

Making a Difference; Celebration of World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) by Ain Shams University Children's Hospital-Child Psychiatry Team (AUCH-CPT), April 2016

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Abstract

Making a difference is the only thing that it really matters in life. It gives an extraordinary and remarkable meaning to our existence. Many people come and go without leaving a trace while only a few of us leaves a significant contribution to life by making a difference not only for themselves and others in their close community but also for the whole universe and humanity; among those are individuals who decide to be the voice of people with special needs including persons living with autism.

Keywords: Autism; World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD); 2nd of April; Ain Shams University Children's Hospital- Child Psychiatry Team (AUCH-CPT); Light It Up Blue (LIUB) for Autism

Introduction

To suffer; this is life but to feel the suffering of others and decide to support them and improve the quality of their lives by all means you can, this is humanity in its simplest and greatest meaning. People who decide to be the voice of individuals with special needs including persons living with autism are examples of those who choose to make a difference and change the world to be a better place for all of us to live in where fairness, goodness, kindness, and beauty prevail.

Autism spectrum disorder

Autism which is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder is one of the most puzzling diseases. Its prevalence is remarkably increasing over the last 20 years. Its diagnosis is usually made before the age of 3 years with significant male predilection. It is characterized by social and communication impairment with repetitive, restrictive, and stereotypic pattern of behavior, interests, and activities [1-3].

Historical background of World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD)

The United Nations (UN) called for one day to be designated as the annual World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) in November 2007. Later, in December 2007, the General Assembly of UN has chosen the second of April to be that day which was first celebrated in 2008. WAAD aims at creating and enhancing public awareness about persons living with autism, especially children, by organization of educational events and production of educational materials for parents, teachers, and health care professionals. Also, WAAD is considered an occasion to feature artistic exhibitions for works created by autistic persons and launch television and radio shows and newspapers' discussions about autism, the importance of its early diagnosis and implementation of early intervention for those

diagnosed to have it, and the daily problems the autistics and their caregivers are obliged to face; with experts, politicians, and non-governmental organizations' (NGO) representatives. Lastly, WAAD is used to display posters and banners to increase public awareness of autism and organize public events to celebrate the day and raise funds for institutions specialized in taking care of autistic individuals and their families [4,5].

The eighth annual World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), April 2nd, 2016

Annually, the WAAD brings all organizations concerned with autism together all over the world to help in research, diagnosis, treatment, and overall awareness of persons living with autism [6]. As a part of a long-running awareness campaign, Autism-Europe focused on the theme "Respect, Acceptance, Inclusion" in their celebration of the WAAD 2016 aiming at eliminating negative stigma associated with autism [7]. Meanwhile, Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General called for "advancing the rights of individuals with autism and ensuring their full participation and inclusion as valued members of our diverse human family who can contribute to a future of dignity and opportunity for all" [8]. UN has laid stress in 2016 theme on mainstreaming disability in general and autism in particular in UN's development 2030 agenda that requires an overall view including designing, implementing, and evaluating socioeconomic and political policies concerned with people with different types of disabilities including autism to ensure non perpetuation of inequality and focus on their struggle for survival and attaining their rights [9].

Light It Up Blue (LIUB) for autism

Light it Up Blue (LIUB) for autism is an initiative posed by Autism Speaks which is a huge non-governmental organization (NGO) leading in the field of autism scientific research and establishment of support system for autistic individuals aiming at shining a light on autism all over the globe and launching awareness creation and fund raising events on WAAD. Many international icons wear blue and many buildings worldwide unite annually in the 2nd of April to shine bright

blue lights in honor of autistic individuals and their families; Figure 1 [10].

Celebration of World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) by Ain Shams University Children's Hospital-Child Psychiatry Team (AUCH-CPT), April 2016

After organization of Meet the Professionals' day (MPD) for autistic caregivers whose children are under follow up in Ain Shams University Children's Hospital-Child Psychiatry Clinic [11], the author of this editorial as the Head of the Clinic decided to share the globe in celebrating the WAAD with an educational workshop for professionals and an open day with the participation of autistic children and their caregivers. MPD has broken the ice between our team and the autistic caregivers and shown the importance of knowing each other in a comfortable setting outside the clinic and its restricted time and routine limitations [11].

"Do not do it; it is a waste of time"

"It is very hot nowadays in Cairo; going outdoors with autistic children in such a weather is insane"

"Alazhar Park in the weekend; Ohhhhhh no, it will be awfully crowded and very difficult to take care of the autistic children"

These were some comments that I heard once I declared my intention to celebrate the WAAD by an open day in Alazhar Park, Cairo, Egypt with the team members and the autistic children and their caregivers. Only because I believe that making a difference is the only thing that it really matters in life and gives an extraordinary and remarkable meaning to our existence, I decided to go on with my plan no matter what. Although not all the team members joined us that day, the participation of those who believed in making a difference was wonderful. They have taken a good care of the autistic children and joined them in enjoying the event.

"We are not sick or odd but we are just different" was the slogan we used for the event and the T shirts that were made especially to be worn by the team members and the autistic children during the day (Figures 2, 3a and 3b). That slogan has attracted the attention of many people who were in Alazhar Park that day enjoying their weekend in spite of the very hot weather. They were very keen to come and ask us about it and about the meaning of autism; hence the awareness process has started.



Figure 1: Light It Up Blue (LIUB) initiative posed by "Autism Speaks" with many landmarks all over the globe sharing in it [7].



Figure 2: AUCH-CPT Arabic slogan for celebrating WAAD, April 2016 stating that autistic persons are not sick or odd but they are just different.



Figure 3a: AUCH-CPT celebrating WAAD at Alazhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, April 2016.



Figure 3b: AUCH-CPT celebrating WAAD at Alazhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, April 2016.

Summary

To summarize, in the point of view of many professionals and organizations that are concerned with autistic persons and their families, AUTISM is just a 6 letters' word that is preferably refers to "Always Unique, Totally Intelligent, Sometimes Mysterious". In spite of

that autism continues to represent a challenge to all of us because of its complex etiology and the lack of curative treatment until now but as we do believe in making a difference, we will continue our efforts in research as well as supporting individuals with autism and their families by all means. Hopefully, one day we will achieve our goals in changing the world to be a better place for all of us to live in.

Acknowledgment

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