

BRAD COHEN – From misunderstood boy to outstanding success

Even over the phone, there is no ignoring the frequent vocal tics that splinter Brad Cohen's speech: the odd barks, the whooping noises, the wah-wah-wahs.

But Cohen, 33, soldiers on, describing Tourette's Syndrome with an acceptance that illustrates the peace he has made with this neurological disorder, characterized by vocal noises and spasm-like movements that he cannot control. He refers to Tourette's as his friend — always with him, through good times and bad.

Given a choice, Cohen would prefer direct questions about his condition rather than stares from people who don't understand why his head jerks or why he lets out a "woop" several times a minute.

"People in our society don't know how to react to someone who is different," Cohen said. "By keeping things open and honest, it gives people a window to take a peek into your life. There can be empathy. Walk in my shoes for a moment to know what Brad's life is like."



In one notable story, Brad says that a teacher made him get up in front of his class and apologize to his classmates for making noises and jerking motions -- all features of the disorder that were beyond his control.

But instead, Brad decided he wanted to be the teacher that he never had, and after 25 interviews, he landed a position as an elementary school teacher in Cobb County. He also wrote a book about his experiences, *Front of the Class*, that has been made into a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie. His book details his uphill battle to become an elementary schoolteacher so that he could help children overcome obstacles in their own lives.

For him, the turning point came in junior high, when he stood before a school assembly and talked matter-of-factly about what it is like to have Tourette's. The tics didn't stop, but some of his classmates began to reach out to him.

"I no longer felt like everyone was teaming up against me," Cohen said. "My self-confidence went up, and I was able to focus on my strengths."

Living with Tourette's is further complicated by behavioural problems that can come with it: obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, or anxiety and mood disorders. Though those problems can seriously hamper learning, it is the tics that get all of the attention.

Below is a short interview with Brad Cohen.

Can you tell us more about your inspirational journey of becoming a teacher? Do you remember any incident that motivated you to choose this career path?

Growing up, I just wanted to be treated like all the other kids with respect. But that never happened. I was bullied by students and reprimanded by teachers. I had no friends. I hated school. But then one day my Principal in Middle School asked if we could educate all the students about Tourette's Syndrome. I agreed. After we educated everyone after an orchestra concert, I received a standing ovation. It was at that moment that I realized the power of education. I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I wanted to be that teacher that I never had. I wanted to focus on the strengths of my students and celebrate their successes. I had a dream and I set out to accomplish that dream while never allowing my Tourette's to stand in my way. After I graduated from college, I had 24 principals say that could not hire me, mostly because of my Tourette's. But all it took was one principal to give me that chance when I was hired as a 2nd grade teacher.

Could you talk a little bit about how you explained Tourette's Syndrome to your students? Did you find that they were immediately understanding, or did it take some time?

I put it into kid language and I say, I have Tourette's Syndrome. Tourette's Syndrome means that there is something in my brain that tells me to make noises and funny faces all day long. I explain how I can't help it because it is a medical condition. I compare it to blinking your eyes. Just like your brain tells you to blink your eyes, my brain tells me to blink my eyes and make my noises. The kids are very understanding once they know. It's the fear of the unknown that confuses them.

What is the idea behind your book "Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had"?

My book is a reminder for those with disabilities, weaknesses or challenges in life to never give up! It's a reminder to keep that positive attitude in order to follow your dreams. My book shows people that with the right support system in place, anyone can follow their dreams.

Who is your inspiration?

My inspiration comes from the fact that I don't ever want my Tourette Syndrome to win. This motivates me daily to go out and be the best I can be. Often times, I notice that I can be better than the average people. It takes the right mindset and determination to make it happen.

Sources: <https://www.upliftingvoices.org/Interviewshow.aspx?name=Brad%20Cohen&id=97&totalrec=8&Alpha=B>
<https://source.wustl.edu/2007/08/teacher-with-tourette-shares-his-journey-towards-confidence/>
<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/q-a-with-educator-brad-cohen/2008/12>

Questions to reflect on:

1. How did Brad overcome the difficulties in his life and create his own success?
2. How can we be more inclusive of people with different needs in our society?

If you're interested to learn more of his inspirational story, grab his book or catch the movie!

