



Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

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DYSLEXIA: A TEENAGER'S GUIDE

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Are you quick-thinking but feel you have some sort of 'block' with reading and writing? Do you sometimes find it hard to express your ideas clearly, or take in what is being said to you? Are you generally disorganised and forgetful? Do you often feel frustrated about such things and ask yourself: 'Am I being stupid or what?'

If you have answered 'yes' to these questions, then it may be that you are experiencing, to a greater or lesser degree, dyslexic difficulties. The word *dyslexia* originally meant difficulty with reading; then it was extended to cover difficulty with all literacy and numeracy skills. More recently, it has been extended again to cover weaknesses in short-term memory, phonology, visual processing and organisational skills.

Dyslexic difficulties often run in families, i.e. they are genetically inherited, but they can also be the result of particular circumstances. For example, if you had poor hearing as a child because of ear infections, that may have affected your ability to process the sounds of the language (phonological abilities) and increased your chances of being dyslexic at a later stage.

Dyslexic difficulties have different levels of severity. If you are reading this article, then obviously you have learned to read reasonably well, and you may find that the people around you don't see that you have any special difficulties. Perhaps you had obvious problems as a young child, but now you seem to be coping all right. So what *is* your problem?

It's often difficult to pin down the problem exactly, but you may feel aware that, though you have a quick understanding of things and good reasoning ability, it takes you a longer time, and more effort, to do work that some of your friends seem to do quickly and effortlessly. You may find that you spend hours doing homework, that you get tired and lose concentration, and that, despite all your hard work and dedication, you are not happy with the results.

All the more annoying if others don't spot your difficulties. And they may be harder to

spot if you're the sort of person who comes over as bright and articulate ('Oh, she's doing fine,' they'll say). Or, again, if you are a quiet and retiring person who doesn't make a fuss about what is worrying you ('Oh,' they'll say, 'he's doing as well as can be expected').

The fact is that, by the time you reach the teenage years, it is not always easy to recognise dyslexic difficulties because they manifest themselves in subtle ways. However, here are some pointers:

Dyslexic difficulties: what to look for

Literacy skills

You may find that, although you can read with reasonable accuracy, you don't readily take in the meaning of what you are reading: you have to read passages through several times to get their detailed meaning. You are not confident about spelling, and when you have to write a lengthy piece, you make many careless mistakes with both spelling and sentence structure. In general, you find it hard to transfer the ideas in your head into written form on the page in a clear and well-organised way; you know what you *want* to say, but it often comes out in a muddled and unsatisfactory way.

Short-term memory

If your short-term memory is poor (i.e. things 'go in one ear and out of the other'), then you will have difficulty in remembering such things as telephone numbers and lists of instructions, and also in taking notes in lessons or lectures. You might also sometimes lose the thread of what you're saying, or not take in everything that other people are saying to you.

Sequencing and structure

You may have difficulty in dealing with sequences: for example, you might write letters or numbers down in the wrong order, miss letters out of words, or words out of sentences, and find it hard to look up things in dictionaries or keep a good filing system. You may find it hard to organise your study schedule and your daily life.

Spatial skills

You might mix up left and right, have difficulty in following maps or directions and lose your way in a strange, or even familiar, place. You might get confused if you have to deal

with complicated visual arrays, such as equations, formulae or blocks of multiple choice questions.

Reactions to these difficulties

If you feel anxious that you are going to have difficulties with your work, then the anxiety itself will make your difficulties worse – because anxiety, like any other strong emotion, tends to 'fog' the brain. People with dyslexic difficulties may feel a whole variety of unpleasant emotions: despondency, anger, frustration. However, once the difficulties have been fully recognised and appropriate help put in place, then these feelings tend to be transformed into more positive ones: relief at being understood, determination to succeed, confidence in having the strategies you need to cope with the difficulties. These calmer feelings help to 'unfog' the brain and so increase your efficiency and allow you to capitalise on your strengths.

Help for dyslexic difficulties

If you feel that you have the sort of difficulties described above, you should discuss them with your parents or teachers. Most schools have a particular teacher who is knowledgeable about such difficulties and it may be possible to get some extra help for them. It is important that any help you have is specific to your difficulties (as opposed to general subject-based tutoring, say for Maths or French). The help you need is with general literacy, study, memory and organisational skills, and such help will be useful in *all* the subjects that you study.

At some point you might have an assessment with a tutor or a psychologist so that a more detailed picture can be built up of your strengths and weaknesses. This will help your teachers to give you exactly the help that you need, and, if your difficulties are severe, you may be able to request extra time, or other forms of help, in examinations.

Looking to the future

As you go through life, you will find that your dyslexic difficulties will come out in different ways in different situations. For instance, whilst you are at school, you might notice them most in reading textbooks and essay writing; but, later, if you work in an office, you might have difficulty with organising your work schedule, remembering appointments or writing down telephone numbers. The important thing is to be alert, at every stage in life, to the ways in which your dyslexic difficulties are making you inefficient, and then to get good

strategies for dealing with them. In this way, the difficulties, though they never entirely go away, can be kept at a manageable level, and you will be enabled to succeed in whatever course of study or career you decide to follow. Dyslexic people can be as successful as everybody else; they just have to work that bit harder for it!

Associated syndromes

Dyspraxia

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

ADD

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is sometimes associated with dyspraxia. It is characterised by poor attention and concentration, and impulsive behaviour. If physical restlessness is also present, it is referred to as ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Visual stress/ binocular instability

People who suffer from these visual problems find that print 'jumps about', patterns are stressful to look at, and white paper 'glares'. They 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.

Specific maths difficulty ('dyscalculia')

The term *dyscalculia* means difficulty with understanding maths 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 reading written maths problems. However, these types of difficulty are probably better seen as dyslexic rather than dyscalculic.

Further reading

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

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

Help organisations

The British Dyslexia Association 0845 251 9002 www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

DANDA (dyspraxia/ADD support) 020 7435 7891 www.danda.org.uk

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