

My name is Steve Woodard. I am 40 years old and I was born and raised in Portage, Wisconsin. I still live there with my parents and my brother.

Before age 4, I would get very bad ear aches and fevers. Sometimes when I got a fever, I would have a seizure so they diagnosed me with febrile seizures. I eventually outgrew this and there were no long lasting effects.

I went to school in Portage, but school wasn't always pleasant for me. I was diagnosed with ADD/ADHD and that made social interaction difficult for me when I was young. Mostly I retreated into my shell but I occasionally lashed out at my classmates. It was such a hard time in my life, I dropped out of high school. The best thing I had going for myself then was Special Olympics. I started when I was 14 and in many ways, that's been a huge lifeline.

I always enjoyed being an athlete but I knew I wanted to do more. I wanted to be a leader and speak on behalf of people like me. I just needed an opportunity. That opportunity came a couple years ago when I landed a spot on the Wisconsin swim team for the Special Olympics USA Games. Going to nationals, I got to meet lots of people in Special Olympics who helped open doors for me to develop into a leader.

I told them I wanted to get more involved in athlete leadership and sharing my story to help others. Thankfully, there were people and programs in place to help me do that. In just a couple short years, I've become an Athlete Health Leader, Global Messenger, athlete coach, and member of Special Olympics Wisconsin's State Athlete Input Council. I've given speeches around Wisconsin, and I've even traveled to Washington D.C. to advocate to lawmakers on behalf of Special Olympics.

I always felt like I had something to offer the world and thankfully I've been given opportunities and a platform to do just that.

Now, I would like to advocate for people with disabilities by being involved in a research project. I am no longer on any medications and I live a healthy lifestyle. I am a good leader with many skills and a willing candidate for research.

I would like to be involved in a study that helps develop health tools for all people including those with disabilities. Since I have had issues with anxiety and isolation at periods during my life, and I know other Special Olympics athletes who also have these issues, I would like my research to focus on emotional wellness. I recently learned that loneliness and isolation can have the same negative impact on a person's health as smoking or having diabetes. Since people with disabilities are more likely to be lonely, it would be a big deal to the health of people with disabilities if we could help solve this issue.

My idea is to have an app on your phone that would periodically ask you how you are doing. It would have options like happy, sad, lonely, anxious, etc. Once you clicked it, it would record the data, but it would also give you an activity or action like – take a walk, call a friend, take a deep breath. Then, after a period, it would ask you again how you're feeling to see if the activity or action helped.

I believe this data would help people like me who have had some issues with anxiety. I believe using technology make sense since most people (including those with disabilities) have cell phones and know how to access apps. That also means there would be no extra cost, which could be a barrier for people with disabilities. Furthermore, since the research is gathered in your home, there is no need for transportation, which can also be a big barrier for people with disabilities.

I will continue to use my leadership and advocacy skills to talk to my doctors, to vote for candidates in elections that support issues that are important to my health and wellbeing and to get involved in medical research.

My advice to everyone in the room is “don't be afraid to be yourself and share your voice.” When you are involved in research, you bring new ideas to the table, you help improve health care for everyone and your interest can educate others.

My advice to researchers is to include people with disabilities in your studies. As a researcher, you understand that if you don't include people with disabilities in your research, your results will not apply to people with disabilities. Therefore, it is the right thing to do in order for everyone to benefit, including you.

Thank you.