

Difference Doesn't Mean Deficit

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Roger & Richard in the studio at the start of the training session

LMBB Syndrome. Ever heard of it? Well I hadn't until one of my instructors, Stuart Wilson, rang me to say that he had been approached by a woman in search of assertiveness training and confidence building lessons for her 27 year old son, Richard, with LMBBS.

Stuart rang me knowing that I sometimes teach privately at my studio which is part of my house. He told me that Richard was blind but that he had other problems apart from his blindness. Could I help? My first reaction was that I was interested in seeing him but could make no promises until I had assessed him. I have previous experience of putting together courses on self-protection for the blind and visually impaired so I was not too concerned about the teaching part. Additionally, I have taught many times in New York at our karate school in the Institute of the Blind in Manhattan during my regular visits to the Seido HQ which is nearby.

I had, however, no idea of what additional problems an LMBB sufferer would face so in February 2008 I arranged to meet Richard at my house where he was accompanied by his mother to discuss matters. First impressions were that Richard was heavysset and slightly ponderous. He moved slowly, and talked slowly giving an impression that he was nervous. He shuffled in a sort of robotic walk and used his white cane to find the way forward. He looked at the floor and had rounded shoulders. Nevertheless, I saw that he could be a powerful man: not tall but broad with thick arms and a heavy neck.



His mother told me about LMBBS which stands for Laurence-Moon-Bardet-Biedl Syndrome, a recessively inherited genetic disorder with a whole range of symptoms, one of which is blindness. In the United States, and more recently here, it is known in its shorter form of BBS. The name is irrelevant: the symptoms aren't.

The degeneration of the retina leads to tunnel vision and then blindness. In Richard's case this had been of early onset: he was registered blind at the age of 9. Other symptoms include obesity despite diet control, poor balance, loss of dexterity, neurological problems, hearing and speech impairment, learning difficulties,

problems with the senses of smell and taste, kidney abnormalities and heart defects. Imagine being blind and then having to cope with such a range of problems as best you can. Small wonder Richard lacked confidence and doubtless had had a difficult and disrupted school life.

His parents and brothers, however, were wonderful with him, cared deeply and he did have his own flat about 1 mile away from his parents where he was learning to become semi-independent.

So I asked to be left with Richard and said that I wanted to talk with him and hear about his life. Then we would visit my training studio and I would familiarise him with its layout. When his mother returned I would make a decision as to whether or not I thought that I could make any difference to his lack of confidence.

I found that Richard was easy to talk to, loved his football and had a good sense of humour. He wanted to learn and I gave him some simple orientation tasks to perform in the studio so that I could see his movement and posture, and gauge his learning ability. I was quickly impressed with how well he responded and sensed that he really was keen to learn new skills and could practise them.

I offered to work with Richard for one month (4x1 hour sessions) after which I would review whether or not we were compatible and whether or not I felt that I could improve his confidence.

In the first month I worked with Richard on his posture as clearly he stooped and this threw his whole body out of alignment making ease of movement almost impossible. We then worked on balance and movement and I taught him how to move using Tai Chi walking and getting away from the “robot shuffle” which characterised his movement previously.

We worked on perception and hearing so that after about the third session, he was able to identify not only where I was in the studio in terms of the clock face, but the distance I was from him and he could achieve over 90% accuracy here. You try it. You need to think and respond quickly. I then taught him how to use a one metre pole to find me and then hit a target, in the same way as you might use your cane if you were under threat. Again he was achieving a high percentage of “hits” on the kick pad.

So in just 4 sessions it was clear to me that his posture and balance had improved and he was responding to the training and picking up points on self- protection as we went along. His sense of humour never left him during that time and I felt that we could make real progress together. In planning his programme, I was learning as much as he was. We agreed to keep the training sessions going and I then thought that I would put together a more in depth programme.

We have now been working together for 6 months. A typical session goes something like this. I first use a metronome on one wall of my studio so that he can always orientate himself by listening to the clicks. It works really well and allows him to know where the centre of the studio is. We start with a basic warm up, jumping jacks, knee

rotation, one legged knee circulating, horse stance and hip movement moving up the body until he is warmed up.

Then I use one of the big exercise balls to throw to him and we throw it back and forth calling out numbers in Japanese when it is our turn to throw – this is to improve his reflexes but also works on his balance and posture. He is starting to sweat a bit by now so we then do 360 degree orientation as described above but I have moved to using the zone approach for Richard to detect me with him standing in the “Thinker” position. I move quite quickly and have to be careful when he uses the pole as he can really catch you with it if you are slow.



Then on to working with “Sid”, my training dummy. He gloves up using 16 oz gloves and we work on combinations with jab/cross/ hook being a favourite. I use a “blocker” then so that he has to detect a potential hit, block it and respond. Then off with the gloves and we do some “verbals” from the “Thinker” position using the forward hand as the fence. I have found that the front hand slap to the face, head grab and palm heel come naturally to him and we are also now using the knee kick as an added combination. We move to the punch ball and he does similar combinations moving 90 degrees each time. Sometimes I let the ball swing back fast at him so that he gets used to having to cover up or even take the odd hit – he laughs when it gets through to him.

Just recently we have been working on one to one movement with a belt tied between us so that he has to move on the balls of his feet and he has made real progress here.

I have also started what I call tracking and audio mapping sessions with him to work on his orientation outside the studio and we are starting to work on some self-defence drills and breakfalls.



At the end of the session I work on his stretch and have prepared a tape so that he can listen to it at home and work out daily to some special routines that I have prepared for him. We wind down and then have a short meditation session and focus on correct breathing.

His family give strong support to the programme so there is a real sense of achievement and most importantly, Richard is noticeably gaining confidence from the training which is almost 100 percent based on martial arts and self- protection training.

My aim is to get to a point where he can work out with me one to one and get the same feeling we all get from that sort of partner training which all adds to the confidence cycle.



Now I have no idea what the future holds for Richard but I do know that the person I first saw in February is not the same person working with me in July and the lesson is not for him but for me: never impose limitations on others –difference just doesn't mean deficit.

I know that as instructors or students we are constantly hard on ourselves often pushing back the limits to see just how far we can go. Sometimes, I think that we focus a bit too much on ourselves when we have so much to share with others. Working with Richard has given me much more than I thought possible and I have been teaching for over 40 years.

So many of you have much to give back so please do look for opportunities, not just to make hard men harder but to use your skills and knowledge to reach out beyond that.

With best wishes and thanks to the BCA for continuing to provide us with a centre of excellence.

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