



Dr. Henry writes about Normalcy

In trying to understand something about the psychological effects of polio, we have often heard how most polio victims exercised and worked vigorously to regain a sense of being normal. In a general sense, this usually meant trying to achieve a level of physical function and social function that was nearly equal to the pre-polio level of function and achievement. Many times this goal was unreachable in measurable physical function. For example, President Franklin Roosevelt firmly believed that he would walk again after his initial polio attack. He actively engaged in physical therapy for seven years trying to walk again. He never walked again, but he did manage to walk for short distances with the assistance of two long leg braces, a cane, and a companion's arm. A mystery does arise in attempting to explain the psychological impact that this tremendous effort made on the psyche and personalities of hosts of young polio victims.

Being normal can include the simplest of tasks such as being able to feed oneself, dress oneself, and attend to one's own personal hygiene as well as strenuous tasks such as running fast, climbing stairs, and peddling a bicycle. This is all relative to the degree of disability because the simplest of tasks can easily become the most strenuous of tasks. For example, when I had polio at age eleven one of the most strenuous, challenging and frustrating goals that I encountered was trying to learn how to get off the floor or ground without the assistance of another individual. I attempted this in physical therapy sessions at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital with the use of two long leg braces and two crutches. Success depended on upper body strength, good balance, determination, and overcoming the fear and reality of falling. In time I was successful. Now, with post-polio, I cannot get off the floor or ground without assistance. Also, currently, I do not expect to overcome this limitation. Psychologically, this loss of a previous level of function can make one feel less than normal, and more dependent.

For many of us, being normal included achieving a good education, getting married, having children, and pursuing a career if possible. Of course, these "normal" goals were common among everyone in the 1940's and 1950's. Obviously, these goals were extremely difficult for many polios because of an inner sense of being "crippled", different, or "handicapped". However, recent polio surveys bear out that as a group in the populous, polios have achieved more education, married at a higher percentage, and have had higher employment percentages than other disabled groups or even in comparison to the non-disabled. Now, after several decades, what toll has "being normal" had on our personhood or sense of self?

Trying to be normal has probably made us into overachievers. I am sure this is nothing new to most of you. In addition, I believe it has also helped us to develop a greater sense of empathy for others in adversity, has made us more tolerant, and has probably made us more stoical. In blunt terms, to change is most difficult for us. Paradoxically, maybe we shouldn't change. Maybe, we should continue to be "normal". I think we have gotten good at it. We just need to alter our ways. Our support group has certainly helped me and others in making healthy adjustments. Five years ago, I acquired an electric scooter. Guess what? I save immense energy. Last year, my son built a sturdy ramp for our house. Guess what? I save more energy. Also, in a practical sense, I attempt to do more brain work and less physically

demanding work. This also saves energy. So at least intellectually, I still feel normal.

Perhaps at future meetings, some of us can be spotlighted to share experiences in trying to be normal. I think we would be enlightened and feel a sense of individual and collective validation. Maybe, over the many years, the toll on our psyches and personalities has not been injurious. Perhaps, conversely, the toll of being normal has resulted in character, integrity, wisdom, and love. Everyone should feel good about this kind of normalcy. To borrow an idea from Forrest Gump, maybe "normal is as normal does".

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