



Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

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DYSLEXIA: A PSYCHOTHERAPIST'S GUIDE

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A client reports the following: low self-esteem, lack of confidence, feelings of shame and embarrassment, inability to work efficiently, panic at the thought of going to the office, poor concentration, memory lapses, periods of blanking out in conversations, difficulty in relating to people.

Is he depressed? Stressed? Dementing? Agoraphobic? Perhaps - but perhaps part of his problem is that he is experiencing dyslexic difficulties. (For convenience I have used the masculine pronoun throughout this article.)

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexic difficulties (also known as specific learning difficulties) encompass a variety of impairments in short-term memory, phonology, sequencing skills and perception. These impairments result most noticeably in poor literacy skills, but they also affect information processing generally. For example, a dyslexic person may have difficulty in following a discussion or a debate, in remembering spoken instructions, or in formulating his own ideas when conversing or giving a talk. He may also have difficulty with analysing complex visual displays, such as maps or timetables.

There may also be problems with spatial orientation – for example, a dyslexic person may confuse left and right, and may easily lose his bearings in strange – or even familiar - surroundings. He may also have poor organisational skills and tend to operate in a generally muddled and untidy way: he may be late for meetings, forget appointments, and miss deadlines.

Feelings about dyslexia

Many dyslexic people are highly intelligent and, consequently, the wide range of difficulties they experience when trying to impart or absorb information causes them great frustration - and in many cases shame and embarrassment.

Dyslexic adults are often not aware of the nature of their problems. Dyslexia is often assumed to be essentially a reading problem, and, since many dyslexic adults have acquired some reading competence over the years, it may not occur to them that their difficulties are dyslexic in nature. All too often they regard themselves as being 'thick' or fundamentally flawed in some puzzling way.

Dyslexic difficulties then become a guilty secret - a source of humiliation. There is also a fear that, if the difficulties become evident to an employer or to colleagues, then promotion may be blocked or, even worse, dismissal may ensue.

In some cases, the level of anxiety generated by these feelings is so great that sufferers have been unable to face going to the office at all; they have perhaps developed sickness or other minor complaints on workday mornings. At work they may be viewed by their colleagues as unco-operative and disagreeable: they may be morose and withdrawn, or touchy and aggressive. They are often the despair of their employers because of their chronic inefficiency – and because they appear to be unwilling or unable to improve their performance.

Clearly the general chaos of a dyslexic person's life, and the confusion of emotions which accompanies it, not only present a problem in themselves but also compound any feelings of dejection, bewilderment or despair that have their origin in childhood or current life experiences.

Help and support

Fortunately, dyslexic difficulties can be identified and dealt with more quickly than 'neurotic' ones: what is required is assessment by a psychologist or dyslexia tutor who specialises in assessing adults with *developmental* dyslexia, and the provision of relevant training and support. (A referral to an NHS Psychology Department is **not** recommended.)

For the psychotherapist, it is obviously useful to bear in mind that some of the problems reported by a client, especially if they are related to work performance, may be due in part at least to dyslexic difficulties. Feelings about these difficulties and how they relate to the general emotional picture presented by the client can then be explored.

Associated syndromes

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is the term used to describe difficulties with spatial skills and physical co-ordination. Other commonly-found characteristics are poor organisational ability and weak social skills.

Attention Deficit disorder

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is often associated with dyspraxia. It is characterised by a short attention span, distractibility and impulsiveness. If physical restlessness is also present, it is referred to as ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Dyscalculia or specific maths difficulty

The term *dyscalculia* denotes difficulty in understanding mathematical concepts and the relationship between numbers, e.g., being unable to estimate percentages. The term is often also used for difficulties in reading, writing and copying numbers, doing mental arithmetic, and carrying out calculations. However, these types of difficulty are probably better seen as dyslexic rather than dyscalculic.

Visual stress/ binocular instability

People who suffer from visual stress find that print 'jumps about', patterns are stressful to look at, and white paper 'glares'. Visual stress is often associated with binocular instability, which is a problem with the way the eyes are co-ordinated. People with binocular instability typically mis-read words and have difficulty in keeping their place on the page. They may develop headaches or eye-strain if they read for long periods.

Further reading

Lifetime dyslexia guides series

Dyslexia: a Teenager's Guide. Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).

Dyslexia: Surviving and Succeeding at College. Sylvia Moody. Routledge.

Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work. Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).

Dyslexia in employment

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

Dyslexia and Employment: a Guide for Assessors, Trainers and Managers.

Edited by Sylvia Moody. Wiley Blackwell.

Dyspraxia/ADD

Living with Dyspraxia. Mary Colley. Jessica Kingsley.

Comprehensive information sheets and newsletter: www.workingwithdyslexia.com

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