

Coping Strategies for People with Disabilities

We at The Inclusive Hive have various support groups for caregivers, people with disabilities, and their allies, such as parents and siblings. This past April, one of our support groups had a candid discussion about coping strategies to help people with disabilities deal with both the expected and the unexpected.

The conversation dealt with positive and negative experiences a few of us have had over the years when dealing with the public. The goal of this discussion was to serve not only as a sounding board for our frustrations but also as a valuable resource for other self-advocates and people in general by providing critical takeaways from sometimes funny and, at different times, annoying life experiences that can benefit us all. Without recounting every funny story we shared that evening because some private information was shared, here are the key takeaways from that discussion.

One of the most important coping mechanisms that seems to be universal is that one must be understanding and be prepared for the unexpected. This does not mean we have to like every interaction we encounter daily. It just means that if someone makes a rude or ignorant comment, it should not be met with ignorance or anger. Rather, as one advocate said in her example, you can use someone's lack of understanding as a

teaching moment. Life presents many challenges and hurdles, but the more we use adversity as a learning experience or teaching moment, the more we fulfill our purpose. For example, suppose someone comments on an individual's power wheelchair or how they sit, talk, or function. Rather than being angry, it is critical to take a few deep breaths, channel that entirely natural anger, and turn it into something positive.

The second takeaway from the conversation was that although killing them with kindness is a great concept, sometimes disabled people should, or even must, be confrontational. This does not mean being rude. Instead, it just means being straightforward and blunt. This is occasionally counterintuitive to what society believes disabled people are capable of, according to one self-advocate. To simplify, sometimes, even though it may or may not be physically possible, we have to stand up for ourselves as disabled people, even if we don't stand up literally.

A third piece of advice was directed towards our family members and allies. Even those who interact with us daily are sometimes too close to us or a situation to realize disabled people don't necessarily need saving. It is human nature to be protective of a "weaker" person or thing, but disabled people are not inherently weak. If you, as an ally or caregiver, notice that the disabled individual you are with is encountering a difficult situation, don't automatically assume they need to be

saved just because they are disabled. They might need comfort or a friend, but they don't always need a savior. Another way of thinking of the same concept is to ask that person if they are okay and need help. If they say yes, then it is okay to ask how you can best help them.

The final topic of discussion was, how do you empower your fellow advocates and friends going through similar situations? The following paragraph represents not only the response given by one of the self-advocates but also ties the whole discussion of disability and coping mechanisms together quite nicely.

"That's a tough question. I would say that every day is a battle. Some days are easier

than others. Know that you are strong, know that you have purpose, that you have potential.

That by waking up and being out in the world. You may be having the most miserable,

difficult day, you may be having flare-ups, but you never know who's going to see you, and they

are going to find you as their hero for that day. They're going to use you as a motivation

to keep on going. They're going to see you, or they're going to say that person. They look like me.

They have my same diagnosis, and they're out there working, they're out there speaking, they're out there sharing their story. I can do it because they can do it. So always remember, there will always be someone looking up to you and looking for inspiration. You're not alone. We're not alone. I have my people that I reach out to when I'm having a bad day, so if there's anything that you walk away from this meeting is to find your person. If you don't have that person already, know that that person is your safety, your safety blanket, your go-to because they get you, and they're never going to judge you. They're never going to belittle you. They'll never assume you need a rescuer because they know you can rescue yourself. When you feel that you're not able to rescue yourself, they will remind you of what an awesome individual you are, so have those people close to you because they are the ones that are going to catapult you to the best you ever."