



Dysgraphia and ADHD in Adulthood: A Talk with Owen Small

Lauren Clouser [00:00:06]:

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Owen Small, a research assistant and an individual with dysgraphia and ADHD. Owen, thanks so much for being here today.

Owen Small [00:00:33]:

Thank you for having me.

Lauren Clouser [00:00:35]:

So this is to continue our Adults with Learning Disabilities series that we've started, and I'm so excited to dive in, but first, I wanted to give the audience a chance to get to know a bit about you. So, Owen, would you tell us a bit about yourself?

Owen Small [00:00:47]:

Yeah, yeah. As you said, I'm a research assistant and a project manager with the FOR-ES project at Trinity College, Dublin. Before that, I was doing my master's at University College Dublin. And then before that, I grew up in America, not too far outside of Philly, went to school in Central PA, and much thanks to my wife, found myself here in Ireland. So.

Lauren Clouser [00:01:15]:

When did you receive a diagnosis for dysgraphia and ADHD? Were those at the same time? Were those different?

Owen Small [00:01:23]:

Yeah, so when I was in elementary school I just kind of received a sort of unspecified learning disability diagnosis, and then kind of went a long time without kind of any further elaboration on that. But as I got older, I kind of got more described as ADHD. And then a little bit later in life, I got kind of told that I have dysgraphia. Which was something to learn, and I guess explains my horrible handwriting for most of my life. So. But, yeah, so I had known for a while that I had something, I guess, different, in the learning space than everybody, but I wasn't fully aware of the ADHD, I guess, until I was a teenager, and then dysgraphia until probably a little bit later after that.

Lauren Clouser [00:02:17]:

It's kind of interesting to go from something so general to something more specific. Did anything

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change for you as a result of having a more specific diagnosis? Did it impact, like, your identity? Did it impact how you approach things? Was there a difference for you that you noticed afterwards once you had that knowledge?

Owen Small [00:02:39]:

I don't know if I can say so for ADHD, because I did know, maybe not formally, just, you know, through family members and people close to family knowing how to identify that, I knew relatively early. And then, I guess, formally I kind of knew about that for sure when I was a teenager. But with the dysgraphia I think there was definitely kind of something nice about learning more about that. It sort of made me, I don't know how to put it, I guess just feel better about things. In retrospect, handwriting was always very, very difficult. I have lots of memories of just getting very stressed out in classes, you know, having to write out a lot of things by hand, like trying to keep up with taking notes. I was always terrible at taking notes because my notes would just turn into scribbles and then my words would just become completely misspelled in every possible way.

And I have to constantly scratch things out because I always use a pen as well. Because on top of ADHD and dysgraphia, I'm also left handed, which isn't like some disability. But also in a right handed world, I guess it kind of is. So I didn't use a pencil because that smudges forever. So using a pen and then also having terrible handwriting, which, not realizing it was because I had an issue with handwriting, just led to lots of frustration and super big blotches on notebooks from scratching things out. So yeah, learning closer to being an adult about dysgraphia was kind of really nice because like, oh, okay. So I didn't just like suck at writing. It was the reason for that.

And it did kind of make things feel better. And then in my masters it helped out because then I was able to actually get some accommodations for that, because school over here in Europe for graduate school exams are pretty much just handwriting for two hours. So being able to use a keyboard in those circumstances was definitely reducing some stress.

Lauren Clouser [00:04:57]:

Absolutely. I'm glad that was able to help you, that you had more specific knowledge and it was actually able to help you get accommodations later in life. So I wanted to talk a little bit about what are some ways that dysgraphia and ADHD can impact you in your day to day life? Are there some things that people might not automatically associate with dysgraphia or ADHD that come up?

Owen Small [00:05:20]:

Yeah, I'll stick with the dysgraphia for a second and then touch on ADHD. But I will say the first thing that pops in my mind when you asked that, in day to day life, is I ask my wife to write cards

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a lot for me. I'm a little bit insecure sometimes about that, I'm thick skinned enough, I think. And I've dealt with it so I'm not really offended when people say, oh, it looks like a little kid wrote this. But like when I left my job before I moved to Ireland, I wrote my supervisor a card. Well, I didn't write it, Sam my wife did, because I didn't want to. I looked at my first draft of it and I was like, this does look like a little kid wrote it.

So I asked her to write it. So just little things like a lack of confidence, or insecurity here and there. And then with ADHD, I mean, I find out new things all the time just through reading stuff, and watching videos, and seeing other people share stuff like oh, that's an ADHD thing. It's not you being an idiot about stuff, because yeah, you just find lots of different things that I guess you wouldn't expect to be difficult. One of the most day to day life things I find very difficult is sort of like task paralysis. I don't know if that's the official wording for it, but yeah, just having an inability to actually do things. Especially when I know I need to do things.

It could be so bad to, the fact of, like, living on a different continent. I've flown back home quite a few times and I can put off packing until mere hours before I need to leave for the airport. And it's like, I know the whole day I need to pack, I need to do this. And I just, no matter how much I just scream at myself in my head to do it, I can't until I have reached a point where if I don't then I'm not going to make my flight. So there's a terrifying, overwhelming extrinsic factor pushing me to actually complete the task. So stuff like that, and that's a bigger example because international travel. But you know other day to day things are just like getting the dishes done, or just straightening up, like putting laundry away. That's probably the one I'm the worst with.

Just random tasks around the house are always pretty difficult with that. And then I guess also on the topic of tasks, so obviously task paralysis, like starting it but also ending like things. So maybe that's more of a projects thing rather than a task. But it's less of like a distracted thing, I feel like it's more just...I don't even know how to describe it sometimes, something comes up that I'm like, well I can't complete the project now. I guess I convince myself that I can't do it because circumstances aren't perfect.

Lauren Clouser [00:08:36]:

I think you did a good job of describing that. That makes a lot of sense. So I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the challenges that you face in the workplace. Are there things that you find yourself compensating for, or things that you've learned to make adjustments for that impact you in the workplace?

Owen Small [00:08:57]:

Yeah, I think fortunately with my current job, I can't say enough about the privileges of working in academia, especially in Europe. I've heard lots of nightmare stories about academia in America, and I'm sure it also exists in Europe as well. But obviously it's a much more relaxed vibe and

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everyone stops what they're doing and takes tea at 11. So that kind of more relaxed environment with a little bit more of an open ended type of job...Like I don't have an exact get XYZ done today. I kind of have a more grander need to accomplish this for the project as a whole. And so it kind of lets me apply myself the way my brain works, you know, kind of in waves. But if I kind of harken back to when I worked in environmental regulation for the state of Pennsylvania, that was more of like a nine to five and you've got to complete these things.

And that was definitely a pretty stressful job in some cases, trying to, by the schedule that I was forced to work, apply my brain by the hours I needed to do it rather than when inspiration hits. So I'd have to go complete an inspection. And then I worked in water quality, so I'd have to go inspect the facility for water quality related reasons. And then I'd have to sit there and do a big kind of mundane report about it. And so trying to force myself to do that report, to just turn it on, was always very difficult. I have people in my life that are on the opposite end of the spectrum. Like they can sit there, and whether it's studying, doing work, something, it's just like a switch. They can just flick it on and off.

Whereas I feel like with ADHD, which becomes a challenge in certain workplaces, it's not like a switch, it's more of like a tide. Like now if high tide is high productivity, then that's when you get work done. And tides don't come at the same time every day. So it's like at 8 o'clock today I feel like hyperfixating on this task and getting a lot done, and then it doesn't hit me until 6pm the next day. So trying to kind of reframe my brain to work in the more stereotypical working hours, I guess would be one of the biggest workplace challenges.

Lauren Clouser [00:11:51]:

Yeah, definitely. Having that sort of rigid schedule. Well, and could you maybe talk a little bit about when you're sort of forced to adhere to this rigid schedule? Does that lead to a type of exhaustion when you're not feeling like you have the ability to complete things? Do you find yourself having to work harder than maybe peers who don't have ADHD?

Owen Small [00:12:14]:

Yeah, I would say I feel like I definitely do. I could definitely feel more like I remember with that previous job, I felt very mentally exhausted by the end of the day a lot of times, even though I feel like I often would also come away with it feeling I didn't really accomplish anything. Like I maybe I didn't get the reports that I needed to get done and other stuff. And I was like, wow, I barely did anything today, but I feel completely exhausted. And that was definitely something I also faced a lot, like in my undergrad as well. It becomes less about getting the task done and more of this internal struggle of keeping yourself on the task. It's like there's two things going on. Like your brain is trying to complete whatever you're being paid to do. And then also in your brain, there's like two people fighting at the steering wheel. One guy that's like, no, we don't need to do this right now.

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And the other guy's saying, like, no, we really, really need to do this right now, man. And so it kind of just makes it this really convoluted process of trying to get a very simple task. Just like writing out a paragraph of what you did in the field.

Lauren Clouser [00:13:33]:

Yeah, it sounds like there's another level to it. Well, do you have any advice based on your experience for other individuals with learning disabilities in the workplace or. I also want to add, this is a separate question too, but any recommendations maybe for employers, too?

Owen Small [00:13:52]:

Yeah. So I guess I'll go with the advice first. I feel, and I definitely don't do this still, I'm definitely really bad about this, but trying not to be too hard on oneself, I feel like, is kind of the best advice I can say for this type of stuff. Because, I mean, I still think about my previous job. I worked for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection for over three and a half years, I think. And then to this day, I'm like, wow, I accomplished very little then. But then I have plenty of people in my life that try to reassure me, like, no, you did a lot. And then even my supervisor said I did a great job.

But then I was just like, ah, that's just being nice. You convince yourself that you did a bad job. And so I guess just trying to always remind oneself that you're probably doing better than you think you are. Even if you feel like it's this overwhelming struggle and just a daily battle just to get very simple tasks done, and you might feel insecure about it and feel like other people just do things much more simply. But then what you think is barely getting anything done might be getting a lot done in other people's eyes. And also, I guess to build off of that,, lots of other people struggle too.

I always assume that I'm having this really hard struggle of getting lots of stuff done. But then with a lot of learning disabilities, I feel like you win some and lose some. So I might struggle with doing the simple force yourself to get this thing done, a tedious task. But also I might fly through a different type of task that other people kind of struggle with in their own way. So on a grand total, like a sum of getting stuff done, I might be just as productive as other people. They might be having the same thoughts that I am about doubt and insecurity.

So just reminding yourself that you're doing better than you think you are, and not everybody else is doing much better than you. Just try not to compare, I guess would be a great way to end that one.

Lauren Clouser [00:16:17]:

Yeah, I think that's great advice.

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Owen Small [00:16:18]:

And with the workplaces, there's actually kind of a recent kind of encounter at work that perfectly lets me answer that. So my supervisor here at Trinity, she is a very, very accomplished researcher. She's in charge and involved in many projects here. So any words of praise from her, you know, make me feel really good. And I was kind of going through some work that I've been doing, just updating her on some of the things I've been working on. And without getting too into the weeds of what I'm doing. You know, I work for a scientific research project and one key tenet of science is that you can't have a conclusion in your mind and then aim your science towards that. That's bad science.

But with the particular project I'm working on, we're kind of working towards creating some type of, I guess you could say product. Not actually a commercial product, but something to provide in regards to forestry and sustainable forestry and ecosystem services. And to do that we need to know that we can actually properly communicate and visualize the results. And so being ADHD, and being great at thinking of projects, and then blasting through all the steps and envisioning how it could end, I just did that first when I started working on stuff and figured out a way how it could possibly be visualized without actually completing all the science in the middle. But in this particular case, unlike a lot of science, it was actually a good thing to know. Will this actually be worth it in the end or is this going to be too difficult of a concept to show, so it's not worth it to actually pursue all the stuff in between? And when I mentioned that and said, yeah, I did a bit of an ADHD thing and sort of worked on the end of it before I actually did all the busy work, she actually complimented that.

She said, like, I think it's really good to have ADHD brains in science sometimes. So that was definitely something that really reassured me. And answering your question about what to recommend to workplaces, I think seeing the value in different types of brains, whether it's ADHD or someone with obsessive compulsive disorder, sometimes that might be something drawing them back, but also what they're doing could be going over things to really make sure things are in place and in order. So I think that there's always benefits to how different brains operate. And for any employer or workplace, if you just figure out how that brain could benefit you rather than how you have to accommodate it, I think would be a great bit of advice.

Lauren Clouser [00:19:35]:

Yeah, absolutely. So I have two questions for you yet before I let you go, but what are some things that you wish more people understood about dysgraphia and then the same thing for ADHD.

Owen Small [00:19:51]:

Having still a lot to learn about dysgraphia myself, I don't know if there's too much to answer

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about that. I guess the simplest would be it's not just bad handwriting. It's a misfire between the brain and the hand for actually completing the process of handwriting. One kind of just funny tangent on that is recently I've been showing lots of people, I guess apparently I was told that this is something related to dysgraphia, but I write every single letter in reverse. Everyone starts a certain letter up here and then goes down or starts down here and goes up. I do everything the opposite way. And I've just been showing like colleagues and coworkers and stuff like that.

And they're all just so confused and amazed by it. But then I guess to answer that question with ADHD, definitely this comes more from my undergrad stuff. But the people just hearing ADHD or ADD, just, either of those and just thinking oh, that person gets distracted really easily. I know that's like the very cliché basic answer to that. And you think people would understand by now it's not just a short attention span. In some cases it can be the exact opposite. It could be you are so hyperfixated on one thing that you can't actually focus on anything else, to the point where it's stressing you out you're just like why can't I stop thinking about this one thing? For me, a lot of times...I love movies. I love watching different movies.

I also have a very visual memory. If I watch a movie I really like, I just can't stop thinking about it. I can just be completely hyperfixated on it. I'll spend my free time Googling, reading everything about the behind the scenes, learning about the different actors who are in it, to the point where people will be having a conversation with me and I'll just be thinking about oh yeah, that one scene in the movie, that was really cool. It's like. So it's not just some random fleeting distraction. I'm so focused on a different thing that I can't actually give you any of my focus right now. So I think that's definitely the biggest thing with ADHD.

People just think it's like a dog and squirrels...No, I guess actually it is like a dog and squirrels. And the fact that dogs are so focused on squirrels they don't have time to be paying attention to whatever you're doing.

Lauren Clouser [00:22:19]:

Yeah, that's true. Well, before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask, is there anything that I didn't ask that maybe you wanted to talk about or any notes to end on? I know I'm putting you on the spot here.

Owen Small [00:22:33]:

I guess one thing that just randomly came in my mind, maybe this would be further to advice or something, is I've found in personal life, like work life, just anything, especially with ADHD, is what's reduced a lot of anxiety that can be born from that is sort of leaning into it. And as long as it's not like, like hampering anything else. But I always get distracted with little side projects, like some type of artistic endeavor that might never see the light of day or something. And I'll just sit there and hyperfixate on it and I'll just do lots of work towards some type of random project. And

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I think rather than trying to fight that and to be like no, I should pay attention, I just think people maybe should lean into it more. Maybe one day you'll write a screenplay because that was your random side project you always just hyperfixated on and put way too much resources into. As long as it's not negatively impacting personal life or your work. Just kind of let your brain run wild and just do the things that's letting it feel at ease. It's kind of cathartic.

And then when you've done it and you'll be like, ah, okay, that was a cool little thing I did. And then stash it away, and then maybe some years later when you're moving, you'll pull out a painting that you did because you just decided to fixate on painting for a week, and you're like, wow, this was a really good painting that I did. So, you know, as long as it's not negatively impacting you in another facet, why not just let it go for a day, you know?

Lauren Clouser [00:24:21]:

Yeah, I like that a lot. Well, thanks so much for being on the show and for sharing your experiences. I love the advice that you shared. I think that was really great. So thanks again for being on the show.

Owen Small [00:24:34]:

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. It was great to talk about it.

Lauren Clouser [00:24:44]:

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