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6th Dec, 2020

Living life with ADD, Tourette's Syndrome and high functioning Autism

Darren Ho sees the world differently, as he discovered after a late diagnosis of 'invisible disabilities' in Singapore

Text: Jo



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Credit: Darren Ho

Four years ago, when I was 34 years old, I was officially diagnosed with high functioning Autism, coupled with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD) and Tourette's Syndrome. It was truly difficult to accept, but it did explain a lot of things that had happened in my past.

At school, I always knew I was different from my classmates. I was constantly distracted. I made physical repetitive movements. When people talked to me, I'd lose interest very fast. I had an explosive temper. I came across as a very harsh and unreasonable person. I once went around cutting strangers' hair with scissors just because I was bored. I did a lot of things I am not proud of.

“That Darren Ho — he’s such an attention seeker!” was the soundtrack to my life.

I'd look at the popular kids and try to do what they were doing. But you know how some people are energised after socialising? I just felt exhausted. It would sometimes feel like the entire world was against me and all the walls were closing in. To cope I would retreat into a world of my favourite hobbies



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At 16, I threw myself into setting up my own digital businesses and experienced some success, but behind the scenes my life was on a downward spiral. I was overeating and relying on alcohol to the point of morbid obesity. Then, one day in 2016, I had a very public meltdown at the food court on Old Airport Road. One moment my girlfriend (now wife) was talking to me; the next I was being verbally abusive, had flipped the tables and chairs, and stormed off in a steaming rage. To this day, I don't know what caused it and I have no recollection of my actions.

I needed professional help and I was lucky to receive it quickly. I booked an appointment with a psychiatrist I discovered online, and on my first visit I refused to leave without a diagnosis.

While my symptoms of ADHD and Tourette's Syndrome were perhaps obvious through my constant fidgeting and lack of focus, being diagnosed as an adult with high functioning Autism was harder to grasp. It runs strong in me and I'll be the first to admit that sufferers are a strange sort if you don't know us. After my diagnosis, the anti-socialism, inappropriate expressions, tantrums, seeming lack of empathy and so many more symptoms I'd been living with slowly started to make sense.

Take responsibility

I realised that to rebuild a new life with disabilities — and a side order of depression — I'd have to do certain things differently. Finding ways to cope was imperative, but I chose to do so without the help of medical intervention or counselling — not because I don't support that process; it just worked better for me. I wanted to take responsibility and I wanted to learn, so I read and researched everything about my conditions that I could.



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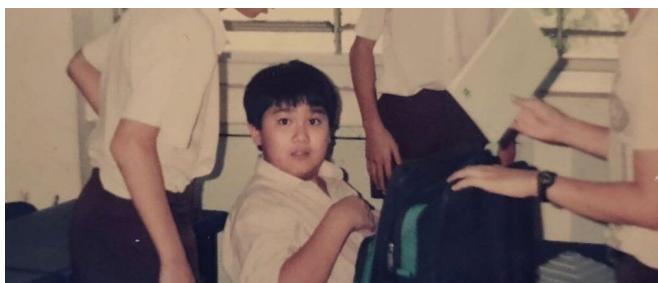
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Dealing the way I did and had to re-learn so many things in my life.

I took up exercise which brought solace to my restless, confused and agitated soul. I also started my first job in an office working in the digital space. I was honest from the start about the mental health struggles I face, and they have been incredibly accepting of who I am. Likewise, my friends and family stood by me on the worst days to see me through to where I am today (my mates joke that they have to speak quickly to me before I switch off).

One of the greatest challenges I have is expressing myself, and following that, being able to do so appropriately. It's a social awkwardness that begins with being a loner and then impacts all situations. Finding ways to get around this becomes imperative for those with Autism, so we try to communicate in a variety of different ways. For me, it's in photographic visuals and the written word. While I'm verbose in text, I speak very little in real life unless approached.

Another fallacy I have to face is the belief that those with ADHD, Tourette's Syndrome and Autism lack care. Mood swings and an inability to show kind feelings, compassion and empathy often lead to people mistaking us as being cold, hard and cruel. But I feel pain, heartbreak, and the irresponsibility of my actions. I feel it in multiple degrees, but due to my conditions I struggle to show any emotion when it matters.





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Darren as a young boy, unaware of his disabilities

Stop the stigma

While I was growing up there was no information about disabilities like mine. Today there is more out there, but we are not an open society and have a long way to go when it comes to having honest conversations about mental health. For this reason, I am open about the struggles I face as a bid to help those who may be suffering in silence.

As an ultra-endurance athlete, I regularly compete in multi-distance triathlons around the world, raising awareness about disabilities along the way. My hope is to break down barriers and to remove the stigma so that others do not have to suffer in silence and live in fear of rejection. I currently run to raise awareness and funds for The Disabled People's Association as well as Community Chest.

Sometimes I think; 'what's wrong with being different from others anyway'? But that's the problem. People with disabilities can be self-aware and we want to fit in. We want to be accepted, to have friends, to have relationships and to have that connection with people that we see all around us.

For that reason, I'd say to all of my peers out there with ADHD, Tourette's Syndrome or Autism — diagnosed or not — stay strong and stay the fight. To those who love someone with disabilities, I'd urge you to have faith and don't lose hope, we have our ways of surprising you from time to time.

To find out more about Darren's journey and the work he does as an ultra-endurance athlete log onto his



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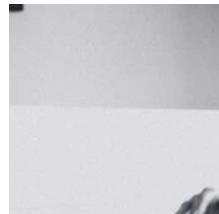
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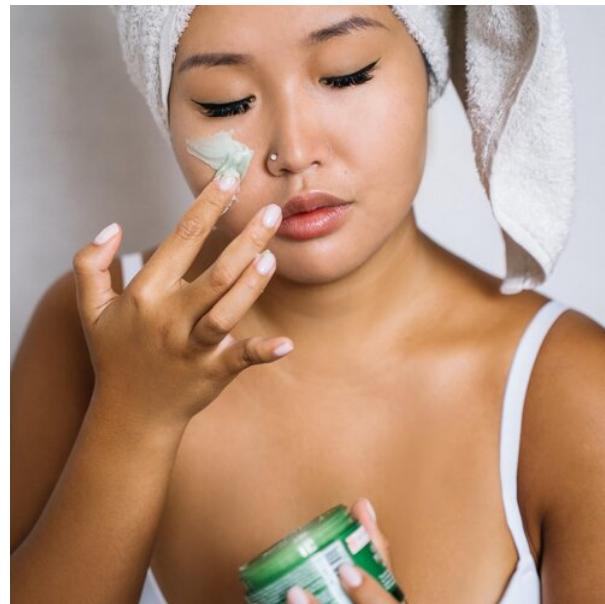

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Many men don't have many healthy friendships, and it could hurt their mental health.

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