

Mike's story

Mike is an Assistant Economist at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). He suffered a severe traumatic brain injury in a cycling accident in 2005. It set his life on a new path. Yet, he feels exceptionally lucky for all the things that helped him make the most of that path. Here he discusses disability and inclusion, in an effort to help others get an environment in which they can succeed.

Some might find it hard reading this post. They'll see themselves as the sort to always be polite – those people would never knowingly exclude disabled people. However, in trying to be polite, they actually do exactly this. We all face challenges. Best we recognise that and just act normal around, or even empathise with, other people tackling their own challenges. Inclusion depends on it.

Like so many other people, I've faced my challenges. In 2005, I had a serious cycling accident. It was just two weeks before I was due to compete in a major triathlon, the New Zealand Ironman. I sustained a severe traumatic brain injury and was lucky to survive. A long recovery ensued, including seven months in hospital and rehab. As my wife will tell you, my brain injury still causes issues like forgetfulness, over 15 years later.

From a young age, we receive training in how to be polite. It includes being taught not to stare at people who look or act different. As we get older, this training doesn't leave us – it's amazing how invisible a disabled person can feel. By the time we're adults, though, it's been extended. We get uncomfortable talking to disabled people, especially talking about their disability. This might be well-intentioned – no one wants to be rude. Yet, few things are more effective at excluding disabled people.

How come I see it this way? My brain injury is invisible – at first glance, I don't look disabled. But there were times during my recovery when my disability was very apparent. Following my accident, I had to learn how to walk again, which included spending time in a wheelchair. Few can imagine how invisible you become, sitting in one of those things. Maybe people don't want to look at you because they think it would underline you're in a wheelchair and they're not. As if you weren't aware of that already!

Likewise, many people are uncomfortable talking about someone's disability. Perhaps this is because it would remind that person they're disabled. What a silly thing! I've dealt with the effects of my brain injury every single day since I suffered it. There's no way I'm going to feel bad when someone talks to me about it. Better you ask me how it's going, and what are the latest challenges I'm overcoming. I had my accident training for a triathlon; how is triathlon for me now?

I admit, not every disabled person will be as open as me. Definitely some won't want to discuss their disability. You shouldn't worry about that, though. We humans are adept at sensing when someone doesn't want to talk

about something. Use this skill. Ask that woman in the wheelchair how frustrating London tube stations are that don't have lifts. You might not know about wheelchairs on the Tube, but you might know about prams. It's so much better to empathise about someone's challenges. Admit you can't imagine the challenges she has. But then talk about the difficulties you've faced, getting around London with a pram. Empathy makes us human.

I give you a challenge for International Day for People with Disabilities, should you choose to accept it. Overcome your politeness training and force yourself to be more inclusive of disabled people. Say hi to the woman in the wheelchair; ask her how she's getting on. Maybe even empathise about the challenges she faces.

If you talk to disabled people about their challenges, you never know how you'll be helping. Perfect strangers helped enormously in my recovery. After I learnt to walk again, I slowly learnt how to swim, bike and run. Helped by encouraging, inclusive people, like some sprinters at a local athletic park, I built my fitness up. In 2010, I finally completed the Ironman triathlon I'd been aiming at before my accident. My story is just one about someone overcoming difficult things, though. To find out others, get to know your colleagues. Showing inclusion is the right way to do that.

Mike is an active member of the DCMS Ability Network. Across departments, there are similar networks that are open for all and offer a safe environment to discuss and learn about different abilities and health conditions. Networks are for all colleagues – whether you have a disability, line manage someone with a disability, or would just like to learn from the perspectives of people with differing abilities.

As a Function, we also want to understand more about what we could be doing to address barriers and improve the experiences of analysts with a disability across government. If you'd like to talk to us, please get in touch at analysis.function@ons.gov.uk.