

Timothy's Story:

Timothy's story was told during an interview. This is the transcript.

I'm 19 years old, living with my parents and studying at university. I was diagnosed with an Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) when I was twelve years old, after being misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) at the age of six. I was told it's like supersonic hearing - I can hear everything around me. This makes it extremely difficult for me to discern certain sounds or focus on one particular voice. I'm bombarded with noise at all times.

It can be very confusing and you lose track of your thoughts. If I'm in a loud place, like a shopping mall, my friends have to be right beside me or else I can't really hear them. I've been given a whole range of different programs, processes and exercises to help me. I have to pay close attention and rely on visual cues to understand what is going on.

My brain has trouble recognising and interpreting the sounds that I hear, I get easily distracted and have disorganised thoughts, which is why I was misdiagnosed with attention problems. Since my diagnosis, I have been having therapy that works on training my brain to coordinate with my hearing, so I can process sounds and understand things better. The person who diagnosed me with APD gave me a listening program which I must listen to every day. It's very important because it keeps my mind active and trains my brain.

One of the symptoms of APD is having auditory memory problems and remembering information such as directions. For example, if I go into a classroom at university and I've forgotten a pencil case, I won't realise it for a while. I need to rehearse information to get it to stay in my mind. If someone's speaking to me I hear it, but I don't process or remember it the first time round. I need to hear things a few times. With APD you're also more susceptible to anxiety which I was diagnosed with in the past four years.

It was hard when I was first diagnosed with APD, I didn't recognise it as a disability at all, because if you're living with something your whole life you don't think or realise you're different from anyone else and just go as you went before. The disability is invisible so if you don't speak up or let anyone know that you're having issues, then they're not able to support you. It's really a case of trying to get up in people's faces as much as possible, because there are people out there who really want to support you and are really, really positive and understanding.

There's quite a lot of shame and embarrassment on my part that I have a disability, or something "wrong" with me. It makes me feel inadequate, or not as worthy as everyone else, but intellectually I know that's not the case. I don't generally tell my friends about my APD. In my whole life I have only told about seven of my friends, and all of them have reacted positively. They've thought, "Oh, I wouldn't have thought that at all," because I just seem to act like everyone else. However, behind the scenes there is a lot of effort to get me to the same level as others.

I'm currently studying a Bachelor in Government and Public Management at Flinders University. Although I didn't finish high school, I was doing a lot of volunteer work, and was offered to educate high school students on behalf of the Mental Illness Fellowship of South Australia. Leaving high school at year 10 meant I had no qualifications behind me so as a result I decided that volunteering in the community and helping others is my passion. I decided to undertake a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment to help develop mental health workshops for young people. From there I discovered a program called SAIBT at the University of South Australia that was a first year of Business, but I also received a Diploma of Business.

When I completed the Diploma of Business at Uni SA I was still very passionate to increase my skills and go to university with all my friends and thus applied to Flinders with my new Diploma and was astonished and amazed that they accepted me into my chosen degree! It was another step closer to achieving my goal, helping others becoming more qualified, and setting me up to hopefully become a Parliamentary Minister.

It takes me twice as long as everyone else to do things. For example, I have to read a page at least three times in order to actually retain any information. It's very frustrating. Before I started my course, I met with both a counselor and a disability adviser, and they were very helpful in creating a disability plan where I would be able to get extra time on my assignments and exams and extra assistance in class.

I prefer close one-on-one contact, so lectures aren't really the best for me because there are 80-100 people in the room and I can't hear properly because of all the background noise, but in tutorials there are only 15 people which makes a big difference. I like university life because the people are understanding and supportive, and really want to help you get the best grade possible and reach your potential.

I hope that when I finish my degree I am able to get a job and move out of home because I don't want to live with my parents forever. My parents are very supportive. They have always treated me with respect and encouraged my individuality. For example, when I was a child, instead of being told what to eat, they left it up to me to choose. I know people have heroes like Batman or sports stars, but my mother is my hero; I have always really respected her.

She has always done volunteer work for helplines and she motivates me to do volunteer work and try new things. She's different than me in a few ways. She'll push through if someone says "No" and find a way for me to achieve. She's like a bull in a china shop, she really is. My parents and I relocated from Sydney to provide me with the best medical specialists and learning supports in the country. At the time, many schools in Sydney wouldn't provide extra support and the only APD listening specialist was here in Adelaide.

As a child, I found that my safe haven was in books, but when I got to high school there was more of a focus on social life and I suffered a bit. I had a lot of friends who were girls, because I've always been quite kind-hearted and gentle, but it wasn't until year ten that I first got a girlfriend. I was so nervous; I had no idea about the proper moves or how to act. There were a lot of mistakes made along the way and I learnt through trial and error. Now I manage to go out and see friends once a week. I try to keep myself organised and follow a particular pattern of study, but I always leave one day to relax and go and see friends. My best friend lives just a two minute walk away so I'm really lucky when I get bored!

When I decided to leave high school and pursue volunteer work and vocational education training, people thought I was a high school drop-out and treated me poorly. People found it difficult to understand my choices and that I wasn't conforming to the usual high school pathway to university. Leaving high school in year 10 wasn't conventional, but it was the best thing for me, because I was able to gain hands-on experience in volunteer organisations and obtain tertiary knowledge and training that suited my learning style. In the end it meant I was able to go on to university and get a job, before my friends at high school even finished Year 12.

Due to these experiences at high school, I felt self-conscious and was afraid to open up to people, fearing they would judge me and reject me if they knew about my disability. But I've found that when people take the time to get to know you and understand, they really are supportive and don't treat you any differently. It's taken me a while to understand that, there have been a lot of mistakes along the way. I have now learned to trust people and accept that not everyone sees you as being different in a negative way, but actually appreciate your quirks and individuality.

Although my hearing disability has caused some challenges in my life, it hasn't prevented me from striving to achieve my goals and aspirations. As a result of all my hard work and effort promoting the needs of disadvantaged young people, volunteering on a local, state and federal level and training to increase my skills and abilities, I have been recognised by the State Government and honored to receive countless awards: a Commendation Award for Advantage SA's Young South Australian of the Year in 2011; Awarded Young Australian Citizen of the Year for SA in 2010; Awarded Young Australian Citizen of the Year for City of Unley 2010;

Finalist for Young Human Rights Medal 2010 & 2011, and; Awarded Channel 9 Young Achiever of the Year Community Leadership Award 2011.

I have become more confident through the support of my family and friends, and by speaking up about my disability and the issues I live with. I work as a speaker for Advantage SA, going out to schools and talking about leadership, volunteering and mental health, and how to overcome adversity. Doing this has made me more confident. I now feel like I have the power to take on anything and I love my work.

My passion is to help others, and the more I do, the better I feel about myself, because there's always someone in a worse condition. I focus on outcomes, not my disability. I'm also very humorous (or at least I find myself very humorous) and I really like seeing people have joy in their lives. I take pride in that.

What motivates me is the end goal - if I can push through, if I can complete part of this assignment, then I can get a good grade; if I can give my time to this organisation, or give a speech, and get through it and talk to these young people about what they can do in the world, then I've been able to give them an idea, or an opportunity to look into something further. I'm proud that I've managed to contribute to people's lives in some way.

I am very committed to social justice issues, especially mental illness and the stigma attached to it, due to my father suffering from Chronic Depression. I worked with the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia to close the Magill Training Centre and re-open a new state-of-the-art facility.

I use to think everything was focused on achieving good grades at school or university and success in sport, but now I've realised that just helping people is an important achievement. You can be helpful just by being around and offering your assistance. I really want to work as the head of a non-government organisation one day ... or maybe even become Prime Minister!

They say that life is hard, and it is! But compared to what?

I'd like those who hear my story to realise that there is so much potential in the world and so much passion that drives us forward. Find the special thing that you're absolutely amazing at and stun and amaze people with your awesomeness.

My whole goal now and for the rest of my life will be to empower young people, helping them to reach their potential and not let disability, age, race, gender or anything else get in the way of reaching your goals. That's why my philosophy is that "If you can't walk you crawl and when you can't do that, find someone to carry you."

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