

"Help Mark": To Help Invisible Disabilities

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It was 3 years ago when I first came across this red tag adorned with a white cross and heart. My friend Chinatsu Kato had it, and I asked her where she'd got the cute keychain. She told me it was a "help mark" badge.

What is a "help mark"?

It was created by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 2012 to help people with hidden impediments, or "invisible disabilities." This includes people with prosthetic legs, artificial joints, internal ailments, and rare diseases.

The badge comes with a strap, so owners can attach it to their belongings. Tokyo officials created it in the hope of making it easier for those suffering from "invisible disabilities" to get help from others. People would recognize the mark and offer up their seats on buses and trains, or help carry luggage.

The "help mark" received Japan Industrial Standard certification in July 2017. It was adopted as a nationwide sign ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. The badges have been introduced in 23 prefectures and Tokyo. Some rail and bus companies have put up signs near priority seating explaining that the badges indicate a person may need assistance.

But public recognition of the sign remains low. Chinatsu says she rarely gets offered seats on trains, despite wearing the badge.

Difficulties of "invisible disabilities"

Chinatsu was in a car accident five years ago. She survived but was left with bone fractures in her legs and arms, and a dislocated hip. She had to undertake a tough rehabilitation regimen. She looks no different from any young and healthy woman. She works as a pharmacist, and during her free time performs live as a singer-songwriter.

But she has a bolt in her left hip joint and the range of motion in her legs and arms are limited. She has been certified as having a 5-degree physical disability. She walks slowly with a cane, and needs to take elevators.

What she finds most difficult to cope with are packed trains. She can't grab the hanging straps as she can't raise her left hand and is holding her cane with her right. Her legs hurt and get numb as she tries to stay balanced on the shaky train. And it's impossible for her to hold her ground if there is an abrupt stop.

But as she looks young and healthy, nobody bothers to offer her a seat. Chinatsu started wearing a "help mark" badge 4 years ago but it goes mostly unnoticed. She says only

once has a person come up to her and offered help after seeing the badge. Chinatsu says it's hard for people to imagine someone so young having physical disabilities. She hopes the "help mark" will raise awareness that there are people suffering from impairments not visible to the eye.

Raising awareness

Michiyo Shibuya is trying to change the situation and started a volunteer group in 2017 to help raise the profile of the "help mark."

Her efforts began 2 years ago, after reading tweets about the plight of people with hidden impediments. "Nobody offers assistance despite the 'help mark'," one message said. "Nothing will make people understand the 'invisible disabilities'," said another. Michiyo herself suffers from a disease called pulmonary arterial hypertension. It is seen in only one in a million people. She cannot live without an artificial respirator, and has experiences of hovering between life and death. She says she felt it was her mission to promote understanding for the "help mark."

She came up with her own "help mark" badge designs and made posters to raise awareness. She sent the materials to the people who need them in other prefectures and expressed the importance of promoting the mark to local municipalities, assemblies, and other bodies. People who saw her efforts volunteered to help from across Japan.

Michiyo has high expectations for the upcoming Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. She hopes to use the opportunity to promote the "help mark" and raise understanding for "invisible disabilities." She launched a new project this year, with an eye on the event. Through this project, she is involving more young people and those without disabilities in her campaign. For instance, she started sessions where university students teach elementary school children what the "help mark" is.

Michiyo says the goal of the badges is to make 'invisible disabilities' visible. She says it's like an amulet for the many people who wear them.

Creating a compassionate society

Raising awareness about "invisible disabilities" is a challenge not only in Japan but across the world. In the United States, a non-profit organization has been hosting an "invisible disabilities week" every October since 2014. It holds various events, posts video on social media, and sends out messages like "not all people with disabilities are in wheelchairs." Many people with hidden impediments have shared photos under #InvisiblyDisabledLooksLike. The organization says one US survey found that 74% of Americans who live with a severe disability do not use a wheelchair or anything that may signal their disability.

In Britain, there's a campaign to put up signs on the doors of disabled toilets that read "not every disability is visible." The goal is to change the definition of a disability, so people with invisible impediments don't feel guilty about using these toilets.

Chinatsu told me that since most people on trains are looking at their smartphones, she's afraid they don't notice her "help mark" badge. Society must come to understand that there are people suffering silently from disabilities not visible to the eye.

Chinatsu's words made me realize that we must look around and try to notice people in need of help, if we want to create a compassionate society.