

Social Work Students on Placement with Dyslexia

A toolkit for students, practice educators and university tutors

Based on the Royal College of Nursing document: Dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia : a toolkit for nursing staff

Characteristics of adults with dyslexia

It is important to remember that every individual with dyslexia will have their own personal profile of strengths and areas of difficulty. This resource highlights the breadth of areas that may be affected, however, it must be remembered that no one individual is likely to experience all of these.

Memory difficulties

- may take longer to 'fix' information into their long-term memory
- may require information to be presented more than once
- people with dyslexia often find it more difficult to discard irrelevant or redundant information which could lead to 'memory overload' and confusion
- may have problems remembering colleagues or service user names
- may find it difficult to remember phone messages or other information to pass on to colleagues
- may find it difficult to learn routines and procedures
- may find it difficult to transfer learning into a new setting (apply theory to practice).

Organisational difficulties:

- may appear to have a short attention span and be easily distracted
- may have difficulty following instructions
- may have difficulty in ordering their ideas
- may have problems sequencing the order of tasks correctly
- may have problems with filing and looking up information alphabetically or sequentially
- may find it difficult to react quickly in busy environments or in an emergency
- may find it difficult to multitask as this requires a good memory, time management skills as well as the ability to work sequentially and be organised; having to do these simultaneously may overload their coping strategies.

Time management

Individuals with dyslexia may find it difficult to:

- plan ahead or plan their work schedule
- estimate how much time is needed for a specific task
- complete tasks on time
- students may find it difficult to balance coursework and placement commitments.

Reading

Individuals with dyslexia may:

- feel embarrassed about reading aloud
- misread unfamiliar words
- read very slowly and find scanning or skimming difficult
- find text is distorted, particularly black print on white
- find it difficult to read with noise distractions
- have difficulty understanding technical and specialist language particularly those words which look or sound similar
- have difficulties with abbreviations and acronyms
- have difficulty reading information from whiteboards
- have difficulty reading information on charts
- need to re-read things several times to get the meaning.

Writing and spelling

Individuals with dyslexia may have difficulty with:

- legibility
- writing in an appropriate language
- writing concisely
- writing accurately – their work may contain frequent spelling and grammatical errors
- checking for mistakes in their written work
- writing under time pressure, some individuals may write very slowly and need to re-draft their work
- spelling technical terms such as legal, procedural and medical terms, especially those which look or sound similar
- identifying numbers and letters and/or getting them in the correct order filling in forms, especially when required to do so at speed.

Language

Individuals with dyslexia may:

- feel embarrassed about language
- struggle to find the right word to say
- mispronounce unfamiliar words
- find it difficult to express themselves orally and talk in a disjointed way
- find it difficult to give clear instructions and/or information and have a tendency
- to 'go off on a tangent'
- have problems presenting verbal information in a structured way, for example when discussing a case and may jump from topic to topic rather than following a logical sequence
- sometimes experience a 'mental block' and be unable to express ideas clearly, particularly under stress
- take everything 'literally' or at face value (beware of words with double meanings).

Positive attributes

Individuals with dyslexia can have particular strengths which are also typically associated with the condition. Some of these are extremely useful attributes for a social worker to have. People with dyslexia are likely to be:

- caring/empathetic
- intuitive
- good strategic thinkers
- good at problem solving
- creative and original
- determined and hard working
- holistic thinkers.

Reading documentation

In relation to reading documentation (e.g. policies, procedures, case management systems) some individuals may:

- read very slowly
- find that they need to re-read something several times to get the meaning
- find it hard to scan or skim read
- experience visual stress – this may cause text to appear distorted, particularly if reading black print on white paper
- find it difficult to read with background noise
- find it difficult to read and interpret information on charts particularly where information is presented in different layers or there is a need to read across and up/down
- have difficulties reading other peoples handwriting e.g. in case files

Reading documentation

Self help strategies

- Give yourself enough time to read things and re-read them if necessary.
- Use a small alphabetical notebook (or card system) to record difficult words and remind you of their meaning.
- Carry a list of common abbreviations and their meaning.
- Use an electronic dictionary to look up unfamiliar terms.
- Use a coloured overlay, if appropriate.
- Print things on cream/off white paper
- Set up your computer screen to use a coloured background (choose the colour that is best for you).
- If appropriate (in other words, if you have a personal copy) highlight key points to emphasise

Strategies to help students

- Allow extra time for reading.
- Present the individual with essential reading well in advance of meetings highlighting important parts if appropriate.
- Provide opportunities to discuss reading.
- When producing word processed documents try to make it 'dyslexia friendly' in other words:
 - write in a logical sequence
 - avoid small print (use font size 12 or above)
 - use a dyslexia friendly font (for example arial, verdana, tahoma or lucinda sans are best)
 - use bullet points in preference to sentences where possible
 - use simple words/avoid overuse of jargon or uncommon words
 - do not justify the right hand margin; this makes the spaces between words uneven and harder to read if you are dyslexic
 - space the information so it is not cramped, use short paragraphs to break up dense text
 - where possible print documents on off white/cream paper.

Writing case notes

In relation to writing case notes and filling in forms, some individuals may find it difficult to:

- organise their thoughts coherently
- write in appropriate language
- use punctuation correctly
- write legibly
- write concisely
- spell chose the correct version of words such as there/their
- write under time pressure if their writing is very slow or they need to redraft their work
- fill in forms, especially when required to do so at speed.

Writing case notes

Self help strategies

- Give yourself enough time to write up notes and other paperwork.
- Try and find somewhere quiet where you are less likely to be interrupted.
- Divide your ideas into sections and tackle one section at a time.
- Create a personal list of difficult words to check when required.
- Familiarise yourself with the layout of different forms; ideally take home a blank copy to look at when you are less rushed.
- Devise 'templates' or checklists for different types of documentation, for example service user assessment, letters.
- Use an electronic dictionary if possible.
- Develop effective checking procedures and proofreading skills.
- For handwritten notes, if your writing looks messy; experiment with different types of pen (chunky/standard/slim) until you find one that helps.
- Consider using a handheld recording device to record your ideas verbally – you can then copy it into the notes but you don't have to think and write at the same time

Strategies to help students

- Allow students enough time to write up their notes.
- Try not to disturb students who you know need to really concentrate on their documentation.
- Help students to devise a checklist of key areas to include in certain types of documentation.
- Consider devising a 'sample' or 'model' for different types of documentation, to show the level and content expected.

Spelling

In relation to spelling individuals may find it difficult to:

- spell certain words – these might not be
- difficult words, some individuals can spell these correctly but struggle with quite straight forward words spell specific terminology particularly where there are words that sound or look very similar.

Spelling

Self help strategies

- Keep a notebook containing the correct spelling of words that you need to use regularly.
- When you need to spell an unfamiliar word – check with a colleague or in a dictionary then add it to your list.
- Devise mnemonics (a rhyme or something) to help you remember difficult words.
- Write words that you are trying to learn on post it notes or small cards and stick them up around the house (by the kettle, fridge door, bathroom mirror) – the more you look at them the quicker you will learn them.
- Try using an electronic dictionary

Strategies to help students

- Provide a list of common terminology used in your setting for students.
- Help students to feel able to ask if there is a word they are uncertain about the spelling of.

Remembering things

In relation to remembering things some individuals may have difficulties with:

- remembering names of service users and colleagues
- learning routines or procedures
- following instructions
- remembering information to pass on to colleagues (e.g. from phone calls, conversations with service users or colleagues)
- ordering their ideas
- listening and taking notes simultaneously such as doing an assessment with a service user
- filing and looking up information alphabetically or sequentially
- multi tasking as this requires a good memory, time management skills as well as the ability to work sequentially and be organised

Remembering things

Self help strategies

- Invent and use mnemonics.
- Use to do lists.
- Always carry something to write on and a pen.
- Write important things to remember on sticky post-it notes and put them in key places where you will see them frequently.
- Use visual methods such as diagrams and mind maps to help you remember.
- Use flow diagrams where procedures need to be remembered in a particular order.
- Use auditory methods of learning and listen to it when you can.
- Use a personal organiser (PDA or mobile phone) to set reminders for key tasks.
- Chunk difficult numbers into smaller chunks they are easier to remember that way.
- Use repetition; the more you repeat something the quicker you remember it.
- Use coloured pens and highlighters to help organise and prioritise.
- Devise prompt sheets for frequently encountered activities for example case recording, telephone duty.

Strategies to help students

- Help the student to invent and use mnemonics.
- Encourage the individual to use 'to do' lists rather than trying to remember.
- Don't give too many instructions at once.
- Make sure that there is always something to write on (and a pen) near the phone.
- Help a colleague to draw up a plan highlighting important tasks/deadlines.
- Set clear, measurable targets.
- Allow enough time for the person to grasp key information, try not to rush them.
- Explain things more than once if required.
- Where possible give instructions in written and verbal form (you could consider using a digital voice recorder to record sets of instructions).
- Create an orientation pack for your setting, outlining useful information and routines

Managing time

- **Managing time**
- In terms of managing time some individuals may find it difficult to:
- plan ahead or plan their work
- schedule
- estimate how much time is needed for a specific task
- be on time for appointments
- complete tasks on time
- read dates and times, particularly those using the 24 hour clock.

Managing time

Self help strategies

- Use timers/alarms to remind you of set time
- deadlines e.g. when you need to go to a meeting or home visit
- Keep a diary or wall planner to remind you of important dates (meetings/deadlines).
- Build up a list of how long certain tasks usually take
- Have a picture of a 24 and 12 hour clock to show the differences.

Strategies to help students

- Help students to build up a list of how long things take to do.
- Set achievable time related tasks

Reading aloud

Reading aloud may be difficult due to:

- problems pronouncing complex words and terminology
- a slow reading speed
- visual disturbances
- reluctance to use equipment, such as a coloured overlay, in front of others.

Reading aloud

Self help strategies

- If you know you will need to read something aloud try to get a copy in advance to practice.
- If you can get an electronic copy (you might need to scan a hard copy) format it in a way that helps you, for example change the font style and size, create extra paragraph breaks to divide it up into smaller sections, or use bullet points.
- Use highlighters or coloured pens to draw attention to key areas.

Strategies to help students

- Do not ask someone with dyslexia to read aloud unless you have given them the material well in advance

Writing in front of others

Writing in front of others might be difficult as a result of:

- spelling difficulties (particularly when writing on a vertical surface such as a whiteboard)
- problems organising ideas, particularly when required to listen and write things down such as during a 'brainstorming' session
- problems writing legibly
- a slow writing speed

Writing in front of others

Self help strategies

- Probably the best strategy would be to try to avoid doing this wherever possible. The advantage in a group situation is that there are others who might be very happy to be the scribe or note taker.

Strategies to help students

- Do not put others on the spot. If someone appears reluctant to act as scribe or note taker, don't push them into it.