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Fighting for accommodations and communication tips for brain injury survivors and their communities

August 6th, 2018 -- August 2018 TMR Digital Support Group

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What are TMR Digital Support Groups? The MindReset (TMR) Community is pleased to offer digital support groups as a medium for bringing individuals together in a safe space for discussion and social support. By conducting these groups through a digital platform, potential barriers created by geography and inability to access human resources are reduced. These groups are facilitated to ensure participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in a growth-oriented environment. Attendees are able to engage actively or passively with no requirement for attendees to reveal their faces or to speak. The goals of these discussions are for participants to leave with useful suggestions or actions they can take to improve their own lives and/or the people they care about.

The August support group was predominantly attended by brain injury survivors. First, attendees shared something they enjoyed over the past weekend, and then something they were looking forward to in the upcoming month. One survivor emphasized how he was looking forward to moving out of his parent's place. Many individuals with brain injury feel that autonomy is an objective they really value.

The group then shifted into discussing how their health conditions were affecting their lives.

One new attendee, Ms. L, shared with the group how she recently took the Praxis Exam for Speech Language Pathology, the required examination for anyone seeking to practice in that field. Ms. L had her injury right after completing her Master's about five years ago and is rehabilitating with the intent of becoming a speech language pathologist who works with individuals with brain injury.

Ms. L is aware that her current state post-injury requires her to take more time with tasks. Therefore, she proactively contacted the testing administrators to request



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accommodations. She shared with the group some interesting information that may be helpful for other people who would like a time-extension for a standardized exam:

- 1) **It is easy to get 50% more time, but not double time.** Ms. L shared how she was rejected for double time, but still thinks the effort is worth it. To get 50% more time, she submitted her doctor's signature and learned that anyone could apply for this amount of extended time without a dramatic health history. In her circumstance, she ended up using the whole three hours instead of the usual two hours. She wished she could have had more time because she was not able to go back and look at random questions as she would have liked. Nonetheless, she was grateful to get at least some more time.
- 2) **You might need to swallow your pride and just seek the accommodations.** Ms. L had to learn how to look for accommodations. She reflected on how hypocritical she would feel working with others with brain injury and saying that people who could benefit from accommodations didn't need them. She said, "Use accommodations if they allow you to succeed!"

Dr. Jing Wu, another brain injury survivor, could not agree with this sentiment more. She recalled how difficult it was for her to ask for help. When Dr. Wu was still self-conscious about her identity and the stigma surrounding disability, she felt like getting a disability visa or pass was an admission to herself that she was disabled, which devastated her at the time, and also was validation that she was "less" than those around her. At the time, she felt like being disabled was an embarrassment. Now she is aware that it takes great humility and strength to ask for help when it is sincerely needed.

Ms. L then directed her comments to attendees without brain injury. She emphasized how each person with brain injury is different and finds that it is "so unhelpful if people try to relate."

She advised against people without brain injury trying to relate, discouraging statements such as, "I know exactly how you feel." She suggested saying, "Man that sucks, I'm so sorry. I'm happy to come alongside you as best as I can." Ms. L expressed that it is easy to look at something from the outside, but if someone doesn't live it, then they don't have the point of view that is founded in experience.

Based upon Dr. Wu's experience, she agreed with much of what Ms. L stated. To expand upon those sentiments, Dr. Wu feels there are circumstances where relating to someone



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with brain injury is appropriate, specifically to feelings or symptoms if someone does indeed experience the same or similar emotions or conditions. Dr. Wu believes that as a whole, comprised of each person's distinct experiences, no two people are exactly alike.

Ms. L also shared some advice to the attendees with brain injury. She said, "Don't assume that someone knows what you want." She encouraged brain injury survivors to be kind to other people who may not be aware of their circumstances and to not be afraid to gently educate them. She also recommended that if people with brain injury are receiving advice they don't really want, they can say, "I know you have the best intentions. I don't want advice right now. I want you to listen." She then emphasized again that even if someone has a background in brain injury, no case is the same and they shouldn't make assumptions.

Overall, attendees of the support group felt more knowledgeable than they did before they attended digital support group. Additionally, both individuals with and without brain injury left group feeling empowered with more tools to communicate with!

REFLECTION:

- How do you feel when someone makes assumptions about you that are false?
- When someone says something that offends you, what might you say that would make future communications more productive?

The MindReset Community encourages others to join these digital support groups, typically hosted every first or second Monday of the month. Topics vary, but participants are able to suggest themes at the beginning of each session. If no topics are identified by participants during open discussion, then the "awareness theme(s) of the month" are discussed. Upcoming support groups can be found on the [Events page](#). Interested individuals are also able to register [HERE](#). We hope to see you then!

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