Dear Alice,

I was born with a congenital defect which is extremely obvious. I have three nostrils. Throughout my life, I have obviously experienced ridicule. I have learned to deal. At Columbia, I find that instead of people just asking me, they stare and talk. It's something which frankly, I'm not used to. What do I do to deal?

?Three-nostril monster

Answer

Dear Three-nostril monster,

Physical differences come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and about three percent of babies born in the United States each year have some form of major physical or mental disability due to genetic, environmental, or other unknown factors. This means that you're not alone and that what others may consider a "defect" is a unique part of what makes you an individual.

Drowning out the negative comments and glances with personal reaffirmations may help you deal. On a daily basis, try reminding yourself of characteristics you feel good about and highlight them (i.e., "My hair looks great today" or "I am doing really well in this class"). You may find that once this becomes a habit, you hear your voice above the other negative ones.

Another way to address your concerns is to express them. Being bold by asking what they are wondering helps you take control of the situation. You may take charge in this opportunity for a brief or longer conversation. You may let your humor and/or informative side shine as you raise bystanders' awareness of differences. Try to be forthcoming while remaining patient of their ability or inability to understand. When speaking with strangers, remember that if the situation doesn't seem like it would be constructive, moving on may be wiser and safer.

Talking with peers may be another way to voice your concerns, and thanks to the internet, you have easy access to others who may be dealing with similar issues. Online support groups as well as links to other support services may be found through a simple web search. You may not become everybody's best friend, but building a core group of friends that see you as you may help affirm the many other sides of you.

Talking with others in a supportive setting may help you, and being vocal about your condition may also help others. Advocating for people with facial differences, or other physical
differences, (whether on a large or small scale) may give others the opportunity to learn about the issue and the people affected. Additionally, your confidence may set an example for others to embrace characteristics they may feel embarrassed by or judged upon. Sometimes confidence isn’t enough, though, so if you find yourself the victim of more than just stares and whispers, you’re not powerless. Reach out to resident advisors (RAs) in student housing or student affairs staff on campus for information on specific services available to you. For additional advice on dealing with bullying, read the Related Q&As below. You may also take action against discrimination by checking out national initiatives run by organizations such as the PACER Center.

Many universities also have counseling services and support groups on campus. However you choose to do it, surrounding yourself with others who embrace and appreciate your differences as much as you do may help you work past any negative attention you may receive.

Being in a new environment may take some time to adjust and feel like you fit in, but finding friends who support and care for you regardless of your differences may go a long way in helping you deal with the stares and talking. Either way, you’re certainly not a monster.

Alice!
Category:
Relationships
Miscellaneous

Related questions

Bullying
Lonely boy from Hong Kong
Legit reasons to go to therapy/counseling?
Making friends when I have low self-esteem

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)
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