

Realistic attitudes and disability

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Nassim Nouzad

Psychology and social services, Canada

Correspondence: Nassim Nouzad, Psychology and social services, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Email nassimn2009@gmail.com**Received:** January 20, 2014 | **Published:** March 19, 2015

Introduction

I am blind. I have not had vision since I was.¹⁴ In the¹⁸years since then I have lived with the reality of my blindness. It has not been easy, but it has taught an important lesson: Realists, people who accept and adapt to the realities of their life, live a better life than people who deny their reality. And the benefits of realism are especially large among people with disabilities. One of the most unbearable realities is physical deficiency which can destroy our life and create a crisis in personal and social life or even lead to our inexistence if we do not want to accept it. Naturally, each kind of handicap is able to influence profoundly the whole personality of people and their family members, but fortunately with the help of realistic attitudes, it is possible to decrease its negative consequences as long as we can. It is notable that after acceptance of this bitter reality, we could even enjoy those negative points with the help of positivism which would be the next important step. When disabled people and their families get aware of this problem, they would be distressed and confused mentally, and the negative thoughts and feelings assail them hence, some of them finally arrive the acceptance after passing some painful obstacles including: shock, denial, and depression, while the others fix in one of these mental status in fact, they give in the troubles which have been created by physically handicap of themselves or their child. Undoubtedly, the negative sequel of non-acceptance is more destructive than disability and its limitations.

Disabled children learn how to adapt with their problem in a realistic method in family environment accordingly parents can play a key role in this case, they must be aware of the principal guide lines which could be helpful to their children to accept disability as a reality of their life, they can also encourage them to use these points practically. It is unquestionable that firstly, parents themselves should accept this reality of their life till they can transfer this positive attitude to their child. I accept that coping with this huge challenge is not easy, but it would not be impossible with having a strong will. Owing to the fact that many psychologists have emphasized the importance of realistic attitudes toward each kind of challenge in our life especially those who work with disabled people and their families, in this manuscript, I presents some practical points according to my own experiences as a person with visual impairment, and also as a psychologist who has worked with visually impaired clients, and their parents. Here, I have spoken about people who have vision deficiency but these practical instructions could be useful to other handicaps.

How we can start

When your blind child encounters a challengeable situation which is incapable to handle it, your mindfully intervention would be affective. For instance, at that moment, you can say to your child “ I am sure that you can do it as well as the others but, whenever you feel that you need my assistant, another family member or one of your friends, you can request for help, and do not forget this important subject that even with the help of others, you yourself have done it, remember that all of us need the others and any person cannot live without the help of other people”. It is very considerable that your children understand their own abilities, know that they can progress

even more than healthy children, and make an enjoyable life in spite of this deficiency. When I was working as counselor in a charity for blinds unfortunately, I had some clients whom their parents had told them, “ other children are blind like you” because they wanted to protect their child mentally in fact, these parents hid this reality even from their disabled child due to lack of awareness and lack of acceptance. In their opinion, it has been the best way to cope with this difficulty while this wrong method can make a lot of troubles and mental disorders for their child. One of my clients was a 14year old girl who really thought that the others are blind like her and she did not anything about her surrounding thus doing even very simple work was so difficult to her for example, she could not eat alone, and going down the stairs made her very anxious because she thought that she was falling down a deep valley, she could not walk without the help of other people. When I saw her for the first time, I thought that she has other physical problem besides her blindness because, none of her behaviors was similar to a 14year old girl but, after speaking with her parents; I understood that she was just blind. During those 14years, her parents had kept her at home, and don all of her personal affairs; even they feed her like a small child. They had not only deprived her from having a natural life but also, damaged her severely.

When you take your child to our friend or relative’s house, and want your child to have social interaction, and play with the other children, you yourself could actively interfere in this process, and help your child start a new social relationship with them because the first step is very important to your child, this method can really helpful to decrease each kind of anxiety or fear. You can start in this way, take your child to the other children, and introduce them to each other, say: “my son is very interested in playing with you, he cannot see anything with his eyes but, he can hear your voice, touch your hands, and speak with you. As you know some games, he also knows some attractive games which you maybe do not know, if you would like, he can teach how to play or you can teach your games to him “. Then you can ask your child explain to them one of the games which do with you or his siblings at home and tell them how to play it. Of course preparatory

to going to the children, you could explain that environment to your child for instance, say: here there are other children who are eager to get friend with, and play with you “. This simple phrase encourages your child to connect with them and comes over his probable anxiety or fear. More importantly, after these steps, you should let your child cope with this condition in the way which is more comfortable, and allow finding his own strategy. Notably, friendly communication with peers plays a considerable role in social and cognitive development of exceptional children hence; parents should facilitate this interactional process as long as they can. For achieving this aim, domestic environment should be amicable and safe till the children can rely on their parents, and express their inner feelings at that rate, whenever they have a problem in various social circumstances, they can count on you, and seek your advice. It is remarkable that both sides of this relationship should participate in this process actively.

Cultural stereotypes related to non-acceptance of reality

In some families, either parents themselves avoid from being in public or they keep away their blind children because they do not want to encounter with people's negative judgments and conflicts toward them or their children. Unfortunately, in Iran there are some stereotypes about families who have a disabled child for illustration, some people take the view that the parents who have handicapped children, have certainly done something wrong, and they are really guilty in their life thus having a child like this has been a punishment which God has considered for them. The others are of this opinion that there are two aspects: badness and goodness: for everything thus, handicapped children are the bad aspect of our life, and God has created them in order to teach us an important lesson. It is clear that most of parents who have this problem, cannot bear these ideas, and prefer stay far from public situations while they are not aware of the harmful and inexpiable affects mentally and socially so that their children would be an isolated person even they would experience some psychological problems and disorders such as Depression, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, Social phobia, low assertiveness.

Two case reports

In this part, I refer to two of my clients. The first one was a blind young man who had lost the major part of his eyesight when he was 12years old. Unfortunately, his parents not only help him to come over his problems but also, damaged his personal and social life intensely. They had put their son in to prison for 5years at home, and did not let him go out, during those years, he could not even open door of their house. When I asked his mother, why they behaved with this adolescent in this way and why they have been so cruel with him? She answered, she and her husband did not like that their neighbors, relatives, and all the people around them see their son, and get aware of his presence in their family because, they felt contemptibility, and where afraid of others negative judgments, they did not have any assertion to cope with this reality.

As a result, those years where the darkest years of his life, he could not continue his education, and deprived of all social communications. When he came to me, he was suffering from Depression and Obsessive-Compulsive disorder at the age of 20, he profoundly hated from his parents, he told me sometimes he was really eager to kill his mother even he confessed that one time, he had attacked his mother, put his hands on her neck, squeezed her neck because he really wanted to asphyxiate her but fortunately, his older brother had interfered, and not let him kill his mother more importantly, he did not absolutely

regret due to this action. He believed that his parents were blame in this case, and their wrong and unfair behaviors had caused a lot of pain besides his handicap.

Here, some of his statements are presented. “During those years, I was asking myself, why my parents especially my mother behaves with me who was their child in this way. Why my older brother could go to school, and was free to do whatever he wanted while, I deprived of all the things for example: speaking with a friend, and going out. Just due to my disability. I could never understand the reasons of this behavior, and I will never forgive them. My disability captured my vision but, my parents captured all of my life, my aspirations, and my dreams. Finally, I decided to leave them and go out the prison which they had made for me, When I found this charity with the help of my old friends, and I saw a lot of people who have physical problem, I understood that I am not alone. Getting familiar with them made me either happy or sad. I got sad because, all of them despite their disability, were educated, and Independent even, some of them were more successful than healthy people in their life in fact, knowing them showed me, how much I am unlucky hence my hatred toward my family increased “.

The second example is related a low vision young girl who was student in the university but, she had to tolerate a lot of troubles in her education due to her physical problem. Unfortunately, till that time, she could not accept the reality of her life because her family especially her mother could not do it. She had lost parts of her vision from childhood but, during all of those years, she had tried to hide her problem as a result she had to bear a lot of stress and anxiety. When I spoke with her mother, she told me, if one day, my daughter had to use Brail line, and white cane, I would die. She could not believe that her daughter needs some special aids in order to have a more comfortable life, and it is her right.

Individual differences

Another important subject regarding realistic attitudes is individual differences. The parents should explain to their child the concept of individual differences. You can say that, “ each person is different thus you should not expect that all the people behave with you in the same way, you can speak with them about your sight deficiency to help them to understand you better because it is possible that they behave with you incorrectly due to lack of awareness or misunderstanding, and make you sad “. It is really substantial that your children learn how to express whatever has a determinant role in their social interactions also, they should perceive this reality that people can communicate with them according to the level of their education, personality or the environment where they has reared in it thus, sometimes some social relationships could annoy them.

My personal experience

I recall one of my own experiences when I was 15years old. I had just arrived with my family to visit a relative and was sitting besides other guests when another guest arrived, a stranger to me. While she was greeting the other guests I felt that she was approaching me, so I stood up to say hello to her. She passed me by, with no greeting or acknowledgement. I felt insulted! When my family and I returned home, I spoke with my parents about it. They listened to me patiently, and then said, “You are right to feel upset if we were you in such a situation, we would be upset too. But you should remember that we cannot modify the other's personality and behavior, what we can do is modifying our reaction to reduce our bad feelings. Perhaps, for example, you can consider that she became distracted or confused, or

that she could not remember whom she greeted, or simply made an unintentional error. This is common. She probably overlooked other as well. Or maybe she was just silly and ignorant, and that would be her problem, not yours.”

My parents’ realistic attitude toward that accident and other accidents like that which was happening to me was really helpful, and developed my social and cognitive skills to analysis better in a logical way. They have always tried teaching me how I can see the real and positive aspect of everything. They have never hide my vision problem obviously, the acceptance of this reality was easy neither them nor myself, and after passing shock and depression, it appeared because they decided cope with this challenge logically, they knew that it was the only way which help all of us to have a better life although they had made them ready to face all the negative, unfair, and inappropriate reactions of different people or their pity toward me. At that time, I understood bit by bit this reality that instead of combat with my destiny, I should accept all of the limitations which had created by my disability, and also this reality that I can use my abilities and talents to come over them. It was a very long way but, my parents have patiently supported me, I never felt that I have been alone in this path. Since my vision has considerably decreased, the sense of inferiority and contemptibility have bothered me especially whenever I where in public but, firstly with the help of my parents’ realistic attitudes and behaviors, this negative sense got weaker and weaker. If we want to justify this process psychologically, we can refer to systematic desensitization. For illustration, whenever my parents wanted to go to one of our relatives or friends’ house, asked me kindly go with them, and try to communicate with the others. They encouraged ne to speak with other people about my problem without thinking of any negative sense, and say to them that I have this disability but, I try to use my abilities to be more productive in my life, I study, I do my personal affairs as long as I can, and also I participate in artistic and sport activities. At first, when I was speaking about myself with the others, I felt severely contemptibility, and sometimes I got angry

at my parents why they wanted me to do it but, this negative sense diminished gradually because I learnt how to communicate despite sense of inferiority. Indeed, the frequency of this behavior helped me to cope with my persecutor feelings.

Conclusion

A few years later, when I started my education in Psychology University, I understood that having realistic attitudes is one of the most important lessons which we should learn in the school of life. I have fortunately grown in a supportive and open-minded family, and I could learn how to develop realistic ideas toward whatever happened to me despite a lot of negative and unfair attitudes of the others which there are in under developed and in developing countries. But unfortunately, as it is mentioned before in this manuscript, there are still some families who are not able to cope with the negative consequences of their children’s physical problems due to non-acceptance of this reality and lack of awareness or more importantly, inappropriate judgments and cultural stereotypes toward exceptional children.

It is highly suggested to conduct more research in order to find psychological and socio-cultural roots of non-acceptance, lack of realistic attitudes, and maladaptive behaviors in families who have disabled children.

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