

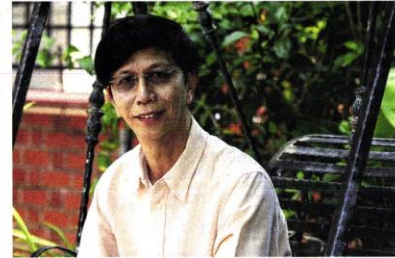
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 Headline: Living with unseen disabilities



Umar Haziq, who has autism, with his father Mohamed Jusri Bangi. Autistic children can find noises and crowds overwhelming. ST PHOTO: LIM YACHUI



Ang Kai Jun suffers from severe haemophilia, a rare genetic condition in which the blood does not clot properly. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



Dr Richard Kwok has dyslexia, a learning disorder that makes it difficult to make sense of the written word, among other aspects. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

LIVING WITH UNSEEN DISABILITIES

In building a more inclusive society, one group finds itself overlooked. Those with learning disorders or hearing loss may not seem obviously handicapped, unlike those with physical disabilities, but they need help and acceptance, too. On Pages B2-4, Insight looks at the effects of having an invisible disability.

Kok Xing Hui

When people think about disability, the image of a wheelchair comes to mind. Even the international blue-and-white symbol signalling easy access for the disabled is that of a stick figure in a wheelchair. Yet, there are some whose plight

is overlooked – those with disabilities that are not visible.

One in 68 children in Singapore has autism, a developmental disorder, for example. Conditions such as hearing impairment cannot be “seen” either.

The issue of those with invisible disabilities – who also need help, empathy and acceptance – is time-

ly, as Singapore is working on its third masterplan to chart the development of policies and services for people with disabilities.

And there is much work to be done, going by my recent experience in a wheelchair. Just by sitting in this obvious symbol of need, I felt vulnerability.

Imagine, then, what it must be like when you look “normal”, yet are inwardly struggling with day-to-day life.

For one hour, I – a healthy 28-year-old – became an elderly woman with impaired movement, bad eyesight and poor hearing, in a wheelchair.

I was fitted out with 6kg of ankle weights. The deafness was due to ear plugs, and the poor eyesight

came courtesy of some foggy sunglasses.

I had no idea what was going on, what people were saying to me, and where we were going. Worse, I was entirely dependent on my “elderly caregiver”, 21-year-old Seet Kai Li – even when I needed to go to the toilet.

I was taking part in a disability simulation with 40 Singapore Management University (SMU) students in a “Managing Diversity in Asia” course, held in March.

Students spent an hour navigating the sprawling campus, wearing props to simulate what it might feel like to have disabilities.

When I told my editors about the simulation, they were concerned it might seem like a token exercise.

However, it was very worthwhile in terms of developing empathy.

Moving around campus was difficult and slow, despite my group-mates being SMU students who knew the buildings’ orientation.

Psychology and analytics student Justin Ong, 24, said: “To use the lifts, we had to go to many corners.”

The experience was also isolating and scary. Being hard of hearing made me not want to talk, but not communicating meant I was clueless about what was going on.

Yet that was just for one hour. As course instructor Ho Jack Yong said: We didn’t have to think about making a home, looking for jobs, or finding a romantic partner.

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