

From school dropout to successful TV host

TV host and ambassador of the Canadian Continence Foundation, *Derick Fage*, has lived with incontinence his entire life. He humorously refers to himself as ‘the face of faeces’. In what is an inspirational tale of overcoming adversity, he shares his personal story with us.

Can you tell us about your incontinence condition?

I was born with a high imperforate anus, which means I was born without the actual anal opening. Doctors had to create the anal opening for me at birth. I was also born without a sphincter muscle. This has meant that I have lived with chronic faecal incontinence since birth.

How old are you and how has it impacted on your life?

I'm 47 years old. This condition has created a number of challenges for me over the years including relentless bullying, shame, embarrassment, anxiety issues, depression, suicidal thoughts, failed relationships, and anger issues.

What/who has helped you best deal with your incontinence?

My Mum and Dad for sure. My Mum was always there for me after a difficult day at school. There were occasions when I would come home at lunch after being beaten up or ridiculed and my Mum would take me back to school and report the incident to a member of the school faculty. My Mum would share the names of the kids and at times would even speak to their parents.

My Dad's role was just as important. My Dad was always available no matter the situation. If I had an accident at school, which happened on quite a few occasions over the years, my Dad would drop everything to come and pick me up at school. My Dad had a pretty high profile job as a senior partner at an accounting firm. He could be in a meeting with a multi-million dollar client and when I called he would quickly explain to his client that he had to leave due to a minor family emergency.

When I describe the issue as an accident, it really doesn't do it justice. I would have diarrhea so bad that I would have to tuck my pants into my socks to avoid it spilling onto the floor. There were no cellphones back then, so I would always have change on me to use the pay phone or I would sneak into the nurse's office to make the call. My code words for my Dad were simple, "Hi Dad, it's me, I've had an accident". My Dad would show up with garbage bags to cover the seat and we would often cut two holes in the garbage bag so I could slide it on.

What triggered you to start talking about your incontinence?

I went public about my incontinence on live TV in Ottawa, Canada, when I was host of a daily talk show called Daytime Ottawa. I met the Executive Director of the Canadian Continence Foundation, Jacky Cahill, in the green room before the show. In passing, I mentioned to Jacky that I have suffered from chronic fecal incontinence since birth. She asked if I'd be willing to share that during our segment and I said, sure. I felt the timing was right for me to go public. So I shared it live on the show and followed that up by posting my story on social media.

Can you detail some of the reactions you've experienced to your story?

The feedback and support from people was overwhelming. I had complete strangers send me e-mails and Facebook messages sharing their own stories or those of loved ones. One story that stands out was a woman that reached out to me and told me she hadn't left her home in 28 years except to get groceries and attend appointments because of her incontinence.

What advice do you have for others suffering from incontinence?

Tell people about it, don't hide it. Hiding it leads people to isolating themselves.

I live a very public life as a TV host, hosting a live television show 5 days a week. I also host and attend dozens of events each year. It's possible to manage your condition with the right support system around you and that includes your family, friends and colleagues.

When people begin isolating themselves because of their condition, it can lead to many mental health issues including anxiety, panic attacks and depression. These are three mental health issues that I have had to overcome in my life and I would imagine many of the approximately 400 million people who suffer from continence issues have struggled with these as well. We need to make a strong effort to normalize it so that people don't feel the need to isolate themselves. Loneliness, is being described as "the hidden epidemic," according to the Red Cross. People are feeling isolated for many reasons of course, but I relate it to incontinence because I've heard too many stories of people who haven't left their homes in months, sometimes years.

What is the main message you try to tell others?

I've had a number of close calls and some of those "accidents" I mentioned earlier. However, I haven't let it stop me and that's a message I want to convey to people. Don't let your incontinence stop you from living a full life! I am really grateful that I have this medical condition. It has shaped the person I've become. I'm more vulnerable, more caring. It has made me a better husband, parent, friend, colleague, TV host.

Derick Fage is a Board member and ambassador of the Canadian Continence Foundation.



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