

Holly

My name is Holly. I am 15 and a freshman in high school. I have been diagnosed with a learning disability, depression and an anxiety disorder. After I graduate high school I want to go to culinary school and become a pastry chef.

I got my first IEP while I was in Head Start. When I was little I had lots of ear infections. I had to have lots of surgeries and when I went to Head Start I kept failing my hearing tests and we found out that I couldn't hear very well so that's why I got an IEP. I was told that I had a hearing impairment.

When I started kindergarten, I had to wear special headphones and my teacher wore a microphone so I could hear her talk. They were very hot and uncomfortable, but I was able to hear her. In first grade I got my first hearing aid so I didn't have to wear the headphones, they just put speakers in my class room.



I was really behind my other classmates and had to repeat first grade. In the second grade they also told me I had a learning disability. I had to go into the resource and speech room a lot and didn't spend much time in the regular classroom.

I always had problems with kids teasing and making fun of me because of my hearing aid, the way I talk, my weight, or not being as smart as them. Sometimes teachers gave me pet names I didn't like. I hated it and it made me feel bad.

I had had surgery on my ear at the end of my fourth grade year. This made me very happy. I still have some hearing loss, but I didn't have to wear my hearing aid anymore. I thought that since I could hear better, things would get better. That is what my fifth grade teacher thought too. She thought she could get me caught up with the other kids. She would give me extra assignments and found other people to help get my work done. Even though I could hear better, I still had a learning disability and couldn't understand what I was supposed to do. When I asked for help from her she got angry and told me "I wasn't trying hard enough." I went home crying a lot. I was so scared of her sometimes that I couldn't breathe. I finally decided not to say anything so she wouldn't have a reason to get mad at me anymore.

I spent the rest of the year, lost and confused, but too scared to ask for help. I started keeping to myself more and more. I didn't want to go to school anymore or be around my friends. My mom was worried and took me to the doctor. That was when I

got diagnosed with depression and an anxiety disorder.

It got better for a while after I started taking medicine and seeing a counselor. But my depression and anxiety never went away completely. I tried other ways to make me feel better. This is very hard for me to talk about, this is the first time that I have actually talked about it in public. One way I learned to cope was to cut myself. I am not proud of this, and I cannot explain how it helps me but it makes me feel better. My counselor has helped me control my panic attacks and not need to cut, but some days it is very hard, especially if I have had a bad day at school with kids teasing me or with teachers not having the time to help or listen to me.

I came here today so that I could help you help other kids like me. First of all I want you to understand for kids like me school is very hard. We work very hard at our school work and we hate getting bad grades. Just because we got a bad grade may not have been because we didn't study or try hard. Sometimes we don't understand the information. Getting angry at us, comparing our work to other in the class or giving us extra assignments as punishments doesn't really help. It only makes things worse, makes me feel more dumb and stupid, and only gives the other kids in my class more reasons to tease in make fun of me.

If I have done something wrong or failed assignments talk to me in private not in front of my classmates. Find out if I misunderstood something first, instead of assuming I just was too lazy to study. Then take the time to help me or find someone who can help me do better in my classes and will not blab to the other kids that I need extra help.

Be understanding and realize we all have different coping skills. We may need to find ways to cope with our stress different than other people. For example, I may use a stress ball or fiddlers to help relieve my anxiety. Don't take these away from me or tell me I don't need them. Don't think you know what it is like to have depression or anxiety because you read it in a book somewhere or you know someone with similar disorders. We are all individuals and different and we should be treated that way.

Don't judge us before getting to know us. Just because we may have a brother or sister with challenges, doesn't mean we will have the same problems. Don't assume it is a problem with our parents or we come from a bad family. You should not only to get to know us, but our families as well and learn to work with us a team to help us become successful.

Learn to look more at what we are good at and not focus so much on our weaknesses. For example, I want to be a chef, so if you can connect my classes to something I am good at or have a lot of interest in, I will feel and be more successful. My teachers have used my love of cooking and tied it into my science, math and reading classes.

Celebrate our successes no matter how small. But be careful to do it in ways that other kids won't ruin it for us. For example, some of my teachers put notes of my success

on the front of my locker, but other kids write bad comments on it or tear them off before I get to see them. Try and help us to think of ways that we will be able to celebrate our accomplishments without getting negative stuff from other kids.

Teachers need to get more training about our disorders. They need to understand about our medications. The problems with my meds I take are that they make me tired, thirsty, and gain weight. I don't need more ways for kids to make fun of me or teachers to be upset with me. I don't mean to fall asleep in class and it's not because I went to bed too late. Understand also the side effects sometimes make us more targets for kids to pick on us more. Watch out for this and help us feel safe and protected to be at school.

You need to listen to us and what we have to say because this is our lives and not yours. If you think you are being helpful by making all the decisions for us, don't! We want to be involved in making our decisions. We know what works and doesn't work for us. We are the best experts on us! Trust me, we can tell you better than anyone if things are working and not working. Yes, we WILL make mistakes along the way. Don't get angry about this, help us learn from them. Someday, we will be adults and have to make decisions for ourselves, help us learn to make wise choices. By working together and listening to what we have to have say, things will work out for the best for us and our future.

Finally, remember each of us is different and our treatments, medications, and learning styles are different. Treat us as individuals and don't label us as "those kids" or a disorder. We all want to be successful and we all have names not just labels. Remember who I am and my name, MY NAME IS HOLLY.

Holly, Age 15
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Nebraska