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An introduction to

Selective / Situational Mutism

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Learning Aims

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- To understand what Selective (situational) Mutism is
- To understand how to help children and young people in school with SM
- To know where to access further support

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TRUE	FALSE

True or false?

True or false?

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TRUE	FALSE

More girls than boys have SM

True or false?

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TRUE	FALSE

More girls than boys have SM

The child likes to feel in control

True or false?

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SM is when a child chooses not to speak

True or false?

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The more pressure a child is under to speak, the harder it is to talk

True or false?

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TRUE	FALSE
More girls than boys have SM	SM is when a child chooses not to speak
The more pressure a child is under to speak, the harder it is to talk	The child likes to feel in control
A child may have other speech, language and communication needs or differences, including autism	A child with SM is shy and they'll grow out of it

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A child may have other speech, language and communication needs or differences, including autism	A child with SM is shy and they'll grow out of it
	SM is caused by trauma

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The more pressure a child is under to speak, the harder it is to talk	SM is when a child chooses not to speak
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What is Selective Mutism?

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A quick overview...

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- Often referred to as ‘situational mutism’
- Children or young people with SM can’t talk in every situation
- SM is like a phobia
- The more pressure or encouragement that is added, the more difficult talking will be

What to look out for

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- A child's talking is different when they are in different places / situations or with different people
- They are unable to speak or talk very little in school, but parents have no concerns at home
- They look frozen or expressionless or like 'a rabbit in headlights' when there's an expectation to speak
- They appear to be very shy and their talking in school is not improving
- Even when they are encouraged or offered a reward to speak, they can't

Two sides

There is a marked contrast between the child speaking to those in their ‘comfort zone’ and in other situations

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In some situations, the child can talk freely and confidently

Often at home, to those in the child’s ‘comfort zone’, they are able to talk freely, confidently and with ease

Parents may describe their child as confident and chatty at home

In certain situations, the child is unable to speak or responds minimally

In other situations, the child may be unable to speak at all

Speaking may be avoided or endured with intense anxiety

This consistent inability to freely speak in certain situations has lasted longer than a month

High profile / Low profile

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High-profile SM

Child or young person is unable to speak at all

When asked a question, or when there is an expectation to speak / respond, the child or young person is persistently silent

Low profile SM

Child or young person can provide minimal responses in certain situations but is unable to engage in a reciprocal conversation.
For example, the child or young person may be able to answer direct questions using 1-word answers or use ‘please’ and ‘thank you’

When the fear of not talking outweighs the fear of talking

Who has SM?

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- Impacts around 1 in 140 children
- SM more common in girls
- SM is more common in children from migrant or multilingual families
- Usually starts when between ages 3-5, but can start at any age
- Children with SM are more likely to have other SLCN
- SM and autism frequently co-occur
- SM also likely to co-occur with other mental health disorders (e.g. generalised anxiety, social anxiety disorder)

Getting a diagnosis

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DSM-V criteria, classified as ‘anxiety disorder’

- Consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there is an expectation for speaking (e.g. at school) despite speaking in other situations
- The disturbance interferes with educational or occupational achievement or with social communication.
- The duration of the disturbance is at least 1 month and cannot be the first month they started school.
- The failure to speak is not attributable to a lack of knowledge of, or comfort with, the spoken language required in the social situation
- The disturbance is not better explained by a communication disorder (e.g. - childhood-onset fluency disorder) and does not occur exclusively during the course of autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, or another psychotic disorder.

Common misconceptions

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The child or young person is ‘shy’.	SM is a specific fear
They are ‘rude’ or ‘stubborn’.	The child’s fear is controlling them
The child doesn’t know how to speak	A child with SM can talk
The child ‘won’t’ talk / is making a choice	A child with SM has an anxiety disorder
The child will ‘warm up’	Pressure to talk won’t help

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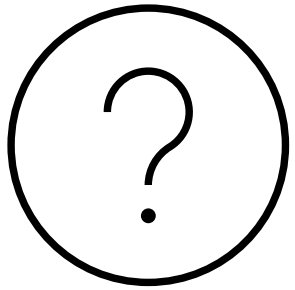
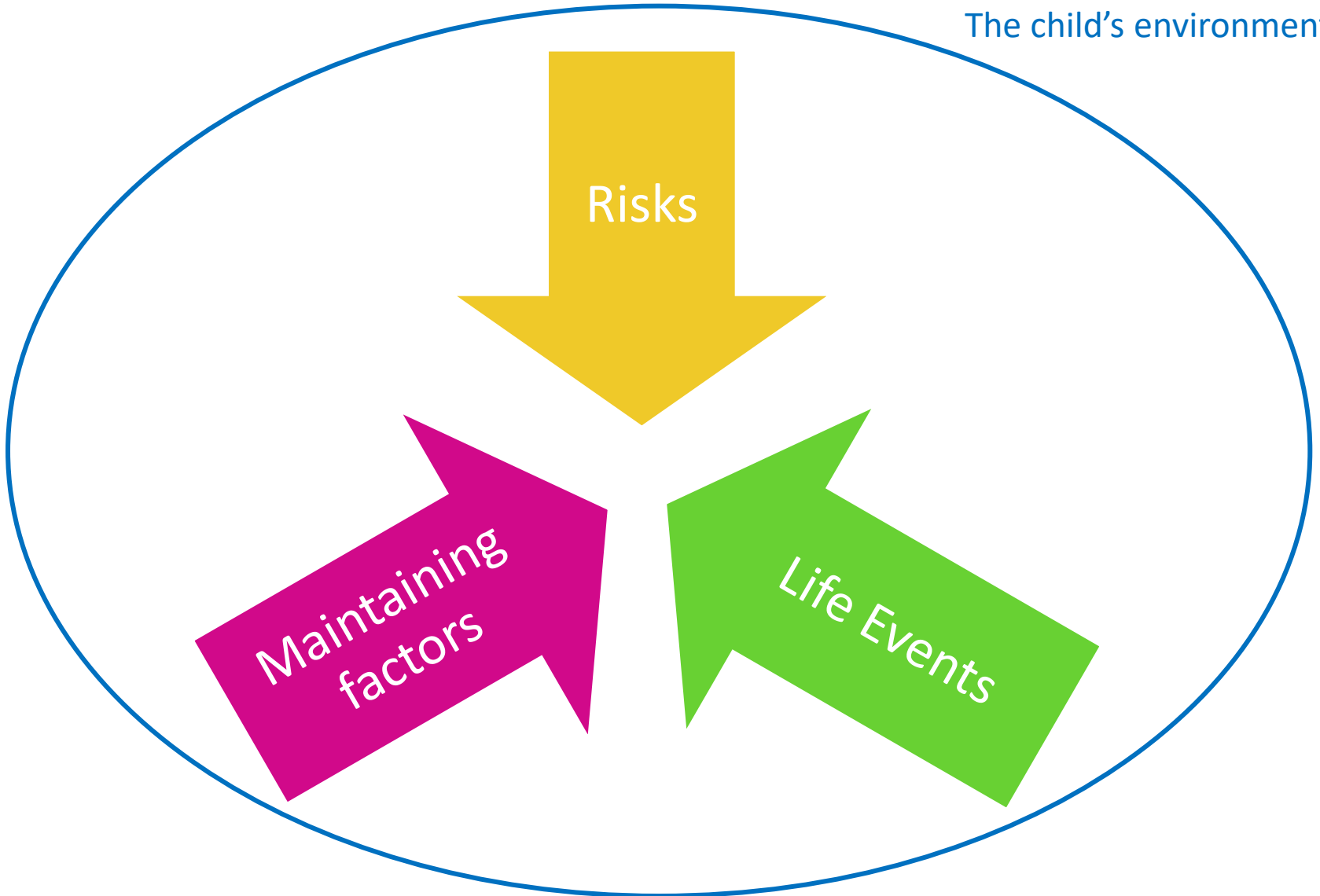


Any questions?

What causes SM?



Contributing factors

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Risk factors: sensitive or wary personality, ‘perfectionist’, anxiety or other phobias, family history of SM, anxiety or mental health disorders, separation anxiety, speech and language needs, sensory issues, autism

Life events: separation from parents, unfamiliar environments and situations, noisy / busy places, pressure from others to perform, difficulty speaking or not being understood by others, teasing, avoidance (may be modelled by others)

Maintaining factors: things that strengthen and prolong fear of talking e.g. continued pressure to speak, punishment for not speaking, others’ reactions to mutism that reinforce their fear

What is a phobia?

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- Amygdala controls your fear reflex – this keeps us safe
- Fight / slight / freeze response is triggered
- This sets in motion several physical responses to a perceived threat, e.g.
  - increased heart rate
  - feeling of panic
  - sweaty palms
  - muscle tension
- Amygdala ‘remembers’ previous threats and triggers the fear response
- Amygdala can become over sensitive to perceived threats / stimuli

‘Kitten phobia’ by Greg Sherrer
Source: Grog’s Bleg, August 2006, http://grogsbleg.blogspot.co.uk

Discussion:

- Does anyone have any phobias?
- What helps?
- Does it help to just ‘get on with it’?

SM: a phobia!

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It’s important to remember that:

- Phobias can be overcome!
- Phobias are common
- Adding pressure makes phobias worse
- Facing our fears is the key to success!
- You can’t avoid your fears
- Confidence has a ripple effect

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Take a 5-minute break

What we can do to help

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EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

MODIFYING THE ENVIRONMENT AT HOME AND SCHOOL

ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFICULTY WITH CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON

BUILDING RAPPORT AND SUPPORTING CONFIDENCE

Education and awareness

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- Important to share information with ***everyone***
- Increase understanding and awareness of SM (it's like a phobia!)
- Support prevention and help early identification and intervention
- Promote behaviour to encourage and reinforce communication ***at the child's pace***
- It's everyone's responsibility

Modifying home and school

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- To create an environment which allows children and young people to feel comfortable and talk at their own pace
- To help the person with SM to feel welcome and included
- To allow them opportunities to participate and join in without the expectation / pressure to speak
- Reduce **maintaining factors** which prolong a child's fear of talking

Maintaining factors prolong and strengthen a child or young person's SM:

❑ *Avoidance of speaking / situations that involve expectation to speak*

❑ *Pressures from others to speak*

Do’s and don’ts

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Think of some changes you can make at home and at school to help reduce pressures

What you can do to help

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- Don’t put child under pressure to talk. Instead use commentary-style talking.
- Allow the child to use other forms of communication while they are building up their confidence talking e.g. visuals and gestures
- It’s OK if the child chooses to talk through a friend when they are building their confident talking skills
- Be open and reassure your child about SM
- Have 1-1 time, daily with key person to provide opportunities for them to foster relationship with a key person in school.
- Opportunities for singing / talking in unison
- Encourage and support participation, rather than focus on talking
- Link closely with parents/setting – important to work as a team
- Desensitisation – videos from home (with child’s consent)
- Set up expectation that child will speak when they are ready to

Talking about SM with your child or young person

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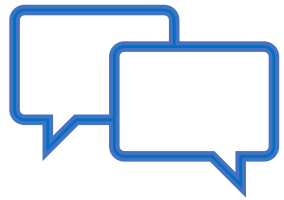
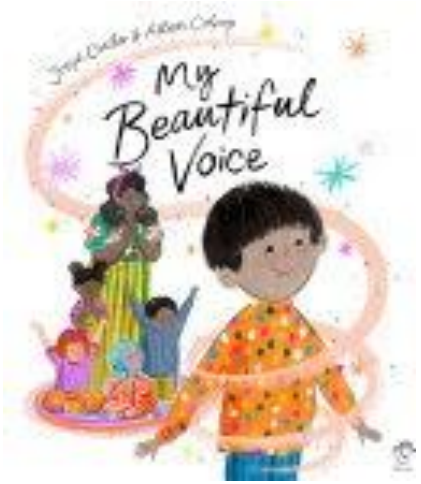
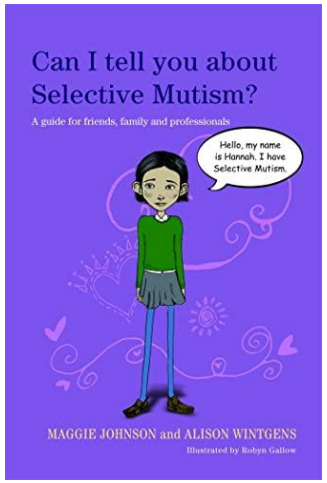
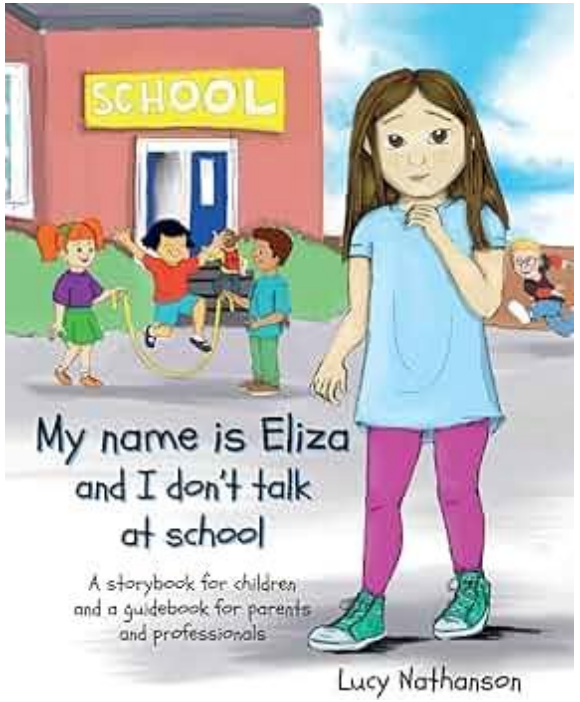
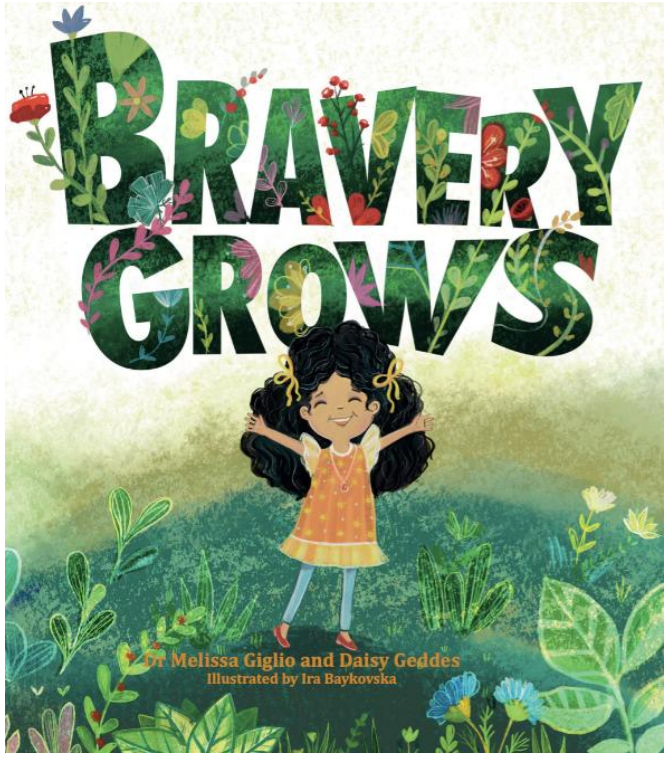
- Help your child to understand their difficulties
- Let them know it will get easier
- The child or young person has intense feelings of panic and this leads them to believe they don't want to speak. Talking openly and honestly about their difficulties help them understand this as a phobia and can give them relief to know they are not alone.
- You show them that you understand them and their needs so they will trust you and your suggestions to help
- Give SM a name and use language at your child's level e.g. 'worry', 'phobia'
- Make a talking map – explore places / situations where the child finds it easy / tricky to speak

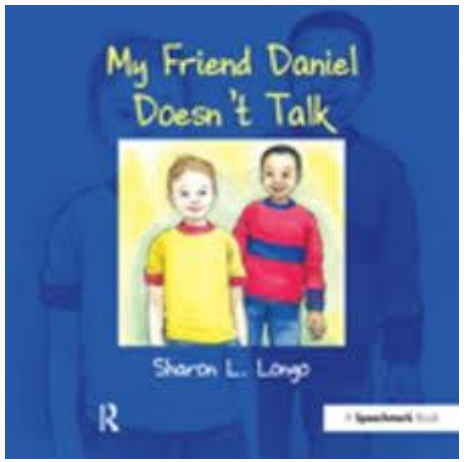



My Beautiful Voice


Can I tell you about Selective Mutism?
A guide for friends, family and professionals
Hello, my name is Hannah. I have Selective Mutism.
MAGGIE JOHNSON and ALISON WINTGENS
Illustrated by Robyn Gallow


SCHOOL
My name is Eliza and I don't talk at school
A storybook for children and a guidebook for parents and professionals
Lucy Nathanson


BRAVERY GROWS
Dr Melissa Giglio and Daisy Geddes
Illustrated by Ira Baykovska


My Friend Daniel Doesn't Talk
Sharon L. Longo

Supporting confidence

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- Takes the focus and pressure off talking
- Focus on what the child *can do* not what they can't
- Set realistic targets and adapt activities to child's capabilities to allow achievements
- Allow opportunities for participation without speaking
- Support self-esteem and confidence and independence
- Children with SM are often 'born worriers' – help to explore strategies to manage general anxiety / worry
- Ensure inclusion in all activities

- **Read handout 'how to help children manage anxiety'**

What's next?

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- Small steps approach
- Aim to establish speech with key people, use a parent where possible
- Shaping programme
- Sliding-in approach
- Overtime, generalise speech to other people and places
- Continue to support ongoing social skills, confidence building, resilience and assertiveness

When to refer to Branching Minds

If you feel the child/young person may need further support from either CAMHS or Compass Be, please consider the following:

- Other factors which might be contributing need to be identified and ensure the needs are being met, this could include- difficulties at home / learning / parenting issues/neurodiversity
- Motivation of the child/young person- Ensure that the child/young person wants things to change, not just parent/professional.
- Provide evidence of consistent strategies being used for a sustained period of time with no evidence of change (remember change can be slow – older child may be more entrenched and have additional social anxieties)
- If all of the above have been considered and implemented, then please either speak to your Compass Be link worker or complete a Request for Support form. This can be found on either the Compass Be or Barnsley CAMHS Website. Please ensure all of the boxes on the RFS are completed and the chid/young person has consented and that they have been supported to identify clear goals for support.
- If you are unsure about any of the above points or would like to discuss if CAMHS or Compass Be support would be beneficial please call Branching Minds on 01226 107377.

Resources and references

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- Johnson and Wintgens (2016) **The Selective Mutism Resource Manual, 2nd edition**, Speechmark Publihsing
- Johnson and Wintgens (2012) **Can I Tell you about Selective Mutism?: a guide for friends, family and professionals**, Jessica Kingsley Pubishers
- SMiRA: https://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/
- iSpeak: www.ispeak.org.uk/
- Lucy Nathanson: https://www.confidentchildren.co.uk/
- Kent Community NHS trust: https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/childrens-therapies-the-pod/speech-and-language-therapy/selective-mutism/

YouTube videos:

Lucy Nathanson– 'What is Selective Mutism?' and 'The Do's and Don'ts'

Saki Galaxidis: Overcoming Selective Mutism

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyatBNFI9u4

Thank you for listening!
Any questions?

https://ratemynhs.co.uk/survey/e5aca070-b7e2-4eda-aaf1-d16127e14bc1

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