

I have Dyspraxia.

Hands up who's heard of it? (pause) Thought not! That's usually the reaction I get!

Dyspraxia is an invisible disability. People looking at me and others who have it, don't realize there's anything wrong with us. We don't have hearing aids, we're not in wheel chairs, we don't use crutches, nothing obvious about us tells people around us that there's something wrong.

Dyspraxia prevents the proper transfer of messages along the nerves to and from the brain. This affects any skill or activity that requires co-ordination of thought or movement. If you think about it that means dyspraxia has affected everything I've done to get here this morning. Getting dressed, (pause) eating my breakfast, (pause) cleaning my teeth, (pause) tying my shoelaces, (pause) in fact dyspraxia effects EVERYTHING that I do.

So, I have dyspraxia, and I have to learn to live it, but this is made difficult by some people's attitudes towards me.

I'm going to tell you one or two true stories now which I hope will help you understand some of the difficulties dyspraxia causes me but also show you how some people's reactions towards me make things worse.

My family and I love to visit Warwick Castle. Any of you who've visited it will know how busy it becomes on a hot summer's day. It was on such a day we were visiting and my sister and I were allowed to explore on our own. Clare, my sister, ran off around the courtyard. She's a much better runner than me, so as usual I was trying to keep up. There were lots of toddlers running around, picnic boxes, people with ice creams, mums with prams, people everywhere! I have real difficulty in crowds. It's difficult for me to avoid the many obstacles.

So, there I am running along, trying desperately to avoid all these people, when an elderly lady appeared right in front of me. I didn't see her at first. I was trying to avoid the toddlers as I didn't want to knock one of them over. By the time I saw her, it was too late. I couldn't react quickly enough, so I bumped straight into her. She turned round and I could see that she was NOT at all happy. Before I could say a word she snapped "Don't push!" I apologized, and tried to explain what had happened, but she gave me a hateful look and walked off, muttering about the 'youth of today'. This is the common reaction if I accidentally knock against someone in a crowd. People think I'm being aggressive. They don't stop to think it was an accident and I have a disability, which means I couldn't help it.

Another time, I was in a well known clothes store with my Mum and sister. Mum asked me if I could move aside for a moment, as she was trying to look at an item of clothing. I stepped out the way and leant on a glass door. (pause) Which wasn't there. I'd misjudged it completely and I landed in the window display, sprawled among the mannequins and "sale" signs.

One of the assistants rushed over to check that everything was OK. (pause) with the window display. She didn't ask me if I was okay, she was just concerned with tidying up. My mum apologised and explained that it had been an accident. I felt so embarrassed. I went outside to wait for my Mum and sister. I sat down on a seat next to a couple of ladies who had obviously seen everything, and were discussing in very loud voices what a 'naughty child' I was. Another example of some people's lack of understanding and intolerance towards others.

It's not just adults that make coping with Dyspraxia more difficult. I was badly bullied, both emotionally and physically, at school, for being "different". I know I seemed clumsy, bumping into things or tripping over frequently. I became isolated because I couldn't join in the football games as I am hopeless at sport. My classmates assumed I was thick as I was slow to complete work, and rarely finished it on time. This isn't because I'm thick. The ideas are there, but I have trouble putting them down on paper because, for me, handwriting is painful. The bullying got so bad, eventually my parents decided to take me out of school and educate me at home. That was three years ago. Then, I felt alone and depressed. I really did believe I was useless, I'd been told it so many times at school.

For five months, my parents tried to repair the damage. Every time we sat down to study, I'd recall the bad things that happened at school. Eventually, my Mum had a brain wave. She suggested that I set up a website about my experiences, so I could get them off my chest and make sense of them.

So, I started to put my website together. I wrote an honest account of the bullying and how it is to live with dyspraxia. It made me feel better about myself. The website went live on the web in August 2001. Since then, I've had over 21000 visitors. Many of these have contacted me to share their own experiences. My site is helping others every single day, giving them support and reminding them they are not alone.

Now, I'm going to read you two poems which are both written by visitors to my website.

The first one is called "If Dyspraxia could talk, it would say to me..." and it's by Charlotte, who's 16.

My name is dyspraxia I've been with you all your life,
I've seen you go through a lot of pain and strife,
I can be your worst enemy but I can be your best friend too,
I've made you what you are today I've made you, you.

Please don't ignore me and hope I'll go away,
You have to face up to me every single day,
People think you're stupid, clumsy, lazy or bad,
But it's me that taught you not to let those idiots make you sad

Please don't feel clumsy when you break that cup,
Please don't feel useless and think you should give up,
Please have the sense of humour to laugh until you shake,
It's me that gave you that ability to laugh at your mistakes.

Please don't feel stupid when you fail the test,
Please understand you learn differently to the rest,
Please revise your way until you get it right,
It's me that gave you the ability to work with all your might.

Please try hard until you succeed
It will happen eventually, I guarantee,
It feels so good when things happen the way you want,
It's me that gave you the determination to carry on.

Please understand when others do things wrong,
You know how they feel so tell them to carry on
Please stay polite even when it's hard to do,
It's me that's made you care so much for others as well as you.

Please don't ever feel like you'll never fit in anywhere,
Keep searching until you find happiness somewhere,
Please stay positive through all that life will bring
It's me that taught you to look on the bright side of things.

My name is dyspraxia I've been with you all your life,
I've seen you go through a lot of pain and strife,
I can be your worst enemy but I can be your best friend too,
I've made you what you are today I've made you, you.

My second poem is called "D is for..." and it's by CJ.

D is for dummy and dope
D is for those who can't cope
D is for disruptive, stupid & lazy
D is for students who drive teachers crazy

D is for butterfingers, who can't catch the ball
D is for idiots who don't get it at all
D is for 'everyone else understands'
D is for people in bottom-bands
D is for despairing, trouble-makers, attention-takers
D is for difficult and 'Do it again'
D is for 'God, you're such a lame-brain'

But D is also for dyslexic, dyspraxic and disabled
D is for people who shouldn't be labelled.

Remember, everyone's different, and we should celebrate those differences, because it's what makes each of us special. Dyspraxia has made me the person I am, and in a way, I'm happy about that. 3 Years ago, my future looked bleak. Now I've achieved so much more than I ever believed I would! I've set up my website, I've helped my parents produce a leaflet on dyspraxia to send to all the primary schools in Britain, which I have copies of here if anyone would like one (hold up leaflet). I've joined Shed MK, a local inclusive theatre group, I'm involved in this project, talking to you now and, in 12 days, I am going to begin studying with the Open University! Having dyspraxia makes many things difficult for me, but it's also allowed me to do many positive things. Without dyspraxia, I would never have done them.