

# Steps to Independence for People with Learning Disabilities



Dale S. Brown

ISBN# 0-942670-00-0, © 2005 Dale S. Brown

Published by the  
Learning Disabilities Association of America

## About the Author

Dale Susan Brown works in Washington D.C. as an author, speaker, and strategic leadership consultant. Her most recent book, Job-Hunting Tips for the So-Called Handicapped or People who have Disabilities, was coauthored with Richard Nelson Bolles, author of What Color Is Your Parachute? She has written three other books; Employment and People with Learning Disabilities: I Know I Can Climb the Mountain; and Learning A Living; A Guide to Planning Your Career and Finding A Job for People with Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, and Attention Deficit Disorder. Steps to Independence for People with Learning Disabilities was the first book she wrote. The Learning Disabilities Association of America asked her to revise it and she was kind enough to do so without payment of any kind. It is now in your hands. She has authored hundreds of articles on various aspects of employment, including many on learning disabilities.

She recently retired from a quarter century as a distinguished civil servant working in disability policy for the United States Government. In 1979, she started work at the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, where she played a key role in shaping federal policy to include services and supports for people with learning disabilities. In 2001, she moved to the newly formed Office of Disability Employment Policy, Department of Labor, where she served in the Office of Policy and Research as a policy advisor one key activity was leading a national effort to make Job Corps accessible to students with disabilities.

Dale Brown founded National Network of Learning Disabled Adults, which worked for a decade to develop people with learning disabilities as a political force. She served on the Board of Directors of the Learning Disabilities Association of America from 1986-1991, where she played a pivotal role in developing infrastructure within the organization to support adults.

She has spoken at over one thousand national, state, and local conferences and symposia regarding people with disabilities. Topics include employment, job accommodation, self-help, and other related issues. Every year since 1987, she has led self-help groups for the International Dyslexia Association.

She is the winner of numerous awards including the:

- Voices Campaign Winner, Charmin Shoppes.
- Secretary's Professional Achievement Award, Department of Labor.
- Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award, United States Junior Chamber of Commerce.
- Flemming Award for Excellence in Civil Service Administration, United States Junior Chamber of Commerce.
- Individual Achievement Award, National Council on Communications Disorders.
- Margaret Rawson Award, National Institute of Dyslexia.

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# Foreword

I wrote the original edition of this book in 1980 when the movement to recognize learning disabilities in adults first began. It was the first self-remediation manual for adults with learning disabilities. Over 50,000 copies were distributed. Many copies were passed around and placed in libraries, each impacting numerous adults and families.

Things have changed since then! In 1980, it was widely believed that children outgrew learning disabilities. Parents and their children were distressed when this did not occur. The word “transition” had not yet been applied to the disability world. Students were very much on their own. There were very few resources. The bibliography of the original book had only two books on adults with learning disabilities. Look at the bibliography in the back of this book and you will see the increase in written products. Americans with Disabilities Act did not exist and it was legal for one of my former employers to look at me straight in the eye and say, “I can not hire you. You have learning disabilities.”

I used to give speeches about the self-help movement and say, “There is no help. We must help each other.” Today, colleges and universities have programs to provide accommodations for people with learning disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation helps some people and it is rare that people claim that learning disabilities are outgrown. Much that is in this book was radical at the time it was printed. Now, it is considered common knowledge.

A new disability, ADHD or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder has been discovered and legitimized. This was a big relief to me personally, as it explained many of my problems, which were not part of my learning disabilities. There is a strong overlap between ADHD and learning disabilities, but they are separate disabilities. There is a lot of literature on ADHD with adults and organizations that help people with ADHD. So, we decided that this book should continue to focus on learning disabilities. We believe, however, that many people with ADHD will find it useful.

Some things have not changed. People with learning disabilities must still work hard to develop independence, set goals, and take charge of their own lives. Parents still have trouble letting go, feeling the ambivalence of paternal love.

This book is offered to young adults with learning disabilities and their families in hope that it will encourage, inspire, and educate.

The author would like to thank Jane Browning, Executive Director, LDA, for her unfailing support. Dr. Barbara Guyer, former Chair of the Adult Issues Committee exhibited enthusiasm about the project and included it in the Adult Issues Committee plan in 2004.

The earlier book was conceptualized and edited by Barbara Scheiber, Director of the Parent’s Campaign for Handicapped Children and Youth, who spent many hours counseling me and editing the first edition of the book. I would like to thank Sam Kirk and Sam Clements, two giants in the field who are no longer with us. They spent time with me when I was a young, unknown person trying to tell the professionals in our field that we didn’t outgrow it! But most of all, I would like to thank the many young people with learning disabilities who have shared their struggles to find jobs, live on their own, and become self-fulfilled. I would like to thank the adults, many in their 40’s and 50’s, who have

given me feedback on how my early work influenced them. Finally, I would like to thank those of you who I do not know who have influenced the field of learning disabilities and its impact on adults.

# Introduction

Imagine yourself in a foreign country. You cannot read the signs. You think you know the language, but you speak slowly and people get impatient. They seem to misdirect you. Cashiers tell you the wrong prices. When you try to follow directions, you do everything wrong. Conversation is a strain and quickly tires you.

You don't know the customs. When you speak to people, they seem uncomfortable and look away. An official explains the money system to you and a group of other newcomers. Everyone but you grasps it quickly.

You are placed with a native family. Everything is difficult. Your "mother" asks you to sweep the floor. You try hard, but the broom doesn't catch the dust. Your "sister" sweeps easily. Pencil points keep breaking when you write, but every one else writes without any problem. There are no street signs or addresses. So every time your "mother" asks you to run an errand, you get lost. Your family often gets angry with you. You want to be on your own, but you do not know where else to live.

You are expected to find employment, but you can't fill out the applications. Finally, you take the form home and ask your "brother" to fill them out. Even so, your interviews end quickly. You are rejected from forty jobs.

How would you feel? Stupid? Inferior? Angry at your "family"? As if everyone were ganging up against you?

The situation described above is similar to life as a person with a learning disability. As a matter of fact, many people with learning disabilities have great difficulty right in their own homes. Some are unsure of where their bodies are in space. They do not have a secure sense of the floor beneath their feet. They cannot tell how far away the wall is. They cannot tell the difference between left and right.

Others have the same difficulty with English that a person without a learning disability would have with a foreign language. They have trouble finding the right words and often have to struggle to express simple ideas. And they may repeatedly misunderstand what they hear.

Some cannot read, or read with great difficulty. They find road signs, menus, and job applications impossible to use.

People who do not have learning disabilities might have learned to adjust more easily in that foreign country. They might have the confidence to learn the language, figure out the customs, get along with the "family" and find a job. That confidence comes from years of successful living which many adults with learning disabilities lack.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Many people with learning disabilities have become successful and even famous. Business Leader, Charles Schwab; Former Chairman and CEO of Ford Motor Credit, Donald Winkler; and entertainer, Whoppi Goldberg are some recent examples. Thomas Alva Edison, John F. Kennedy, Albert Einstein, and Leonardo Da Vinci are historical figures believed to have experienced learning

disabilities.

One does not have to be famous in order to be successful. People like these are also successes: a young man who graduates from high school with a knowledge of computers and has a successful small service business helping people set up and use their computers; a single mother who has raised four children; a man who has spent five years getting his master's degree and is now a vocational rehabilitation counselor; and a teenage girl who baby sits to earn college money.

But many adults with learning disabilities find that success seems beyond them. They have difficulty with the basic tasks of life. Some cannot find employment. Others have no friends. Many depend on their parents for money. Some get jobs that are beneath their abilities. Others are supported by welfare. Some get into trouble and end up in jail or in a mental hospital.

The purpose of this booklet is to help adults with learning disabilities become economically independent and reach their full potential. The contents include:

- definitions of different types of learning disabilities
- ways to get a professional diagnosis
- ways to diagnose your own problems
- ways that parents can help a person with learning disabilities find a home, manage money, cook, be self-sufficient
- steps to take to find a job, make friends, use one's strengths to overcome one's disabilities
- the advantages of having learning disabilities

We hope this guide will help you as you take on the challenge of becoming independent. Good luck!

## Who is Learning Disabled

Adults with learning disabilities receive inaccurate information through their senses and/or have trouble processing that information. Like static on the radio or a bad TV picture, the information becomes garbled as it travels from the eye, ear, or skin to the brain.

This inaccurate sensory information leads to problems with reading, writing, or other vital activities such as driving. Either these skills have not been learned, have been learned after heroic effort, or have been learned poorly. Many adults with learning disabilities have trouble listening and speaking. Common problems are:

1. accident proneness
2. having to work longer to produce the same amount of work as co-workers
3. having to choose between carelessness and slowness
4. frequent errors
5. often misunderstanding people
6. having to do consciously what comes naturally to others
7. academic failure
8. vocational failure

### DEFINING THE DISABILITY

The disability is perplexing and has many definitions. The most well known definition is codified in the regulations for IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and was unchanged from The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). It reads:

“Specific Learning Disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. This term does not include learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.”

This definition emphasized educational issues and did not legitimize the life difficulties of people with learning disabilities such as difficulty getting jobs and developing social skills.

To meet the need for a more inclusive definition, the Learning Disabilities Association of America defined learning disabilities as follows:

“Specific Learning Disabilities is a chronic condition of neurological origin which selectively interferes with the development, integration, and/or demonstration of verbal and/or nonverbal abilities. Specific Learning Disabilities exist as a distinct handicapping condition and varies in its manifestations and in degree of severity. Throughout life, the condition can affect self

esteem, education, vocation, socialization, and/or daily living activities.<sup>1</sup>”

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, a coalition of the leading organizations involved in learning disabilities, developed a definition which included aspects of both definitions.

“Learning disability is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the lifespan. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences.<sup>2</sup>”

The field of learning disabilities has not yet reached complete consensus on a definition.

Today, however, there is little controversy about the following facts. Learning disabilities are an actual difference (called a dysfunction) in how the central nervous system operates. This has been proven by scientists. People do not outgrow their learning disabilities which persist throughout adulthood. Also difficulties in social perception and social interaction are part of the syndrome of learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities are different from intellectual disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities have limited learning capacity. From childhood, they consistently develop at a slower-than-average rate.

People with learning disabilities, on the other hand, have specific trouble with perception or taking information in through their senses. In general, they are capable of learning and performing at their age level, but their learning is affected by the problems they have with perception. They tend to have unique ways of gathering information from the world around them.

In order to teach people with either intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of individual difficulties as well as an open mind about individual potential.

In the next chapter, many different kinds of learning disabilities are defined. These should be helpful in deciding how each individual can overcome obstacles to learning and can be what is in each of them to be.

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<sup>1</sup> **Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. (1986). ACLD Description: Specific Learning Disabilities. *ACLD Newsbriefs*, Sept./Oct. (166), 15.** Note: The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities is now the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Revision reported in March/April *Newsbriefs* 2004, pg 7.

<sup>2</sup> **National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. (1988). *Collective perspectives on issues affecting learning disabilities: Position papers and statements*. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.**

## Types of Learning Disabilities

The term “learning disability” covers many problems. Definitions of these problems are not standardized. This booklet will use the terms and definitions that follow:

### ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES

Problems with basic academic skills. These include:

1. **Dyscalculia** – Difficulty doing math
2. **Dysgraphia** – Difficulty writing
3. **Dyslexia** - Difficulty reading

### ASSOCIATED REACTIONS

One part of the body moves involuntarily because of the movement of another part of the body, for instance, the left arm may move a little when the right arm moves or one arm may move when the head turns.

### AUDITORY PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM

Trouble taking information in through the sense of hearing and/or processing that information. People with this problem frequently hear inaccurately. A sequencing or discrimination error can change the meaning of an entire message: for example, one might hear “I ran to the car,” instead of “I rented the car.” People with auditory handicaps frequently do not hear unaccented syllables. They may hear “formed” instead of “performed,” “seven” instead of “seventy.” Some auditory perceptual handicaps are:

1. **Auditory discrimination problem** – Trouble telling the difference between similar sounds, such as “th” and “f” or “m” and “n”; hearing “seventeen” instead of “seventy”; hearing an angry rather than a joking tone of voice.
2. **Auditory figure ground problem** – Trouble hearing a sound over background noise, for example, being unable to hear the cell-phone ring when one is in a crowded, noisy room, or having difficulty hearing someone talk at a party when music is playing.
3. **Auditory sequencing problem** – Trouble hearing sounds in the correct order, for example, hearing “nine-four” instead of “four-nine”; hearing

“treats” instead of “street”; hearing music garbled because the melody is perceived out of order.

**CATASTROPHIC RESPONSE**

An involuntary reaction to too many sights, sounds, extreme emotions, or other strong stimuli. This may result in losing one’s temper, becoming dazed or unaware of one’s surroundings, or “freezing” for a short time.

**CROSSING THE MIDLINE**

Trouble with moving ones limbs across the center of the body. This could include: difficulty writing across a page, sweeping a floor, or controlling a steering wheel.

**DIRECTIONAL PROBLEM**

Trouble automatically distinguishing left from right; learning north, south, east, west; remembering the placement of an icon on a computer toolbar; learning the layout of a large symmetrical building.

**DISINHIBITION**

Difficulty in behaving appropriately in an automatic way. This is a problem with the self governing part of the brain that stops one from doing such things as laughing at the wrong time, talking aloud to oneself, coughing without covering the mouth. A disinhibited person might abruptly interrupt a conversation or talk aloud to himself in public.

**INTERSENSORY PROBLEM**

Trouble using two senses at once or associating two senses, for instance, not realizing that the letter “d” which is seen, is the same as the sound “d” when it is spoken; being unable to feel someone tap you on the shoulder while you are absorbed in a task; being unable to listen to a conversation and drive at the same time.

**MEMORY PROBLEM, SHORT-TERM**

Trouble remembering names, numbers, specific facts, what happened a few minutes ago. A poor memory makes academic success difficult.

**MOTOR PROBLEM**

Trouble moving one’s body efficiently to achieve a certain goal. Some motor problems are:

1. **Perceptual motor problems** – Trouble performing a task requiring coordination because of inaccurate information received through the senses. This may result in clumsiness, difficulty in participating in simple sports, awkward or stiff movements.

2. **Visual motor problem** – Trouble seeing something and then doing it: learning a dance step while watching a teacher, copying something off a blackboard, throwing something at a target.

3. **Auditory motor problem** – Trouble hearing something and then doing it; following verbal directions, dancing to a rhythmic beat, taking notes in a lecture.

**PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM**

Trouble taking information in through one's senses and/or processing that information.

**PROPRIOCEPTIVE PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM**

Trouble knowing where one is in space. A person with this problem might not be able to tell the position of her limbs with her eyes closed.

**SOFT NEUROLOGICAL SIGNS**

Signs of central nervous system dysfunction that can be observed: staring, turning the head instead of moving the eyes, inability to look at people in the eye, not holding the head straight, being easily startled.

**TACTILE PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM**

Trouble taking information in through the sense of touch. Some tactile disabilities are:

1. **Tactile defensiveness** – Tendency to avoid being touched and to perceive light touch as threatening.

2. **Tactile discrimination problem** – Trouble feeling the difference between similar objects such as heavy or light sandpaper, silk or cotton, ripe or unripe cantaloupe.

3. **Tactile pressure problem** – Trouble judging the right amount of pressure needed to perform motor acts: holding an egg in two fingers without breaking or dropping it, tapping someone playfully rather than hitting them.

**VESTIBULAR PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM**

Problem with one's sense of balance, for example, a tendency to lose one's footing on a curb.

**VISUAL PERCEPTUAL PROBLEM**

Trouble taking information in through the sense of sight and/or processing that information. Some visual perceptual difficulties are:

1. **Visual figure-ground problems** – Trouble seeing a specific image within a competing

background: finding a face in a crowd, finding keys on a crowded desk, picking out one line of print from the other lines in a book. People with this problem cannot see things that others can see. To them the keys on a crowded desk are not there.

**2. Visual sequencing problem** – Trouble seeing things in the correct order, for instance, seeing letters or numbers reversed, seeing two cans reversed on shelf of cans. The person with this problem actually sees a word incorrectly. He may see “was” instead of “saw.”

**3. Visual discrimination problem** - Trouble seeing the difference between two similar objects, such as the letters “v” and “u,” or “e” and “c”; the difference between two shades of one color; or two similar types of leaves. The person with this problem sees the two similar objects as alike.

**4. Depth perception problem** – Trouble perceiving how far away (or near) an object may be: for instance, you may not know how close the fork is to your hand or how far to reach to put a glass of water on the table.

## Diagnosing Learning Disabilities

### PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF A DISABILITY WITH NO NAME

Most adults with learning disabilities are not diagnosed. They do not understand their problem. They are often rejected by others because they lack social skills and have soft neurological signs that make them seem odd. They know they must struggle for what comes easily to others. When they compare themselves to people of their age, they see that they are doing poorly.

Emi Flynn, Director of Multisensory Learning Associates (MLA), described how her brother learned to read easily and with great excitement. Then she went to school the next year. “When I started school the following year, I was so excited to learn to read like my brother. But reality quickly hit. I couldn’t figure out how to remember what the squiggles on the page said. I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t remember when I tried so hard.”

“Arithmetic was just as difficult. I had to use my fingers to add numbers together, but as things got more complicated, I ran out of fingers. It was hard to remember which number was 6 and which number was 9. When we started multiplication, I mixed up the “plus” (+) and the “times” (X) signs. Somehow the magic I had looked forward to wasn’t there. School was not fun.”<sup>3</sup>

Like Emi Flynn, most learning disabled adults do not understand why the magic isn’t there. They do not understand why tasks are so difficult. Since they lack knowledge of their learning disabilities, four possible causes seem to explain their problems: craziness, low intelligence, not trying, and personal weakness. All four explanations lead to low self-image which paralyzes their desire to improve. Thus, some people with learning disabilities actually become emotionally disturbed, stop trying, and fail to develop their intelligence. Society may label them “mentally retarded”, “mentally ill” or unmotivated.

Many learning disabled adults seek help. But unfortunately, learning disabilities are stigmatized. Vocational rehabilitation agency counselors are required by law to help the most severely disabled people first. Learning disabilities are invisible, unrecognized, and misunderstood. They usually are not considered severe.

People with learning disabilities struggle alone. Unless they are receiving therapy for their difficulties, as they advance, they are not complimented. Instead, they are criticized, teased, or even worse, disciplined. Allison Merriweather, who has dyslexia and dyscalculia, is an eminent American folk artist who has exhibited extensively. She remembers being teased for her difficulties reading, writing, and even tying her shoes. She explained, “The one time I could have been singled out as having talent I ended up being unfairly punished. I was in third grade and we had an assignment to illustrate a story. I was interested in the project and took it home to complete. I drew on all these pieces of paper and stuck it together. But, when I brought it to school, the teacher didn’t believe that I had done it and the other kids didn’t either. They thought that my older brother or my mother had done it

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1. Stories of Hope compiled by Leslie Coul, Howard Eaton, and Jessica Werb. Book One, Eaton Coull Learning Group, 2003, pg 41

for me. As punishment, I had to sit outside the classroom on a chair.”<sup>4</sup>

Most people cannot teach themselves under these conditions. As a matter of fact, failure can become comforting. If one expects to fail, one avoids disappointment.

The inaccurate information received through the senses causes insecurity. If people cannot trust their senses or bodies, what can they trust? Without knowing what the real problem is, they may blame others. People with auditory perceptual problems sometimes believe that friends are lying to them. A social worker was convinced that staff members of her hospital set up meetings and told her the wrong time.

Thus, adults with learning disabilities become angry—angry at people who reject them and condemn them for “not trying,” and angry at people who seem to do everything so easily.

### **FINDING A NAME FOR THE DISABILITY**

Fortunately, many people with learning disabilities do discover their learning disabilities. They may learn about them on the Internet, TV, radio or in a book. A doctor, teacher, parent, or counselor may recommend that they be diagnosed.

When they find out, some people with learning disabilities do not want to believe that they have disabilities. They have convinced themselves that they are failures and don’t want to believe otherwise. Others fear that having a disability means that they are unable to improve.

Most people with learning disabilities feel relieved to learn the cause of their problems. One construction worker who is unable to read said, “When the psychologist told me I had dyslexia, I couldn’t control myself. I started to cry.” He said, “Why are you crying?” I replied, “I’m crying because I’m happy. Now I know I’m not stupid. I understand why I have so many problems.”

### **A Label Can Be Harmful**

Some people with learning disabilities are diagnosed early. The lucky ones receive proper remediation and catch up with peers.

But it’s not enough to give a disability a name. A label of any kind can be harmful if nothing is done to help the person improve. Sometimes, less is expected of a person labeled “disabled.” He or she tends to fulfill those low expectations and do poorly. In some schools, people with learning disabilities are educated with people who have other disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities or severe emotional disabilities. In this setting, inappropriate help is often provided.

Once a person has a label, many problems which have nothing to do with the disability may be blamed on it. It’s easy to use the disability as an excuse. Some children are overprotected and learn to let others act on their behalf. They develop another disability: dependency.

Much of this could be avoided by treating the disability in a matter-of-fact way, describing it clearly and giving the person only as much help as necessary. An unclear or stigmatizing label does not save an individual from many of the psychological effects of a disability with no name.

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<sup>4</sup>Stories of Hope compiled by Leslie Coul, Howard Eaton, and Jessica Werb. Book One, Eaton Coull Learning Group, 2003. pp. 72-3.

## **DISCUSSING LEARNING DISABILITIES OPENLY**

Some children have been diagnosed, but their parents have never told them about their disability. If your teenager or young adult lives at home, tell him/her what you know. If you feel uncomfortable about this, ask the person who diagnosed your child to explain. Your son or daughter should know the answers to these questions:

- X What exactly is the disability? It is important to use and define the scientific terms.
- X What improvements have been shown? The improvements should be ascribed to your child's efforts, not "outgrowing it," upbringing or treatment technique.
- X Has medication been used in treating the disability? What medicines? What effects have they had? Are they still being used? Will dependency be reduced? Is the medication expected to be used indefinitely? What would happen if your child stopped taking medication?

A report should be given to the person with learning disabilities in writing or on tape. If your child hotly denies that s/he has a handicap, wait a few months and try again. Describe the handicap as it shows itself in various ways: for example, if s/he gives a bizarre response to something you say, ask, "What did you hear me say?" If s/he responds incorrectly, tell the child what you really said and explain, "It sounds as if you made an error in auditory discrimination." Without knowing what the problem is, children may be unable to improve and may continue to blame themselves for things that are not their fault.

If you are an adult who suspects that your parents knows you have a learning disability, but will not discuss it, ask them directly and calmly. Ask if they will pay for a professional diagnosis. If they get upset or refuse to talk about it, wait a few months and try again. If they again refuse, remember that you may be stirring up difficult feelings: guilt, anger, denial, bad memories. Get as much information from this book as you can. Keep studying about learning disabilities. Eventually you will be able to arrange for a diagnosis on your own.

## **PROFESSIONAL DIAGNOSIS**

Professionals who are willing and able to diagnose adults with learning disabilities are available in most large urban areas and university settings, but can be difficult to locate in rural areas. A few doctors still believe that the signs of learning disabilities disappear in adulthood, although many adults have learning disabilities throughout their lives. Diagnosis is approached in two directions which are sometimes used together. These approaches are: medical and educational.

### **Medical Diagnosis**

Neurologists, neuropsychologists and psychiatrists: often diagnose people with learning disabilities. General practitioners and internists often refer people with learning disabilities to specialists. Neurologists test for soft neurological signs, the symptoms of central nervous system dysfunction which can be observed. Other doctors examine for possible physical causes of sensory deficits, such as loss of hearing and poor vision. They check for nutritional imbalances and biochemical problems. Psychiatrists confirm or deny emotional causes for the problems. Neuropsychologists are not

doctors, but they are licensed to give a battery of tests which examine perception, cognition, attention, and motor abilities. Some agencies require a medical diagnosis before they will accept an individual for their services.

## **Educational Diagnosis**

Psychologists and educational therapists administer a variety of tests to evaluate academic skills, perception and motor abilities. This type of diagnosis defines the learning disability and locates individual strengths. You should be able to find out through such an evaluation which learning “channel” is your best. Do you learn best through seeing, hearing, touching, or a combination of these? Based on this knowledge of yourself, a plan to improve your skills can be developed. This type of diagnosis may be found through:

- **Your school system.** Because of their responsibilities under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), they often have lists of evaluators.
- **Disability Student Service Centers in Colleges.** These are usually open only to enrolled students. However, most provide testing. Almost all of them can give you referrals.
- **Hospitals.** Those that are connected to universities can be a good resource; other hospitals may also have clinics that offer testing.
- **Private educational testing centers.** Check to see if they specialize in learning disabilities. Be sure you know the background and training of the person who will test you, what types of tests will be given, and how much it will cost.

## **LOCATING A DIAGNOSTICIAN**

Start with places that diagnose learning disabilities. Call your local Learning Disabilities Association of America or other national organizations listed in Chapter 10, page 54, which lists organizations. Ask for their list of diagnostic centers. Check under “Schools with Special Academic Education” or “Reading Improvement Instruction” in the Yellow pages. Go on the web and search with the key words “learning disabilities” and “diagnosis” and your geographic area. Also, use the names of the professions such as “educational therapist.” Contact individuals you find through your research and ask if they are willing to evaluate adults with learning disabilities. If they say “no,” ask them to refer you to someone else.

Two public agencies can help provide a diagnosis:

- **Your local school district.** Under IDEA, any person of school age (up to age 21) who is having academic difficulty has the right to be evaluated for disabilities related to their learning. The school district pays for this evaluation. Under the terms of the law, more than one test must be used to make a decision about the need for a special education program. Testing done by the school system will emphasize educational needs, strong points as well as weaknesses, and the way a person learns best.

- **Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies.** These offices, which are available in most states, are set up to help people with disabilities obtain appropriate job training and find (and keep) employment. One of the key services offered is evaluation of disabilities which interfere with employability. Vocational rehabilitation services are discussed more fully on page 30.

## SELF-DIAGNOSIS

Professional diagnosis may not be available to you because it is too expensive or too far away. You may not be able to find someone who has experience with adults. Remember, you yourself are a diagnostic resource.

How can you determine if you have a learning disability? You may not be able to find out for sure, but you can decide whether you have problems similar to that faced by people with learning disabilities. You can try suggested ideas in this book for dealing with them. And you can realize that you have a disability, not a personal weakness. By using self-help techniques, you can overcome the effects of your learning disabilities. Then, it really doesn't matter whether or not you have them. Here are some ways to "diagnose" yourself:

- **Think about yourself.** Does what you have read so far sound as if it could be about you? Do you have a history of failure at school, social life, or work? Page 8 lists symptoms of learning disabilities in employment. Does this sound like you?
- **List problems.** List mistakes that bring you in conflict with other people or cause you trouble, such as needing a great deal of time to accomplish a task. Read the definitions in Chapter Two.

Do your problems sound similar?

If you find yourself saying "yes" to these questions, you may be learning disabled. In chapter 6, entitled, "Overcoming your Disabilities," self-help techniques are discussed.

The following chapter is for parents of economically dependent adults with learning disabilities, but we hope you will find it useful too as you take your own steps to independence.

## **Building An Independent Life**

Like everyone else, people with learning disabilities must learn how to get along with others, manage their money, shop for necessities and find a place to live, if they are to become independent. These things demand time and effort for everyone, but they are far more challenging for people with learning disabilities.

### **PROBLEMS IN FAMILY LIFE**

People who have learning disabilities may be disorganized. They may be sloppy, leaving possessions all over the house. They may lack a routine, making it difficult for their family to plan ahead. Some people with learning disabilities are clumsy and accidentally break household items. Carelessness, the mental equivalent of clumsiness, can be nerve-wracking: for example, an adult with learning disabilities may repeatedly leave the phone off the hook or forget to close a door behind him.

Housework may be extremely difficult. Washing dishes requires visual and tactile discrimination. Changing a light bulb uses visual motor ability. Sweeping the floor depends on visual discrimination, motor coordination and ability to cross the midline. Many people with learning disabilities cannot see the difference between a clean and dirty floor. They might not notice that they left a dustpan in the middle of a room.

Family errands, such as shopping, present further problems. Adults with learning disabilities may have trouble getting to the store and finding what they need. Ripe, unripe, and overripe bananas may look the same to them. Some people with learning disabilities make errors in counting change and have trouble remembering to bring receipts home.

Following directions is hard for people with auditory perceptual handicaps. They might buy forty instead of four cans of soup or buy soap instead of soup. Or they might come home at eleven o'clock instead of seven o'clock.

Time is a difficult concept. Reversals make reading a clock confusing, and it is hard for disorganized people to get ready to be at a certain place by a certain time. They may get so absorbed in activities that they fail to notice the passage of time and keep people waiting.

Many adults with learning disabilities stay at home far beyond their teenage years. This forced dependency causes problems for the whole family. Mothers and fathers may resent having to live with an adult child and may envy the freedom of their friends whose sons and daughters are going to college and getting jobs. They may get angry with their child with learning disabilities and then feel guilty about their resentment. Adults with learning disabilities usually dislike "being treated like a child" and may have a hard time meshing with their parent's routine.

### **FINDING PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS**

If your son or daughter has any of the problems described above, you can help. Remember, no matter how severe the handicap, your child can change. As a first step, take stock of the interactions

between your child with learning disabilities and the family.

### **Make a List of Problems**

It may help to list the problems. Which problems bother you the most? Sort out those which cause inconvenience to you or the family from those which are your son's own personal responsibility. An example of the former: your son leaves the bathroom and kitchen a mess each morning. An example of the latter: he doesn't do his homework.

Begin with problems that are personally disturbing. They may seem petty, but solving them is important to your peace of mind. Probably what you find upsetting will also bother your child's future roommates.

Start with one habit you'd like to help your child change. Be clear about what you want. Ask yourself:

X Has my child ever *not* behaved this way? If the answer is "yes," what was the difference between then and now?

X What have I already done about this? Have my efforts been encouraging or discouraging?

X Is my child's disability contributing to this problem?

X Will it help if I change the way I act? Are there changes I should make in the environment?

For example: Marcia and Tom live with their daughter, Janet, who has a learning disability. They described the situation this way: We never knew what we'd come home to. She would leave the refrigerator door open, stove burners on and the door to the house unlocked. Twice we came home to a flooded kitchen because she left the water on and the drain plugged up.

Before Marcia returned to work, there was no problem. Marcia had seen to it that the burners were off, the refrigerator door was closed and everything was in order. The trouble started when she began leaving the house before Janet did.

Marcia and Tom realized that in order for Janet to become more responsible, they needed to change the environment somewhat. They took stock. The refrigerator latch was worn. Sometimes it didn't click shut. People with normal perception noticed it, but Janet did not. That problem was easily solved: a refrigerator repairperson fixed the latch. But her disabilities were also part of the problem. Janet's memory was poor, and she had trouble remembering a sequence of tasks.

### **Discuss the Problem with Your Child**

After you've pinpointed the problem, the next step is to talk to your child. Treat her as a peer during this conversation. Tell her the problem as you understand it yourself. Explain what you find disturbing. Ask her to help you. Criticize her behavior, not her character. Work out a solution together.

To continue the example, Janet didn't know why she forgot so many things. She said she remembered turning the burners off. Her parents asked her to show them. When she did, she overshot the "off" mark, so Tom painted a red arrow on the "off" mark. Memory was the basic problem, however. After a long conversation, Janet asked her parents to make a list of things for her to do in the morning. She practiced several times. The next day, when Marcia came home, the house was in order and safe.

Remember to compliment your child as s/he improves. Even if the improvement is slight, s/he still deserves praise. After the first problem is solved, work on another.

### **A Few Other Tips**

- X Don't be overprotective. Give only as much help as necessary: for example, if your son has a problem with a teacher or a boss, help him practice what to say. In most cases, you should not talk to the teacher or boss.
- X Be sure that people with auditory handicaps understand what you say. You may want them to repeat important instructions.
- X Express yourself directly. Avoid hints or nonverbal signals.

### **TEACHING INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS**

Many adults with learning disabilities must be taught the skills necessary for independent living. They usually do not pick up the information on their own. Independent living skills include:

- X shopping and cooking
- X money management
- X finding a home

When teaching people with learning disabilities, keep these three principles in mind:

- X Teach only the most important things
- X Divide tasks into small steps
- X Simplify the job

Work with your child with learning disabilities to make sure you are teaching what is most important and relevant. Your child is unique—different from any other person with learning disabilities. Nothing written here should substitute for what you and your child think is right.

### **Cooking**

People with learning disabilities can become good cooks by watching and working with their parents.

Some parents divide ingredients into two parts, and prepare one part while coaching their child to prepare the other half. Others must be taught more carefully. Here's how to apply the three principles outlined above.

**Teach only what is most important in cooking.** Before a person can live on her/his own, s/he must know how to obtain and prepare nourishing food. Usually this means:

- knowing how to shop
- knowing how to cook a few simple meals
- knowing how to balance meals

**Divide tasks into the smallest possible steps.** For instance, to teach a person with learning disabilities to crack an egg, the instructor might show how to:

- X Take the egg out of the box and hold it without breaking it.
- X Tap the egg on the side of the dish.
- X Separate the eggshell from the egg without leaving the shells in the egg.
- X Be sure all of the egg white is out of the eggshells by holding them upside down over the dish for a moment.
- X Throw away the eggshells.
- X Look for bits of eggshell in the egg.
- X Fish them out with a spoon.

**Simplify the work.** This depends on the individual. Some people use plastic tableware and paper plates to keep from washing dishes. Teflon pans are easy to clean. Many foods are nutritious and easy to prepare. Here are a few ideas for simplifying shopping:

- X Choose one store, preferably a small one. Learn the layout. Comparison shopping and sales are usually not worth the time and effort. Set up a routine and buy the same things again and again.
- X Nonreaders can use their old labels to match with products in the store. Most ads have pictures. Shopping lists can be made from labels and ads. One can memorize a few key words or how certain labels look.
- X If you can plan ahead, shop each week with a list. Otherwise, stock up with canned and frozen goods and buy what's needed each day.

Many adults with learning disabilities become good cooks. Jeff Barsch learned from watching educational television. He taped the shows and later followed directions in his kitchen.

## Money Management

Whether people are supported by themselves, their parents or the government, they must know how to manage money. They should understand how to draw up a budget and use a checking account. If possible, they should be able to fill out tax forms, although they can hire somebody to take care of this. They must know how a W-2 form looks and that they must save them.

People who have learning disabilities should open a checking account in a bank and be taught how to use it. If they can't add or subtract, they can use a calculator. An index card with a hole in it can be used to check individual letters and numbers and prevent reversals. All personal items, such as clothes, food and entertainment should be paid from this account.

Parents may have to pay their child who has a disability a certain amount each month until they can support themselves. Using a checking account teaches the basic concept of personal financing.

Budgeting is hard to teach since it is highly individual and requires willpower as well as a general understanding of financial principles. Some parents explain the family's expenses and income and tell their children that when they live on their own, they will have to work out their finances for the same things on a smaller scale.

Essentials should be paid first. Some people with learning disabilities manage by cashing their paychecks or government assistance checks each pay period and dividing the money into envelopes or jars. One adult with a learning disability described her budget as follows:

"I get 280.00 each week. First, I buy my tokens. That way my transportation is taken care of. Then I put \$100.00 in my rent jar and \$30.00 in an envelope for my gas and electric bill. Once a month, I pay these bills. I get money orders from a nearby store. Then I shop for all of my food. I usually have about \$50.00 left each week and I put part of that in the bank for savings. I spend the rest on clothes and sometimes a movie."

People with learning disabilities will find credit cards difficult to handle, as they require thinking about money in the future. There is no concrete sense of "spending" the money. One possibility is to have a credit card only for emergencies and simply not use it except in case of a real emergency. Another possibility is to have a check register and write down the amount that is charged for each purchase. If each new purchase is added to the previous purchase, it gives the person a clearer sense of how much money is owed. The total can be subtracted from the amount of money the person has available to pay it off. Teach them how interest compounds. Show them the misleading way that most credit card companies emphasize the minimum payment and de-emphasize the total amount owed. Credit card debt is a major national problem and people with learning disabilities are at particular risk.

Budgets can take many forms. The important thing to teach your child is not to spend more money than they have. That is easy to do—even if you do *not* have a learning disability!

## Finding A Home

When adults with learning disabilities are ready to leave their parents' house, they sometimes need help choosing their new living quarters. They may be overwhelmed by the many options. Should

they live in an apartment alone or with a roommate? Should they live in a house with a group of people? They may need advice in selecting a rent range or thinking through the factors involved in picking out a place to live: transportation costs, amount of space, noise levels, neighbors, neighborhood, safety, government services available, and convenience to shopping.

Parents can help their child list the pros and cons of various choices and come to a decision. Sometimes parents should see the place, since a person with visual perceptual problems is apt to overlook such things as a hole in the ceiling or peeling paint on the walls. A lawyer or legally experienced person should study the lease before it is signed.

Some adults with learning disabilities are ready to leave home but not ready to live completely on their own. Sometimes families are not able to continue to provide a home for their adult children. Some adults with learning disabilities may need a group home or apartment with adult supervision. There may be transitional living or halfway house programs in the community, but it is more likely that you will have to be a pioneer in creating this type of opportunity. The first step is to talk with others who might be interested in such a project. The local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of America may have members willing to work with you.

## The World of Work

The problems that adults with learning disabilities have with their families foreshadow problems on the job. Someone who leaves possessions all over the house is bound to do the same thing with work tools unless he makes a conscious effort to change.

In business, clumsiness and carelessness are costly. The hammer left on the floor can cause a worker carrying expensive machinery to trip and break the equipment. A minor error made while inputting data could result in having to redo a whole job. Beyond the costs involved, these problems exasperate supervisors and coworkers and cause them extra work.

Clumsiness and carelessness are symptoms for only some people with learning disabilities. Each person with learning disabilities has unique strengths and weaknesses. It is important to remember that people with learning disabilities can develop good work habits which will make them valued employees.

### PROBLEMS ON THE JOB

Learning disabilities can have the following effects on one's work:

- **Inefficiency.** It can take a worker who has learning disabilities longer than others to do the same task.
- **Errors.** Some adults with learning disabilities frequently make mistakes. The only way for them to keep from making errors is to be careful and go slowly. This may cause low productivity.
- **Accident proneness.** Some people with learning disabilities are easily startled. Individuals with visual perceptual problems often bump into things.
- **Problems in learning a sequence of tasks.** Supervisors often report that it takes longer to train employees with learning disabilities.
- **Time.** Some adults with learning disabilities have trouble being on time, either coming in late or overcompensating by coming in too early. They may have difficulty meeting deadlines.
- **Social skills problems.** Social skills are usually just as important as performing a job well. They are discussed fully in Chapter Seven.

### FINDING YOUR STRENGTHS

To succeed in the world of work, it is necessary to choose a job which will be a good one for you. People with learning disabilities should know how their disabilities affect them occupationally. But most important, they should know what they are good at, what they *can* do. Their job choice must be

based on strengths. For example, Julia Walker, film and television hair stylist, started doing hair as a child, so she could earn her lunch money. She found it was always her forte. She went to beauty college to be credentialed and gradually worked her way up. Today, she cuts, blow dries, and colors the hair of movie stars such as Whoopi Goldberg, Sammy Davis Jr. and Richard Prior.<sup>5</sup>

How can strengths be determined? What Color is Your Parachute? by Richard Nelson Bolles has many practical exercises. Private job placement firms will administer tests and advise job hunters. Vocational rehabilitation counselors might be able to help you choose a field that is right for you. Remember that vocational skills tests can serve as a valuable guide, but they are not completely accurate for everyone. Think about the things that you enjoy doing and other people praise. Your actual achievements are the best indication of your strengths.

Sometimes, people with learning disabilities are steered towards programs in which many people with intellectual disabilities have been successful. Although at times this can work out, most people with intellectual disabilities have stronger perceptual motor skills than people with learning disabilities. For example, dishwashing, a job done well by some people who have intellectual disabilities, requires tactile discrimination between clean and greasy dishes, knowing how many dishes fit into the dishwasher, knowing the proper amount of soap to use, remembering where to put the dishes away and stacking them in such a way that they cannot fall. None of this is easy for most employees with learning disabilities.

It is best to start thinking about your career as early as possible. Decisions made in high school can determine what post-secondary opportunities will be open to you. Use your Individualized Education Plan if you have one to obtain support to meet vocational goals. Take the highest-level academic classes you can, since today's jobs require significant math, science, writing, and language abilities.

Consider options besides your neighborhood high school such as magnet schools, charter schools, schools that specialize in learning disabilities, career centers, and vocational classes. Some school systems offer "tech prep programs." These programs combine two years of high school with two years of community college. This prepares you for a trade that pays well when you graduate. In addition, you would have the option to enter a four-year college with substantial credits towards graduation. And you can use your vocational skills to pay for your education.

## **A COLLEGE EDUCATION**

Some jobs require more than a high school diploma. Most professional employment demands at least four years of college. Some students with learning disabilities can handle classes with accommodations, such as using tape recorders rather than taking notes, carrying fewer courses, taking untimed or oral tests or doing special projects instead of examinations.

Sometimes people with learning disabilities are not considered college material because they do not "look bright." Adults with learning disabilities who talk in an unusual pace, tone, or pronunciation, appear intellectually disabled, or have soft neurological signs must make a special effort to show how intelligent they are.

Today, there are many colleges for students with learning disabilities. Study colleges that interest

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<sup>5</sup>Stories of Hope compiled by Leslie Coul, Howard Eaton, and Jessica Werb. Book One, Eaton Coull Learning Group, 2003 pg 100-103

you and ask them what programs they have for students with learning disabilities. Many schools have disabled student service centers that you can contact. Some information can be found from HEATH Resource Center, the government funded resource on post secondary education and disability. They have publications on financial aid, assistive technology, and information specific to learning disabilities.

### **Contact Information:**

The George Washington University  
HEATH Resource Center  
2121 K Street, NW Suite 220  
Washington, DC 20037  
Voice/TTY: 202.973.0904 or  
Toll Free 1.800.544.3284  
Fax: 202.973.0908  
<http://www.heath.gwu.edu>  
E-mail:askheath@heath.gwu.edu

In studying particular colleges and other post secondary options, contact the chapter of LDA where the college is located. They will often know important facts about the actual services offered by the program. Telephone or e-mail people with learning disabilities who are in programs that interest you. You may want to ask to speak to students who are attending the school you are surveying. The application process for college can be quite a challenge. Ask about accommodation for your learning disabilities when you take your SAT's and other standardized tests as these scores play a key role in obtaining admission. Consider requesting or sending alternatives to the essay.

You may want to go to graduate school. Many doctors, lawyers, and college professors have learning disabilities. A few graduate schools have programs for people with learning disabilities. You have a right to reasonable accommodations there as well.

### **Other Post Secondary Options**

Many young people today desire careers in technical fields and other careers that do not require a four-year degree at a college. Two-year colleges offer both occupation-specific degrees (Applied Science, AAS) and two-year degrees (Associate of Arts, AA) that enable you to transfer to a four-year college. You will find that a strong academic background in high school is extremely helpful to both entering and doing well in these programs.

Jobs such as dental technician, hygienist, computer technician, nurse's aid, broadcast technician, and automotive technician often require specific training. In addition to the AAS degree, consider proprietary or private programs. If you are investing in a degree with the goal of getting a job in that area, check with local employers and see if they are hiring graduates from that program. Ask graduates if they have received jobs in the area they are trained.

## **EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

### **Vocational Rehabilitation**

One government agency which may be able to help you find a job is vocational rehabilitation.

Vocational rehabilitation is a nationwide program funded jointly by federal and state governments. Local offices exist in or near most cities. To be eligible, you must show thorough medical documentation that you have a disability, that you need vocational rehabilitation services to get and keep a job, and that you will be a good and marketable worker after you get these services. In most states, you must prove that your disability is severe. If you are selected, you and a counselor develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). Services may include:

- X Diagnosis of your disabilities
- X Evaluation of your job skills
- X Psychological evaluation
- X Career counseling
- X Assistance in looking for work
- X Technology to help you such as computer software
- X Tuition fees
- X Social skills classes

If you feel you need these services, your first step is to contact your local vocational rehabilitation office. Find it in your local telephone book by looking under the section for state government. Ask your local public library, your LDA chapter, or call National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC) at 1-800-346-2742 and ask an information specialist for the name and address of your state vocational rehabilitation agency. Ask them for the contact information for your local office. Try NARIC's website <http://www.naric.com/>

If you apply, remember that you are not entitled to services. You must prove that you are eligible. Some areas have long waiting lists. Others require that the most severely disabled people must be served first. Although some counselors recognize that people with learning disabilities can be considered severely disabled you may have to advocate for yourself to persuade them to do so. Be clear about how your disabilities make it difficult for you to get or keep a job. Explain how the services will provide the critical difference in making it possible for you to work. Most states have a fiscal year and it is best to apply at the beginning of that year when the most funds are available. If you are turned down, you can appeal the decision with the help of your state's client assistance program. A list of these programs can be obtained from:

National Association of Protection and Advocacy Services  
900 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, NE, Suite 211  
Washington D.C. 20002  
202 408-9514 (Phone)  
202-408-9520 (FAX)  
[www.napas.org](http://www.napas.org)

Although it can be difficult to obtain the services, vocational rehabilitation has made the difference

between success and failure for many people with learning disabilities.

## **Special Employment Programs for People with Disabilities**

Many local and national organizations for people with disabilities could help you with career development and/or searching for work. Ask your vocational rehabilitation office for referrals, whether or not you are accepted for services.

Some programs specialize in people with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and/or mental disabilities. To obtain help from them may require you to educate the staff about learning disabilities.

A few places to try include:

- X **Easter Seals.** Most states in the United States have Easter Seals affiliates. One of their roles is to help people with disabilities find jobs. Most of their clients have physical and mental disabilities, but their counselors will assist anyone with a disability that needs help. In addition, these affiliates may help you find other assistance. Call the “Voice of Easter Seals” at 800-221-6827 or visit their web page at <http://www.easterseals.com/site/pageserver>.
  
- X **Goodwill Industries.** This is the nation’s largest non-profit provider of employment and training services for people with disabilities. They collect donated goods and sell them. They work mostly with people who are not yet ready for competitive employment. They train you for low wage jobs. Like Easter Seals and Vocational Rehabilitation, their personnel will help you link up with other resources. Contact them by calling 1-800-664-6577. Press 1 and then your zip code. They will give you the number of your closest Goodwill, or visit their web page at <http://www.goodwill.org>.
  
- X **The federal government’s selective placement program.** Some federal agencies can hire people with disabilities for trial appointments to positions without competition. The Office of Personnel Management has set up a website <http://www.opm.gov/disability/> as a resource to inform people with disabilities about federal jobs. The website includes a list of selective placement coordinators, which are your first point of contact for agencies that interest you. For a job at a federal agency, you must contact that agency to ask about career opportunities. Office of Personnel Management does not advise people with disabilities by telephone.

## **Job Accommodation Network**

Job Accommodation Network can tell you how to accommodate your disability during the job-hunt process and when you are successfully employed. They can also assist you if you run into a discriminatory situation. Human factors consultants provide personalized advice on the telephone. Call them at 1-800-526-7234 or go on the web at <http://www.jan.wvu.edu>.

## LOOKING FOR A JOB

When you are ready to look for work, use the same techniques that other people use. Develop a strong resume. Talk to your friends and family about the type of job you want. Look for openings. Try to meet with employers who are hiring in your field of interest. A few specific concerns:

- **The application.** Someone who has difficulties reading and writing will find the job application, whether on paper or online, to be a significant barrier. If possible, have the application mailed to you. Or, you may be permitted to take one home. Someone else can fill it out. They might sit with you at a job kiosk and input data into an online form. Sometimes a resume can be substituted. People with learning disabilities who can read and write must beware of making careless errors such as inputting data into the wrong field online or filling out applications with sloppy or childish writing.
- **The interview.** It is essential to be punctual. This means confirming the time and place of the interview and giving oneself plenty of extra time.
- **Grooming.** People with learning disabilities must take pains to look neat. Persons with visual perceptual difficulties should have someone check them over before they meet their potential employer. It is important to have a contingency plan for looking neat if you must arrive in snow or rain.
- **Should you disclose your disability?** Talking about it can change the focus of the conversation from your ability to your disability. Most employers hesitate to hire people with known disabilities. If you bring it up, discuss it in a positive way with explanations as to how the problem will be dealt with on the job. For example, someone with severe difficulty reading and writing could show their future employer how their computer software works. They could show the computerized voice speaking the words that are in the document. They might explain how they do an assignment.

There is no legal obligation to mention the disability. However, some people feel they should disclose it if the employer must make a difficult accommodation. Disclosure will go most smoothly after the employer is sold on you as an employee. If you tell them after the job offer, they can prepare the accommodation before you start. You risk having them withdraw the offer, but discrimination would be more difficult for them to hide.

### Nontraditional Ways of Looking for a Job

In What Color is Your Parachute? Richard Nelson Bolles suggests interviewing people who have positions similar to the one you want. Asking people about their work can help you decide if the job truly uses your strengths. Bolles also suggests researching and interviewing potential employers to see if they have any problems that you may be uniquely able to solve. He recommends that you ask questions that help to locate jobs, rather than ask directly to be hired. This avoids putting anyone on the spot and gives you a chance to learn about the field. In this way, you enter the “hidden job market.”

For job seekers with learning disabilities, this approach has extra advantages. Applicants meet potential employers before being pitted against competition. While asking for career advice, they can bring up their disability in context. An informational interview is less stressful than an actual job interview, since nothing is really at stake. This relaxed atmosphere is helpful, since tension exaggerates symptoms of learning disabilities.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT JOB

Job applicants with learning disabilities should study the job as carefully as a potential employer studies them. The following factors should be considered:

- **The job.** Understand all aspects of your duties. Analyze each step. Think about possible problems. For example, hyperactive adults should avoid a job that requires sitting in one place all day or electronic monitoring which measures each time the worker leaves their desk. If answering a phone is part of the job, a person may be unable to leave their workstation. Is data input, reading, writing, or driving involved? What software does the computer use? What needs to be memorized? Are accuracy, speed, or being on time important? How are priorities assigned? Will you frequently have to interrupt one task to handle another one? For example, some jobs require you to be alert to e-mails coming in. You must answer them within a set amount of time.

Beware of hidden job requirements. For example, some telephoning jobs require reading questions off computer screens, listening to the caller, and then typing in data. Executives who used to be able to use secretaries to assist them are now required to format their own correspondence. Request a written job description.

- **Personality of the direct supervisor.** How patient is this person? Does she seem willing to accommodate your learning disability? If you have problems following directions, will the supervisor listen to you repeat things back? Will she put important directions in writing? How will she feel about your doing some things in a different way? Will she mind if you substitute phone calls for letters? Do you feel a sense of rapport with your future boss?
- **Personality of Your Co-workers.** Today's jobs often require working on teams. Your team members will probably impact your effectiveness as much as your boss. Even if you are not on a formal team, you need to assess your coworker's communication patterns, tolerance for diversity, and values. Try to sense whether you will fit in. If you have self accommodations that you need to get the job done, consider whether they might cause resentment from the other people. For example, will team members expect you to be available for their questions all day? That could be a problem if you need quiet periods.
- **Environment.** A person with severe visual motor problems might decide against an office with desks crowded together or casual housekeeping

habits such as cartons on the floor or open file drawers. A person who is easily distracted needs to avoid open space environments or make arrangements to work in a quiet location. If you have self accommodations such as color coding or specific ways of arranging your work, assure that this is acceptable on your job.

- **Company values.** Do the employers see staff members as individuals or cogs in a wheel? How long are the hours? Consider checking the employee parking lot on a weekend to see how many people are at work. Are there frequent layoffs and firings? How high a tolerance do they have for non-conformity? Does the compensation system set up co-workers to compete rather than cooperate?

### **BE PROUD OF THE WORK YOU DO**

All jobs are important. Whatever you train yourself to do, whatever work you choose, respect it. Strive to do as well as possible and reach the highest level you can. Although the talents of people with learning disabilities are often underestimated, their range of abilities is vast.

Some may think that people with learning disabilities are not smart enough to be managers. If you know that you do have management ability, keep working towards it. These jobs tend to allow the most accommodation for perceptual problems. It is often easier to get help from subordinates than from supervisors or co-workers. For example, an assistant might keep the schedule for a professional who has difficulty keeping track of time.

People may also think that people with learning disabilities are too uncoordinated to repair machines or too socially inept to teach or lead. But none of the symptoms of learning disability apply to all people who have learning disabilities. Trust your judgment about which job is right for you.

Whether you become a customer service representative or a CEO, a retail sales person or a franchise operator, a construction worker or an architect, you should realize you are contributing to your employer and your community. You can and should feel proud of your achievements.

No job is perfect. You will need to spend time overcoming your learning disabilities. But if you have chosen your work based on your strengths, have studied the position thoroughly and have decided you can do it well, then you are on the way to successful performance.

## Overcoming Your Disabilities

People with learning disabilities can overcome their disabilities. But a disability is unlike a weakness. Trying harder won't always help. You need a plan. This section describes how to develop a self-help plan and make it work.

### **ANALYZING YOUR STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND DISABILITIES**

A self-help plan begins with an accurate analysis of your disabilities, weaknesses, and strengths. Chapter Three has suggestions for diagnosing your disabilities. Weaknesses such as laziness and impatience are personality characteristics which cause problems for yourself and others. They often develop as a result of having learning disabilities and may disappear as you overcome your disabilities.

For many people with learning disabilities, discovering one's strengths is a harder task. Compliments are rare; put-downs are more frequent. It may help to answer the following questions:

- What do I enjoy doing?
- What successes have I achieved?
- How do I "work around" my disabilities?

Study your replies. What do they have in common? Here is an example.

John, a seventeen-year old teenager with a learning disability, decided to improve his abilities. He had a fourth-grade reading level and hated school. He was graduating from high school but suspected it was due to social promotions.

His parents had him tested. The diagnostician told him that he had trouble with visual sequencing and discrimination. His sense of direction was poor, and he had some motor problems. His auditory perception was excellent.

John knew that his disabilities caused him more than academic difficulty. He often got lost on the way to his girlfriend's house and was usually late. It was hard for him to fill out job applications. He had trouble with mechanical tasks because of his visual motor problems.

In answering the three questions listed above, John noted that he enjoyed listening to the radio and talking to people. Socially, he got along well with two friends he had known since childhood. He worked around his disability by listening well and taking the time to observe carefully.

John also remembered a major success he had last year. He had walked twelve miles to raise money for an important national charity. He had convinced his friends, teachers, and even his veterinarian to sponsor him, which meant giving him a certain amount of money for each mile he walked. He raised \$1,280.

He realized that he had a pleasant personality, and was a good listener and persuader. He also

realized that he was disciplined, not lazy. Not everyone had completed the walk, and he received a gift certificate for being in the top ten percent of the fundraisers.

## **SOLVING YOUR PROBLEMS**

Based on this kind of analysis, you can remediate your disabilities and use your strengths to work around weaknesses.

Choose a problem that you want to solve or think of a task that is difficult for you. It could even be an everyday thing like cooking, buying clothes or starting a conversation with a stranger. Perhaps you want to overcome one of your perceptual problems or improve your social skills. Some people write a list of long-range goals and then think out the steps that will lead to those goals. Most people choose a few problems and begin to work on them.

To continue the example: John decided he wanted to widen his circle of friends and make some of his acquaintances true friends. He realized that although one his strengths was the ability to persuade, he really only had two pals. He resolved to meet new people. He realized that getting lost and being late for appointments or dates wasn't helping his popularity.

John's next step was to state his problem and set a clear goal for himself. He thought, "I am often late because I get lost. When I need to be somewhere new at a certain time, I'll practice driving there the day before. I'll try to be on time for my next three appointments."

Problems are not solved overnight, and it helps to keep track of even small victories. John, for example, practiced going to his girlfriend's house. He still got lost because he practiced in daylight but picked her up at night. Still, he was only ten minutes late, and he felt proud of that rather than being angry at himself for still being late.

He also looked into Geographical Positioning Systems (GPS) navigation for his car. Although it was too expensive for him, he has it in mind for the future.

Sometimes one problem has many parts. For example, Karl knew he looked sloppy. This was caused by many things, most of which involved poor visual perception. His clothing often clashed. His hair wasn't always combed neatly. He didn't notice stains and rips in his clothes. He didn't always shave thoroughly. He asked his father to help him write a grooming checklist which he now goes over every day. It clearly states each step of his routine. Before he goes to bed at night, he checks the weather forecast and makes sure he sets out clothing appropriate to the weather. He hangs matching clothes together. He makes sure his razor has good blades and shaves carefully. He checks himself in a full-length mirror for rips and stains in his clothes. He makes sure he looks his best before he leaves the house. His father and mother check him over, too.

## **LEARNING DIFFICULT TASKS**

In some cases, you may have to learn a specific task that is especially difficult because of your disability. In this case, analyze and practice each step. As you learn each step, feel proud of yourself.

For example, Mary had to use her parents' new dishwasher. She practiced checking to see that the dishes were in place, pushing the racks of dishes into the dishwasher, pouring the right amount of

detergent in the holder, closing the holder, shutting the dishwasher door firmly, checking to see it was closed and turning the knob to the left to the “wash” position.

### **A Few Tips for Learning New Tasks:**

- X Have several people teach you, so they do not get impatient.
- X Practice in a quiet place or when you are alone.
- X As soon as possible, ask someone to watch you do it correctly.
- X If you are unable to do a certain task, find out why and solve the problem. For example, Mary kept on turning the knob the wrong way. She put velcro on the left side of the knob to help her remember the correct direction.
- X Sometimes, the task should be made easier while practicing it. For example, John often got lost in certain confusing parts of town. He learned to drive in these areas on Sundays when the traffic was light.

As you work to overcome your disabilities, remember that although it is not easy, someone with your inner strength and determination can do it. Feel proud with each success, no matter how small. Be confident that you will reach your goals.

## Improving Social Skills

Many people with learning disabilities have trouble meeting people, working with others, and making friends. They do not “fit in” easily. Social skills problems are often an issue for people with learning disabilities.

These problems can cause difficulty in making a good first impression. Grooming is hard for those with fine motor and visual perceptual problems. Soft neurological signs can cause an odd appearance. Speech may come slowly and with difficulty.

Due to their perceptual problems, individuals with learning disabilities may have trouble understanding others. A person who cannot visually discriminate between light and dark colors will also be unable to tell the difference between a happy and sarcastic smile. A person unable to discriminate between a “v” and “b” sound may not be able to tell the difference between joking and questioning voices. People with auditory handicaps work so hard to understand the words of a statement that they may ignore the nonverbal meaning. This confusion can cause adults with learning disabilities to respond incorrectly.

It is extremely difficult for people with learning disabilities to pick up the social customs many of their peers take for granted: small talk, entering a circle of people, introducing themselves at parties. People with learning disabilities are in culture shock in their own culture.

### FORMING A SOCIAL NETWORK

How can you, a person with a learning disability, end your loneliness? Remember, lack of social grace is fairly common. Classes in assertiveness training can teach the hidden rules. “Don’t Say Yes When You Want to Say No” by Herbert Fensterheim and Jean Baer is a book that describes many social situations and how to deal with them. You can probably find it in your neighborhood library or bookstore. It is available online.

Practice makes perfect and your abilities will improve as you become more socially active. The rules are more obvious in structured situations such as meetings and classes than in unstructured situations such as parties and dates.

Find a group with an interest you share. It might be a hiking club, service organization, diet club, sports team or some other group that meets regularly. If you don’t enjoy the people, leave the group after one or two meetings. Then look for another. Once you find a group you like, invite people to your house, ask them to meet you for a cup of coffee, or propose an activity you would both enjoy. Search out other people who need friends.

Meanwhile, develop a social self-help plan and work on your weak areas: for example, you may speak too loudly. You may not be able to hear the volume of your voice. In that case, put your hand on your throat; talk loudly, then softly. Can you feel a difference? Studying your voice may help you know when you should lower it. If not, ask people you know to tell you when you talk too loudly. When you speak, remember to speak softly. Eventually, it will become a habit.

You may not know how people take turns talking. When people want to interrupt each other, they use a subtle cue such as leaning towards the speaker or making a low sound. The person talking will usually wind up his thoughts.

If these signals do not make sense to you, you may talk on and on, or be unable to get a word in edgewise. Watch people and study the flow of conversation. When you understand these rules, practice them. When you have something to say, signal and wait until the person winds up their thoughts. Then speak and be alert for cues that the other person wants to talk. Constant practice will make it automatic.

### **Help People Work With You Rather Than Against You**

In order to overcome your social problems, you need help. But you may find that people hesitate to assist you. When you ask, you may be accused of being unwilling to do your fair share. You are expected to act “normal” and when you accidentally do something wrong, you may be laughed at or ignored.

Since your disability is not obvious, it is natural for people to think you are behaving the way you do on purpose. For example, if you interrupt people a lot, they may think you do not care about what they are trying to tell you. If you can’t do housework very well, your roommates or parents may believe you are trying to get out of it because you are lazy. It is difficult for people to feel empathy for an invisible handicap that they don’t understand.

### **DISCUSSING YOUR LEARNING DISABILITIES**

People may be more understanding and helpful if they know about your disability. Information about your disability can be given with the scientific words in Chapter Two or in simple everyday language. You can say either, “I have an auditory sequencing problem” or “I have trouble hearing sounds in order.” Use simple words with your friends.

Scientific jargon is helpful when you need to impress people with the seriousness of a situation and make it clear your learning disability is a disability, not a minor weakness. For example, if you need to tape a class and you must tell your teacher why, you might explain that you have “dyslexia due to visual perceptual problems.” If you use the phrase “learning disability,” be ready to explain that people with learning disabilities can learn. They just learn differently.

Don’t mention your disability right after you make a mistake. If you act ashamed, people will think of your disability as shameful. It is helpful if your friends already have a positive impression of you when you disclose your disability. Wait until the person is feeling good about you. Be sure of yourself and express your thoughts positively. It may help to connect your disability to one of your good points. For example, “I noticed that mistake in the bylaws because I read very slowly. My learning disability forces me to concentrate and read one word at a time. It takes me a long time, but I don’t miss anything!”

### **Be Clear About the Kind of Help You Need**

If you need help from other people, be specific. Make eye contact. Ask directly for what you want. Thank them if they help you and be prepared to return the favor. Some examples of specific requests:

- X “I can’t see very well. Can you read the label on this dress for me?”
- X “If I come in again with clothes that clash, please let me know. I can’t always see things like that.”
- X “Please let me finish. I know I talk slowly, but it’s a lot easier for me when people let me finish my sentences.”
- X “Please let me repeat your instructions. Listen to me, so you can be sure I have them right. It won’t help me if you tell me again. I need to say them myself to remember them.”
- X “Could you do me a favor and drop by my office on your way to the executive staff meeting? Sometimes I get so absorbed in work that I forget the time.”

### **Gaining Respect From Others: A Few Tips**

- X Be patient with others’ impatience with you.
- X Take responsibility for your actions. Admit your mistakes. Pay for anything you break or lose.
- X Apologize as little as possible. Turn apologies into compliments. Say, “Thank you for being so patient,” instead of “I’m sorry I’m so slow.”
- X If you must apologize, apologize for your behavior, not your personality. Say, “I’m sorry I knocked down those books,” instead of “I’m sorry I’m such a klutz.”
- X In most cases, say, “It’s difficult for me to do that,” rather than “I can’t do it” or “I won’t do it.”
- X Don’t let people put you down. If they try, reply with the word “you” in your response. For example, if someone says, “You don’t even know where the cafeteria is!” you might reply, “Why are you trying to embarrass me about that?”
- X Develop your strong points so you gain self-respect and become a valued member of the community.

## Coping With Specific Disabilities

### PRACTICING YOUR PERCEPTION

Perceptual problems can be improved by practice. Some people think this can't be done. They forget that normal people improve their perception through training and effort. A piano tuner improves his already good auditory discrimination. A medical student learns to visually discriminate subtle shadows on X-rays.

But a person with a perceptual problem has a disability. If you have a visual figure-ground problem, you may work as hard as that medical student just to be able to spot your friends in crowded places. Alternatively, if you are uncoordinated, you may have to train as hard as any football player in order to throw and catch a Frisbee.

Activities that use your areas of perceptual weakness can help you practice them. A few examples follow.

- **Visual figure-ground problems.** Look around you and focus on objects. Look at a forest and study each tree. Study the lawn, find an insect and watch it move. Choose a specific person in a crowd and watch what s/he does.
- **Auditory sequencing problems.** Listen and then repeat. This can be done by playing a taped conversation, repeating a sentence from memory and playing that section of the tape again to check yourself. In conversations say, "So what you are saying is ...." and repeat what you heard. Check and see if you were correct.
- **Tactile discrimination problems.** Go to stores and feel the different textures of similar items. Can you tell cotton from wool? Ripe from unripe fruit? In the woods, feel the leaves and bark on trees. Study the texture of paper. Can you tell the feel of laser print paper from the feel of the newspaper? Try various settings on your computer for equipment sensitivity such as the movement of the mouse, the pressure needed to push the keys, and the double click rate.

Make a game out of practicing your perception. Don't work too hard. Find a level that challenges you but isn't too difficult.

Hobbies in your area of weakness can be fun. For example, many computer games improve visual perception and visual motor skills. Bird watching and other nature activities improve both visual and auditory perception. Listening to music helps auditory perception.

Although practice can improve your perception, it probably won't make the disability disappear. How can you limit its effect on your life? The next sections on visual and auditory handicaps will give you some ideas.

## LIVING WITH VISUAL PERCEPTUAL PROBLEMS

**Improve your environment.** Home and office should be simple, uncluttered, and well organized. Color codes and labels help to keep things in order. Keep important objects where you can see them. Shelves and pegboard walls are better than drawers are. Mark your automobile so you can find it in a crowd of cars. For example, put a large object on the antenna or use a vanity license plate. If you have problems following your companions in a crowd, ask them to wear a hat or recognizable shirt.

**Improve your habits.** Karl solved his grooming problem with an organized routine. Good habits can reduce your need for accurate visual perception. Have a place for important objects and train yourself to put them there. For example, always put your keys in a specific place.

Have a routine for keeping track of items such as your money, glasses, keys, cell phone, ID card, and health insurance card. You might want to have a checklist and review it before you leave your home. In addition, you might have a routine of checking your pockets or purse before you leave an area such as your place of work, a restaurant, or a park.

**Find objects you lose.** No matter how careful they are, people with visual perception and memory problems often lose things. If you can't find something, keep calm. Try to remember when you had it last. What did you do with it? If you can't remember, retrace your steps backwards, going first to the last place you were, then to the place before that. Then relax your eyes and look for it. Don't look carefully by focusing your eyes first in one place, then another. Swing your eyes all over the room. Use your peripheral vision. If you still can't find it, consider waiting until it shows up. Can you buy another one? If you need it, systematically look in and under things. If it's still missing, take a long break and start over. Consider asking another person to look with you.

If you lose things frequently, keep duplicates of important cards that go in your wallet, such as your identification card or insurance card. If security routines prohibit duplicates, consider the possibility of confidentially disclosing your disability proactively to the security personnel, as they may see your frequent losses as a sign of criminal activity or worse. Leave extra keys with your neighbor or in a location that cannot be identified with you, such as taped to a wall behind a fire extinguisher. Reproduce documents that should not be lost. Buy two or three umbrellas, scarves, pairs of gloves, or other frequently lost items. When buying technology such as personal communication devices, consider the cost and the possibility of having to replace it. Back up your data daily or weekly. That may mean less expensive and effective items. Check the steps to back up data before buying them.

**Use your hands to help your eyes.** Study shapes, textures and weights with your hands. For example, if you run your hand over a surface that has not been cleaned, you can often feel the dirt and grease.

**Use your ears to help your eyes.** When a task is being demonstrated, pay more attention to the words than to the actions. Ask questions. The sound of someone's voice can substitute for a facial expression. Tapes can replace books. Take advantage of lectures and recorded information on telephone interactive voice systems.

## LIVING WITH DYSLEXIA

Many people with dyslexia get remediation for their reading disabilities. Even as adults, it is possible to learn. However, there are two taped book programs that can help.

**Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB &D) ®**

National Headquarters  
20 Roszel Road  
Princeton, NJ 08540  
866-RFBD-585 (866-732-3585)

RFB &D provides educational materials to all people who cannot effectively read standard print because of a visual, perceptual, or other physical disability. RFB & D is the number one producer in the world of audio textbooks and has more than 98,000 titles in their library. If you have learning disabilities, you must apply to use their services and a qualified professional must attest to the physical basis of the disability which limits your ability to read standard print.

**National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped**

Library of Congress  
Washington D.C. 20542.  
1-800-424-8677.

To use this service, you must have a doctor certify that you have a reading disability, that it is serious enough to prevent reading regular printed material in a normal manner, and that the identified condition has a physical basis.

Arrange ways to meet your academic needs. In high school, you might obtain an individualized educational plan (IEP), which allows you to have the accommodations you need such as your reading assignments in advance, large print books, or time extensions on examinations. In college, you would use the disabled student services. Many people with dyslexia join or form study groups so they can learn the reading materials from discussion. Don Winkler, former Chairman and CEO of Ford Credit, had trouble mixing up the words in hymns at church. The minister let him take the book home so he could practice.<sup>6</sup> Some students obtain help from fellow pupils or their parents who assist them with reading and writing chores. Consider alternative forms of learning such as videos, movies, and tapes.

**Communicating without writing.** Many people with dyslexia become masters of verbal communication. Use discussions and telephone calls rather than e-mails and letters. Computer software is available that will allow you to talk to the computer and have it write for you. There is also software that will “read” your e-mails and other documents on your computer. Reading machines can read books that are not digital.

**Working without Reading.** Jobs which require a lot of reading may have to be avoided. Remember, people who are blind fill many professional jobs by using tape recorders and paying readers. There are many ways to work around your dyslexia. Some workers have cheat sheets with important words written on them. Harry Sylvester, former President of the Learning Disabilities Association of America, described how he worked in a paper mill and teamed up with an older engineer. The older engineer liked to do reports and writing. Harry liked being out in the field working with the crews. They worked together successfully for many years. However, Harry also

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<sup>6</sup>*Stories of Hope, Book One*, Eaton Coull Learning Group, 2003, Vancouver Canada, 113

reported that he had difficulty being promoted because he did not leave a paper trail.<sup>7</sup>

**Remediation.** Learning, communicating and working without reading are not easy. Some adults who have dyslexia choose to undergo the difficult process of learning to read. If you make that choice, avoid clinics that do not know about learning disabilities. They may say that you are “just not trying.” Find a teacher, tutor, or educational therapist who is experienced in instructing adults with dyslexia. The Resource List (Chapter 10, pp...) has organizations that can help you locate a person or program. The International Dyslexia Association specializes in helping people with dyslexia to read.

## LIVING WITH AUDITORY PERCEPTUAL PROBLEMS

**Improve your environment.** Limit the background noise around you. Try to live and work in quiet places. Turn on appliances and listen to them before buying them.

**Use your eyes to help your ears.** Look at people’s faces and lips as you listen. Watching them do things will reduce your need for explanations. For example, if you are going to work for a fast food chain, watch people work in another restaurant of the same chain before you begin the job. Read a lot to learn what you may not “pick up” through hearing.

**Follow directions carefully.** If directions are given verbally, repeat them. As you say them, make sure people are listening to you. If possible, write them down or ask to receive them in writing. You may have to ask for one direction at a time. But no matter what, be sure to remember the *first* thing you are told, so that your first step will be correct.

## LIVING WITH BOTH AUDITORY AND VISUAL PERCEPTUAL PROBLEMS

Some people have both visual and auditory perceptual handicaps. This causes insecurity. Neither sense can be trusted. One sense cannot easily be used to compensate for the other. If you have this problem, decide if one sense is actually stronger and use it to help the weaker one. If both senses seem equally inaccurate, practice your perception as proposed earlier, working with one sense at a time. Don’t be surprised if your senses develop unevenly. Your ears may seem stronger for a while, then your eyes may seem stronger. For the most part, the sections on living with visual and auditory perceptual problems will apply to you.

Here are a few tips to help you learn.

- X Get information from as many sources as possible, for example, if you are taking a class, you might:
  - discuss the class with other students
  - read or listen to as many books as possible, including books written for youngsters, if they cover your material
  - ask if you can audit another section of the class
  - ask your library if you can borrow videotapes or DVD’s of the material
  - get help from the instructor

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<sup>7</sup>*Legacy of the Blue Heron* by Harry Sylvester, Oxton House Publishers, Farmington, Maine pp 25-6

- X Because of your double disability, you are especially apt to make mistakes. When errors occur, correct them immediately. Don't get angry with yourself.
- X Practice a lot but be careful not to overload yourself. Many short periods of effort are better than one long period of work.
- X Your perception will be uneven. Some days will be better than others. Don't push yourself when everything seems to be going wrong.
- X Ask yourself how you *like* to do and learn things. Use that technique. You will naturally find the most efficient way for you.
- X Should you use taped books and lectures? Taped books may not be helpful as you may have to listen to the tapes many times.
- X You will have to use your eyes and ears together to learn a task which is being demonstrated.

### IMPROVING PERCEPTION

It's hard to learn when both your seeing and hearing are inaccurate. Try to improve your perception by:

- **Paying attention.** Some people who receive inaccurate information from their senses ignore their environment. They daydream and let their minds wander. Don't let this happen to you. Struggle to be aware.
- **Relaxing.** Some people who receive inaccurate information from their senses pay so much attention that what they see and hear confuses them even more. If you relax, your perception will automatically improve.

Most people with perceptual problems alternate between paying too little and too much attention. Try to find a state of relaxed awareness. Most people without learning disabilities have a section of their brain which automatically keeps them relaxed and aware. You may have to train yourself to do this consciously.

## Dealing With Your Disorganized Central Nervous System

### IMPROVING YOUR MOTOR ABILITIES

**Keep Physically Fit.** This is hard for people who have always been clumsy. Nevertheless, it is very important. A strong body helps keep the mind and senses strong. Physically fit people may have an easier time controlling their hyperactivity. Almost all athletic activities improve your sense of balance and sense of where you are in space (your vestibular and proprioceptive senses). Your visual and auditory perception will also be improved. You should participate in sports with people at your skill level.

**Find an exercise you enjoy and do it often.** Walking, hiking, and running are simple, and don't require especially good coordination. Swimming can be fun and floating in the water makes people feel graceful. Calisthenics can be done alone, are usually self-paced and may involve crossing the midline. Many people with learning disabilities say that karate and yoga have improved their coordination and helped them keep calm.

**Keep track of your progress and feel proud of each success.** Compare yourself with what you did last week, not with other people. Find another class, track, or pool if you are teased. As an adolescent or adult, you do not have to put up with the things you endured as a child.

If you have moments where you don't know where your body is in space, it helps to stop, be still and relax. Be aware of each part of your body. If you get confused or dizzy, sit down or lean against the wall.

A person with learning disabilities with coordination problems must learn to love his or her body and feel at one with it.

### Harnessing the Energy of Hyperactivity

Hyperactivity can be used to your advantage. It can enable adults with learning disabilities to work longer and harder. Find your best pace. If you need to move around a lot, you may want to organize your duties so you can take little walks or do some errands. Or you may want to make an effort to slow down. This helps you know where you are in space and prevents accidents. Meditation and yoga can help.

### TELLING RIGHT FROM LEFT

You may not automatically know right from left. Intellectually, you can tell the difference, but you don't have the instinctive knowledge. This lack of an anchor to the world makes getting lost a frightening experience.

Wear something such as a watch on the hand or arm you use the most to aid you in distinguishing right from left. It may help if it is heavy or bright. To remember which direction you were going before

you entered the building, carry something in the hand which will face in that direction as you leave and make sure you go out of the building using that same entrance.

## **OVERCOMING SOFT NEUROLOGICAL SIGNS**

Someone meeting a person with a learning disability for the first time may feel uneasy. He might not know why he feels such anxiety. But unconsciously, he may try to avoid the person who has a learning disability.

Why is this? Soft neurological signs, the visible results to central nervous system dysfunction, may be an explanation. To review, some examples of “odd looking” soft neurological signs are:

- X staring
- X turning the head, not the eyes
- X not being able to look at people in the eye
- X overreacting to stimuli, for instance, jumping because someone shuts a door
- X not holding the head straight

If you think any of these are your problem, you must consciously try to blink, hold your head straight and look at people in the eye.

Some soft neurological signs are not as controllable as others. You may have a delay in processing sensory information. This may cause you to appear to hesitate in your replies, laugh after everyone else has stopped or nod your head at inappropriate points in the conversation. Your movements may be disorganized. You might appear rigid and tense.

If you have soft neurological signs or any other problems that cause people to feel uncomfortable, it may help to bring them out in the open. Say, “I’m sorry I’m staring so much, but I can’t help it.” Or, “the reason it’s taking me so long to answer you is that I’m thinking about everything you said.”

## **OVERCOMING DISINHIBITION**

The self-awareness that helps you to overcome soft neurological signs will also help you overcome disinhibition, the difficulty in automatically behaving appropriately. Disinhibition is not your fault. It is part of the disability. People without this problem don’t have to worry about coughing without covering their mouth, talking aloud to themselves or making embarrassing statements. A section of their brain watches over them and keeps them from doing these things. You, on the other hand, will have to watch yourself consciously. If you have a problem with disinhibition, try to:

- X Avoid making aimless motions with your hands. Some adults with learning disabilities interlock their fingers or hold their knees.
- X Be careful to keep your mouth closed when you are not talking.
- X Encourage friends and family to tell you if you behave inappropriately or say something out of line. People who know you may ignore embarrassing statements. Watch their faces carefully and listen to your

responses. Thank them when they tell you about saying or doing something wrong.

X Remember, the struggle against disinhibition is hard. Sometimes it seems as if the minute you relax, the old behaviors are back again! But as your conscious mind gets used to its new work, you will begin to do it unconsciously.

## DEALING WITH CATASTROPHIC RESPONSE

Catastrophic response describes what happens when you involuntarily overreact because too much is going on around you or within your mind. It seems that when your central nervous system is overloaded with stimulation, it turns off for a while. You may lose your temper. You may be unaware of the environment for a few seconds and appear to freeze. At times, the period of unawareness may last longer. When such a severe catastrophic response is over, you may feel disoriented, not knowing how much time has passed or where you are.

Try to prevent catastrophic response. Learn what situations cause it, and avoid them. How do you feel before it happens? If you can identify a specific feeling such as confusion, dizziness, sounds too loud, sights too bright, you might be able to prevent the response by:

- **Isolating yourself.** Find a quiet place to rest for a while. At parties, find an empty room. If you are on a crowded street, find a small store, place of worship, or a side road.
- **Taking a break.** If you are being tutored, tell the teacher you need to stop for a while. If you are studying or working alone, relax for a few minutes.

If you “freeze” for a moment during conversation, look around. If nobody has reacted, continue talking or listening. If people are giving you puzzled looks or calling your name, say, “Sorry, I was thinking hard about...” or “Sometimes, I space out a little, sorry.” Then show that you are in control of yourself by acting as if nothing happened.

If you are disoriented after catastrophic response, remain calm. Sit down and relax. Find out where you are and what time it is. Look around. Take time to absorb the environment. If you are still disoriented, call someone who knows about your problem.

If you lose your temper, apologize. If appropriate, explain that sometimes you overreact when there are too many sights and sounds.

## CONTROLLING PERSEVERATION

Perseveration (repeating the same action again and again) can also be prevented by noting what brings it on and avoiding those conditions.

Don't do tasks involving motor coordination unless you can switch to another activity. If you make a mistake more than three times, take a break and do something else.

If you find yourself thinking in circles (mental perseveration), distract yourself. Do something different to get rid of the repetitive thought. If you are thinking repetitively while trying to learn something, it may be because you are learning it by reading or listening to the same material again and again. You must approach it from a different angle. Ask someone to explain it to you or find the same information written in a different way.

If you often say the same thing over and over again, encourage people to interrupt you. When someone doesn't seem to understand you, pause. See if they ask a question before you repeat yourself.

## **IMPROVING YOUR MEMORY**

A poor memory is common among people with learning disabilities. If you have a poor memory, try to discover how you remember best. What do you remember and how do you recall it? Some ways to help memory are:

- Writing important things in one notebook or calendar that you always carry with you.
- Asking people to remind you of important events.
- Associating one thing with another. For example, you may recall more facts if you read or listen to two books on the same subject and compare them.
- Using information as soon as you learn it. For example, if you are introduced to someone, repeat the name a few minutes later in conversation.
- Sometimes, smelling and tasting can help the memory. Chew a certain flavor of gum or open a bottle of vanilla extract while studying for a test. On the day of the examination, chew that flavor of gum again or put a dab of vanilla extract on your arm.

There are many technological solutions, such as e-mail automated reminders, PDA's and small voice recorders.

## **REMEMBERING PASSWORDS AND NUMBERS**

Today's world requires memorizing many number-letter combinations to obtain access to activities essential to your daily life, such as your telephone voice mail, your computer, credit card information, websites, and other critical information sources. Writing it down nearby can cause theft of critical data. Here are a few ideas.

- X Use digits and numbers that can be used in a sentence that you remember. For example, although I am changing it now, I had a password which was \*STIFPWLD\* It stood for Steps to Independence for

People with Learning Disabilities, which was easy to remember. I put stars on either side of the letters, because I liked the idea of surrounding my book with stars.

X Spell a word using your telephone keypad. This will make a number that you can easily find. For example, 5322 spells LDAA.

X Use numbers that you have memorized as a unit, such as an old address or phone number. Be careful not to choose something easily available on databases, such as your social security number.

X If you have a large number of passwords, consider having a list under lock and key.

## Resources for Help

### LEARNING MORE ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

Some of the suggestions in this booklet will help you. Choose the ones that are right for you. The more you find out about learning disabilities, the better your decisions will be. Many people with learning disabilities have studied the subject so thoroughly, they entered the field of learning disabilities professionally.

### ORGANIZATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

**Learning Disabilities Association of America** is the largest non-profit volunteer organization advocating for people with learning disabilities. It has over 20,000 members and over 200 state or local affiliates. Information on transition is available on their website, through publications, and through their conference. Many state chapters have specific resources on transition.

Learning Disabilities Association of America  
4156 Library Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349  
Phone (412) 341-1515  
Fax (412) 344-0224  
<http://www.lidaamerica.org/>

**Attention Deficit Disorder Association** provides information, resources and networking opportunities to help adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).

Attention Deficit Disorder Association  
P.O. Box 543  
Pottstown, PA 19464  
[www.add.org](http://www.add.org)

**Center on Accelerating Student Learning (CASL)** is designed to accelerate learning for students with disabilities in the early grades and thereby to provide a solid foundation for strong achievement in the intermediate grades and beyond.

Center on Accelerating Student Learning (CASL)  
John F. Kennedy Center  
Box 328 Peabody College  
Vanderbilt University  
Nashville, TN 37203  
Phone (615) 343-4782

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CASL/>

**Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice** supports and promotes a reoriented national preparedness to foster the development and the adjustment of children with or at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance.

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice  
1000 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W.  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20007  
Phone (888) 457-1551  
Fax (202) 944-5454  
<http://www.air.org/cecp/>

**Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA)** is a national center for research on early reading.

CIERA  
University of Michigan School of Education  
Rm. 2002 SEB  
610 E. University Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259  
Phone (734) 647-6940  
Fax (734) 615-4858  
<http://www.ciera.org/>

**Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)** provides education, advocacy and support for individuals with AD/HD.

CHADD  
8181 Professional Place, Suite 150  
Landover, MD 20785  
Phone (800) 233-4050  
Fax (301) 306-7090  
<http://www.chadd.org/>

**Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)** is a non-profit membership organization with 17 specialized divisions. **Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD)** is the division dedicated to learning disabilities.

Division for Learning Disabilities  
Council for Exceptional Children  
1110 North Glebe Road  
Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201-5704

Phone (888) CEC-SPED  
Fax (703) 264-9494  
[www.teachingld.org/](http://www.teachingld.org/)

**Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)** - <http://www.cldinternational.org/> provides services to professionals who work with individuals with learning disabilities.

Council for Learning Disabilities  
P.O. Box 4014  
Leesburg, VA 20177  
Phone (571) 258-1010  
Fax (571) 258-1011  
<http://www.cldinternational.org/>

**The International Dyslexia Association** is dedicated to the study and treatment of dyslexia, a specific type of learning disability. They have 13,000 members and over 40 branches. They provide a program of support groups for adults at their conference. Information on transition is available through their website and publications. Many branches have specific resources on transition.

International Dyslexia Association  
Chester Building, Suite 382  
8600 LaSalle Road  
Baltimore, Maryland 21286-2044 USA  
Phone (410) 296-0232  
Fax (410) 321-5069  
<http://www.interdys.org/>

**National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Disabilities (NAEAACLD)** website includes information and resources provided by an established network of individuals and organizations experienced in minority research and special education. It also provides a parent resource network and publications for teachers, parents, and others.

NAEAACLD  
P.O. Box 09521  
Columbus, OH 43209  
Phone (614) 237-6021  
Fax (614) 238-0929  
<http://www.charityadvantage.com/aacl/HomePage.asp>

**The National Center for Learning Disabilities** increases opportunities for all individuals with learning disabilities to achieve their potential. Its programs include a public policy office, advocacy programs, public awareness and information programs, publications, and a website. Its website has a section titled Living with LD [http://www.ld.org/livingwithld/adults\\_home.cfm](http://www.ld.org/livingwithld/adults_home.cfm) which has materials written specifically for adults who have learning disabilities.

National Center for Learning Disabilities  
381 Park Avenue South Suite 1401  
New York, NY 10016  
Phone (212) 545-7510

Fax (212)545-9665  
Toll-free 888-575-7373  
<http://www.ld.org/>

**Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic** provides information on over 80,000 recorded textbooks and other classroom materials, from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through postgraduate levels, available for loan. Individuals with learning disabilities are eligible to participate but must complete the certification requirements.

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic  
20 Roszel Road  
Princeton, NJ 08540  
Phone 866-732-3585  
<http://www.rfbid.org/>

**Schwab Learning** is a program of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, dedicated to helping kids with learning differences be successful in learning and life.

<http://www.schwablearning.org/>

**Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, Inc.** is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing support to parents of children with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders.

Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, Inc.  
P.O. Box 2726  
Westport, CT 06880  
<http://www.smartkidswithld.org>

## TRANSITION

Teenagers and young adults need to make a transition from living at home with their parents to living on their own or with others. They also need to move from economic dependence to finding a way to make a living. The following are two organizations that specialize in developing and distributing information on transition for young people with disabilities.

**HEATH Resource Center** is the national clearinghouse on post-secondary education for students with disabilities.

HEATH Resource Center  
The George Washington University  
2121 K Street, NW Suite 220  
Washington, DC 20037  
202-973-0904 (phone)  
800-544-3284 (toll-free phone)  
202-973-0908 (fax)  
E-mail: [askheath@gwu.edu](mailto:askheath@gwu.edu)  
<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/>

**National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)** provides information and

technical assistance regarding education after high school, employment, independent living, and policy development.

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)  
Institute on Community Integration  
University of Minnesota  
6 Pattee Hall  
150 Pillsbury Drive SE  
Minneapolis MN 55455ncset@umn.edu  
612-624-2097 (phone)  
612-624-9344 (fax)  
<http://www.ncset.org/>

## THE WORLD OF WORK

**Job Accommodation Network (JAN)** provides information on handling your learning disabilities in the workplace. If you have problems, call them and describe your disability and what you are having difficulty doing. They can consult with you after job interviews to think about how to do a specific task. They can help you handle difficulties with internships, volunteer work and they may be able to assist you if you are discriminated against. In addition, a counselor is available if you are interested in starting a small business.

Job Accommodation Network  
PO Box 6080  
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080  
jan@jan.wvu.edu  
800-526-7234 (phone)  
304-293-5407 (fax)  
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

## A Bright Future

The future is bright for adults with learning disabilities. Once they learn to deal with their disabilities and develop their strengths, people with learning disabilities can do anything. A recent study by Tulip Financial Group, in which 300 millionaires were tested, showed that forty percent of them had dyslexia. Richard Branson, billionaire and head of Virgin Industries, has dyslexia. Walt Disney also had dyslexia. There is also evidence that many geniuses of the past had learning disabilities.<sup>8</sup> For example, Leonardo Da Vinci's manuscripts have many reversals which he claimed were a secret code. But experts have commented that there are reversals within the reversals. Royal tutors tried without success to teach Hans Christian Anderson to read. His stories were dictated to a scribe.

Although it is hard to generalize, people with learning disabilities often have the following strengths:

- **Creativity.** Incorrect perception leads to a slightly different way of looking at the world. Inability to think in an orderly way can lead to new solutions to problems.
- **Self Discipline.** An invisible handicap must be overcome while receiving little praise. This takes a lot of inner strength.
- **Overcompensation.** Disadvantage can be turned to advantage. For example, some people with learning disabilities overcome their disorganization by becoming super organized. Or a person who is overly aware of background noise becomes a sound engineer— a job where ability to hear sound is important. The need to check and recheck for errors can lead to greater thoroughness and convincing people to help you can develop strong social skills.
- **Inner-directedness.** People who have learning disabilities tend to follow their principles and are less apt to run with the crowd.

The difficulties faced by people with learning disabilities can lead to strengths of character. Each person with learning disabilities has different abilities. Like everyone else, they want to share their talents with others. Each person who has a learning disability is unique and has something important to offer the world.

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<sup>8</sup>The Sunday Times, United Kingdom, October, 5, 2003

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