



## Pro-so-pag-nos-i-a (Face-blindness)

The term 'neurodiversity' reminds us that we humans are infinitely varied. Every brain is wired slightly differently. Many of the variations are small, and not easily noticed, but others have a significant impact on daily life, and have been given a name. You've probably heard of the most commonly-identified ones: dyslexia, autism etc.

About 10 years ago I realised that one of my brain's particular quirks has a name. About 1 in 100 of us has difficulty processing faces: it's called prosopagnosia (or 'face-blindness'). It makes it hard for us to recognise people that we have met, and can lead to quite embarrassing and hilarious situations. Like many forms of neurodiversity it is a developmental difference, which lasts the whole life, and appears on a continuum. I am at the lower end – I can start to recognise people's faces if I see them often enough, but I can't bring them to mind if they are not in front of me.

Face-blindness is a misleading term. It's not that I can't see faces – of course I can. It's more like face-dyslexia, in that I can see the elements of a face (nose, mouth, eyes, etc) but I find it hard to put them together in my head. I know that my husband has brown eyes, a distinctive nose and a huge smile, but I can't visualise his whole face as a unit.

As a teacher, this obviously presents some challenges for me, especially when meeting a new class. More than one student has had to fill out enrolment forms twice for me - once when they first arrived, and then the next day when they arrived with a different haircut / no hat / smaller beard.

I have strategies for learning names, and by the end of a first session, I can usually refer to my new students accurately. But the next session, if they are wearing different clothes, or sit in different places, I have to start again (apart from the few individuals with bright blue hair / unusual glasses / a visible tattoo)!

As I get to know people better, I recognise their voices and their movements, but it is a long process. In my class now there are three young women with long dark hair, and still (after 15 weeks) I am not confident in greeting them by name. Of course, masks and lock-down hair are not helping me at all – none of us look like our Teams photos when we meet in person. And in any case, photos don't help me – sometimes I can't even recognise myself in family photos!

Conferences are also challenging. I'd like to thank @EnglishUK for their BIG double-sided name badges which mean that I don't have to spend the first few minutes of every conversation working out who I am talking to. I have gradually learnt to be more open about my difficulties and sometimes I just explain why my responses make no sense and ask my conversation partner to introduce themselves (again).

So please don't be offended if I appear not to recognise you when we meet. It's probably just that I haven't recognised you!