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LIFE

Accepting My ADHD Diagnosis Was A Lesson In Ableism

Disabled people were 'that group over there' who needed support, but weren't anything to do with me

By Sarah Marie Graye
Indie-published novelist exploring her adult diagnosis of ADHD both in her novels and in life

06/06/2018 05:20pm BST

AMANDA STUBBLEFIELD / EYEEM VIA GETTY IMAGES

In November 2017 I received an adult diagnosis for ADHD. Going through the acceptance process of such a diagnosis was bemusing to me in many ways.

Firstly, I had to step away from the media’s idea of the condition: the seven-year-old boy terrorising his classmates while his poor teacher struggles to teach him anything.

When you’re a 42-year-old female and your education history contains no fail marks, no resists, and culminates in two degrees, you can’t even see that character as part of your past.

Then I found myself chomping through all the facts in order to understand what my diagnosis meant – that it’s a neurodevelopmental disorder, a dopamine deficiency disorder, an executive function disorder, that its effects can be seen on a CT scan.

The process of disseminating and sharing these facts was an important part of coming to terms with my diagnosis. But it was also my first experience of ableism.

I felt very much like I was shouting into the wind because those around me who had not been diagnoses were more than happy to cling to the ADHD definition of the “naughty child”.

accept that I was disabled. But to me, disabled people were “that group over there” who needed support, but who weren’t anything to do with me.

I held a preconceived opinion about what it meant to be disabled. An opinion that wasn’t based fully on reason or experience – the definition of prejudice.

In order to accept my disability I needed to accept that my understanding of the word was flawed. But I had no idea how I was going to make this mental shift.

And then it happened quite by accident.

I saw a video interview with Ellie Simpson, who has cerebral palsy, where she asked the government to consider the needs of the disabled before banning plastic straws.

I noticed that many of the responses on social media were from able-bodied people who felt Ellie should be able to manage perfectly well using either strong paper straws or a reusable metal straw.

In her video, Ellie explains neither of these alternatives are any good, but people who didn’t have her condition felt they knew better.

I found myself standing on the same side of the argument as Ellie.

As ADHD is linked to the executive function area of the brain, one of the symptoms is sensory sensitivity. So someone with water hurts their skin in the same way a graze would.

I find it difficult to have wet skin – and when my skin is wet it can be too sensitive to rub dry. On bad days, my skin sensitivity is so bad I'm unable to bathe or shower.

So I rely on disposable single-use wipes in order to present myself as clean and maintain a certain level of dignity and self-respect.

I checked the list of proposed banned items – disposable wipes were included. Something I need in order to navigate the world might be taken away from me by able-bodied people who didn't understand why I needed them.

I found myself standing firmly in the corner marked disabled.

So when I saw a *Guardian* article discussing biodegradable wipes, where the author of the piece concluded, "single-use biodegradable wipes are justifiable only if…" and the ifs didn't include "you're disabled", I realised I had to comment:

"Banning products without consulting disability groups is ableism.

Just as banning plastic straws would affect a range of disabled people's ability to eat and drink, so banning wipes (and offering only eyewateringly expensive options in their place) affect a whole range of disabled people's ability to look after themselves.

There are many who have had their support cut and who are unable, without that support, to wash safely. There are others *water on their skin.*

This idea of 'banning' something only ever seems to look at it from a 'the user is selfish' perspective. This is not only really frustrating, but it discriminates against certain disabled groups."

I was pleased my comment was chosen as a '*Guardian* Pick' because it said to me that someone somewhere was listening. But I knew before I clicked to submit my post what sort of ableism I'd face in the replies.

Now my mental shift has happened I feel that, unless I learn how to not speak up, facing ableism is going to be a part of everyday life.

And I've decided that I have to be okay with that.

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00:40

Study: Chemicals That Multiply Children's Risk Of ADHD Is Virtually Everywhere

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Indie-published novelist exploring her adult diagnosis of ADHD both in her novels and in life