D Y S L E X I A

1. WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia is the name given to a specific learning difficulty (SpLD) which impedes the typical progress in learning to be literate. However, this is a very narrow and slightly misleading view. Most recent research suggests that it changes the way in which the brain functions, including where certain brain activities are carried out. These changes are responsible for the difficulties and some particular strengths that those with dyslexia and related conditions may experience.

The problems experienced in language processing distinguish dyslexics as a group. This means that the dyslexic has problems translating language to thought (as in reading or listening). It's helpful to think of these conditions as creating difficulties in the intake and manipulation of data.

2. THE DYSLEXIC BRAIN

The British Dyslexia Association states dyslexia is actually one condition amongst a group which are considered to co-exist and is a genetic condition. Dyslexia results from differences in the structure and function of the brain. There are two distinct features of the brains of dyslexic people; firstly, they contain malformations in the cortex and, secondly, they show less cerebral asymmetry than 'normal' brains. There is also a suggestion that there is a difference in the connections between hemispheres and that therefore the pattern of communication between hemispheres is also different (Galaburda 1999). This may support the notion that dyslexic people think differently and it may also allow for claims that the difference is linked to a special ability.

3. POSITIVE SIDE OF DYSLEXIA

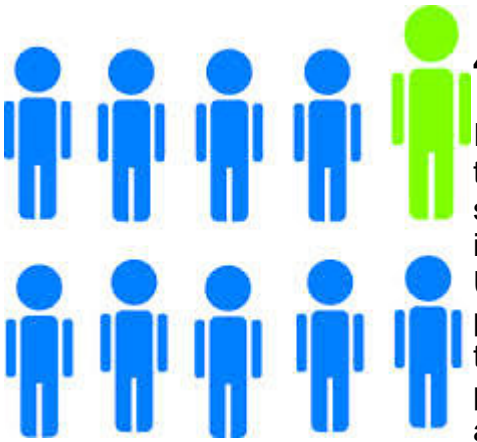
The positive side of dyslexia is an ability to conceptualise on a broader scale and to see the whole before others do. There is a great deal of research into dyslexic weaknesses but virtually none into the question of whether they have distinctive strengths. The non-dyslexic world has determined the place of written language and the value of academic success in our society. In fact, many of those who have contributed greatly to both our culture and economic life have not been academically successful.

Dyslexic people can often perform a range of complex tasks, such as solving complicated problems in science and design, yet cannot do the seemingly simple: learn to read and spell, order and organise writing, copy from the board, remember instructions, tell the time or find their way around. Intelligence is not the problem. An unexpected gap exists between learning aptitude and achievement.

With regard to their attributes, dyslexics have good listening skills: an area of proficiency for many simply because they may rely on taking information in through auditory channels to avoid having to read or write. They also possess right-brained

attributes such as: empathy, creativity, innovation, problem-solving approaches, lateral thinking, patience and tenacity.

"To what extent are learning disabilities just a difference in style that becomes a disability because of our lack of understanding about individual learning differences. If teachers were able to respond better to different learning styles we might erase the notion of disability" (Rieff et al, 1997)



4. HOW MANY ARE AFFECTED?

It has generally been accepted for over 25 years that around 10% of the population are affected in some way by dyslexic difficulties which occur independently of intelligence. Two studies, (Oxford University into the "Reading Gene" and the BDA's project "No to Failure" - June 2009) suggest that the genetic predisposition to dyslexia may be present in as many as 15.5% of the population. It is also likely that some individuals are only lightly affected by the difficulties but are able to maximise their strengths. These may include individuals who have excellent compensations around their challenges. Perhaps this explains the incidence of exceptional performing individuals within the creative industries and as entrepreneurs who are also dyslexic.

Comparisons with other disabilities shows that dyslexia is by far the largest disability group within the UK. It is present from birth whereas other large disability groups tend to be age-related. By adulthood, many people with dyslexia are able to compensate through technology, reliance on others and an array of self-help mechanisms, the continued operation of which, however, requires sustained effort and energy. Unfortunately, these strategies have a tendency to break down under stressful conditions which encroach on areas of weakness.

5. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS

Researchers have been trying to assess the effects of dyslexia on the individual for over 40 years and there seems to be a consensus that dyslexia has a profound effect on the individual's educational experience and ability to master literacy skills. However, it is difficult to truly assess the effects of dyslexia without also considering the emotional and social effects.

Everyone suffers from emotional issues at some

time or other. However, life changing events combined with the inevitable intense emotions that accompany them can cause real confusion and distress for the dyslexic person. These effects could be stress, lack of confidence, anxiety, depression, sadness or anger. Therefore, a person who has gone through the whole education system, especially without dyslexia being picked up, can grow into an adult who has already had their self-confidence severely dented. Research and self-reporting seem to agree that people with dyslexic difficulties are particularly susceptible to stress, compared with the ordinary population, with the result that their impairments become even more pronounced. As a result of their difficulties, many people with dyslexia have little confidence and low self-esteem.

Many undiagnosed adults develop sufficient strategies to allow them to cope but may still have residual difficulties with reading speed or comprehension. This can result in extreme tiredness when having to read and understand text thoroughly as they will need to make much more effort to achieve this than non dyslexics. This becomes an increasing problem as our world of work becomes more 24/7 with the internet, email, texting and the continuous information-sharing opportunities that electronic communication affords.

The cognitive profile of dyslexics shows common indications of weakness in short-term or working memory, particularly with storing and retrieving verbal information. Whilst being quick to grasp ideas, they are quick to forget because of their inability to retain the information in long-term memory. Long-term memory is based on association and understanding. They therefore have trouble with word retrieval, evidence awkwardness of expression or misuse of words and have difficulties understanding figurative language. Although very creative, because of these deficits, they will have difficulty with proofreading and presentation.

Dyslexics have a right hemispheric or global learning style which means they need an overview and context to learn. The dyslexic learning style is such that they develop literacy and learning skills most effectively when they are context-bound, especially in a personally meaningful context. They tend not to generalise but rather learn from experience and make connections through meaning. They also tend to take language literally and have difficulties understanding multiple meanings, and consequently struggle to make sense of what is expected of them. The inability to appreciate nuances in language can impact socially and dyslexics misconstrue irony and humour. When processing oral language, noises tend to take over. Noises dominate even in an interesting session which can become really tiring. There is a general feeling of shock when the dyslexic realises that they do not do things the way everyone is 'supposed to'. This initially isolates and is followed by stress in having to find strategies to change (or appear changed) if the person wants to succeed in a non-dyslexic world.

6. EMOTIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

The emotional side of coming to terms through the life course with all the elements of dyslexia is one of the most commonly missed areas. Teachers and parents are very good at noticing problems in their children with reading, writing, spelling and even maths. What they can miss is the growing element of lack of motivation, low self-esteem and upset, which develops as the child goes through school and the pressures grow greater and greater. This has ongoing effects throughout the whole life course as you do not grow out of dyslexia - if you are dyslexic you will be so for life.

If nobody tells the person that there is a reason for their difficulties, there is a tendency to label themselves as dumb, thick and stupid. The difficulties can become harder to manage in secondary school and when children begin to fail they can become very vulnerable and on edge. These feelings can stay throughout life.

The frustration of prolonged failure on a range of curriculum subjects at school, resulting in feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence, can have profound effects upon social status, friendship patterns, and acceptance and adjustment in new settings. Aggressive and antisocial behaviour may result from these tensions. Stress and insecurity can lead to a prominence of information processing difficulties. When dealing with problems, the dyslexic may adopt strategies of avoidance and self-blaming.

To the person experiencing them, these emotions often feel bewildering and shaming. Inevitably the emotional consequences are lack of confidence, low self-esteem, frustration, even depression. What follows on from this is a sort of social nervousness, a reluctance to take part in conversations or discussions, perhaps a tendency to avoid other people - often with the result of being seen as a loner, an outsider, unfriendly or difficult.

7. EFFECT ON OTHERS

The family members, managers and colleagues of an un-diagnosed dyslexic are also presented with genuine difficulties. They may feel baffled and annoyed at the inefficiency of the person, resentful that they have to constantly recheck or redo work and find the person's social manner offensive with no obvious explanation. Somebody who is observably disabled, for example a blind person, is readily accepted as having genuine difficulties. A person with hidden difficulties, such as dyslexia, can be regarded as being, at best, difficult

and workshy, and, at worst, a fraud. (Sylvia Moody 2010).

To a dyslexia assessor, this collection of inefficiencies is immediately recognisable as a common syndrome of difficulties, all of which relate to each other in meaningful ways. Helpful strategies can be sourced and put in place - but the emotional and social consequences remain.

The common theme is that many problems arise out of a lack of understanding of dyslexia which can be in the dyslexic themselves as they, too, may not recognise their difficulties as dyslexic. Even if they understand the nature of the difficulties they may not know how to present these in a way that allows other people to help them. An understanding of the difficulties, by and large, brings a sense of relief, as all the bewildering inefficiencies can be brought into a consistent picture and this helps to explain problems in a clear and confident way. It is hard for a person to continue feeling positive about themselves when they are constantly feeling tripped up, frustrated and shamed by perplexing inefficiencies.

Confidence, therefore, does not come overnight and for many who have been keeping their dyslexia secret for many years, it can take time to come to terms with the fact that they have been confused about themselves for many years; that they may well have been let down by other people who should have recognised the difficulties or been more sympathetic to them; that they have consequently lost opportunities for study or work and that personal and professional relationships have been affected.

8. EMOTIONS

There are several specific emotions and difficulties commonly reported by dyslexics, especially in cases where the difficulties have gone unrecognised for a long time.

ANXIETY
ANGER
CHANGE - DIFFICULTY ADJUSTING
DEPRESSION and DESPONDENCY
EMOTIONAL REGULATION
ENVIRONMENTAL AND EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY
FAMILY PROBLEMS
FEAR

ISOLATION
PANIC ATTACKS
P.T.S.D.
SELF-IMAGE
SHAME, EMBARRASSMENT and GUILT

All the emotions described above are, of course, felt in certain situations by all human beings, not just by dyslexic people. One of the challenges in counselling dyslexics, whether child, adolescent or adult, is knowing where to stop disentangling dyslexia-related issues from more general anxieties.

(Please access our additional information leaflet for more details.)
EMOTIONAL REPERCUSSIONS OF DYSLEXIA

9. WHY IS COUNSELLING and COACHING USEFUL?

Individual therapy or counselling could be effective when introduced in conjunction with special educational provision. However, because peers may be a better source of support and insight, and especially peers who have the same problem, groupwork and individual therapy may often complement each other. When insight is gained in individual therapy, it can be exercised in the safe environment of the supported and supportive small group. Dyslexic people do not often have a chance to air the problems they experience without being judged or criticised, not only problems with reading and writing, but also problems about making friends, feelings of isolation, shame and frustration.

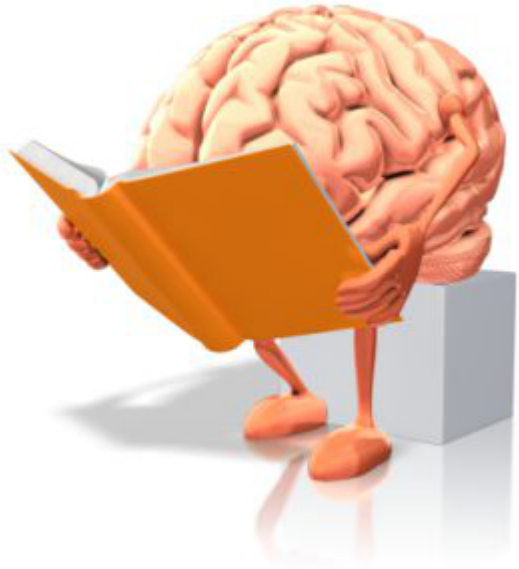
Because of the nature of their difficulties, many dyslexic people have difficulties in expressing feelings, and thoughts often get confused because they do not have the skills to verbalise these thoughts effectively. They may also have difficulties pointing to the source of their anger or frustration. Therefore, individual counselling or coaching or group counselling or a combination may clear some of these uncertainties. In addition, counselling and coaching can be helpful in teaching strategies for dealing with anxiety attacks; controlling feelings of anger or violence; and developing practices such as deep breathing meditation in order to promote long-term anxiety reduction.

In other people, the emotions that they feel, specifically about their dyslexic difficulties, may be entwined with similar emotions stemming from general life experiences, for example, from having had a childhood in which parents have constantly been undermining and dismissive of their child. In this instance, counselling can be helpful in bringing greater understanding of past life events and experiences, and in disentangling dyslexia-related from more general anxieties.

If dyslexic difficulties are fully recognised, understood and confidently disclosed to

other people, and if appropriate support in the way of skills training and counselling is provided, then the more likely it is that a dyslexic person will become less defensive and more able, in both professional and social life, to confront the world in an assertive and confident way rather than an aggressive and defensive one.

Counselling provides an opportunity for the client/s to move from dependence to independence, improve access to opportunities, increase participation and achievement. It also influences self-perception, life chances and relationships with others.



10. TRANSITIONS OF LIFE DYSLEXIA CAN IMPACT ON.

WORK

Every job has its up and down sides for the dyslexic and they can choose careers, or exclude others, because they make incorrect assumptions about what is required, or underestimate their own abilities. Dyslexics have an innate ability for intuitive problem-solving and lateral thinking which can make them good at science, engineering, medicine, nursing, social work and teaching. Others can manage to do well in apparently dyslexia-unfriendly subjects such as law, public services and journalism. Unfortunately, problems with organisation, direction, sequencing, timekeeping, deadlines, articulation and spelling can cause difficulties and there will always be problems digesting large amounts of text.

Dyslexic idiosyncrasies can get in the way in the most unpredictable ways. Quoted by Miles (1993), one dyslexic who surmised that bell ringing had to be an ideal choice (flexible hours and no writing) was forced to give it up because he could not remember the ring change sequences. It is obvious that employment support of all types is essential to dyslexics. This is a worthwhile investment because dyslexics make excellent employees, are very loyal and do not job hop - because they really do hate change.

WORK COUNSELLING and COACHING PROVISION

Counsellors can be very helpful in averting dyslexics making unwise career choices. Many dyslexics can be in jobs which are inappropriate to their skills and this mismatch often leads to remorseless daily pressure as even the most basic task can trip up a dyslexic's processing or literacy weaknesses. Sometimes this bad choice comes from inaccurate assumptions about what the job will involve, and dyslexics may decide to choose a job that seems to have no need of literacy skills, but find that it is not as easy as it sounds. For example, many dyslexics make excellent engineers, architects and artists, but may discover that copious reading and writing is needed to complete essays and theses during training. On the artistic side,

musicians have to read music and actors have to study lines.

A counsellor may have to explore with the client whether the stress involved in coping with an unsuitable job is worth it.

COLLEGE
Higher education has some of the best provision for dyslexic people in this country, and it really shows up the inadequate and unhelpful dyslexic support in schools. University websites on dyslexia are prolific, sophisticated and informed. Dyslexic students have excellent legal support and on-site provision that is upheld by Singleton's report - Dyslexia in Higher Education (Singleton 1999).

The Singleton report underlined the need to counsel dyslexic students in order to help them deal with their negative experiences, and overcome any problems in their current studies.

Dyslexic students, more than any other group, will have trouble coping, and not only with the obvious challenges posed by the academic requirements of their chosen course. They can also have a significant number of peer and isolation problems that are a hangover from school. Dyslexics may also have panic reactions in academic situations, and the additional effort required to cope with studying can make them extremely anxious and tired. Like all dyslexics, they will have bad days when they make more mistakes, misread information, lose things and forget appointments.

Dyslexic students will also have problems in lectures including taking notes while listening, having overheads flashed up or trying to follow the lecturer's lines of thought. Comprehension will continue to be a serious problem. With all the electronic gadgets and tape recorders in the world, dyslexics still have a struggle on their hands. They must listen hard, sit right at the front and focus for every single second. Dyslexic students also expend much more effort than non-dyslexics on essay writing, and their anxiety at examination time can be disabling.

COLLEGE COUNSELLING and COACHING PROVISION
Counselling provision would, therefore, in this context be about working alongside separate skills training and looking at anxiety reduction, deep relaxation and establishing coping mechanisms as well as assessing the impact of life experiences to date.

SCHOOL
Pupils with dyslexia are very often described as having low self-esteem or negative self-perception. Such descriptions are not surprising as dyslexic pupils often experience academic and social failure and receive negative feedback at school as well as at home. Pupils who are low in self-esteem are more likely to exhibit anxiety and insecurity and perform less effectively under stress and failure. The more the pupils experience the consequences of specific learning difficulties, the less enthusiastic, optimistic and self-confident they may become.

The frustration of children with dyslexia and their adult counterparts often centres on the inability to meet expectations. The pain of failing to meet other people's expectations is surpassed only by the dyslexic's inability to achieve their goals. This

is particularly true of those who develop perfectionist expectations in order to deal with their anxiety. They grow up believing that it is 'terrible' to make a mistake.

In striking contrast to the quantity of help and understanding of the dyslexic student, dyslexics at school have no coherent counselling support. Where there is the greatest need, there is the least provision. The requirements of the Children's Act (1989) for pastoral provision in schools has encouraged some schools to set up a formalised counselling service, so mentoring and counselling in schools is much more common than it was. However, what is available remains largely ignorant of the special problems of dyslexia. Things such as circle time (a discussion group with the teacher) that works well for non-dyslexic children can be actively harmful for dyslexic children. By its very structure, it is a nightmare for any dyslexic, as they will be required to speak in public, with lots of people listening, and to think of abstract ideas, all whilst being face-to-face with potential bullies and at the mercy of peer group derision. This really only works well when all the children in the group are dyslexic, and it is led by someone whose understanding of dyslexia extends beyond some vague idea that they reverse letters.

SCHOOL COUNSELLING PROVISION

In Rosemary Scott's view, school-based counsellors are not really useful to dyslexics. Firstly, they are not familiar with dyslexia. They do not know that a child is dyslexic, and they do not know the dyslexic child. They also get little, if any, training in dyslexia. Coming unawares upon the dyslexic brain can, however, be like "standing on a rake" to the uninformed counsellor.

Secondly, school counsellors are not very helpful to dyslexic children for the same reason that they are unable to help many schoolchildren; their role is not understood. School counsellors can also be undermined by the prevailing view that school counselling is little more than a quiet chat which any teacher can do with half an hour to spare.

Thirdly, the problem is already out of control when a school counsellor first sees the dyslexic child. This is because the teacher is creating the dyslexic child in one room faster than the counsellor can extinguish it in another. It is inadequate help with the dyslexic's literacy that is the fundamental handicap, no matter how much counselling they receive. Sometimes, all a school counsellor can do is to give a dyslexic child support, encouragement and, never to be underestimated, a model of someone who can be kind, congruent and respectful to them.

Finally, school counsellors can have profound problems with boundaries. Children identify school counsellors within the school establishment, and it is hard for children to be open in counselling if they imagine that their problems are being discussed over coffee in the staff room.

The best option for counselling provision is often to refer to outside agencies. In Scott's view, using an independent school counselling service is found to be more effective, since a proper therapeutic alliance could be formed with an outsider who is on the child's side. Outside agencies also sidestep the problem that dyslexic children have with being 'othered' at school. School can describe the counselling and

remedial unit as the 'support centre' but the effect of special provision results in the same exclusion from their peers.

11. PRESENTING ISSUES

A counselling client presents with the following:
- **Low self-esteem**
- **Lack of confidence**
- **Feelings of shame and embarrassment**
- **Inability to study or work efficiently**
- **Panic at the thought of going to the office (school, college)**
- **Poor concentration**
- **Memory lapses**
- **Periods of blanking out in conversations**
- **Difficulty in relating to people**
- **Sensitivity to noise, light and certain textures**

Are they depressed, stressed, agoraphobic, suffering an anxiety or personality disorder or OCD? They may be any and all but perhaps at least part of the problem is caused by having dyslexia.

All too often dyslexics are not aware of the nature of their problems. Many are highly intelligent and the wide range of difficulties they meet causes them to experience an assortment of disagreeable emotions and lack of ability to develop strategies to deal with them. Consequently, they may have to take time out because of stress. They can regard themselves as being rather capricious and flawed in some bewildering way. In these circumstances difficulties can become shaming and a guilty secret that must remain hidden. Sometimes the level of anxiety caused by these feelings is so great that sufferers are unable to face going to work at all.

The general chaos of the life of an adult with unrecognised dyslexic difficulties, and the confusion of emotions that accompany this, not only present a problem in themselves, but also compound any feelings of dejection, worthlessness, bewilderment and despair that may have their origins in childhood or in current real life experiences (Sylvia Moody 2013).

Rosemary Scott (2004) reports that anxiety often leads to panic attacks in both dyslexic children and adults and some of the panic attacks can occur in the counselling session. These can arise when there is an unexpected retrieval of traumatic memories, or may be sparked by some innocuous event or noise. They can also occur with no obvious reason. With this in mind, Scott advises that any counsellor working with dyslexic clients must know how to act in the event of a panic attack since the effects can be appalling and, in severe cases, imitate epileptic seizure. Scott also advises that the counsellor can usefully approach the nature of dyslexic stress from the perspective of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In addition, there are specific issues to consider when counselling adult dyslexic

clients. Although adult dyslexics are already damaged by their experiences, they have survived by adapting and devising strategies to cope. They are not children, and problems of work in literacy can replace the child's problems of school in literacy. It is, however, the child in the dyslexic adult who was damaged, and will be looking for healing in the therapeutic space. Constructive approaches to the damage caused in childhood reside in adopting adult life choices and strategies.

In this respect, dyslexics are no different from any other adult client in that the key to understanding their problems lies in discovering what coping strategies - conscious and unconscious, adaptive and maladaptive - have been internalised and carried forward from childhood to adulthood. Counselling dyslexic adults is, therefore, informed to a major extent by an understanding of the dyslexic child's experiences with school, peers and all types of parental reaction. As the International Adult Literacy survey found in 2003, over 60% of learning disabled adults reported that their childhood problems still persisted into adult life.

The one common area that arises regularly with dyslexic adults is employment. Rosemary Scott observes that, on balance, dyslexic employees at work are far more protected and supported than dyslexic children at school. One important issue a counsellor can therefore examine when the dyslexic adult is having work problems is whether he/she is transferring his attitudes and perceptions of school onto the work situation. If this is the case, dyslexics can become blind to the rights and options available to them and unconsciously hand over power to employers in the same way they were forced to with teachers. The transference between teacher and employer can be significant and dyslexic adults can find it instructive when the counsellor draws attention to it.

Published sources of information include:

Dyslexia and Counselling, Rosemary Scott
Dyslexia in the Workplace, Diana Bartlett and Sylvia Moody
Dyslexia and Self Concept, Robert Burden
Living with Dyslexia, Barbara Riddick