

Managing Social-Emotional Issues of Adults with Learning Disabilities

Jerome J. Schultz, Ph.D.

Introduction to Social-Emotional Issues and Learning Disabilities (LD)

Learning disabilities have common features, but those features show up in different people in different ways. This is especially true in adults. Two people born with the same type of disability may have entirely different life paths, influenced by educational, social, emotional, financial and health factors.

Negative social experiences in the past can lead to negative self-thoughts and a subsequent lack of opportunities, so it's important to know how to create positive social experiences.

The topics that follow are based on questions many adults with learning disabilities have about the impact of their LD on social-emotional functioning.

Friendships and Romantic Relationships

Many adults say that they "hide" their LD from potential friends or romantic partners, including spouses. However, the unique characteristics of the LD usually find their way to the surface in any relationship. At some point, it's important to share with your significant other the fact that a learning disability impacts your life.

In this conversation with your partner or friend, focus on what you have done to accommodate or overcome challenges in the past, and how that will likely continue in the future. Making the effort to manage a life with LD is sign of character and strength. A good friend, significant other, or spouse is more likely to be your partner in this venture when they feel like they are pairing up with a person who lives by the motto, "This might be hard, but I can do it."

You might want to establish rules like, "We never accuse or blame each other.," "We don't argue in public," "Please don't talk until I sit down," or "Never promise or threaten anything when we are upset." You could even make a video of yourself saying the things you want to say to your friend or partner, and watch the tape a few times before you share the message in person. This kind of social rehearsal can save you embarrassment or regret later. One note of caution: don't post this online and *don't email it anywhere*.

Anxiety and Self-Doubts in the Workplace

If you have a job that takes advantage of your strengths, it will be a better fit for you than jobs that make demands on skills that are challenges.



If you have a reading difficulty like dyslexia, or a specific math disability, or you are not great at organizing and managing tasks and your work requires any of these skills, this means that you will not only have to work harder than other people, but also, you'll have to work "smarter" to keep up the pace and quality of your work. Using this extra effort could make you short-tempered or very tired. Getting proper sleep, nutrition and exercise will help your brain work better.

If you do something at work that may get you in trouble with the boss or a co-worker, let them know about it before they find out about it from someone else, then apologize and let them know you will not let that happen again. Let them know that you learned from the experience, and never blame it on your LD. Also, try not to dwell on it. Try to begin each day with a fresh start.

Misunderstanding Words and Actions

Most adults say there are one or two people in their lives or at work that they can understand better than others. This is usually because these associates or friends "say what they mean and mean what they say." These are people you want to be around as much as possible.

Some people are not as clear with their words and body language. Learn to say, "I'm really interested in what you think about this, but I'm really not sure what you mean." You can also say, "I need to think about that a bit. Can you say that again?" or "I'm not quite sure that I heard you right; is this what you mean?"

Speaking Impulsively...Oops!



Impulsive speech can be socially disastrous for some people with LD, whether with friends, family, or colleagues. If you find that you have blurted something out that you didn't mean to, it's always okay to say "I'm

sorry, I didn't mean that." It's also okay to explain, "Sometimes I get worked up and when I do, it's hard to control what comes out of my mouth." Think about it: when you step on someone's toes, it's okay to say, "I didn't mean to hurt you." Likewise, when you blurt something out impulsively, it's always okay to say, "Sorry—that's not what I meant. Let me say that another way."

Social Skills Coaching

Some people can work on social skills by themselves, while other people need more guidance and advice to learn how to navigate the social landscape. If you try improving your social

skills on your own, but can't seem to make progress, it might be helpful to ask a trusted friend or family member to help monitor your progress. The key to success is understanding what you might be doing that pushes people away, and practicing responses that pull people toward you. Doing role plays or watching popular TV shows that depict social interactions and discussing these with friends may be very helpful. Finding that special thing that you do extremely well will also help reinforce the image of you as someone who does something well—someone who takes responsibility for his or her own life.

Resources

- National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Developing Social Skills and Relationships," <http://www.nclد.org/parents-child-disabilities/social-emotional-skills/developing-social-skills-relationship>
- National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Dr. Arlyn Roffman on Promoting Self-Awareness and Self-Acceptance in Teens," <http://www.nclد.org/parents-child-disabilities/teens/dr-arlyn-roffman-promoting-self-awareness-self-acceptance-teens>
- LD Online, "Social Skills and Adults with Learning Disabilities," <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6010/>
- [Arlyn J. Roffman](#) (2011) [Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood](#), Princeton Review.

Revised February 2014

© 2014 Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA). LDA encourages the distribution of this information. Please provide appropriate credit if portions are cited. Information may not be reprinted for the purpose of resale.

**Learning Disabilities Association of America • 4156 Library Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349
Ph (412) 341-1515 • Fax (412) 344-0224 • Email: info@LDAAmerica.org • Web: www.LDAAmerica.org**