

Bringing Visibility to Invisible Disabilities: Understanding What You Cannot See

Objectives: Russell Lehmann

Session Description:

Invisible disabilities often go unrecognized, leading to misunderstanding, miscommunication, and missed opportunities for meaningful support. In this session, Russell Lehmann uses his lived experience with autism and mental health challenges to provide a grounded, practical lens into what cannot be seen. Through a combination of personal narrative and applied strategies, Russell guides attendees in developing a deeper awareness of the internal experiences that shape external behavior. Participants will learn how to better interact with, support, and accommodate individuals with invisible disabilities while expanding their broader understanding of the human condition. The session prioritizes actionable insight over theory, equipping attendees with tools they can immediately apply in real-world settings.

Learning Objectives:

1. Attendees will describe observable and non-observable characteristics of invisible disabilities and analyze their impact on behavior and interaction.
2. Attendees will implement practical accommodation strategies that align with individualized needs rather than generalized assumptions.
3. Attendees will evaluate their own biases and expand their conceptual understanding of the human condition as it relates to neurodiversity and mental health.

Russell Lehmann is a charismatic activist, motivational speaker, and acclaimed author and poet for autism, mental health, and disabilities. He is the International Disability Rights Advocate at UCLA's Tarjan Center for Disabilities and captivates audiences with his powerful message of acceptance and resilience. Lehmann's work has had a positive and life-changing impact on many, and his advocacy and activism have helped to increase understanding and support for individuals in the disability community. He serves on numerous national boards, taskforces, and councils, and his influence extends beyond borders. Russell's talent lies in several areas, showcasing his diverse skills and abilities to deliver impactful, educational, and encouraging presentations about the nuances of autism and mental health, while also contextualizing the intersection of disability and society.

Russell has emerged as a beacon of inspiration. He shares his intense and painful personal journey of being diagnosed with autism at the age of 12 after 5 weeks in a lockdown psychiatric ward for severe OCD and phobias. These struggles, on top of a lack of support, compassion, and understanding led him to withdraw from the world for the next 15 years resulting in prevalent isolation. Russell has transformed his unique experiences into a compelling narrative that challenges stereotypes, fosters understanding, and shifts perspectives.

Russell is a dynamic and engaging speaker who captivates audiences with his authentic storytelling. His presentations leave a lasting impact, offering deeply reflective insights into the complex world of autism and mental health, while encouraging empathy, sincerity, and inclusivity.

A powerful poet, Russell performs spoken word throughout each presentation that presents a unique vehicle to the audience to provoke deep thoughts. Russell's multifaceted talents have allowed him to reach a wide audience and make a significant impact in the numerous areas of inequity throughout society, and his ability to engage and inspire audiences showcases a talent for connecting with people on a deep and meaningful level. His global reach continues to make waves, shaping perceptions and challenging societal norms.