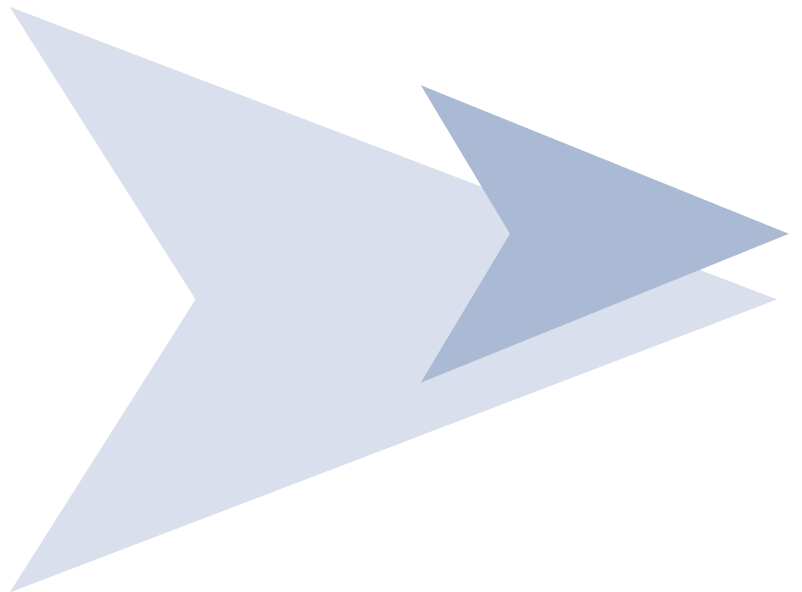




Diagnosing Learning Disabilities





Diagnosing Learning Disabilities (LD)

Do you have difficulty learning in your adult education class?
Do you have trouble understanding what you read?
Do you have trouble remembering?
Do you have difficulty passing tests?

Do the above questions describe you? It is not uncommon for students like you to have difficulty learning sometimes. Most of us struggle with new material or specific subjects at times during life. Figuring out difficult things and overcoming challenges are very normal and important parts of the learning process. However, many adults live with the effects of a learning disability (LD) without knowing it. This possibility may explain the difficulties you have faced in school while growing up, on the job, and even in everyday social relationships. You may be among an unusually high rate of adults with undiagnosed learning disabilities. Read on to learn more about determining whether you might have a learning disability.

What is a Learning Disability?

In 1988, The National Institutes of Health defined the term "learning disabilities" as:

...a heterogeneous group of disorders that is manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of reading, writing, reasoning, mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are presumed to be due to central nervous dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions, with socio-environmental influences, and with attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

What are the Most Common Types of Learning Disabilities?

The most common learning disability is dyslexia. About 80% of people diagnosed with LD have their problems in reading. Other types of learning disability are listed below. When you read the descriptions and areas of difficulty, ask yourself whether you have problems in any of the areas.

1. Dyslexia	Processing language	Reading, writing, spelling, speaking
2. Dyscalculia	Math	Doing math problems, understanding time, using money
3. Dysgraphia	Writing	Handwriting, spelling, organizing ideas
4. Dyspraxia (Sensory Integration Disorder)	Fine motor skills	Eye-hand coordination, balance, manual dexterity
5. Auditory Processing Disorder	Hearing differences between sounds	Reading, comprehension, language
6. Visual Processing Disorder	Interpreting visual information	Reading, math, maps, charts, symbols, pictures

What are Some Symptoms of a Learning Disability?

Students with learning disabilities typically have average to above average intelligence/ability; yet they experience significant trouble in one or more academic and behavioral areas. This results from an information processing disorder, a basic problem with learning disabilities. An information processing disorder is a deficiency in a person's ability to effectively use the information the senses have gathered. It is not the result of hearing loss, impaired vision, an attention deficit disorder, or any kind of intellectual or cognitive deficit.

The following list includes just some symptoms of learning disabilities. It is important to remember that not all learning problems are symptoms of learning disabilities.

- Makes poor grades despite significant effort;
- Needs constant, step-by-step guidance for tasks;
- Cannot remember problem-solving steps because they do not comprehend tasks or the logic behind them;
- Has poor memory of spoken or written material;
- Has difficulty mastering tasks or transferring academic skills to other tasks;
- Can't remember skills and facts over time;
- Has strong general knowledge but cannot read as in dyslexia, write as in dysgraphia, or do math as in dyscalculia;
- Has difficulty with communication and language processing, expressive, and receptive language;
- Is frustrated with school and homework; and
- Has low self-esteem.

Learning disability symptoms involve constant problems with learning. However, having just a few of the above may not be a serious problem. Knowing what behavioral signs and symptoms to look for is also important. The following list includes behavioral signs of LD. As you read them, ask yourself whether any of them describe problems that you have.

- Bored and careless;
- Generally quiet and withdrawn in class;
- Disinterested in school or reluctant to go to school;
- Embarrassed by attention;
- Feels powerless;
- Loud and disruptive;
- Disorganized, inattentive;
- Wants attention even though it is negative;
- Work is sloppy or poorly done;
- Blurts out incorrect answers impulsively;
- Breaks school rules and is referred for discipline because of behavior problems;
- Has behavior problems at home;
- Aggression toward peers or adults;
- Clowns around and jokes at the wrong times;
- Looks for other underachievers;
- Has delinquent behavior at home or in the community;
- Slow to respond to questions; and
- Has physical symptoms of stress — headaches or stomach aches.

If you have had many of the above symptoms that have not improved since childhood, you may have undiagnosed learning disabilities. Take the time now to review the Checklist on page 8 of this document. Put a check mark (✓) before each area where you know you have difficulty. If you suspect you may have LD, testing is the first step in getting a specific diagnosis.

What Should I Do if I Suspect that I Have a Learning Disability?

If you suspect that you might have some of the above learning disability symptoms, contact your teacher or guidance counselor to discuss your difficulties. Teachers and counselors can suggest strategies for you to use at school and at home and with the next steps you should take. You may be asked to consider taking an official battery of tests to determine whether in fact you do have a learning disability. There are some questions, which are important for you to consider here. You need to know the answers to these questions before seeking someone to do the testing, as it will save you time and money.

Here are the questions you need answered:

- What are the titles of professionals that perform LD testing?
- What can I expect to go through during the testing process?
- How much will the testing cost me?
- What will I receive after the testing is complete?

Some answers to those questions are in this document. Others depend on where you live.

What Professionals Administer LD Testing?

There are different professionals involved in administering diagnostic assessments to determine the existence of LD. Sometimes an entire team including your teacher will work together to obtain an accurate diagnosis. It is essential that the professionals you choose be licensed, experienced with diagnosing adults with LD, and have the needed certifications to diagnose this disorder. It is acceptable to ask the professional about his or her credentials. Your teacher and guidance counselor can be helpful in finding a good professional in your community. Finding a reputable referral is important. Your medical doctor can also be a big help in referring you to an experienced professional for testing.

Especially trained professionals include:

- Clinical Psychologists. (Ph.D. and licensure required in most states for private practice. Completes psycho/educational assessment.)
 - School Psychologists. (Ph.D. or MA licensure in most states if in private practice. Certification within school systems. Provides assessment of learning and school-related problems and both intellectual and educational testing. Can assess emotional functioning.)
 - Educational Psychologists. (Ph.D. or Masters licensure if in private practice. Provides educational testing. Must be Level C to administer assessment of cognitive, intellectual functioning as well. In general, not trained to assess emotional functioning.)
 - Neuropsychologists. (Ph.D. Needs licensure if in private practice in most states. Assesses brain processing and functioning. May not be skilled in administering educational tests and does not assess emotional functioning. Needs to obtain educational assessment from educational specialist.)
 - Psychometrists. (Usually not licensed for private practice, found in schools and mental health centers, etc.)
 - Psychiatrist. (Only with state medical board certification.)
 - Physician. (Only with state medical board certification.)
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What Should I Know about Diagnosis and Testing for LD?

The process of diagnosing a learning disability can be confusing. It involves testing, an interview of your history and growing up, and being observed by a trained professional. You can't be forced to get tested. It should be your own decision based on knowing how it will benefit you. Here is information you should know before making your decision.

Testing for LD usually involves three main types of assessment as follows and takes approximately six to eight hours over two or three testing sessions:

- Testing of intellectual or cognitive potential (aptitude);
 - Testing of information processing, short- and long-term memory, reasoning, sensory motor abilities that are indicative of a learning disability; and
 - Assessment of your current educational achievement.
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What are the Advantages of Getting an LD Diagnosis?

There are advantages and disadvantages to getting an official diagnosis of learning disability. Your teacher, tutor, or counselor should review both sides of the issue with you before proceeding. If an LD screening tool has already been administered to you, and the results indicated you are at risk for learning disabilities; or you ask that a diagnostic evaluation be conducted based on information you have read here, you need to understand the possible consequences of an official diagnosis. The advantages of an LD diagnosis are as follows:

- Allows access to legal accommodations. (You can obtain accommodations necessary for success in school, your job, and in testing settings {e.g., entrance tests to postsecondary institutions, certification or licensure testing, or GED testing}. This will allow you to show your knowledge without limitations by the symptoms of a disability.)
 - Allows access to protections under Federal law.
 - Is a source of emotional support.
 - Is a comfort and relief to know the basis of your learning or performance problems.
 - Is a guide for making instructional and/or accommodation plans.
 - Provides needed documentation to request testing accommodations.
 - Determines what type of work may best suit you.
 - Helps to understand learning disabilities and determine the best ways to address them.
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What are the Disadvantages of Getting an LD Diagnosis?

- Can be expensive.
 - May not be worth the effort if few positive consequences result.
 - Having an LD diagnosis may not change the services you could receive in the literacy program.
 - The diagnosis may not have an impact on your personal or work life.
 - Literacy programs often can help you meet with success by making instructional adaptations, even though there is not a documented learning disability.
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What if I Can't Afford the Cost of Testing?

Being tested to determine whether you might have a learning disability is important for opening doors to your future. However, you may not be able to afford the cost of a private psycho/educational evaluation. This is a problem for many people. Some alternatives can help to reduce the cost of assessment or offer it on a sliding scale basis.

- The first place to check is your (or your parents) health insurance company. There is a possibility that it will help defray costs. That includes a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO). Some have psychologists on staff who can do LD assessments.
- Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) has funds to do testing. Their mission is to rehabilitate people with disabilities for employment purposes. Your request for assessment must clearly link your learning problems to employment and not just to school or for GED Testing.
- If you are a GED Prep. student, contact your GED testing center to see if they have

a list of professionals who will provide low cost assessments.

- University programs that provide graduate training in psychology or school psychology often have clinics that will do low cost assessments. In these clinics graduate students do the testing but their work is supervised by faculty who are trained to diagnose LD.
 - Mental health clinics may have psychologists who can do assessments.
 - An advocate who specializes in helping adults with LD may know of private practitioners who will do low cost, or pro bono (free) assessment.
 - Call psychologists in your area and explain your financial situation. Some may choose to assist you and provide low cost assessment.
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What Does the Diagnostic Assessment Actually Test?

The testing will estimate your intellectual potential, abilities, and educational achievement levels. It results in recommendations for educational planning. Answers will come from your background information, educational history and records, and data from tests of intelligence and educational achievement. Lastly, ratings tests of attention, behavior/emotions and adaptive behavior are used. Testing will find answers to the following questions:

- Do you have one or more learning disabilities?
 - Do you have problems with attention?
 - What are your academic and thinking abilities?
 - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - What educational recommendations would help you and your teacher?
 - What testing accommodations would be useful to you?
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What Can I Expect After the Testing?

After the testing is completed, schedule an appointment to discuss the results of the assessment with the diagnostician. Ask all questions you want answered. No question is out of bounds or unimportant. You need to know how your test results affect your learning.

You will not get the actual test back, but make sure to get the official written report. The testing professional who made the diagnosis should have signed the report. The tester's name, title, level of education, (M.A., Ph.D.), and state license number should be on the report. The report should be on letterhead stationery of the agency where the diagnosis took place. This report must contain a written summary of your educational, medical, and family histories, a list of the tests used in the assessment process, the results of the assessment with a confirmed diagnosis, and recommendations that relate specifically to the area of learning disability identified. There must be an explanation of the impact of the disability on your performance with a list of accommodations identified to reduce your barriers.

It is important to label a file folder where you should keep all your testing paperwork. This is called your "disability documentation" and will be essential for you to have when requesting testing accommodations, for help at work, and for continuing education/college,

etc. According to Federal law, *you* are responsible for providing your written disability documentation each time you ask for services.

Keep this brochure for future reference about the diagnosis of LD. For more information about learning disabilities, go to <http://www.ldonline.org/lbasics>.

Symptoms & Behaviors Associated with a Learning Disability Student Checklist		
YES ✓	NO ✗	Symptom/Behavior
		Makes poor grades despite significant effort
		Needs constant, step-by-step guidance for tasks
		Cannot remember problem solving steps because they do not comprehend tasks or the logic behind them
		Has poor memory of spoken or written material
		Has difficulty mastering tasks or transferring academic skills to other tasks
		Can't remember skills and facts over time
		Has strong general knowledge but cannot read as in dyslexia, write as in dysgraphia, or do math as in dyscalculia
		Has difficulty with communication and language processing, expressive, and receptive language
		Is frustrated with school and homework
		Has low self-esteem
		Bored and careless
		Generally quiet and withdrawn in class
		Disinterested in school or reluctant to go to school
		Embarrassed by attention
		Feels powerless
		Loud and disruptive
		Disorganized, inattentive
		Wants attention even though it is negative
		Work is sloppy or poorly done
		Blurts out incorrect answers impulsively
		Breaks school rules and is referred for discipline because of behavior problems
		Has behavior problems at home
		Aggression toward peers or adults
		Clowns around and jokes at the wrong times
		Looks for other underachievers
		Has delinquent behavior at home or in the community
		Slow to respond to questions
		Has physical symptoms of stress—headaches or stomach aches
<p><i>It is important to remember that not all learning problems are symptoms of learning disabilities. If you have had many of the above symptoms that have not improved since childhood, you may have undiagnosed learning disabilities. If you suspect this may be the case, testing is the first step in getting a specific diagnosis.</i></p>		