

Daniel Allen

As we journey through life and its emotional roller coaster, young people tend to strive for one thing more than anything else, instant gratification. Basically a swift reward without making the extra effort, instant gratification allows individuals to feel the pleasure of winning, without working hard or experiencing struggle. I believe so many kids fall victim to this mentality because they are afraid to look vulnerable or to fail in front of others. We compare ourselves and if we aren't constantly succeeding, it affects our self-image. In my life, I was forced to work against the pressures of instant gratification. I struggled to succeed because of a neurological disorder and had to learn the importance of delayed gratification.

I was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3. I experienced social, emotional and developmental delays that caused me to struggle with things that typical children did easily. I struggled to read, write, make friends, focus in class or sit with kids at lunch. I had no social life because I was in my own little world and could not relate to those around me. I started speech, occupational and physical therapy when I was diagnosed and continued with these treatments through kindergarten. I started in a pre-school class for children with special needs on my 3rd birthday. I spent more hours in treatments each week than some adults spend at work.

One of the hardest things to do in life, but one of the best traits to have, is to be able to learn from your challenges. Not being afraid to admit your weaknesses, and to come back bigger and stronger is an amazing gift. Once I started to develop my reading and writing skills, gained confidence in math, improved on how I communicated and was able to make friends and build relationships, it meant so much more. I knew the mountain that I had to climb to reach these milestones and if I would have given up when I did not see immediate results, I never would have achieved what I did. Being courageous, strong and brave is something that you can't teach, you just have to do it.

To say that being a young child with special needs influenced my life is an understatement. Because my starting point and expectations were so low, the pure joy that comes with life's successes is exemplified. My parents were told I would not play team sports. I have played 4 years on the basketball team at Coronado High School (a nationally ranked high school team) and 2 of those years were on the Varsity team. My family was told I may not be in a mainstream classroom. I am an A-B student who excels in Honors and Advanced Placement courses. I have amazing relationships with my family and friends. When the doctors told my parents I would never say "I love you" and mean it, they were very wrong.

Being on the spectrum, I've been an underdog my entire life. In school, sports, clubs and normal social situations, I have to try harder than the person to my right or left. Instant gratification is not in my vocabulary, because the work I put in when I was younger was not immediate. The years of therapies and special treatments did finally pay off, but it took a lot of time. Those obstacles that I faced when I was younger made me the person I am today and I couldn't be more thankful.

I hope my story encourages families and young people to never give up. Concentrate on long term success and not instant gratification. I learned how important it is to celebrate the small victories and continue to put in the hard work, especially when you don't know when you will see the results.