

From Henry's Desk.....

Polio and Discrimination

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, discrimination is: 1: the process by which two stimuli differing in some aspect are responded to differently: the quality or power of finely distinguishing and 3 a: the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually; b: prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action, or treatment such as racial discrimination.

Throughout our country's history discrimination has had an ongoing presence. Women, people of color, some immigrants, some religious groups, some with a different sexual identity and those with physical or mental disabilities are among those who have been the recipients of discrimination. Most of you that are reading this article are survivors of polio. Have you experienced the sting of discrimination because of your history of polio? Perhaps you have some objective evidence or memory of discrimination related to polio. Perhaps you cannot describe any objective evidence of discrimination, but maybe you have experienced the feeling of discrimination.

I know that this issue is a sensitive one. One's perception of others could easily be a misperception. With this thought in mind I asked ten active members of the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group regarding their experience or feeling about discrimination. These ten members included some who had a visible mark of polio, some who had a visible mark of polio but could hide it and some who passed for able bodied until Post Polio Syndrome. Below I will list the eight questions asked and share some of the responses.

1. As a survivor of polio do you feel you experienced any form of discrimination or prejudice?

Three responders did not feel they had experienced any discrimination related to polio. The other seven did. A few unique examples follow:

There were times when I started a new job, I felt like I had to prove myself.

Yes, in school I could not earn A in phys ed since I could not run, only B I got in high school; so made me 10th in class rather than at the top.

Yes, in college getting into a fraternity and after professional school – to some extent in the lack of opportunities for work with excellent groups; thus I have been self employed for most of my career.

I have not felt discrimination. I kept the fact that I had polio to myself and did not speak about it to anyone in elementary school, junior high or high school. I doubt that my peers or teachers noticed. I was very thin so having an arm that was even thinner than the other was not obvious. When in OT school I was a bit of a celebrity during labs teaching muscle testing because I actually had weakness which made it much more exciting to learn on me as a partner. I knew what I could physically do and not do. In public I never attempted activities with my right arm that would have revealed weakness or difficulty.

2. If you had a visible physical disability from polio (atrophy, limp, orthotic devices, curvature of spine or limbs, etc), were you ever called a "cripple" or overheard comments to that effect?

Three responders reported "No." The other seven were called derogatory terms. Here are a few examples:

The only recollection I have was that when my mom and I went shopping as a smaller child, other children would stare at me. It didn't hurt my feelings as much as make me angry and I know I made the comment "What are you looking at!?" more than once.

I was called "gimp" as a child often because I was in a cast and used crutches (doctor efforts to correct drop foot).

Yes, I was called a cripple by a few peers, felt stares and once was called Quasimodo.

I have muscle wasting in my right shoulder, elbow, hand and thenar eminence. In street clothes, it took a very observant person to notice. I worked with many therapists in other departments who did not notice. In contrast to this, young children would often notice my hand and ask why it looked like it did.

I had a limp but I don't ever remember hearing comments. I was pushed out into the middle of Grove Ave. into traffic while riding my velocipede. I also was beaten up every day on the way home from kindergarten because I could not run away from the kids. The solution was to send me home 15 minutes before dismissal. I did not think that was a good way to handle it. As a senior citizen, I was attending a Board meeting of the condo and one woman wanted to make a law that no more wheelchair people could move in!

3. Even if you have no objective evidence of being the victim of prejudice or discrimination, did you ever "feel" that way?

Four members stated "No." A few of the positive responses are below

Yes, I was turned down for a job for which I was highly qualified, and had been told by the interviewer that I definitely had the job, but she changed her mind when she saw me. I had obvious scoliosis at the time, but could walk without problems.

Who among us hasn't felt "different"? Or asked "Why did this happen to me?" and shed some tears as a young child or especially a teenager. I was aware that I wasn't asked out on dates in high school, but went out with groups of friends instead. Most teenage girls with obvious polio had to have dreamed of a romantic boyfriend, etc. which didn't happen. By the time I got to college, I had enough self confidence to be gregarious, social, humorous, etc. and a new social life opened up. I never looked back; and although I was very aware that I had a physical disability, I didn't dwell on it. I guess I felt people were "attracted" to the person and overlooked any physical difference.

Polio affected my self image. I felt somewhat "inferior" but I don't remember anyone trying to make me feel that way.

I think I just felt I had to try so much harder to be normal in every way.

4. Do you think having polio caused you to receive more attention after you regained a level of stability (the acute phase was over)? If so, what kind of attention?

This question got more positive answers than any other. Here are some of the responses.

When I returned from my first hospitalization at age 6, I remember the neighbors coming in and asking to see me walk. I know now that, for them, it was somewhat of a miracle that I could walk (I had not walked since I was 10 months old), but at the time I felt humiliated and exploited.

I have an older brother (5 yrs. older) and I've often wonder if he had some form of resentment because I got more attention (or at least I thought I did). He was a wonderful big brother then and now, so he certainly didn't show any resentment. I certainly got some benefits from having polio. I was in the newspaper often, photographed with First Ladies, dignitaries, fund raising, etc. I know I was protected and got special treatment from my aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.

Yes, small town, everyone wanted association on our newspaper coverage than other teenagers for accomplishments

I generally denied or avoided getting help as I tried in every way I knew to be normal. During the first year back in school my best friend carried my books.

I think there were two kinds of attention. One was the attention that appeared to be done to "help" me but really seemed sadistic to me. The other was done perhaps in a more concerned way. (That does not mean I wanted that attention.) One example of the first kind was in kindergarten when we had to run races or do skipping races. I could not run and I did a sort of half skip hop thingy. The teacher made me go the same distance as the other kids and they finished before I even covered half the distance. That would have been uncomfortable but the kicker was that the teacher and kids all jeered at me the whole time that I was trying to catch up.

5. If you did get more attention, did you like the attention or did you try to avoid the attention?

The majority of the responders attempted to avoid attention related to polio. . Two admitted that they enjoyed the attention. Here are some of the responses.

I never turned down special treatment. I can't say it was horribly obvious and no one else my age was overlooked because of it. That would have bothered me.

I try to avoid attention which is why I was resistant to using a scooter in stores. After a while I realized that people in the grocery store were not paying any attention to me. I use it now without concern about what others are thinking.

I was allowed to "help" the PE instructor since I couldn't play basketball, etc but I don't remember either liking or avoiding the attention.

6. Did you ever feel you were the subject of pity from others?

The majority did not feel that they were the object of pity from others. A few answered "Yes."

ARRRRRG! Yes

Yes, some childhood peers, a few adults at church.

When I first started using the scooter/wheelchair at schools I could see the pity in the eyes of the adults I would encounter in the hallway. As they got used to it they just saw me and that look was no longer in their eyes. I think that anyone who has a visible limitation receives pity occasionally from people they do not

know. (except in the grocery store!) When people know you well, pity is not there because they just see you.

7. Did you feel that being a survivor of polio ever hampered you in the work place?

The majority of responders stated "No."

Yes, I was turned down for a job for which I was highly qualified, and had been told by the interviewer that I definitely had the job, but she changed her mind when she saw me. I had obvious scoliosis at the time, but could walk without problems.)

No, but as a passer, few knew. However, I was limited in type of job since I could not walk or stand for long periods

Yes, everything was harder to do and I did a lot of compensating, finding alternative ways of doing things and used sublimation like trying to make good grades.

I think I am going to include college in this answer, too. When I was at U of R in the 50's, I had a math class on the men's campus. The 10 minutes between classes was not adequate for me to walk from one side of the lake to the other. I would not make it in time. The professor would lock me out of the classroom and make me beg to come in. I had to throw apology letters over the transom before he would open the door for me. (Can you imagine that now??? Lawsuit time, for sure!)

8. Did you feel that being a survivor of polio hampered you in social settings?

One half of the responders reported "No." Others reported "Yes." Here are some of their responses.

Slightly, I cannot stand up long; so cocktail parties were out. I could not play sports with friends. In high school and college people noticed my limp and commented.

Yes, during adolescence I avoided dances or proms until I was a class officer and I had to go to the prom because I was in charge of it. It was extremely difficult asking a girl to go with me.

Polio did make me unsure of myself as an adolescent in terms of self image. I wasn't comfortable at dances, for example.

It may have made me shyer around boys but I may have been that shy anyway. Most guys I met or dated did not even know that I had polio. I was concerned that my "little arm" would not be found attractive.

I guess I could say maybe a little bit. I tried to play tennis in high school because my friends did but I could not do that. I always felt awkward dancing.

What does this little survey reveal? Actually not much is unexpected. As a reality of our polio generation, discrimination and prejudice were generally denied or we simply dealt with it. It wasn't until twenty years ago with the passage of the American with Disabilities Act that polio survivors began to be more assertive in regard to realizing that we had certain rights as polio survivors. As a result many more buildings, both public and private, are more assessable than fifty or more years ago. Earlier in our lives we were more motivated to adapt to the environment as it existed rather than seek to change the environment. Some of us clearly had feelings of being subject to discrimination; even if there was not much we could do about it.