



Today's Collegian



Mr. Breitsprecher's Edition

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FREE!

Learning Differences



What do Tom Cruise, Whoopi Goldberg, General George Patton, Walt Disney, Winston Churchill, and Alexander Graham Bell all have in common? These famous people have all been successful despite the fact that they had or have learning disabilities (LD).

We can see that some of the most creative thinkers of all time were diagnosed with LD. Just because a person has trouble learning in certain areas, such as reading, writing, math, or communications, doesn't mean they are slow or less intelligent.

We all have differences in how our brain works – in some cases, this means difficulties in the way our brain takes in and process information. Actually, it would be more accurate to talk about "learning differences" instead of "learning disabilities."

The fact that people learn differently does not mean that they cannot learn. It really just means that some people need to find different ways to learn.

What Are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities can be inherited like many other traits like hair color, passed down in families through genes. Often, someone with a learning disability has other family members who have experienced the same challenges, perhaps a parent,

brother, or sister.

Dyslexia is the most common type of learning disability and results in having trouble understanding written words. Because reading ability may be the only thing that is affected, often no one knows a person is dyslexic unless that person is asked to read or write.

Other types of learning disabilities might result in problems with math. This is referred to as *dyscalculia*. Some have trouble forming letters when writing. This is called *dysgraphia*

Trouble understanding language, even when they are seeing and hearing clearly, is referred to as a *language disability*. When a person struggles to understand language, it often affects how they read, write, and communicate. All of these situations are really just differences in how people learn.

People that have problems with their attention span often have learning disabilities too. About half of those with *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD), a type of attention problem, also have learning disabilities.

Keeping up in school is can be a challenge with any of the learning disabilities we have discussed, when you combine this with problems paying attention, school becomes even more difficult. While some have both ADHD and Learning

Disabilities (LD), one does not cause the other.

School and Learning Disabilities.

Many people have problems with school from time to time, but we can work our way through these difficulties. In the process, we learn more about ourselves. This, in turn, makes it easier to work through additional problems should they arise.

It is normal to find that school places demands on us – even to sometimes struggle with those demands. We can all benefit from looking at our learning strengths and weaknesses. Students that have learning disabilities report that they:

- ✓ Struggle in school
- ✓ Do not do as well as they feel they should
- ✓ Find school harder than friends, harder than it should be
- ✓ Have problems writing or reading
- ✓ Consistently struggle with math, even though they are working on it and getting help
- ✓ Struggle keeping organized

It is normal to experience any of these things occasionally, but if a person is really working on their schoolwork, getting help, and still struggling, it might be time to have a professional help determine if any



Want To Learn How You Learn?

ECLG Learning & Publishing Group has developed a simple checklist that is available free, on-line to help people self-assess their learning needs at: <http://www.eclg.com/pdfs/checklist.pdf>. They also maintain a variety of other helpful related links at: <http://www.eclg.com/links.php>.

learning disabilities are at the root of these problems.

Most of us want to go through life with as few problems as possible. When there are problems, finding out what is wrong can be a relief. It can also help us adjust to the different ways we learn.

We can build on our strengths and find ways to work on areas where we might not be as strong. Sometimes, we can find strategies to let us work around areas that are problems. Learning should be fun – getting a handle on how we learn can help us find excitement and joy in school again.

Coping With Learning Disabilities

Often, people that learn differently struggle until someone sees that the problem isn't that they are not trying or "slow," they just have different needs. This can be a frustrating and lonely situation to be in. Until people appreciate that

the problem is with differences in learning, many just assume that we need to work harder.

When one learns differently, the problem isn't how hard they work. The challenge is to find alternative ways to learn. Often, students with learning disabilities are some of the hardest workers in class. Until they try different ways to learn, their grades just don't reflect how hard they are working.

For many, learning to trust our feelings is the key. If we believe we should be doing better and are ready to look at reasons that we are having problems, we can start to develop an appreciation and self-understanding of our learning needs. Then, we can communicate these needs with others. Talking to our parents, a counselor, or teacher can be a great way to start.

Most problems in life don't just go away. It is OK to ask for help. If a person has a learning disability, it is also OK to learn more about the

difference ways we learn. Discovering problems moves us towards solutions. The good news is that when we discover differences in learning, there are plenty of ways to work around them.

Taking Action

Many support services have been developed to help those with LD and more are being developed. Specially trained educators and tutors can help people better understand the different ways they learn.

We do not all learn the same way. For those with LD, the key is to develop a plan that builds on ways we can learn. Often, this also includes ways to get organized. Having learning and organization strategies makes learning much easier.

Technology can also help. Today's computers have spelling, grammar, and other writing tools. There are even computer programs that recognize a person's voice and display those words on the screen. Computers can also read text so that someone can learn by listening.

Because differences in learning are better understood today and more is being discovered, there is no reason to feel bad or ashamed about a learning disability. Finding alternative strategies to get organized and learn is much more effective than trying to cover up problems.

Trying to hide from problems actually makes many of us feel worse, because the problems don't just go away. Perhaps most important of all is to learn to accept our differences, otherwise they are a constant source of frustration.

Learning that it is appropriate to seek help when it is needed is important – regardless of a person's learning styles. People with different learning needs can get help. People with different learning styles can learn.

People with learning disabilities can be successful, just ask any of the many famous and not-so-famous people who have different learning styles. If it works for them, it can work for you too!

10 Steps to Be an Effective Advocate for Yourself

1. **Believe in yourself.** You can do it!
2. **Realize you have rights.** You are entitled to equality under the law. Inform yourself by asking questions and using available resources. Insist that explanations are clear and understandable. Remember that service providers are public servants. They work for you!
3. **Discuss your concerns.** Talk directly with your teacher and other providers of services either by phone, in person or writing a letter. You may bring someone along for support.
4. **Get the facts.** Problem solve by gathering information. Get the facts in writing. Politely ask for the policies, rules or the regulations being cited to you.
5. **Use the chain of command.** If problems are not being solved, work within the "chain of command" or proper channels to make sure a supervisor or someone else with authority has an opportunity to resolve issues or problems.
6. **Know your appeal rights.** Request clear written information on your appeal rights either within an agency or outside an agency. Don't threaten, but know what the next step will be if you are dissatisfied.
7. **Be assertive and persistent.** Politely keep after what you want. Follow up!
8. **Use communication skills.** Have a plan outlining your concerns. Stay calm and express yourself clearly. Be willing to listen because what you hear may be as important as what you say.
9. **Ask for help.** Link up with people and organizations that can provide assistance. Remember there are also community support groups or organizations.
10. **Follow up.** Don't give up without using these skills. You are entitled to know and exercise all your options to obtain the assistance you need. Remember to thank people along the way.

Adapted from The Advocacy Center for Persons With Disabilities, Inc.