

Learning Disabilities with Dorothy Watson Marcus Tanner podcast

Speaker Key:

VO Voice Over

CB Chantal Boyle

PS Paul Shriever

DW Dorothy Watson

MT Marcus Tanner

00.00

Welcome to The Sunflower Conversations, where we explore the Hidden Disability Sunflower and its role in supporting people with hidden disabilities.

00:00:20

CB

Welcome to The Sunflower Conversations. Today your hosts are me, Chantal, and my colleague, Paul. How are you, Paul?

PS

I'm very well, Chantal. Lovely to see you. Lovely to see you.

CB

Our guests today are Dorothy Watson from The Sunnybank Trust and Marcus Tanner, who's also part of the Sunnybank Trust and Understand Us. The Sunnybank Trust supports adults with a learning disability across Northeast Surrey to have confidence, opportunities and control over their own lives, to be able to live without prejudice and discrimination.

We're really looking forward to this podcast. It's the first podcast that we've done about learning disabilities, so I think it's going to be super-informative. And I'm looking forward to coming away from it with just some new ideas and how to approach learning disabilities and to be as supportive and welcoming and open

as possible to effect that equity and inclusion that we are all striving to achieve. Paul and I normally have a little bit of a free chat. Paul, how are you doing?

00:01:32

PS

I'm very well, thank you. We're very busy. I'm preparing bits and pieces for exhibitions that are looming up soon, so I've been very much involved in that. How about you, Chantal? How's life?

CB

Yes, good. It's the start of a very busy week. The beginning of the year, I just think everyone I speak to is so busy. But, for us, it's great because it means there are more people joining, more businesses joining The Sunflower, and that means us getting just your regular person to understand and recognise what the Sunflower is.

We're going to be at the O2 soon, chatting to paying visitors who are going to be watching some performances. That's really good. It's really great that we're able to get in front of people. And we're heading to Naidex in Birmingham this year, so there's lots to look forward to from a Hidden Disabilities Sunflower point of view.

But Dorothy and Marcus are very busy people, so I think that we should jump into the reason that we're here. Dorothy, can we start by you explaining what are learning disabilities, please?

00:02:43

DW

I think it's interesting. I think there are lots of different words to describe it. It's, basically, a learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability. It's a difficulty with everyday tasks. It's where you need to take longer to learn. You might need support to develop skills and understand information. You might need support interacting with people.

A learning disability is something that affects every part of your life, and it is something that you live with. Yes. I think that's probably the easiest way to describe it, do you think, Marcus?

MT

Yes.

CB

Thank you very much. And your mission statement, I think it'd be quite good to talk through that. It seeks to support adults to live without prejudice and have confidence and opportunities over their own lives. What, in your experience, are the common myths about learning disabilities and the types of prejudice that people have experienced?

DW

Yes, Marcus and I were talking about this earlier, weren't we?

MT

Yes.

00:03:56

DW

And one of the things Marcus said was that sometimes people think people with a learning disability are lazy.

MT Yes.

DW

Which is an interesting one. People tend to ignore people with a learning disability. They might know how to talk or to be with them. They may think that they actually don't have many opinions, that they're not bringing much to society, that they can't do much. There's a lot of cant's in there.

And I think working with and coproducing, codesigning with people with a learning disability, it's not what they can't do, it's about finding the ways that make it easier for them. Because it is about making those adjustments. And you suddenly get a much richer input when you actually make those adjustments. And everybody can contribute.

I think, in the UK, a couple of statistics. Employment, people with a learning disability, is between 5% and 6%, versus, I think, the general population employment's round about 70%. It's somewhere around there. But 5% to 6% of people with a learning disability are in paid employment.

CB

[Overtalking].

DW

Yes, shocking.

CB

That is really shocking, isn't it?

DW

It's absolutely shocking. People with a learning disability are 50 times more likely to experience mental health conditions versus the general population, and some of that is partly because they're so isolated and so marginalised. Again, that's quite a shocking one.

00:05:59

And then when you look at that inequity and the accessibility, people with a learning disability, on average, their mortality is 20 years younger than the general population. That's staggering, and that needs to change. It is a host of reasons. It could be general health, but it is also about access to good health, getting information about understanding what good health is, helping the professionals understand to know how to support and work with someone with a learning disability. Those statistics are not just down to one reason. It is around a whole complex of issues that reinforce those myths.

CB

I think the things that you said in the beginning about the myths and the stereotypes, they're all negative.

DW

Absolutely.

CB

They're all negative. It's not going to give anybody confidence, if that's how you feel that you're being perceived by the general population, to get out there. And I would imagine it would have an effect on social interaction. A lot of people go to work, yes, for the money, but it's also that social interaction, isn't it, and also having a purpose.

00:07:35

DW

I think, having a purpose. And, also, if you've got a skillset that is relevant in the workplace, fantastic. We employ, two of our staff have a learning disability, and what they bring is really, really good insight for us, but, also, their skillsets are perfect for the jobs they're doing, absolutely perfect. One of our staff members has autism as well as a learning disability, and so she's incredibly good at making sure that every minute, every note from a meeting, that we follow it. That is absolutely a really useful skill.

CB

That is.

DW

I think there are a lot of myths to break and to shatter around this particular part of the community. What do you think?

MT

Yes, I think there are, yes.

PS

Can I ask something, guys? Dorothy, is a learning disability something that you are born with, or is it something that can develop? Is it something that happens? Does it get progressively worse over your life? How does it come about?

DW

Traditionally, a learning disability is either something that happens to the baby in the womb or happens in early childhood. It is a lifelong condition. The learning disability doesn't necessarily get worse, but, obviously, if you have medical conditions, and often someone with a learning disability will have physical conditions as well, physical disabilities or medical issues, these are the aspects that could get worse. The learning disability is something you're born with that stays with you.

CB

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00:09:55

DW

But it is about saying, I can't understand the information in the way you're presenting it. And then for organisations to say, okay, we're going to need to think of a different way to actually share that information. Top tips, like making words simple, using images, immediately is going to help how that person is able to understand and translate that information. It's really saying, let's think about this, let's do things a bit differently because that's what's needed here. And the benefits are fantastic.

CB

I can understand that. In previous roles, I might've been in meetings with people who are perhaps very, very senior or just had an extensive vocabulary, and sometimes I haven't understood what they're talking about, the words used, the language that is being used. And it takes a great deal of courage to say, I'm sorry,

could you just explain to me what does that word mean, or what are you trying to ask me to do, or what are we trying to achieve?

However, then, if you've also lived with these negative stereotypes and the myths that we were talking about before, to have the confidence to do that is really, really tough, and that's something that you do as well, isn't it? You build confidence at Sunnybank Trust, what methods do you employ to do that?

DW

I think confidence. Marcus, what are the things that you have been involved in where you have felt more confident or, yes, actually, that's been really useful?

00:11:57

MT

Mainly Understand Us have helped me get the confidence. And, obviously, talking to people also with learning disabilities, by making friends, that's helped.

DW

Friendships, that's a good one.

MT

Yes, friendships, yes.

DW

Friendships. At the charity, we have a lot of clubs and activities. We have the chance to learn new things, things like looking at the CV, looking at how people can improve what their skills are that make them more interesting for employers, that's something else, isn't it?

MT

Yes.

DW

And as Marcus said, I think Understand Us is the thing that is about engaging with the wider community. And by engaging with the wider community, the only way change is going to happen is getting the right people at the table. And the people at the table have to be the people with a learning disability.

CB

Yes. Marcus, do you want to tell us what Understand Us is?

MT

Understand Us is a business with a learning disability. The consultants offer training. We do audits, surveys, website reviews, and we also specific projects.

CB

That's a lot. That's a lot of things that you offer through Understand Us.

MT

Yes.

CB

Marcus, can you tell us why you think this work is important that Understand Us does?

00:13:33

MT

It is important because it helps businesses understand and deal with people who have learning disabilities.

CB

And how have companies and businesses reacted to you and your colleagues when you have been working with them as part of Understand Us?

DW

The feedback, we were talking about this, the feedback has been great, hasn't it?

MT

Yes, excellent. I'd say the feedback's been excellent.

DW

The feedback we've had has been great.

MT

No, it's been excellent, Dorothy.

DW

Yes. We've had organisations just saying they haven't even thought about the sorts of points that Marcus and his colleagues have raised about simplifying language, simplifying information. Marcus was involved in presenting to one of the Cabinet members, one of the councillors, for Health and Social Care. And what was the feedback?

MT

The feedback was very good.

00:14:45

DW

Was very good.

MT

Yes.

CB

Excellent.

MT

Maybe. Yes, sure, excellent.

CB

How did you find that, Marcus? Did you enjoy talking to them?

MT

Yes, I did. I enjoyed it.

CB

Can you remember any of the things that you suggested?

MT

No, I can't, not off the top of my head.

DW

You talked about websites being [overtalking].

MT

Oh, yes, yes.

DW Without naming particular websites.

MT

Oh, yes. Particular websites, sometimes I feel like they're rubbish and they're really hard to use.

DW

What makes them hard to use, Marcus?

MT

If you can't find information or it's too hard to find information. Because, obviously, I do the research, so if I'm researching on a website, and I can't find the information, that's when it's hard for me to do that. If they had pictures, many pictures, that's good. But then if they have more pictures than writing I think that's where it's more good.

00:15:44

DW

It's getting that fine balance.

MT

Yes.

DW

Keeping the words manageable.

MT

Exactly.

CB

How long have you been with Sunnybank, Understand Us, and what do you enjoy about it, Marcus?

MT

I have been with Understand Us for almost a year, and I joined Sunnybank just before that. And what I enjoy doing at Sunnybank and Understand Us is I enjoy making friends at the Sunnybank clubs. With Understand Us, I enjoy the IT work and working on the projects with my Understand Us colleagues.

CB It must be very rewarding.

MT

Yes.

CB

And, Dorothy, a question to both of you. How can society become more inclusive for people with a learning disability?

00:16:43

DW

I think there are some very simple things. I think it's about the small things you can do, making information accessible, keeping words simple. But I think it's about even just thinking about ways you can include this part of the community, which at the moment, it just doesn't occur to people, offering, thinking about work opportunities in a different way, looking at, even in your local community, if there's somebody you know with a learning disability, acknowledging them, talking to them. Don't talk to their carer or their support worker, I mean, it's great, but talk to the person, meet the real person. Even at that level, it makes a difference.

But, on the wider level, how do you increase inclusion? It is about the communication tools, making them accessible so that if somebody goes to the airport or goes to a swimming pool, that they can actually navigate their way through by the simple information that's available.

I think it's things like that, how you make a meeting accessible, they do make a difference. Because it's come from Marcus and some of the other guys... We started, and I think it was a couple of the Understand Us group came up with a How Are You Feeling? card. Because a lot of people find it difficult to know how to start conversation or how to speak to somebody. And, actually, if somebody says to you, how are you feeling, and you've got the chance, with a card that has a picture of nervous, then you can tell that person, I'm feeling nervous. That's immediately going to make the other person go, okay, well, what do we need to do to make you feel less nervous?

CB

It's such a simple concept, isn't it? When you showed it to us earlier, it looked like it was A4, A5 size.

00:19:05

DW

Yes. It's folded. It's got a whole set of emojis, effectively, inside that give you a whole range of emotions, from happy, angry, tired, I want to go slow today... You can use that card in any place, going to the police station, having it available at hospitals, at a meeting. How are you feeling is a really good way to start a conversation with somebody who may have something they want to talk about.

CB,

I think it's a fab idea. I really do.

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I wonder whether sometimes some of the issue is because of when children maybe go to different schools, so if you're going to a specialist school, so then the children in the mainstream school, they're not making friends with children who have got learning disabilities again. Maybe it's the difference. They're like, it's something different to me.

It's like all marginalised groups, isn't it? If you don't know anybody from that marginalised group, you might have a preconceived idea of what they're like until you get to meet somebody, and you get to know their characteristics and you decide you really like them. But it's having the opportunity to get together, isn't it?

DW

Definitely.

CB

And representation is huge. There's the BBC drama, I don't know if you've seen it, Paul, it's called Ralph and Katie. And it's about a couple of newlyweds. They both have Down's Syndrome. And it's rare to see the main characters of TV shows and movies with the character to have a learning disability. I just wondered what both Marcus and Dorothy feel about representation in television dramas and films?

00:21:17

DW

There should be more.

MT

Yes, definitely, there should be more.

DW

Yes. And by having more people with different disabilities and learning disabilities, it means that everyone feels included...

MT

Exactly.

DW

And you've got that representation there. We say bring it on, and let's have more of that.

MT

Yes.

CB

There was actually one of the ladies who's part of the production team, she had got in touch with us prior to recording it because a relative of hers uses the Sunflower. She wanted to have it within the show, not like, here's a massive Sunflower lanyard, but just that placement just so that people start to see it a bit more and just get that recognition. We were delighted to see. I think it won an award, the show. We were really pleased to see that, and for all the right reasons.

PS

Yes. Marcus, tell me, I can see that you're wearing a Sunflower...

MT

Yes.

PS

Can you tell me what you think about it?

00:22:26

MT

I think it's useful because, obviously, people know you have a hidden disability, but I also think more people should know about it as well. It's useful, Sunflower, at shops, at airports, cafés, for anywhere that's likely to have people.

PS

That's fantastic. And, Marcus, is it something that you feel has genuinely helped you in those situations and places?

MT

In some situations, I say yes, it has. But some, it hasn't because sometimes they don't know what they're dealing with.

DW

A bit like the representation, I think the more people know about it, the more useful it becomes.

MT

Exactly.

DW

And it is really, really useful. A lot of our group really use their Sunflower lanyards a lot. And I think what you see, and I'm adding to what Marcus said, is people feel more confident with it on, so that they feel that that gives them a tool to say to a bus driver, I've got a Sunflower lanyard, and, actually, I need a bit of help. It's like the How Are You Feeling? It gives them the excuse to be able to tell people that they have a hidden disability. There is that extra support in it, in that way.

PS

Absolutely.

00:23:55

CB

Yes. It's a good communication tool.

DW

Definitely.

MT

Yes.

CB

Without necessarily having to say or speak.

PS

Exactly.

CB

We watched a wonderful film by Understand Us earlier. Dorothy, I don't know if you just want to quickly give an overview of what the Understand Us film is about? And then we can direct people to your website to watch it.

DW

Yes. We talked to our Understand Us consultants about the sort of problems they faced and how they felt and what could've been better. What we weren't expecting was such powerful stories and such powerful emotion that came from the consultants about the frustration they felt that they hadn't been really heard or that they had been given a form which was really difficult.

It was very, very powerful to hear, as I said, the frustrations, the upset, the anxiety that some of them felt. And then when you said to them, so what could've been

better, what do you think could've been improved, and they had the answers. And if more companies and more businesses just engaged with people... As I said, Understand Us would love to talk to companies about ways to make their services better. The video is very powerful, and, yes, we will make it anyone that wants to can either come via you or can visit our website.

00:25:51

PS

I thought it was great, by the way. I thought the video was really good, the way it reaches out and expresses itself was very, very strong.

CB

And it's filmed [overtalking].

DW

What I think is good is it's their experience, their voices, and it's not me sitting, or somebody else, explaining for them. They're telling you.

PS

Do you find businesses coming to you for advice? Is this something that is becoming more a thing?

DW

What is interesting is once people understand what the barriers are, they're like, oh, yes, no, we could really benefit. It's still a little bit hidden. This whole thing of hidden disabilities and things like making information accessible, making a website more accessible, are things that people think they're doing, but often don't get it quite right.

I say, once we've started talking to a business or a company, and we get some of the input from the consultants, they come back for more. The company comes back for more. Starting off those initial conversations, a bit like Marmite, you either get it or you don't. Yes, I think there's a lot of work to be done. I think the team are fantastic. You think the team are fantastic?

MT

Yes.

DW

You're going to say that, aren't you?

00:27:27

MT

No, excellent.

PS

I think most businesses could do with hearing that. I think it gives a lot of focus on just what actually matters, and I think a lot of those things are missed, and people could generally just do a bit of that, bit more of that.

DW

We talked about supermarkets, and something one of our consultants came up from is that all supermarkets think that fast service is good, that you've got to get people through the till as quickly as possible. And one of our consultants actually said, why don't they have a slow till for people that can't do it quickly? And that's not just people with a learning disability, but, actually, where there is a bit more time. And, as Maria in our video says, more time, please.

PS

That's brilliant. I think that's a great idea.

DW

Yes, absolutely. What makes good customer service?

CB

Yes, because Aldi and Lidl have joined, and they were traditionally known as the... I think they were on a target, weren't they, to basically throw your shopping through as fast as they possibly could at the checkout, which is just way too overwhelming for so many people and would put you off shopping there. We are pleased to see that those companies are also thinking about being inclusive. If anybody who's listening to this wants to learn more, who should they contact?

DW

Our website is the charity one, www.sunnybanktrust.org. Otherwise, to get in touch with Understandus@sunnybanktrust.org is the email address.

00:29:11

CB

Fantastic. My final question to both of you is, what has your biggest achievement or proudest moment been so far?

MT

What has been my biggest achievement or my proudest moment? I have two. I have a biggest achievement, and I have a proudest moment. My biggest achievement I'd say is probably when I went to a Job Centre, and I was filling in for a staff member of Sunnybank who couldn't be there. And I ran a stall for Sunnybank and told people about Sunnybank and about Understand Us and all of that. And my proudest moment would probably be when I actually did a presentation to the councillor, yes, for Understand Us.

CB

That sounds like it was pretty monumental. Both of those things are achievements to be really proud of, really [overtalking].

PS

Fantastic.

MT

Fantastic, absolutely fantastic.

CB

Because it's to help other people. Yes.

PS

Well done.

CB

Well done. And Dorothy?

00:30:19

DW

I'm just leaning in again. I don't know how you're going to edit this video with our faces looming in and out of the camera.

CB

I do not know. That will be my proudest achievement.

DW

I know. I was going to say, your proudest achievement is going to be editing this, isn't it? I think one of my proudest moments was when the Understand Us team did their first presentation to the Citizens Advice. And they basically did the presentation, they ran it, and I felt so emotional because I was looking at a team of empowered guys that were just getting on and proving, proving and breaking

all the myths that we discussed earlier and smashing it, they absolutely smashed it. For me, that's one of my Up There moments...

CB

Brilliant.

DW

Really.

CB

Something to be really proud of.

PS

That's lovely, Dorothy.

CB

Yes. Thank you both for your time.

PS

Yes.

CB

Thoroughly enjoyed...

DW

Thank you.

MT

Thank you.

CB

Talking to you both.

PS

Yes.

DW

And thank you very much for the opportunity. I'm so sorry it's been such a challenge on the Wi-Fi.

CB

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00:31:57

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00:32:45