November 7, 2012: Please use these contacts for questions, rather than the out-dated references included in the text below:

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Sender: Journal of Virtual Reality In Education Complete Journal <JVRE-ALL@SJUVM.STJOHNS.EDU>
From: Dick Banks <rbanks@SAVVY.COM>
Subject: How I lost 20 pounds on the New Moo Diet

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Off the top of my head.....

A series by Samantha J. Scolamiero (Samantha at DU) aka Brain Woman, listowner/creator "Brain Tumor Research / Support"
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"How I lost 20 pounds on ### The New MOO Diet ###" *

(* NO, this is not a tabloid article. MOOers have wonderful senses of humor and fun. You'll just have to get used to it. :-)

I ask you to consider the Diversity University MOO -- a virtual college campus that exists partly in cyberspace and partly in the minds and collective imagination of those who visit there. I ask you to consider it's power to change REAL lives.

Take me for example:

My disabilities are hidden. I have Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) as a result of a congenital brain tumor and subsequent surgery for its removal in 1990. I have spent the last five years trying to return to "normal".

I have begun to realize that what I experience now, may BE "normal" for the rest of my life. I have cognitive or sensory overload. Too much noise, light, or conversation can be overwhelming, tiring and even painful. This makes working, playing and navigating in real life difficult.

Working in a traditional office environment is draining as the fluorescent lights, noise and activity add up quickly -- on many days a few hours of that is all my poor brain can manage to process before it just shuts down.

Then there is playing. Until recently there was no energy left over for playing after coping with the added stresses of just trying to live with these new challenges that crept into my life as insidiously as the tumor grew. I would often refuse invitations to social gatherings like parties or concerts because I knew they would be PHYSICALLY taxing.

As for navigating, driving is difficult as my senses are dulled by scenery and cars whizzing by while split-second decisions should be made. After surgery, merely walking has become a task since I have vestibular damage which causes balance problems. Having to be conscious of keeping myself upright adds a challenge to the act of simply walking, which most everyone who can, takes for granted.

However, besides just avoiding overloading situations there are some things I discovered I can do to ease the strain on my body. For example: I often wear my sunglasses or a baseball cap indoors to reduce glare from fluorescent lighting. I have been known to sit down in public places when I get dizzy (including taking advantage of the wide edge of the refrigerator cases in the grocery store. No kidding. :-) I have even borrowed a wheelchair a few times at the shopping mall which helped a lot; it more than doubled the time I could spend there.

One of the most frustrating and difficult aspects of having Acquired Brain Injury is that I appear perfectly healthy. I *LOOK* "fine". I know that some people therefore think I am odd or even exaggerating because I wear sunglasses indoors or use a wheel chair. (I wonder what goes through the mind of the shopping mall attendant when I mosey up to the counter, ask for a wheel chair, sit myself down and wheel off.) These preventative measures may seem odd, but I have noticed that using these strategies extends the time that I can DO things!

Many people just can not comprehend brain injury because it is invisible. Someone even suggested I was agoraphobic. A phobia is an inexplicable and illogical fear of something. My "fears" of being in large groups of noisy people, or malls full of noise and bright lights and chaos that cause my senses to overload (therefore decreasing my ability to function) are not inexplicable or illogical as a neuropsychologist or a fellow ABI survivor can confirm. Withdrawing in this way from social situations to prevent debilitating overload is not understood by people who think you *LOOK* just fine.

Being "anti-social" does not fit my personality either. Being dictated by my body to limit my exposure to people and sensory stimuli, in order to pamper my damaged brain has been very frustrating and lonely if not devastating at times.

I did not recognize that person, MYSELF, sitting on the couch day after day, numb from interacting with people, dizzy from standing too long, tired from just looking and listening....

I used to be a person who thrived on interacting with people, running around half-crazed trying to get as much done as humanly possible every day. Again I say:

I did not recognize *THAT PERSON* sitting on the couch day after day, numb from interacting with people, dizzy from standing too long, tired just from the simple effort of looking and listening. That just wasn't ME. It was my body there, but it wasn't ME.

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I will never forget my first "trip" to Div. U., one Friday night in March 1994. I was supposed to go out... to a party... that night, but I was too tired to deal with people. So I stayed home, turned on the computer and started surfing. I reached this place called Diversity University and went to a party there instead. I was overjoyed! I went to a party and I didn't even have to leave the house. Best of all there were no side conversations, no radio in the background, in fact no noise at all, no sensory overload. I could sit quietly, socializing with people in an environment I could manage.

Diversity University gave me my personality back. I can exercise the REAL me who is unfortunately trapped by a brain that doesn't work like it used to. It gave me back real life capabilities. I can run around the campus meeting every one, talking and socializing, like the maniac that I am, but in silence. It is the social environment I desperately needed that is not physically debilitating or painful. (Hmmmmmmm, now if I could just get a JOB there.... :-)

There are so many aspects of DU that are beneficial for me. I could write another article on that, but here are some examples. I have trouble attending to real life conversations. At DU I don't have to ask people to repeat themselves because I didn't hear what they said, it is captured in text on the screen. I can read it over 5 times if I need to. It is not as embarrassing as having to ask people to repeat themselves in real life. Also, I don't have to walk for miles across campus to attend classes or meet friends and professors. And when I am tired I can just turn off the computer. I don't have to worry about the commute home, because I am already there.

"What about ### The New MOO Diet ### ?", you ask.

Yes, I have lost 20 pounds since I discovered the DU MOO just a few months ago, and would directly correlate this pleasantly surprising change to my participation there. Diversity University lightened my MOOd (no pun originally intended) and lifted my spirits; it gave me something fun I could do, and there is no food allowed in the computer room :-). But mainly it helped me to acknowledge and accept and overcome some of my limitations, at least "virtually."

Using the MOO technology I saw my productivity increase. I saw the differences between trying to manage in real life and managing better with computer assistance. This realization gave me the confidence to try other "assistive" technology. I finally broke down and got a walking stick. (Don't call it a cane or I will bop you with it.) Now I can walk longer distances and therefore I get more exercise. THAT is how I lost 20 pounds on "The New MOO Diet." :-)

If you call *RIGHT NOW* you can order ### The New MOO Diet ### Companion Cookbook. Call 1-800-NEW-MOO-DIET... But WAIT!!!!... there's MORE! ~

My disabilities are very subtle, and you would never guess anything was wrong if you met me; it is a blessing and a curse. I have had to struggle to define my limitations and accept them. While they are still VERY hard to accept in real life, Diversity University offers me an opportunity to forget them for awhile and to accomplish more and operate more efficiently while I am there. Sometimes I wish I could live and work full-time in cyberspace.

Cyberspace empowers the disABLED. Those who cannot, CAN in cyberspace. Someone with cognitive overload can maintain an active social life because they can control their environment. A person who must always rely on a wheelchair in real life can run and jump and play at the MOO, just like everyone else. A person whose hearing is impaired can now "listen" to a group conversation in room full of talkative people. Can you imagine the impact these newfound freedoms have on people's perception of themselves and ultimately upon their lives???

Cyberspace is a leveler. Technology is a powerful tool which is creating a new social structure where equality among individuals is more asymptotically approached than is possible in "real life" circumstances.

My experience at Diversity University has enlightened me. I envision endless possibilities for enhancing people's quality of life. It has certainly improved mine. I hope these simple words conveying my experiences may enlighten many more and inspire wider use of this incredible resource.

MOO and other cyber applications must be acknowledged, advertised and fostered. The myth that this environment is just for game players must be destroyed.

I challenge anyone who reads this to share it with at least one healthcare, medical or rehabilitation professional, to spread the word so that "cyberspace" may become an integral part of REAL LIFE for those who can benefit most from this new environment that has emerged using creative technology.

The possibilities are VAST and definitely transcend cyberspace.

The future is now.

Just MOO it.

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