

I may look like a normal junior high school girl, but I was born with a condition that makes it hard for me to exercise a lot. When I was little, I loved to run and play, but it got harder as I grew up. People felt bad for me, and in return, I felt bad for myself.

Then I went to a place called Nagashima Aisei-en with my classmates. It is an island where people with leprosy live. There is a small community of houses, a nurses' college, and a hospital. These people often have difficulty feeling or seeing things, and even moving around can also be an issue. I learned a sad fact that many couldn't meet their families because of the stigma connected with their condition. At first, I felt sorry for the people, but someone who worked there told me they weren't "unhappy" - they were strong because they had to deal with such difficulties. At that moment, I realized I was wrong to judge sick people in such a negative light. It's like I felt sorry for them in a way that made them seem helpless. Guess what? I was doing the same thing to myself! I didn't want people to do that to me.

Afterward, I wanted to open up about my disability to my friends. I wanted to know how they would react to what I had to say. It wasn't a surprise to find out that they were concerned about me. One friend asked, "Are you going to be ok during PE class?". Another said, "Try not to push yourself too hard." This experience made me understand I was the one who needed to be worried, and that I truly was someone with a disability. I've thought a lot about why people feel sorry for people with disabilities. I think it's because they believe disabled people cannot live a normal life, and they need help with everything in life. Maybe "normal" people feel superior when they worry for us but I think a disability is just a nuisance and not a bad thing. This is why we should learn to use the term challenged rather than disabled. Many physically or mentally challenged people are very able, but it might take more time or effort to do something. Sure, my body sometimes makes my life difficult, but that doesn't mean I'm unhappy. Just like abled people, every success...and every failure is emotional.

At school, when I have the energy to do so, I want to support and care for my classmates to the best of my ability. On days that I have to go to the doctor, they support me by giving me updates on homework assignments, club activities, and so on. I am thankful to have a great network of friends.

I hope my experiences and thoughts will help change how people view challenged people. I want everyone to think carefully about what it really means to feel sorry for someone who has difficulty doing something. We all have difficulties, some have to take more time and effort to live a 'normal' life. If you have challenges in life, you are not alone.

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Time and Effort