

DYSLEXIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

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An emphasis on supporting mental health and wellbeing is becoming central to our thinking in education in the workplace and at home. Understanding the impact of dyslexia on mental health is something that all employers, educators and parents could, and should, be more aware of. Just as we are all unique in our reactions to challenge and adversity, the emotional repercussions of dyslexia are unique to the individual. In order to provide more effective support, here are five key issues around dyslexia and mental health that we should try to understand better.

The emotional impact of dyslexia can be like looking at an abstract painting for the first time. Initially, you may not be able to see patterns, themes or repeating motifs and finding a narrative can be perplexing. On the surface we might be seeing weak reading, difficulty in accuracy when copying, and time spent learning that seems to have little benefit. We may see memory and co-ordination difficulties and still not realise that there is an underlying story of personal trauma.

Dyslexic learners may be dealing with a cocktail of difficulties and our ability to really see what is going on is often obfuscated. Many dyslexic learners learn to mask their difficulties and find strategies to go under the radar. The emotional cost is not always obvious, and our lack of understanding is part of the problem. Often internal dialogue that is taking place is cluttered with negative self-talk, frustration and anxiety. Being unable to grasp the mechanics of a task can lead to symptoms that are in the same range of impact as post-traumatic stress disorder when experienced repeatedly over time.

When looking at a student, colleague, child, or employee; and considering the difficulties they are presenting in tasks like reading, writing, and organisation you may also see the following signs:



Behind these there are also a cocktail of emotional difficulties that can include:

- **Generalised anxiety**
- **Poor self-image & self-confidence**
- **Weak self-esteem**
- **Challenging, self-defeating or self-destructive behaviours**
- **Not feeling a sense of belonging**



Appreciating the difficult emotional landscape for dyslexic learners and seeing the adverse effect of coping strategies is a challenge. Here are five things that you can look out for and some strategies to support.

1. Generalised Anxiety

Life through a dyslexic's eyes can seem very unbalanced and the experience of growing up with dyslexia is often characterised by delays to identification, diagnosis and intervention. The process of recognising that you are out of step with others is distressing and depressing. Self-recrimination and anxiety are very common.

What can you do?

Provide opportunities to talk about the learning journey that has been experienced. Listen to any worries, concerns and anxieties. Encourage opportunities to share and talk through what could be done differently. Discuss what feels threatening and what sort of emotional responses they feel. Ensure that this discussion feels safe, confidential and is supportive in tone.

Support you can offer might include:

- Extra time for tasks.
- Ensuring that written materials are accessible, give consideration to fonts, paper colour and
- size of print.
- Streamline workload with tick sheets to reduce the reading and writing load.
- Find ways to help work-flow with visual charts and organisers.
- Encourage the use of colour coding tasks and activities.

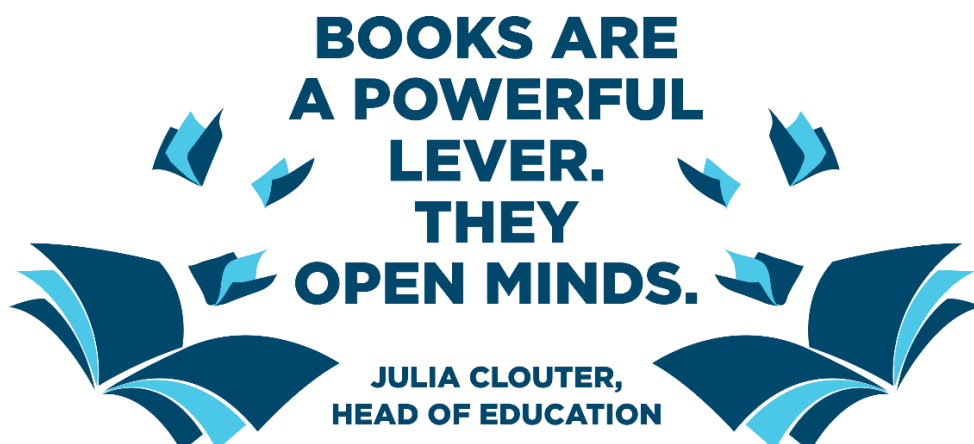
2. Poor self-image and self-confidence

Confidence and effectiveness can be grown, and successful past experiences help to pave the way for future successes. Outward signs of strong self-esteem include:

- Self-direction
- Not blaming others
- Good self-care
- An ability to make mistakes and learn from them.
- An ability to trust others.

Support you can offer might include:

- Provide opportunities to work on autonomous projects that enable the dyslexic learner to build on their strengths and follow their interests.
- Always build on a previous positive learning experience rather than introducing something new and potentially daunting. Even just saying that you are going to be building on a previously learnt concept is re-assuring and helpful.
- Provide opportunities for self-reflection and problem solving.
- Create conditions that are not conducive to bullying, teasing or perpetuating exclusion.
- If possible, provide opportunities for dyslexic learners to work together and discuss the ways they tackled the challenges of learning or working on a task.
- Celebrate successes and look for ways to showcase and utilise the individual's personal strengths.
- Investigate the use of assistive technology that can relieve the burden of reading and writing with speech-to-text software and text-to-speech tools. These tools have the ability to increase confidence levels and level the playing field for work tasks.



3. Weak self-esteem

Shame and self-esteem are linked together. In order to increase self-esteem, always ensure that goals are achievable. Thoughts, feelings, and actions are all woven together; so, when a task is set that is not achievable, the inevitable impact is feelings of shame. Self-belief has an impact on your outcomes and potential.

Support you can offer might include:

- Realistic goal setting.
- Make time for consistent and regular support with a supportive mentor.
- Find opportunities to confirm success and achievement and realise these successes in a tangible way. It could be a certificate, sticker or a tick in a box. Praise is crucial. It doesn't matter how, but recognition and appreciation are crucial to recognising worth and increasing productivity.
- Reward perseverance and praise the journey rather than the outcome

4. Challenging, self-defeating or self-destructive behaviours

Unrecognised and unsupported dyslexia is a destructive combination. Sometimes disruption is caused because the work and the situation feel threatening. Handing out reprimands only serves to re-enforce poor self-image and does not change the situation. Lack of support and understanding perpetuates behaviour problems.

Support that you can offer might include:

- Ensure that a passport for positive learning is created that identifies support needs. Then share this passport with staff and make notes on what is working. To change behaviours positive re-enforcement is far more powerful than negative attention.
- Use a 7/3 approach. Seven out of ten messages given should be modelling the behaviour or actions that you are looking for or praising positively. In school we call this 'catching them doing it right' it is a great platform to build on and does change behaviours.



5. Not feeling a sense of belonging

Unfortunately, over time, some dyslexic learners develop a state of learned helplessness. This may be through becoming dependent on others for support – for example, with a teaching assistant. Feeling hopeless in the face of challenges is very damaging, and can result in disconnection and depression.

Support that you can offer might include:

- Offer genuine praise and support rather than praising 'synthetic false' achievements.
- Identify the learner as a valued part of the team or group.
- Draw upon their personal strengths. If the individual is struggling to see them, provide evidence that enable them to identify their skills.
- Use the learner/workers name and identify them in the work of a team.
- Often dyslexic's have many misconceptions about their learning difficulty.
- The work of challenging these misconceptions is essential to them making progress. The use of assistive technology is a great way to do this as it gives opportunities to work at the same level.

Assistive technology is not the cure-all for dyslexia, but it can be incredibly helpful in the following ways:

- It raises self-esteem by making tasks accessible.
- It changes self-perception about capacity for learning.
- It enables independent work to be completed and reduces dependency on others.

In all of these strategies the views of the teacher, trainer, employer, or parent are crucial. By ensuring that positive strategies are being used the landscape of emotional wellbeing can be changed very much for the better.

