

HOW WELL CAN YOU READ?

Understanding Dyslexia

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Chances are pretty good that you have heard of dyslexia and that you have the perception that people with this label will read the word dog as God, or the word rat as tar. Interestingly, dyslexia does not have anything to do with one's ability to see clearly and it is by no means that simple to describe or recognize. Imagine being asked to read hieroglyphics fluently with no training. This is what the dyslexic has to deal with every day of his life.

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) defines dyslexia as:

"a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

Here are some interesting factoids about dyslexia:

- **It affects nearly one out of 10 people**
- If you are dyslexic there is a good chance one of your parents or children have the trait
- It is termed a language based learning disability
- Dyslexia is identifiable with over 90% accuracy, at ages 5 ½ to 6 ½
- Many people with dyslexia cannot read at better than a third grade level and some college dyslexic graduates cannot read a single word
- A dyslexic's IQ has nothing to do with his condition
- Dyslexics are often singled out as academic losers at a very early age by teachers, classmates, and even their parents
- Many dyslexics experience low self-esteem, are often fatigued, and may contemplate taking their own lives
- A number of those that cannot read a single word are: Nobel prize winners, exceptional (and wealthy) entrepreneurs, award winning artists and sculptors, and college graduates with advanced degrees.

You might be interested to know that reading is NOT a natural ability. It must be taught and then fully assimilated in the brain. To a "normal" student, reading seems to be a step by step progression

of proficiency. To the dyslexic student, the development of reading skills is greatly impeded by the fact that the left brain connections that "light up" when one is learning to read are often dark. When this happens, the student begins to use the prefrontal cortex (which is not fully developed until young adulthood) and consumes enormous amounts of energy in the process. So, not only do dyslexic students not comprehend what it is they are supposed to, they also create a brain frenzy that often leads to mild to severe ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

I recently attended a local conference for members of the South Carolina chapter of the International Dyslexia Association. The conference had one track that focused on the basics of learning to read and the various approaches to deal with non-verbal language disabilities. The presenter, Dr. Margie Gillis, E.D, and head of Literacyhow, is a nationally recognized reading expert and she exposed us to many tools and techniques that are available to facilitate the development of reading abilities. Her approach is a sensible consideration for all parents of children for whom reading is problematic.

For me, the highlight of the day was having 15 conference attendees take part in a dyslexia simulation exercise. Do you want to feel confused, frustrated, ashamed, abused, and truly dumb and picked upon? Then this exercise is right up your alley! I knew this was a simulation, but the tangible impact it had on me was enormous. While I can never know what it truly feels like to be dyslexic, I certainly can now understand the negative and hostile world within which a dyslexic individual must strive for "normalcy." It is no wonder that reading failure is the most commonly shared characteristic among juvenile offenders; 60% of prison inmates are illiterate and over 27% of children with learning disabilities drop out of high school. Illiteracy costs the U.S. \$2 billion per year for students that must repeat a grade due to reading problems and over \$20 billion per year to businesses and taxpayers.

Like many brain wiring issues, dyslexia cannot be cured but there are MANY ways to overcome its impact. In addition to honoring all of the incredibly successful dyslexic achievers, there is also a reason to celebrate one's own dyslexia: right brain thinkers are likely to be the leaders, innovators, and most progressive individuals as our society continues to evolve.

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