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Emotions and Specific Learning Difficulties: Hiding emotional pain

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Specific Learning Difficulties

Reason for "SpLD" name: specific areas of difficulty alongside other areas which are average – strong

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dysgraphia
- ADD / ADHD
- Dyscalculia

Mild to severe; often overlapping.

Independent of cognitive ability, socio-economic or language background.

Frequently said …

- I will never become anything
- I'm bored at school
- I do what they want so they will be my friend
- I try so hard, but they say I don't
- I'll never become anything
- How will I manage in life?
- I must be stupid
- No-one understands
- They bully me
- I do silly things to make people laugh
- It's easier to follow than risk being hurt

Mental health issues

Approx 25% experience mental health problems in life e.g.

- Low self-concept
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Anger
- Eating disorders / alcohol / other addictions

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Link SpLDs & Emotions

- Anxiety, frustration, stress; sometimes anger
- Believe they are "stupid"; feelings of low self-worth
- Ongoing and daily challenges
- Unidentified / unaddressed disorders?
- Difficulty focusing / following; may avoid specific tasks
- Lose motivation, self-esteem, academic self-confidence
- Struggle to keep up with peers
- Friendship difficulties e.g. shared interests, games, work
- Academic frustration – seeing others who know less, do better - better writing / memory skills
- Become disillusioned
- Out of (suitable) work

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Stress affects health

Effects on body:

- tiredness / difficulty sleeping / loss of appetite
- pain - especially neck, head, shoulders, stomach
- negative effects of habits → used to block out pain

Effects on feelings:

- overwhelming sadness / depression / cannot cope
- irritability / anger / frustration / anxiety
- hard to focus on work / studies
- feeling "weird" / hearing voices
- loss of self-esteem / confidence / motivation
- desperation / threat of suicide

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Anxiety

- Anxiety Disorders e.g. general / social / separation
- Severe anxiety … significant distress → can seriously affect life
- If bullied … lack friends, trouble with studies / work, often worry

- *Fluctuating symptoms include:*
- Fear / panic
- Breathlessness / sweaty
- Complaining of butterflies in tummy / pain in chest / stomach
- Feel tension, fidget; use toilet often

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Motivation

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Personal Needs based on a *Motivational* structure
- When each level is not met, person not motivated to move up a level
- Lowest level needs are very powerful. Person will lose interest if those needs are not met …

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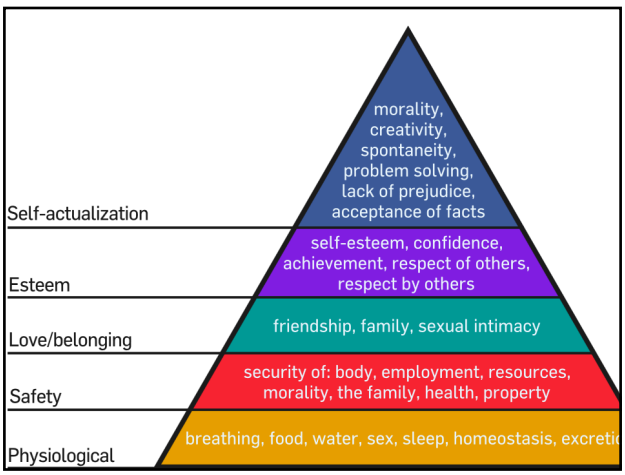

Reading and Long-term Failure

"Without the ability to read fluently and with accurate comprehension, for many children there can be a downward spiral of poor educational achievement and career prospects.

Studies following the development of children at family-risk of dyslexia have revealed that it is associated with language delays and speech difficulties in pre-school years before reading instruction even begins.

Literacy outcomes in children depend not only on the risk factors that predispose reading difficulties but also on protective factors which mitigate the risk."

Prof Margaret Snowling lecture (2013)

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Dyscalculia and Mental health

"Many affected children acquire a negative attitude to counting and arithmetic, which, in turn, often develops into a specific mathematics anxiety or even a generalized school phobia."

AND

The early identification and treatment of dyscalculia are very important in view of its frequent association with mental disorders. Sufferers need a thorough, neuropsychologically oriented diagnostic evaluation that takes account of the complexity of dyscalculia and its multiple phenotypes and can thus provide a basis for the planning of effective treatment."

Profs Liane Kaufmann and Michael von Aster (2012)

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Frustration …

Frustration often leads to antisocial or even deviant behaviour. There is no doubt that the strain placed on a child to "do better" when they are trying to the best of their ability is unreasonable…much reported evidence that many children displaying significant behavioural problems related to frustration seem to improve dramatically when the situation that is inappropriate is replaced by something more Suitable.

Peer, L. Dyslexia: Successful Inclusion in the Secondary School

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Failure

- Mental health problems common; often develop during childhood and adolescence
- Early intervention critical for long term success – academically, socially and emotionally
- Early failure in school often leads to long term failure and mental health issues.
- Need to address academics and develop resilience

Ways of concealing failure

- Withdrawal
- Avoidance
- Evasion
- Distraction
- Digression
- Disruption
- Clowning
- Daydreaming
- Negativism
- Absenteeism
- Cheating

Prof Diane Montgomery

Resilience building skills

- *Optimism* – gaining control, things will improve
- *Self-efficacy* – problems solving, fixing things, making decisions
- *Adaptability* - flexibility in problem solving, changing course
- *Trust* – accept self, then others
- *Support* – set up a person / network to whom to speak when difficulties loom
- *Comfort* – calm with self and with others; socially at ease
- *Tolerance* – ability to accept others with different views
- *Sensitivity* – coping with life in manageable way
- *Recovery* – returning to normal as soon as possible

Self-esteem & confidence

Feedback needed to help monitor own performance:

- Continue to make clear **what specifically** is good effort in each learning task
- Praise and encourage where possible
- As many achievements as possible should be frequently pointed out so child learns to value self and success rewarded
- Encourage to do co-operative learning tasks with others. Praise frequently in order to increase esteem within class
- Assign special responsibility in presence of others; observed in positive light
- Provide job(s) of responsibility to feel mature and trusted
- Avoid negative criticism and negative comments
- Encourage development of strength e.g. drama, music, art, sport

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- Find ways to help feel more positive; positive self-talk can be helpful
- Set appropriate targets and attainable goals. Reassurance ability to do and help in ability to be successful
- Help increase confidence by pointing out similarities between task in hand and tasks with which successful in the past
- Compare achievements against his *own* previous work rather than others. Show progression
- Encourage to meet peers of *cognitive* ability level (even if struggles with literacy)
- Enrol in clubs of subject interest
- Set up in school a meeting - successful students who speak about coping with and overcoming challenges

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Address bullying

- ***Traditional disciplinary approach*** – set out clear behaviour standards; use punishment to prevent / deter bullies from repeating behaviours
- ***Restorative practice*** – encourage admission of bullying by perpetrator & stimulate remorse; help bully take steps to restore damaged relationships
- ***Strengthen victim*** – help / coach students to confront bully assertively & stand firm & discourage bullying behaviour through calm & controlled language
- ***Mediation*** – assisting bully & victim in resolving their differences & help them find a peaceful win-win solution or compromise
- ***Support group method*** – gain cooperation of perpetrators - reveal distress experienced by victim at meeting where students supportive of victim are present
- ***Method of shared concern*** – empower bullies to assist in resolving bully/victim problem through the use of individual / group meetings with the participants

Ken Rigby. Also see resources by psychologist Tina Rae

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Self-help for students / adults

- Speak to GP
- Refer to psychotherapist / psychologist
- Ensure balanced diet
- Join a *Circle of Friends*
- Stay away from negative influences
- If desperate, do not stay alone. Do physical task / something to take your mind off things
- Share with family / friend
- Educators / parents / friends – be vigilant. Offer support and monitor
- Ensure first quality transition at all stages

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Remember … The future can be far brighter than the past …

- Do not hold it inside
- Go for help
- There are other ways of achieving; help should be there to find them

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