

Have I seen your face before?

I don't know. I'm not sure.

Maybe you look familiar?

Really, even though we may have just met, recently gotten to know each other, or known each other our entire lives, it's not a given I know who you are.

Some people may think there's something wrong with you if you didn't know who they were after having already met them?

I have Prosopagnosia. It's known as Faceblindness.

(Latin) Prosopo: Face Agnosia: Forget. It's like having amnesia for faces. Yes, I'm serious and it's for real.

It's not that people like me don't see faces? We do. It's just that the part of the brain that processes facial identity known as the fusiform which is part of the visual cortex in the back of the brain either doesn't work or isn't there..

So when the eyeballs send the film with the images to the dark room for developing in the back of the brain, the brain doesn't have all the pieces of the puzzle and we forget or just don't know who or sometimes what we're seeing. There is no negative. So there is no positive.

Until recently, it was considered a very rare disorder with less than 2,000 people in the world diagnosed, but through the work of Dr. Brad Duchaine a Neuroscientist and leading researcher at Dartmouth College, it seems that up to one percent of the general population suffers from some degree of facial recognition impairment.

Faceblindness isn't something you'd readily notice about someone. It's not like missing an arm or a leg. It's not like a tumor or a burn. It's invisible and it's bazaar. So when people encounter someone with Faceblindness, it occurs as something weird.

It's like missing memory. Instead of forgetting where someone is, or what their job is supposed to be, or what you were supposed to do when you came into the kitchen, people with Faceblindness simply can't retain the metadata contained in a face.

For most people it's easy, in fact, it's automatic. Your eyes see a face, the brain processes it in a millisecond, and you know who or what you're seeing. You aren't even aware your brain just instantaneously calculated millions of perceptual functions?

With Faceblindness, the eyeballs see the info and that's where the fun stops. The brain simply has no mechanism to put the parts of the face puzzle it recognizes back together in a way that the rest of the brain will understand,

Faceblindness sees two eyes, eyebrows, eyelids, eye lashes, a nose, nostrils, a mouth, chin, ears, lips, tongue, scars, jowls, wrinkles, teeth, lips, pigmentations, fat/thin young/old, pretty, ugly, level of attractiveness, ethnicity, shape, color, hue, even expression and while your eyes do it instantaneously, a Prosopagnosic must focus, consider, analyze, evaluate, calculate, consider, compare, infer, and decide in the same time it takes someone to say hello. Few Faceblinds can. Most cannot.

It could not have been harder during the the Dark Ages when knights fought with long, sharp lances, face guards and shields, The difference is they hid their faces. We just can't remember yours.

There is no treatment or cure. There are few only trainings that might help some to limit the impacts Faceblindness has on their lives. In the meantime, for some Faceblinds, going through life is like living in a carnival funhouse of distorting mirrors and unsolvable riddles.

While it's true that a great many diagnosed Prosopagnosics are multi-diagnoses, such as autism, stroke, brain damage or disease, many are congenital having been born with it or developing the condition over time.

I am perhaps the luckiest of all. Because I suffered a TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) and blindness at the early age of 5, I benefited from brain elasticity and neural compensation.

I have also benefited from a lifetime of knowing what works and what doesn't in the pragmatic, practical, and real world of facial recognition and ultimately real life cognitive compensatory strategies.

Some things that worked before no longer work. Like where people sit or what their assigned tasks might be.

I'm not any better than anyone else, only that given my vocation of Professional Writing, perhaps I can be the voice of this phantom malady?

There are no pharmaceuticals, no surgeries, no cowboys coming around the corner to save the day for Faceblinds.

Since little to no practical research is currently being done in labs to study it, it's up to us all individually to find our course and journey it alone and onward.

The good news though is that PA is a condition that is not life threatening and in most cases does not increase in severity over time like Cancer.

After all, it doesn't cause pain, and it won't get you in trouble like a communicable disease.

It's a big pain in the ass! So if you think about it that way, we have it pretty good after all.

I have chosen to view Prosopagnosia as a humorous and amusing inconvenience rather than as my late colleague neurologist

Dr. Oliver Sacks said, "The Devil in my brain."

While it's an utter embarrassment to forget faces immediately upon encountering them, it's a wild thing to constantly forget .who you just spoke to or with whom you spent an hour sharing dinner. Or watched a movie for two hours and have no idea who is who on the screen? Or who it is you're speaking to in the moment.

The 1973 Woody Allen movie called Sleeper in which the main character is frozen and is revived centuries in the future and everyone he encounters has shields on their faces like robots in a way represents the experience of Faceblindness. It's kind of how we were during the Pandemic, too.

No meaning. No discriminating features. All were exactly the same. This is what it was like when I was a boy and young man. It really wasn't until my thirties that I was able to get a manageable dominance over it.

As I've lived and grown I have been able to create strategies and tools to increase my ability of facial recognition and minimize the amount of frustration and confusion this can cause,

An example of this might be finding a single trait or two that a face contains so that I can always use that to know someone in the future. However, time and testing has definitively proven that lots

of people have the same traits and this strategy can backfire as often as it works.

For instance, about 25 years ago I visited my lifelong friend Marc Feinstein at his new condo in New Jersey. We barbecued with his work mate Raj Travedi. Raj was fascinated by my sharing about Faceblindness.

“Can you recognize me” asked Raj?

“I would use the dot on your nose” I offered “to remember and identify you.”

To wit Marc barked, “What dot?!”

I said, “The dot right at the end of his nose.”

Raj shared that a lot of people have commented on it. And I explained that the dot is his single most identifying feature. We all laughed about it while Marc, who had worked side-by-side with Raj for years never even noticed.

Another way is to associate something physical with their face. Is there a limp, a scar, a color in their complexion, a problem with their skin, hairline, ears, chin, neck? Weight, height, mannerisms, posture? ANYTHING?!

If yes I have a strategy. If no, I keep working.

Not everyone is memorable. Not everyone has aspects of their faces that someone like me can latch onto. In fact I often quip that you all look alike. Not Black people, or White people, not Hispanics or Asians...

Those of you with faces. Which ironically, make up most of you.

Prosopagnosia is a kaleidoscope of constantly changing images and a bingo cage with infinite numbered balls. The object is to put the right balls in the right place on the card and when you get it right, yell "BINGO!"

But do it in your head. Otherwise people will think there's something wrong with you.

For interview availability or more information about
Prosopagnosia
(aka) Faceblindness, reach out to Michael J, Herman
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