

Learning from My Disability

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Reflections on Disability Pride Month

Did you know that more than 1 in 4 adults in the US have a disability? That's over 70 million people. Some disabilities are lifelong, while others are acquired through accidents or aging. Disabilities are both visible and invisible. The disability community is continually working to increase acceptance of all disabled people.

July is Disability Pride Month, which was first observed officially in 2015. Disability Pride Month celebrates disability identity and community and recognizes disability culture and leadership, along with marking the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) anniversary and the ongoing work to make civil rights real in daily life. Disability Pride means different things to different people, but this blog post will focus on a few positive lessons that having cerebral palsy (CP) has helped me to learn over the years. As I share my perceptions of my own disability experience, I hope that what I share might be useful and uplifting.

My muscles don't respond well when my brain sends them signals. It takes time for the signals from my brain to get to my body. Even simple tasks require me to slow down, focus, and concentrate. Examples are wheeling my wheelchair, reaching for something, and doing my daily exercises. I need to consciously take deep breaths for my tight muscles to relax, and I need to focus on one task at a time. It may sound odd, but I can't wheel and talk at the same time. I can't exercise and talk at the same time either. I have learned how my body functions best and I must apply this knowledge every day. My mom says she should follow my example to slow down and stay focused, since it can prevent mistakes and injuries.

I've had CP for my whole life, and it has helped me develop problem-solving skills and learn to manage my emotions. I've been making adaptations for most of my life, such as using large print, typing my kindergarten journal, and reading with books on an easel. I've learned that

getting upset or angry about a challenging situation never helps me come up with solutions. In fact, being upset tightens up all my already-tight muscles and it's quite painful. Lack of pain is a great incentive to stay as calm as I can and come up with a solution through research, trial and error, or advice from others.

Another lesson my disability has given me is knowing when I need help and how to ask for it. I like to do many things on my own, but realistically I know that I can't do everything. This keeps me humble and appreciative of others because I couldn't live without physical help from others. I have found that I feel connected with others while they are assisting me. Because I need help every day throughout the day, I've learned how to ask for it in a kind way, without embarrassment. For me, needing help has always been a regular part of life.

These lessons from my disability have not come suddenly but over time. I've had support from family members, teachers, friends, and others. Having such support has enabled me to discover positive aspects of having my disability despite the frustrations it brings. Disability Pride Month acknowledges both how far the disability community has come as well as the work that is still needed. Having a disability usually feels isolating, but there are over 70 million of us in the US. While each of our disabilities and experiences are different, together we can be strong. We are each one person, but each one adds to the whole. Let's keep working to be counted, included, and heard.