



Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

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ASPECTS OF ADULT DYSLEXIA

by

Dr Sylvia Moody

Four areas of difficulty

are discussed:

1. Short-term memory
2. Sequencing & structure
3. Perception & movement
(dyspraxia)
4. Emotions

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1. SHORT-TERM MEMORY

Short-term memory (STM) is a temporary store for information. The information in this store will later either be forgotten or, if important, transferred to our long-term memory. For example, we use STM to remember a telephone number for a few seconds, or to keep the shape of an object in mind as we try to draw it. To use your STM, carefully read through the following numbers ONCE ONLY; then look away and see if you can recall them in the correct order: 5 9 2 8 3 7 4 6.

An important component of STM is working memory. In the example given above, STM was a passive recipient of information – its task was simply to remember the information, not to do anything with it. The working memory component, however, is active: it takes the information held in the main STM store and uses it in some way. For example, we use working memory when we do mental arithmetic. To use your working memory, carefully read the following sentence through ONCE ONLY and then try to work out the sum in your head. Add 5 and 3 and 8 and 4 and then divide by 2.

Poor short-term memory, especially in the visual and auditory modalities, is often associated with dyslexia. Below are some of the difficulties it causes:

General difficulties

- remembering telephone numbers
- copying numbers
- remembering messages, instructions and directions
- keeping track of ideas when speaking, listening or writing
- remembering people's names
- remembering where things have been put

Study difficulties

- taking notes in lectures or from books
- formulating responses to questions in seminars

Workplace difficulties

- taking notes in meetings
- following and contributing to discussions
- following oral instructions
- taking telephone messages
- giving presentations / talks
- multi-tasking

Managing the difficulties

- break numbers and words into chunks
- read sentences slowly and methodically
- try to identify the central theme of each paragraph you read
- ask for instructions to be repeated
- ask for instructions to be given in visual form, e.g., flow charts
- ask for instructions to be emailed to you rather than given to you verbally
- use set formats for telephone messages
- use visual symbols or pictures as cues and reminders
- record instructions / lectures / meetings
- take regular rest breaks
- do relaxation exercises

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2. SEQUENCING AND STRUCTURE

The logical sequencing and structuring of information, ideas and activities is a necessary part of human life. Though we may prefer to see the world holistically, yet still we cannot escape structure in our daily lives.

Language in particular is highly structured. It is not surprising, therefore, that dyslexic people have a number of difficulties with language, especially written language. However, they are often also inefficient in many other tasks which involve sequencing and structure. Some commonly-reported difficulties are listed below.

General difficulties

- writing and copying words and numbers
- following instructions / carrying out instructions in the correct sequence
- working under pressure
- keeping workspace tidy
- organising daily life

Study difficulties

- structuring essays
- taking succinct notes
- organising work and revision schedules
- presenting an argument logically in a seminar
- dealing with library catalogues / finding books

Workplace difficulties

- filing documents / retrieving files
- following work protocols
- writing letters and memos
- structuring reports
- presenting ideas clearly in oral interactions / presentations
- carrying out tasks in an efficient, logical way

- dealing with a varied workload
- remembering the times and places of meetings
- keeping appointments
- prioritising work / meeting deadlines
- having the right papers to hand

Managing the difficulties

- read words and sentences bit by bit
- skim text to get an overview before reading for detail
- use alphabetic cards or a pocket-sized alphabet arc
- colour-code columns and rows of figures
- colour-code instructions / protocols
- colour-code files and filing trays, e.g., use red for urgent work
- clearly label files and filing trays
- keep workspace tidy
- plan daily, weekly and monthly action lists
- leave some time each day to deal with emergencies / unexpected tasks
- at the beginning of each day review the action plan for that day
- at the end of each day check what has / has not been done
- pre-plan letters and reports
- pre-plan oral interactions / presentations
- pre-plan tasks, and split them into sections / stages
- work one step at a time

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3. PERCEPTION AND MOVEMENT

Dyslexia denotes difficulty with reading and writing, and it is often supposed that this difficulty must stem from poor phonology (the ability to recognise, produce and sequence letter sounds). However, dyslexia may also be associated with perceptual, spatial and motor (movement) difficulties. Such difficulties are grouped together under the term 'dyspraxia'.

General difficulties

- poor balance and posture
- clumsy gait and movement
- difficulty with team sports, bat-and-ball games
- tendency to fall, trip, bump into things and people
- poor handwriting and typing
- lack of manual dexterity (needed in tasks such as cooking)
- over-sensitivity to light and noise
- discriminating between left and right
- judging distance
- finding one's way about
- doing numerical and spatial tasks
- planning and organising thought, and expressing thoughts
- organising daily life
- social interaction

Study difficulties

- presentation of written work
- keeping place when reading
- keeping overall structure of essay in mind
- planning study schedules

Workplace difficulties

- using machines such as photocopiers, faxes
- entering data on a computer / calculator
- copying down figures correctly and in the proper columns
- remembering where things have been put
- taking messages
- using a date stamp
- keeping papers in order
- carrying trays, e.g., of coffee mugs

Managing the difficulties

- use a ruler to keep place on page
- use a screen reading ruler on the computer
- photocopy text onto coloured paper
- colour-mark layout of tables of numbers
- systematically scan each part of graphs, charts, tables of numbers
- keep operating instructions for fax machine, etc. by the machine
- use an ergonomic keyboard
- use keyboard shortcuts / slow down the mouse
- plan a daily, weekly and monthly work schedule
- carefully pre-plan before going to a new place
- use upside-down maps
- make a note of routes, e.g., to photocopying room
- request a quiet workspace
- get a tray with high sides and a long central handle (from disability organisations)
- use specially-adapted utensils for cooking / tools for DIY

Assessment

Dyspraxic difficulties can be identified in a dyslexia assessment provided a full history is taken.

If physical clumsiness is a marked feature, it is advisable to seek an assessment also from a physiotherapist or occupational therapist who specialises in adult dyspraxia.

If perceptual difficulties are marked, then a referral to a perception therapist could be useful.

Useful book

Living with Dyspraxia. Author: Mary Colley. Publisher: Jessica Kingsley.

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4. EMOTIONS

Many dyslexic people view their dyslexia in a positive light. However, people whose difficulties have not been recognised at an early stage may feel a number of distressing emotions about their situation. Most commonly reported are the following:

Confusion and bewilderment

Many dyslexic adults are unaware that they have a recognisable pattern of difficulties which can be significantly alleviated through the learning of appropriate skills and strategies. They may feel thoroughly confused about themselves: they seem to be quite bright and quick-thinking in some ways, but apparently quite slow and 'stupid' in others.

Embarrassment, shame and guilt

Feelings of embarrassment about dyslexia can deepen into shame, and, whereas embarrassment is often specific to a particular situation, shame seems to seep through the whole personality. Often dyslexic people come to feel that they have a guilty secret. Ella, a successful potter, describes it thus:

'I had a secret inside me. I kept 'it' in a box; and would only open the lid very cautiously. You may well laugh when you know the contents of the box: it was dyslexia. That word, that almost indescribable thing, lived in the box and pervaded almost every part of my life, but no one could see it. It was a living nightmare.'

Lack of confidence, low self-esteem

The emotions described above – bewilderment, shame, guilt – deal a crippling blow to confidence and self-esteem. Lack of confidence manifests itself both in relation to specific tasks that a dyslexic person finds difficult, and in a more general way. At work there is a feeling of not being competent to hold down one's job. There is also a nervousness about applying for promotion, or for another job. In interviews, particularly, lack of confidence can be very damaging.

The daily questioning of one's own abilities and capacities will slowly but surely erode one's self-esteem. Among all the problems, the difficulties, the inefficiencies, the traumas, where is the person who is of worth? Is there such a person in there somewhere? Lack of confidence may result in aggressive or defensive behaviour. Then the dyslexic person becomes trapped in a pattern of interaction, or rather reaction, which imprisons him/her in a lonely and distressing world.

Frustration and anger

A sense of being imprisoned, trapped, impotent is often reported by dyslexic adults. George, a long-distance lorry driver, described it thus: 'I felt I couldn't move in any direction. In my job I was always moving, going in all directions, but in myself I couldn't go anywhere. I was

grounded. That's why I liked the driving – I would drive and drive and drive to try and get away from the frustration, but however far you drive, you can't get away from yourself.'

In human beings, frustration soon turns to anger. But who should the anger be directed against? Who is to blame? All too often dyslexic adults end up blaming themselves.

Anxiety, fear and panic

Whatever difficulties one may have in life, anxiety usually makes them worse, and this is certainly true of dyslexic difficulties: dyslexic adults become locked in a vicious circle of anxiety and inefficiency. Anxiety and stress can also precipitate physical symptoms: panic attacks, nausea, migraine, susceptibility to illness. Being physically below par naturally further reduces efficiency and so the downward spiral continues.

Despondency, depression and despair

If the difficulties continue to go unrecognised, if there is a continual failure in attempts to study and hold down jobs, then the dyslexic person may lose hope and sink into depression.

Relief, determination and hope

It perhaps seems as if this article has been full of doom and gloom. Yet all the emotions that have been described here are commonly reported by dyslexic adults. However, once dyslexic difficulties have been recognised, and strategies for dealing with them put in place, life can often take a turn for the better. All the energy that previously went into worrying about the problems, and covering them up, can now be channelled into developing effective ways of dealing with them, both practically and emotionally. What usually emerges most strongly is a sense of hope and a feeling of determination to turn one's life around.

As James, who was recently diagnosed as dyslexic, said: 'I felt as if the prison doors had been opened. I looked out and saw paths leading in all directions. I didn't know which of the paths was mine. All I did know was that I would have a path in future and that the years of confinement were over.'

Useful book

Dyslexia and Stress. Editor: Tim Miles. Publisher: Wiley Blackwell

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USEFUL BOOKS

For employers and dyslexia professionals:

Dyslexia and Employment: a Guide for Assessors, Trainers and Managers.
Edited by Sylvia Moody. Wiley Blackwell.

Edited by award-winning author, Sylvia Moody, this jargon-free guide to good practice in dyslexia workplace consultancy, and related legal issues, provides comprehensive coverage in four clearly-distinguished areas:

- **Professional dilemma** chapters discuss tricky issues which have arisen during consultancy work.
- **General perspective** chapters present the viewpoint of workplace professionals such as HR managers and trades union representatives.
- **How to do it right** chapters offer advice on how to carry out diagnostic, workplace needs and legal assessments, and how to devise training programmes.
- **Information Point** chapters provide brief information on general topics such as dyslexic difficulties in the workplace, disclosure of difficulties, and the application of the Disability Discrimination Act.

With contributions from leading experts on workplace consultancy, this definitive guide will be of interest to dyslexia professionals, managers, legal professionals, trades unions, work coaches, mentors and careers advisors - as well as to dyslexic employees and job-seekers.

Endorsement from Jenny Lee, National Adult Dyslexia Coordinator, Dyslexia Action:

This is a comprehensive, invaluable and extremely readable book giving in-depth information and guidance on a wide range of issues affecting professionals who work with dyslexic employees. For me, it is a rare find; the authors do not shy away from the most controversial issues, indeed they confront them head-on, revealing their (and our) dilemmas. They share their internal debates and in doing so both reassure us and give practical advice born out of real experience. This excellent book is a must for workplace consultants and indeed anyone working with dyslexic people. I strongly recommend it.

For a general introduction:

Dyslexia in the Workplace: an Introductory Guide. Diana Bartlett and Sylvia Moody. Wiley Blackwell.

For employees:

Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work. Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).
Dyslexia: Surviving and Succeeding at College. Sylvia Moody. Routledge.
Living with Dyspraxia. Mary Colley. Jessica Kingsley.

Help organisations:

The British Dyslexia Association 0845 251 9002 www.bdadyslexia.org.uk
DANDA (dyspraxia/ADD support) 020 7435 7891 www.danda.org.uk

Comprehensive information sheets and newsletter:

www.workingwithdyslexia.com

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