

AN OPEN LETTER TO THOSE WITHOUT CEREBRAL PALSY

Please understand that just because I am *capable* of doing a physical activity without accommodations does not mean that I do not *need* my accommodations. If I use my accommodations, it does not mean that I am lazy, or taking advantage of my CP. It only means that this is what I need to do to make sure that I can enjoy the same things that people without CP do.

Please understand that there are some effects of CP that you cannot see. Yes, I walk funny. Yes, I fall over a lot. But please remember, CP is brain injury, and brain injury is a tricky thing. I have severe problems with depth perception, which makes interpreting three dimensional diagrams and maps difficult. This is as much of an impairment as my physical impairments.

Please understand that it's not just my legs. CP affects my entire body, including my hands, arms, speech, eyes, and a million other things. It is extremely difficult for me to sit up straight in a chair, especially when I am tired. I stutter and have trouble controlling the volume of my voice, especially when I am tired. All of these things are connected to the CP.

Please understand that my feet and ankles are always cold. They may turn odd colors at times. This is related to the CP and many CPers have this problem. Do not be alarmed when my feet feel like ice cubes. It's just the way they are.

Please understand that things take me longer to do than the average person. I am not capable of climbing two sets of stairs, going to my locker, and getting to class on time if you only give me five minutes. With practice, I may be able to accomplish such a task in the allotted time, but I will likely be too exhausted and in pain to focus on anything for half of first period. Extra time-for *all kinds of things*-is an accommodation that you need to provide me with, just like any other.

Please understand that I am still your (semi) ordinary person: I have other stresses and worries in my life. When-in some way, shape, or form-I am not getting my accommodations and/or am being discriminated against, it pushes me to the breaking point. I simply do not have the energy to be worrying about if I am getting unequal treatment on top of all my other stresses and problems. If anything, I have less energy for those sort of things than an average person.

Please understand that CP is exhausting, both physically and mentally. Standing, walking, talking, even sitting, all of those activities are more difficult for me and take up a lot more energy. Doing two or more of those things simultaneously is nearly impossible, and it means that other things (like sitting up straight or keeping my balance) will become more difficult to do as well. I am not anemic; I do not have some sort of unrelated condition that results in exhaustion. I am tired all the time because I'm using up so much more energy than the average person.

Please understand that if I do not make eye contact with you, I am not being rude. Making, and holding eye contact with someone is as much of a muscular task as anything else. It is extremely difficult for me to make eye contact with someone while talking and still be able to speak clearly and focus on the conversation. It is simply a matter of too many muscular tasks being performed simultaneously.

Please understand that I have a startle reflex. This causes me to jump at unexpected (and sometimes even expected) loud noises, flashes of light, and movements. I understand that “everyone has a startle” to some extent, but for people with CP it is much worse. I know it may look funny when I jump, but it really isn’t. Sometimes the startle can even be painful when my muscles go into spasm. So please don’t laugh. The startle is beyond my control and it is extremely frustrating when people laugh at me for something I cannot help.

Please understand that I have my own way of doing things. Many people will attempt to “help” me do things, whether it is walking or any other activity. This supposed “help” is not only unwanted, it actually slows me down more. If you grab my arm to “help” me walk, it will throw me off balance more and may actually *cause* me to fall. I know my body, and I know when I cannot do something on my own. When I need help, I *will* ask for it. But please do not help me if I do not ask to be helped.

Please understand that this is the way I have always been and will always be, and I’m okay with it. I do not want a cure, I do not want to “get rid” of my CP. CP colors every aspect of my life, and having it has taken me on a path in life that I probably would never even know existed if I didn’t have CP. This is my body, and I love it.