

Overnight, I became disabled.

The first thought I would like to banish from your mind is that you are reading the comments and thoughts of a feeble-minded or mentally retarded vegetable – the unfortunate general conception of *The Disabled*.

I am, like you, a thinking, living, person, who – like you – can feel frustrated, angry, happy or whatever.

Having said that you must realise however, I *am* different, both physically and mentally.

Just how different is the disabled person from a normal one? My own experience may be of some help. At 16 my neck was broken on the rugby field, terminating instantly any chance of a good, active athletic career, such as it was, and a normal social life. Suddenly each step I took became a problem, something to be considered, tried and assessed so that ghastly mistakes did not happen. For the first time I could not hide anonymously in the background; somehow I was always at the mercy of others, being challenged to prove my worth and right to a place in society. I found any lack of conforming was pounced on and easy ways out were not to be found. I became reliant on the kindness and goodwill of others to take me out, even just to accept me as a social equal – a stage particularly noticeable while still in a wheelchair. I seemed to be indebted to everyone all the time; little wonder independence is my goal!

It was the first time I had ever had to deal with disability of any sort and it came as a hard blow. I count myself lucky to have had the experience of being able-bodied. This set my sights on something higher than a chair-bound existence in an institution; but not all are as lucky – and those born with a disability will never know anything better without help. This is where an independent organisation such as Scouting can assist and not just on a troop night either.

Under the present system most disabled youngsters tend to be grouped in special schools either on a day or boarding basis. They will also probably spend time coming and going to hospital. The net result of this, coupled with difficulties at home, is that the youngster becomes introspective, possibly depressed and certainly institutionalised. This vicious circle narrows their horizons and increases their dependence on others. They therefore have little social awareness which may be tolerable at 8 or 9 but by 16 or 17 there is a sharp difference between the disabled and the able-bodied. I believe that, as Scouting will take any boy through 8 – 25, our job is to try and put some of the things that have happened right, and avert the rot before it starts in the disabled boy.

I appear to be talking a contrary culture but I know that it is possible – you only need some know-how. The two most important points in my mind are being tolerant and having concept of time.

When I came out of hospital I realised just how much time means to different people. For me, I was content to get there as soon as possible, albeit slowly. But quite literally a race seemed to be taking place around me where no one had time for anyone else and insisted on rushing around rather than sitting quietly and having a cup of coffee.

No one appeared to have the necessary time of day to help anyone else. It was an alien, hostile environment for which even a short spell of institution had left me unprepared. Imagine emerging after 16 years of it.

It is not that the disabled boy cannot cope with the pace – he will though time – it is just that he is unprepared. You can help to redress this balance. Obviously you will be frustrated with your attempts either by the slowness or by the apparent incompetence of the boy but remember one good rule applies to disabled as well as fit boys. He will *only rise to your level of expectation*.

To work with a disabled boy you both have to be tolerant of each other, not giving up at first failure, not getting frustrated, as is inevitable when things don't go your way, not to rush on and leave the boy behind mentally or physically and not to rush in with help where quite honestly it's neither needed nor wanted. Far better that the youngster struggles for half an hour and makes some attempt that you come in and complete the task in five minutes – you'll get no thanks.

All disabled people have limits in the sense that there are untrodden areas of experience which may require company to overcome (if they can be).

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This factsheet is part of the Training Pack for volunteers working at the Greater Glasgow Special Needs Summer Camp. It may be used for bona fide Scouting purposes – but please let us know first!

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