportunity to [<i>volunteer/ enrol/ work/ join/ apply for</i>].</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Thank you for inviting me...</p>
<p>Add further detail if appropriate, showing the side of you that sometimes gets masked by your SM.</p>	<p>If you have already met the person you are writing to: I enjoyed coming to [<i>place</i>] and meeting you on [<i>day or date</i>].</p> <p>Or, if you have not met them yet: I am looking forward to meeting you [<i>on day or date</i>].</p> <p>Or, if you are applying for a job: I see this role as [<i>an exciting/a good</i>] opportunity to [<i>further my professional development.../ gain experience.../ develop my interest in...</i>]</p>
<p>Explain SM (if you feel a formal situation demands it, replace, 'it's', 'I'm' and 'that's' with 'it is', 'I am' and 'that is')</p>	<p>I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that talking sometimes causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze - I'm unable to talk when I want to. People [<i>may/sometimes/ often</i>] think I'm choosing not to speak but that's not the case.</p>
<p>Sell yourself!</p>	<p>I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work or understand. [<i>I am focused on the job/ understanding/ empathetic/ determined to succeed/ sensitive to others' needs/ organised/ creative/ conscientious/ a good listener/ a good team member/ I have a good sense of humour, etc</i>].</p> <p>This is why I feel I would [<i>enjoy/ be a good addition to/ make a good contribution to/ do well at</i>] and I am really looking forward to [<i>working with you/ starting the course/ meeting the rest of the team/ spending more time... etc</i>].</p>
<p>State the adjustments you need to be put in place (add anything else you have found helpful in the past)</p>	<p>I would find it helpful to email if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time.</p> <p>It would also help me to [<i>select any of the following you feel will be helpful</i>]</p> <p><i>listen in group tutorials without feeling pressured to speak out;</i> <i>make notes;</i> <i>get used to talking to people on a one to one basis;</i> <i>put things in writing when it's hard to initiate conversation;</i> <i>nod or shake my head when talking is difficult;</i> <i>be included in conversations, even though I may not talk straightaway.</i></p>

	<p>Or, if you are applying for a job</p> <p>It would also help me to [select or adapt any that apply to you]):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Receive information in advance about the interview/meeting set-up, e.g. room layout, number of people present, format and length of meeting;</i> • <i>Have a quick visit or meeting beforehand to familiarise myself with the building if this is possible;</i> • <i>Have a quick informal introduction with the interviewer before attending the interview to help me feel more relaxed;</i> • <i>Have a copy of the interview questions in front of me;</i> • <i>Have plenty of time to answer. My responses may seem a bit slow or disjointed but this will be purely down to my anxiety;</i> • <i>Move on to another question if I freeze at any point and come back to it later;</i> • <i>Bring a few notes to prompt myself if I freeze;</i> • <i>Write my answers down if I become particularly stuck;</i> • <i>Have one person ask all the questions if there is an interview panel;</i> • <i>Make notes during the interview.</i> <p>N.B. If you want to emphasise the organisation's duty/responsibility as an Equal Opportunities Employer, include the phrase "to ensure equitable opportunity to present my real knowledge and capabilities".</p>
<p><i>Draw to a close and sign off</i></p>	<p>Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better [as well as the strengths I have to offer]. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.</p> <p>I look forward to hearing from you,</p> <p>With thanks,</p> <p>[Your name]</p>

See pages 4-5 for feedback from people who have used the template.

See pages 6-12 for examples of how the template could be used.

FEEDBACK FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE USED THE TEMPLATE

I used the template for a job interview. I found it very easy to use and helpful in explaining my SM. I think my employer took my SM more seriously thanks to the template; they were happy to make adjustments to suit my needs. I was successful in getting the job and they have continued to be considerate of my difficulties. I would definitely use the template again and I recommend it to others.

What more can I say except this really works! I was turned down for a talking therapy project and my mum was fighting with the service (via the phone) for around 3 weeks (and after 20 years of having to fight for me she's quite effective at it!). But despite them saying on their website that they 'aim to be inclusive and diverse, meeting the needs of all, including those previously marginalized in society' they still wouldn't take me because I couldn't talk to them over the phone. So much for being inclusive...

I then used the template to assemble a letter and emailed it to them and ***within a few days they had accepted me onto the project!*** It's so important I go to this project which is why I used this template as I knew you can't go wrong with it and knew it would put across my best fight.

With them going from no to yes in days just shows this template really does work and help. Quite frankly I think I'll be using this all the time!

It is so official (more than I could put together after months of thinking about it) but also contains information on how I am despite having SM. With it also explaining how they can help me, there isn't much they can turn around and say no to.

I feel really professional using this due to how well it's laid out and written, and there isn't anything more I would add to a letter written using it.

I used the template to disclose my SM at a job interview for a national mental health charity. I didn't send it ahead of the interview but asked to read it aloud at the start of the interview.

If I'd had to write my own letter I would not have known where to start or how to make it a balanced letter. The template felt safe to use and it gave me the confidence to explain how my SM affects certain areas of my life and my work. It also made the explanation of SM very clear – with enough information to get the point across but not too much so that those listening would switch off. Knowing that it was co-produced by those with lived experience of SM made me feel confident about using it – I trusted it. It wasn't created by any outside service.

The employer I disclosed to did have an idea of my SM already but the letter reinforced that it is an official disability (in a direct way but not aggressively) and it must be taken seriously. As a result, they asked how they could improve their interview procedure to support someone like myself. They had learned more about SM, realised it was an official disability, and were open to supporting me in the interview and consequently (after I got the job!) in the workplace.

I would certainly use the template again. Since using it, I feel more confident and open about disclosing/explaining my SM. It did feel like a risk to disclose but those feelings are now outweighed by the positives using the letter has made. The template and the letter I wrote almost feel like my support tool that can be used when I'm not heard or others really don't 'get it'. I would definitely encourage others to use the template and have a go at letter writing, even if they didn't end up using it at that time. It is also a good reflection tool and good document to refer to.

I used the template for a hospital appointment - I was due to go back to a doctor I'd seen before who didn't understand SM. It was so much easier to use than writing my own letter. In fact, without it I wouldn't have been able to write anything and wouldn't have attended the appointment that I needed to go to.

The template gave me confidence because it felt much more official and professional than anything I could have written. Also, it felt like something they would be more likely to read and pay attention to. It helped me explain how to approach my SM and how to communicate with me and it let them know the positives of SM which I think is important.

I like the way the template expresses SM as an official disability. Lots of people just discard so many conditions without taking them seriously and this template makes a letter that really does enforce they need to take SM seriously, just like anything else.

Unfortunately my appointment was cancelled but I will be using the letter I wrote when I am next due to go. And I'll definitely be using the template again - not only for hospital appointments but any courses I want to go on, or job interviews etc. You can really change it and use it with whatever you need. I recommend it 100%!

I used this template to explain my SM issues to university staff, prior to starting a course. The template frames SM as a disability and explains it in a succinct way; it therefore helped me to explain my needs in simple language.

It was easier to use the template than write my own letter as it outlined the difficulties that someone with SM was likely to experience and suggested "reasonable adjustments" that could be adopted; it was then simply a case of choosing the suggested adjustments that best suited me as an individual with SM.

The template also makes it more likely that I would share this information. For me, the problem with writing an individual letter is that it might come across as though I am the only person with SM. The letter would somehow feel less credible coming from me only. The employer might ask who or what gives me the right to think that I can demand special treatment. Somehow it feels as though there is safety in numbers when using the template.

Had I known about SM years ago when I applied for a university course and had the opportunity to use this template, I would certainly have done so. The more that we can get the information into the public domain that SM is a disability that affects adults; the more effective the template will be.

A FEW EXAMPLES

1. Applying for a job	page 6
2. Attending university	7
3. Attending a talking therapy group	8
4. Volunteering at a veterinary practice	9
5. Attending a medical appointment	10
6. Attending a job interview	11
7. Being on a committee	12

1. Applying for a job (to accompany CV)

Dear Engagement Team

Application for Peer support officer

Thank you for considering my application for the role of Peer Support Officer. I see this role as an exciting opportunity to further my professional development within the field of peer support and to work in a national charity such as Mind.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that sometimes talking causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze. Often people think I'm choosing not to speak but that's not the case – I'm unable to talk when I want to.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work, understand or take full responsibility for this role. I am determined to succeed, a valuable team player, organised and creative with a good sense of humour. This is why I feel I would be a good addition to your peer support team where my empathy and strength in facilitating skills would inevitably support Mind's work.

I would find it really helpful if we could discuss the interview process as this is an area where I would need additional support to ensure equitable opportunity to present my real knowledge and capabilities. It helps me to approach interviews in a more relaxed conversational way rather than the usual direct questioning by a team of interviewers. If I were to freeze during the interview I will need to take a pause before I continue.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and allowing me to express myself. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better as well as the strengths that I have to offer. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks,

2. Attending university

Dear Dr Smith (Course Tutor),

Thank you for the opportunity to attend your induction day for the course “Political Science - Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion”. I really enjoyed my visit and found the tour round your department and subsequent talk particularly interesting.

I would like to explain that since I was a child, I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM-officially a disability). This means that sometimes talking causes me to get so anxious that it’s difficult to get my words out. It’s a bit like extreme stage fright and I just freeze. Often people think I’m choosing not to speak but that’s not the case.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work or understand. I am perceptive, focused, organised and determined to succeed. This is why I feel I will be well suited to the course and I am really looking forward to starting here and meeting the rest of the teaching staff and students.

I would find it helpful to email if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time. It also helps me to listen in group tutorials without feeling pressured to speak out. Please allow me some time get used to talking to people on a one to one basis.

I would also find it helpful to put things in writing, on occasion, when it’s hard to initiate conversation, nod or shake my head when talking is difficult. I would very much like be included in conversations, even though I may not talk straightaway.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks,

3. Attending a talking therapy group

Dear Dr.....

Thank you very much for the opportunity to explain a little bit about my anxiety disorder and how it affects me and what will help if I can attend your therapy group.

Before I start I just want to say how much I really need the help and support that you offer at the SUN project as it's been really hard. I just hope you don't see me not talking as a hindrance to me coming and taking part.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that talking sometimes causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze - I'm unable to talk when I want to. People often think I'm choosing not to speak but that's not the case, I'm literally so anxious the words just can't come out. However, with understanding and support I am starting to talk.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work or understand. I am very understanding, determined, creative, organised, a good listener and have a very good sense of humour.

This is why I feel I would be a good addition to the other service users that attend the SUN project. I really hope I'm able to take part and look forward to possibly coming and meeting other people with personality disorders like myself.

I would find it helpful if on occasion if I was able to email if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time.

It would also help me to:

- have a look around the building so I know where everything is in case I can't ask, e.g for the toilet.
- listen to the group without pressure to speak out.
- be able to write down on my iPad or communication app when talking is too hard.
- nod or shake my head when communicating is very difficult.
- be included in conversations, even though I will not talk straight away.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better as well as a few of my strengths. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks

4. Volunteering at a veterinary practice

Hi

Thank you very much for the opportunity to volunteer at your veterinary practice.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that sometimes talking causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze – I'm unable to talk when I want to.

Having SM does not affect my ability to work, understand or be part of the team. I am very understanding, empathetic and determined to succeed. This is why I feel I would be a good addition to the practice and I am looking forward to seeing how the practice is run.

I would find it helpful to email if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time. It would also help me if I am asked questions and given prompts to speak.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better. Please get back to me if you have any questions.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks,

5. Attending a medical appointment

Dear Dr Edmunds

Thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss my condition further. I am looking forward to meeting you on July 3rd.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that sometimes talking causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze. That is why I was unable to speak at my last appointment. Often people think I'm choosing not to speak but that's not the case.

Thankfully I have made excellent progress from saying nothing to anyone for 4 years, to talking freely when I am not under pressure and allowed to open up at my own pace. I have now spoken to many strangers without anxiety, initiated conversations and coped well when approached unexpectedly.

I am determined to continue making progress and eventually overcome SM completely.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to think or understand. I am sensitive to others' needs, a good listener, and have a good sense of humour.

When I meet new people it helps me to:

- be included in conversations, even though I may not talk straightaway
- try to respond to simple questions initially or talk via my mother
- use my iPad to communicate in writing if necessary
- refer to written notes if anxiety causes my mind to go blank
- email if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better and the progress I have made. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks,

6. Attending a job interview

Hi Amy,

Thank you for asking me along to an interview on Thursday. I am looking forward to meeting you.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called Selective Mutism. This means that talking can cause me to get so anxious that it is difficult to get my words out and I just freeze – unable to speak even when I want to. People sometimes think that I'm choosing not to speak but that is not the case.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work, understand or take full responsibility for a role. I am a focused, conscientious worker and will always complete any task to the best of my ability.

It would greatly help me at the interview if you could consider the following:

- Please allow me plenty of time to answer. My responses may seem a bit slow or disjointed but this will be purely down to my anxiety.
- If I do freeze at any point it would be helpful to move on to another question and come back to it later.
- I might bring a few notes with me to prompt myself if I freeze and if I become particularly stuck, I may write my answers down on a pad for you. Would this be ok?

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

With thanks,

7. Being on a committee

Dear Chairman

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my services to sit on the Tennis Club committee. I am very interested in the position of General Secretary.

I've really enjoyed playing tennis at the club with my sister and it was good to meet you at the recent charity tournament.

I would like to explain that since I was a child I have lived with a condition called selective mutism (SM - officially a disability). This means that sometimes talking causes me to get so anxious that it's difficult to get my words out and I just freeze – I'm unable to talk when I want to. People may think I'm choosing not to speak but that's not the case.

I want to assure you that SM does not affect my ability to work or understand. I am a good listener and have excellent secretarial skills. I also care a lot about the tennis club and want to see it continue to do well. This is why I feel I would be a good addition to the committee if you are still looking for someone to take on this role.

If I'm accepted onto the committee, I would find it helpful to email after meetings if anything crops up that I find difficult to say at the time. It also helps me to respond to question prompts and nod or shake my head when talking is difficult. And it's lovely to be included in conversations, even though I may not talk straightaway!

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope it has helped you understand my condition better. Please get back to me if you have any questions and I will be happy to help.

I look forward to hearing from you,

With thanks,