

# Dyslexia and Depression

Mark Le Messurier for Next Generation <<http://www.generationnext.com.au/>>

## Slide 1

Children and adults with Specific Learning Difficulties battle an invisible condition that's easily misunderstood!

They're often labelled as lazy, avoiders, lacking in ability and poorly motivated.

THE EMOTIONAL FALLOUT varies from tough to unbearable.

Every dyslexic can tell about embarrassing and soul-destroying experiences they've had at school.

Self-image is vulnerable. Sadness, anxiety, anger and depression are common in this group.

There is now more than enough clinical evidence to show that both male and female dyslexics carry elevated negative perceptions of their peers, of their self-concept and of their academic futures. The result is heightened levels of emotional and behavioural turbulence.

For those of you who wish to read the clinical evidence, I have gathered 13 research articles for you. The last slide will show you how to access them.

What do you need to look out for when it comes to dyslexia and possible depression?

First up, and vital, is to consider the individual's coping capacity and the family's ability to cope, because they will have a lot to deal with no matter how well things unfold.

Here's Tim's story, and how he chose to cope with his dyslexia ...

*"Our Timothy had been very flat for most of the summer holidays, but the last couple of weeks were particularly hard for him. He had cried a lot about having to go back to school. A day did not pass without him questioning why he had to go. With a week of holidays left the tantruming subsided, but the tears continued. It seemed he had resigned himself to return to school.*

*His younger brother and sister were asleep, Timmy was watching the television and I was in the kitchen.*

*'Thud.' A couple of seconds passed. 'Thud.' A few more seconds passed. 'Thud' is the only way to explain the sound. It was deep and powerful like nothing I'd heard before and recalling it makes my heart jump to my throat.*

*'Thud.' It got the better of me, so as good mothers do, I went to investigate. Not often did I need to check on Timmy, we had been blessed with a calm, thoughtful child. I made my way into the lounge, stepped inside and looked. There I saw Timmy doing a tall hand stand on the couch.*

*"Timothy how many times have I told you and your brother?"*

*'Thud.'*

*"No. No. No. No. Stop!"*

*It all hit home. He was lifting himself up as high as he could with his hands on the back of the couch, and then jerked his hands away so his head crunched into the couch seat below. The 'thud' was his feet hitting against the wall helping to propel him with all the more force into the seat.*

*I grabbed him and pulled him onto my lap.*

*"You could break your bloody neck if you keep doing this!" I screamed.*

*"I know," he calmly responded.*

*"If you know why on earth are you doing it?"*

*"I don't want to be here."*

*Innocently, I said, "That's fine. If you're bored don't stay here. Go and do something else."*

*"No. I don't want to be here. I want to die," he said staring up into my eyes.*

*He continued, "I don't want to feel this way anymore and if I am dead I won't have to go to school."*

*"You can't help me mum. I'm never going to learn to read".*

*I hugged him and sobbed. I couldn't let him go.*

*Timothy had spent eighteen months in preschool, eighteen months in reception and twelve months in year 1. After four years of formal education he had stalled on the readers from the orange box. Each of them had just a word or two to a page. His best friends were beginning to read the Harry Potter books. A few months later Timothy was identified with a learning difficulty, dyslexia. That helped to explain why he has such confusions, but it hasn't changed the way he feels about it.*

*I love our son. I hate our lounge. I still can't think of our beautiful desperate little boy bouncing on his neck because he didn't think there was anything else he could do. Timothy was seven and half when he tried to escape the world because he couldn't read.*

*Suzie, Timothy's mother*

Tim is now 15, and is a beautiful young man.

He's lucky because he's found dancing and he's brilliant at it.

He perseveres at school and copes really well, keeping his LD in perspective.

## Slide 2

Let's jump into Specific Learning Disability

It's a broad umbrella term to explain why a person can do relatively well (even really well because they can be gifted) in some areas of learning, but encounter unexpected problems in other areas.

Typically there are 3 areas where problems occur;

- Difficulty with number skills - dyscalculia
- problems with writing output/ spelling and spatial planning - dysgraphia
- and reading difficulty - dyslexia

Best estimates tell us that about 20% of the population are affected by some form of language-based learning difficulty.

SLD's probably account for about 15%

Dyslexia affects a little over 10% of the population (BDA, 2012), so that's about three kids in every class room.

It is inherited.

6 genes have now been linked to the disability.

It affects the way an individual processes language, and is on a sliding scale of severity.

Dyslexics may also have issues with planning, organisation and co-ordination. In combination, their listening comprehension may be affected, especially when under pressure.

Interestingly, SLD's have really only 'existed' since we've had to learn to read, write and do maths. They became evident after some bright spark introduced the dictionary, and called for standardised spelling. We've got a scapegoat – apparently we can blame Samuel Johnson who created the first dictionary in 1755.

### Slide 3

The image on the screen summarizes what we term 'the dyslexic impairments'.

Phonological awareness difficulties are always present - this is the ability to break words down into sounds, actually hear the sounds and the syllables, be able to discriminate these sounds from one another, and to manipulate them.

RAN refers to how quickly individuals can recall, or name aloud objects, pictures, colours, letters or numbers. Variations in RAN time in children is a strong predictor about their ability to read.

Then, there's the capacity to break the alphabetic code – that's orthographic processing - recalling the letter – naming the letter – recalling the sound and naming the sequence of sounds to make a word.

Hey, this is no easy task, because English is such an irregular language - 44 sounds represented by 26 letters! That's hard!

So, the term dyslexia refers to a spectrum of problems based around capacities to read and write.

## Slide 4

Early on kids have difficulties pronouncing longer words, and finding the right word. At first it may seem cute!

Early on, good teachers notice difficulties in their ability to acquire basic reading, writing and spelling skills. The link between sounds and letters do not develop as it does for others.

Their reading lacks fluency and speed.

They trip over small common words like was for saw, and they for that. They read words that are not there, keep forgetting the same simple words and lose their place. They sound out syllables as they read, but forget them before they are able to blend the entire word together – it is so frustrating for them.

Later on, these are the kids who can learn for their spelling test and get 'good' marks. Then, when tested on the same words three weeks later they achieve poorly.

A common observation is that they spell words their way - very phonetically.

And, dyslexia may be in the company of dysgraphia- a writing impairment.

Kids with dysgraphia are often slow to learn to write; may experience letter reversals, produce inappropriately sized letters, mix upper and lower case letters, forget word spaces and produce untidy and inaccurate bookwork. These students just can't seem to get their great ideas on paper.

Mathematical difficulties, called dyscalculia, may be present as well.

Indicators include persistent number reversals (e.g. 37 becoming 73), copying inaccuracies and continual misreading of written information so that mathematical outcomes are messed up. These students often say, "that's an adding sign, isn't it? Or is it a multiplying sign?"

They have difficulty retaining simple formulas, remembering the sequential steps involved in basic maths operations and recalling number patterns (especially the multiplication tables – many will never be able to learn them all).

## Slide 5

Here's a practical activity - I'd like you to read the following passage.

Can you make sense of it? It's tricky!

In other words, how well can your intellect, common sense and comprehension skills work together to make sense of this?

I'll give you a few seconds to sort it through.

.... wait 25 seconds...

Stand up and sit down if you think you made pretty good sense of it?

CLICK

... here's the original on screen.

What you've just experienced is the 'hard work' it takes many dyslexics to process print.

Now you've got an 'idea of how it feels' to read as a dyslexic.

Imagine doing it like this every time you had to read?

How hard would it have been to achieve a medical degree?

The comment classically made about the reading of a dyslexic is, "despite their reduced reading capacity (in this case skipping many of the sight words) it is surprising how good their comprehension is."

But, it comes at a cost – they work so hard!

## Slide 6

Let's continue to inhabit a dyslexic person's world for a few moments

To do this I have another quick task for you.

Yes, all I want you to do is to copy from the screen on to a sheet of paper.

Please substitute each vowel with the '@' symbol.

I want you to start now!

Hurry up... push them along... hurry them along....

What feelings did you experience as you forced yourself to do this exercise?

Was there any frustration, annoyance, distress or anger?

I'm sure there was.

And, I'm sure there were a few of you who had to push yourself even to engage in this exercise. That makes me really happy - because you mirrored the feelings many dyslexic students feel when repeatedly asked to copy from the board.

## Slide 7

If you think a child or an adult that comes your way may have dyslexia, get hold of a dyslexia checklist and help them fill it out.

This is a great start.

If the results convince you that 'dyslexia,' or some kind of 'language/learning-based issue' is probably at play, then it's time to refer them to a skilled psychologist. Just as your profession specialises, so do psychologists – not ALL psychologists are adept at identifying dyslexia, especially in young children. Some psychologists do better jobs than others making the report personalised and filled with practical strategies and sensible interventions to help students, teachers and parents.

Skilled psychologists can find strong dyslexic markers in children as young as 3 or 4 years of age. Results certainly become more accurate as kids approach 7 or 8 years of age.

What about if you don't know a skilled psychologist who is also fabulous with kids?

Then ask around, or speak to your local SPELD association. They'll offer great contacts, and you can get on to their mailing list at the same time!



## Slide 8

Depressed or not, the road ahead for a dyslexic child is tough – even with the right kind of teachers and parents.

To find success they will have to work so much harder, put up with many frustrations and deal with constant misperceptions by others.

They face a long tricky road that requires big doses of resilience because there will be big ups and downs.

Based on this, you have to consider their coping capacity, and the quality of the support network they have around them.

Are they a 'glass half-full' kind of person?

Or, are they more prone to negative self-talk?

Are they more likely to blame others, or live in denial?

Are they a positive problem solver with determination?

Are their parents' positive problem solvers?

Does depression or anxiety also run in the family?

Does the child know what dyslexia is?

How do they feel about having dyslexia?

Do their parents really understand it? Does it run in the family?

Might a SPELD short parenting course on dyslexia increase their understanding?

Do you need to refer them to a psychologist who can counsel the parents and/or the child – even if it's to set them on the right road with the right kinds of resources, understandings and contacts?

Will you need to keep a close eye on their emotional journey?

And, this is the time to mention that dyslexia is a co morbid condition.

There seems to be a high co-morbidity with dyslexia and ADHD – about 65% of those with ADD have dyslexia as well.

We need to be mindful of comorbidity.

## Slide 9

Get involved, or find out more about the 'Dyslexia Friendly Schools' program.

It's currently being promoted by the UK's Neil MacKay, and supported by a number of parent and SPELD groups throughout Australia.

Many 'Dyslexia Friendly Schools' already exist in the USA, Ireland and the UK.

Yes, we're being left behind! Sadly, much of the discussion about dyslexia here is from the dark ages.

Some of it still relates to whether the condition even exists. And, apart from New South Wales, it is not legally recognised as a legitimate learning disability in most school systems.

What does a dyslexia friendly school look like? Pretty unremarkable really...

- there's NO stigma about having a learning difficulty – dyslexics simply learn differently
- the hurdles they face are acknowledged and ways are found to help them learn to cope
- there's easy access to text-to-speech and predictive typing software
- teachers receive specialised training

There's an awareness that some people simply need other ways of expressing information and getting information.

*Excerpt of a letter written by one of my year 11 students to his history teacher*

*"You don't get it and I need you to. If all you want me to do is write essays all the time then all you are testing is my learning disability, and I'll just keep showing you I've got a really big one!"*

Actually, 'dyslexia friendly schools' works for everyone, not just the kids with dyslexia – in truth the approach has a name, it's called – "good teaching."

Thankfully, there are some good schools about with willing and skilled teachers who understand dyslexia.

But, you'll need to hunt them down!

## **Slide 10**

Reassure them that they're not the first person in the world to have dyslexia.

Reassure them that many well known dyslexics have done really well with their lives.

And, don't only rely on 'famous others'.

Sometimes there are people who've done okay for themselves much closer to home – yourself, their mother, father, auntie, uncle, cousin or grandparent. Good homegrown models can be inspirational blue prints.

**Slide 11**

Teach how to take advantage of organising systems to overcome poor memory and planning.

These include calculators, phones and hand-held organisers. Some of my secondary students use their mobile phones and take photos of the homework written on the board.

Teach them how to make reminder 'stickies' that come up on the screen as the computer boots up. Similarly, *Microsoft Office Outlook* can be used as a wonderful little memory jogger having the capacity to set up lists, schedules, time lines for assignments and reminders.

## Slide 12

The '*Disability Standards for Education*' developed around the '*Disability Discrimination Act* ', means – that technically – there's an onus on every institution and teacher to manage students with all kinds of differences far more vigorously.

A popular idea you should know about are '*student access cards*'.

The card, details any special provisions or adjustments the student is entitled to, and has agreed to. It can be fastened into the back of their diary so it is easy for all teachers to see. The '*access card*' is likely to state things like;

- exemption from reading aloud in class
- student to receive handouts instead of copying notes from the board
- supervision of diary entries for homework
- Or that the student has a modified homework program
- extra time in tests and exams
- use of computer in lessons and tests
- use of calculator in lessons and tests
- use of hand held spell checker in lessons and tests
- assistance with organisational strategies when planning an assignment
- work to be marked without penalty in relation to spelling and grammar
- provision of a reader or a scribe in tests

## Slide 13

Let me tell you about Jake.

Just like his father, Rick, he was dyslexic big time!

And, just like his dad he had a desire to succeed, and the 'grit' to do it.

At 9 years of age Jake tried to burn the primary school library down. He thought that if he could get rid of the books – and all the print they contained – then, his world would improve no end!

I also remember when I showed him how to 'cut and paste' from the net. He was 11 at the time, and he cried with relief that never again would he have to start with a blank page or screen. It was so liberating! And, of course, we had conversations around plagiarism, and loads of lessons on how to convert the text of others into his own words.

But, of greatest interest to you was an event that occurred during Jake's weekly session with me. At the time he was 17 years old and in year 11.

We'd spent most of the session planning an assignment, and had just started on the introduction together. I needed a coffee so left the room for a 5 minutes leaving Jake to continue. When I returned I noticed a list of a dozen words or so on the screen. They shouldn't been there.

I asked Jake about the list.

His response; "Mark, I kept writing and then I got to the word 'really'. I had no idea how to spell it. So, I decided to write down as many ways to spell as I could for you. You know what, Mark? They all look right to me."

## Slide 14

### Treatment of Dyslexia

There is no cure for dyslexia.

Mostly, it can be remediated with proper therapy and training.

Specialist intervention at a young age is always recommended. But, because the approach has to be systematic and intensive, it takes BIG commitment by kids and parents.

It can also be costly.

Remediation and support must be dyslexia specific - putting dyslexic pupils into a remedial group for struggling learners, getting them to do more of the same work, or repeating a year just doesn't cut it.

The Orton-Gillingham Multisensory Method - developed in the early 1930's - has special way of teaching phonemics and language structure to dyslexics. Research supports its approach.

The approach is multi-sensory so it involves all of the student's senses: visual, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic.

We have learnt much from The Orton-Gillingham Method. We know that the BEST interventions have to focus on:

- i) explicit training in phonological awareness
- ii) strong focus on decoding or orthographic word work
- iii) the reading of progressively more difficult texts
- iv) practice of comprehension strategies while reading texts

Programs such as Hickey, Multi-lit and Phono-Graphix consistently deliver worthwhile results for students.

There are also helpful software programmes, such as The Reading Doctor, Nessy, Units of Sound, Rapid Reading and Wordshark.

Oh, before beginning any treatment have the eyes checked by a behavioural optometrist who understands dyslexia.

## Slide 15

Never think that assistive technology should be delayed until dyslexic students learn the basic skills of handwriting, spelling, grammar or reading first.

Hey, these kids learn differently, and no matter how well they are taught many will never cope with these rudimentary skills.

They need legitimate options to take short cuts to reduce the frustrations of intermittent memory weaknesses for spelling rules, grammatical conventions and basic number facts.

Why make a student agonise over their memory difficulty when they could use an inexpensive device to take the pressure off?

Not only does this practical approach allow kids to access their higher level thinking skills more easily, but helps to buoy their motivation as successful learners.

This is a 'dyslexic friendly' approach!



## Slide 16

### *Social skills*

Feeling humiliated or sensitive about learning most lessons doesn't set the perfect footing for reciprocal friendships.

It's hard to cement friendships with someone who's a bit too enthusiastic, is moody, who has a 'chip on their shoulder', who is too sensitive, who thought jumps, who forgets and seems a bit stuck in their world.

And, the research is crystal clear - without adequate social success children and adolescents are far more likely to be at risk from emotional and mental health difficulties!

The impact of attaching to peers is significant.

## Slide 17

### ***Social skills***

Sometimes an edge can be found by immersing kids in a formal social-skills training program - with peers - where they're explicitly taught how to behave in pro-social ways benefits.

They also engineer opportunities for kids to feel the embracing comfort of warm interactions with peers.

There are some quality social skills programs about, and they can be easily tracked down.

And, never forget to mention to parents the value of clubs, associations and social groups that exist in the local community.

What a way to connect socially over an interest. What a fabulous way for a young person – a person of any age – to find value in themselves and in others!

Gather up your contacts and distribute them to support young people and families make healthy connections.

## Slide 18

I remember asking 13 year old Brett how he felt about his dyslexia;

*He reached for a black jumbo sized texta and a blank sheet of paper on my desk.*

*Next, he placed eight bold black dots randomly over the page, and explained that each one represented something in his life.*

*As he circled one dot he spoke about his downhill racing and how he loved it.*

*Another dot indicated the value he placed on his friendships.*

*The next showed his enjoyment of collecting movies.*

*Next was his connection to his family, and he continued until he reached the last dot.*

*As he circled it, he explained this one was his learning difficulty. But, it was just one part of his life.*

Brett had it in perspective! Yeah, great coping skills!

## Slide 19

I'd like to wrap up with Penne who's 18 years of age;

*"Late last year on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday I found out I was dyslexic.  
I'd never heard of it before, but it answered lots of questions for me.*

*Having dyslexia was like carrying a heavy weight on my chest, and it hurt. It made me feel so stupid every day in front of everyone I was growing up with.*

*It caused my low grades and it meant that teachers had to put up with me spitting it, giving up on work, and saying how life's not worth it.*

*And, my friends they've had to put up with me being happy one minute and upset the next.*

*My family, well, they had to put up with all this, and me cutting myself. Every Sunday afternoon I used to feel so depressed about having to do homework or going back to school. By the evening I'd be making new cuts or going over old ones.*

*What's the worst thing a teacher ever said to me?*

*My maths teacher told me in front of the class that I was useless, and would never amount to anything. That was last year. After she said that I found school even harder.*

*I can't believe she made me blame myself for something that isn't my fault. To calm my anger at her I'd sing a song I liked over and over in my head.*

*Then she left the school. Now I can't listen to that song without crying.  
But to this teacher I say, "I'll succeed in life. I'm much more than the speck of dust you saw me as."*

*How can people help? The most important thing is for them to be positive.  
To praise dyslexic kids so we know we are going in the right direction and can make it.*

*But, the most brilliant thing is the support I've got from teachers this year now they know I'm dyslexic.  
I feel so relieved that I don't have to go through this by myself anymore."*

Pennie, 18 years

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# ***Useful websites***

## ***Specific learning difficulties***

<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>

<http://www.dyslexia.com/library/classroom.htm>

<http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk>

<http://www.dyxi.co.uk>

[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability\\_rights/standards/standards.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/standards.html)

<http://www.iamdyslexic.com>

<http://www.ldonline.org>

<http://www.ldinfo.com>

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/dysgraphia/dysgraphia.htm>

<http://www.speld.org.nz>

<http://www.speld-sa.org.au/links.html>