

Do you feel awkward? I know you were wondering why I kept silent. There are some people who can't talk at all in certain situations because of extreme fear or anxiety. This is called selective mutism. It is a mental health condition in which they can't talk even though they're willing to talk.

I have a friend who has selective mutism. She can't talk at all in our class, even when the teachers ask her a question. She only nods or shakes her head a little. In the first English lesson, we introduced ourselves. When it was her turn, she stood up and said nothing. Her face had no expression. Our teacher was worried about her because she didn't speak at all. The teacher went closer to her and asked her questions little by little. "What fruit do you like? Apples? Bananas? Strawberries?" It looked like she nodded a little when the teacher said strawberries. At that time, I thought she was very shy. I wondered why she didn't answer with her voice. I also thought there may be quiet kids naturally like her. So I didn't worry too much about her behavior. I just wanted to be friends with her because I discovered she had a pencil case with my favorite character.

On her birthday, I gave her a present and wrote her a letter. A few months later, she replied with a letter. Recently, my mom told me my friend might have selective mutism. That was the first time I had ever heard of the disorder. My friend can speak with her family in a comfortable situation, but at school or outside of her home, she suddenly becomes silent. I read many books and researched about selective mutism. What I learned is that individuals have different needs for support based on the degree of their disability and personality. So, I asked her if I could do something for her. To my surprise, her mother explained to me she has no trouble at school, because of the teachers' help. But, doesn't she need our help, from the other students, as well? She doesn't write much by text or letter. I still don't know what she needs. She might have given up asking for help or wants us to leave her alone. Since her disorder started, maybe countless people have misunderstood her and walked away.

If she wants to try to overcome her difficulties, I can wait. And if she needs help, I'm always ready to offer help. I'm always her friend. At school, I learned there are people in our society who use a wheelchair, are blind, or deaf. However, there are even more people who have hidden disabilities. According to the World Health Organization, up to 80% of disabled people are living with an invisible disability. I think schools should teach about them. We need to understand there are many people struggling for many many reasons, that may not be obvious.

People with selective mutism want to talk, but they can't and they don't know when they'll be able to talk freely again. Try to talk with a warm heart. It might take a little courage from you. However, continue to ask, "Do you need help?". Someone might be grateful and appreciate your kindness. Your little action will inspire others to help more, and make a big difference. We should increase awareness of hidden disabilities, promote acceptance and create a more caring and inclusive society.

Why are we here? We are here for each other.

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Listen to Silent Voices