

Accommodations Make Success Possible: A Personal Account

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I was honored when The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) asked me to be a contributing author of this issue. Me, a contributing author? An oxymoron! As a child I could never have imagined the word "author" and my name being said together. The truth is, the first time IDA asked me, I declined. I teased and said, "This isn't a publicity stunt. I'm really dyslexic." I remember thinking how very hard it is for me to write an article that makes sense. All the information is jumbled up in my head. How could I get it straightened out? My sentences, my grammar, my writing. I may make an impression when I speak, but I write poorly. After all, once a dyslexic always a dyslexic.

Then came the transition, from panic to resolve. I realized I must remember all the psychological accommodations I teach my patients in therapy. I needed to slow my mental state way down. I needed to create goals that were obtainable. I had to stop focusing on the whole project and think of small steps instead. For example, I knew I could take the first step and write a workable outline. I needed to work very hard and resign myself to the fact that I would work harder on this project than other contributing authors who were not dyslexic.

If I go over and over the article; if I ask many people to help me, to edit, to go over it again; if I don't quit until I'm satisfied; if I hand in the article early allowing for potential problems; if I handle my frustration by taking a break whenever writing gets too difficult; if I discipline myself to go back to working, even when I'd rather not; if I impose, once again, on my loved ones to support me through a difficult assignment – then maybe I can do it. I can write something worth reading.

In essence, I needed to use the accommodation techniques that would be presented in this issue of *Perspectives*. Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic promised to be there again for me as they have been so many times in the past. They volunteered to put any articles I needed to read on tape.

They promised to put this issue of *Perspectives* on tape so that I, and other dyslexics, could read what is written.

Today, people regard me as successful and assume I can do things I can't do. Yet, when I was a child, people assumed I couldn't do things I was able to do. Like most individuals with dyslexia, I did not fit a mold as a child. And I still don't. One memory stands out in my mind.

When I was in ninth grade, I took a standardized test which measured aptitude toward spatial relations. It was given to the entire class. I scored the highest mark in the ninth grade. However, the experience turned out to be such a humiliation that I never even told my parents about one of the very few successes I ever had in school.

I was, of course, a poor student, always in the very lowest section; always in remediation classes, which never helped me get out of the lowest section. So, how could I score so high? School officials could not believe it was possible. They were convinced I had cheated. My teacher called me to the front of the class and asked me whose paper I had copied. The forces in charge could not modify their image of me. They could only see me as someone who had cheated.

Two days later, my teachers apologized. They had looked at all the scores of the students who had taken the test. No one in the room had done nearly as well as I had. They finally realized I could not have cheated. I still cringe remembering the pain of that day.

I was finally diagnosed as severely dyslexic at age 33. The brain presents learning opportunities which, by the time my dyslexia was discovered, were long past for me. I'm not remediate like my son who was diagnosed with dyslexia early and reads quite well; although, as with many people with dyslexia, reading is not an enjoyable process for him.

Now I'm a licensed psychologist specializing in helping individuals with learning disabilities. I earned a doctorate when the university didn't really understand what a learning disability was and students didn't receive accommodations for these disabilities. How did I do it? I took the maximum amount of time allotted to earn my degree, even though I went to school every semester. I took one course at a time. This was the only way I could handle the caseload. The only true accommodation accorded me was that

I was able to become a member of Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic and received my textbooks on tape. I also had someone edit every paper I handed in.

But I still don't fit the mold. Colleagues often assume I can do things I cannot do. When I wanted to submit a workshop proposal to the Philadelphia Branch of IDA, they suggested I simply put it in writing. For me, there's nothing simple about writing. I asked if I could come and present the proposal at a board meeting. Speaking is always easiest.

Yet, professional standards must be maintained. With or without a learning disability, in the end I must perform as well as my colleagues. It is up to me to fill in the gaps of the mold I do not easily or completely fit. Psychological reports need to be read, patient records must be kept, I have to stay current in my field. Professional articles are waiting to be written.

Success is so sweet after knowing so frequently what failure feels like. To succeed, we must learn how to accommodate. This issue is dedicated to answering the question, "How do people deal with a learning disability after they've been

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Remediated to the fullest extent possible? The answer is accommodations. I finally finished this article and it's published in Perspectives. This is proof that accommodations make success possible. I know it can work for you.

The psychological accommodations I used in writing this article can be applied to most situations in order to deal with a learning disability:

1. Slow down – give yourself permission to take the time you need.
2. Create obtainable goals.
3. Break each task down into small, manageable steps.
4. Be willing to work very hard.
5. Recognize and accept the fact that only extra effort will get you the success that others achieve with much less work.

6. Don't quit, especially when the going gets tough. Take a break instead.
7. Establish a timetable that is realistic and leaves as much room for error and re-doing as possible.
8. Anticipate and prepare for problems.
9. Take a chance. Do something you're not sure you can do well. It's the only way to grow and find your full potential.

Dr. Linda Tessler is a licensed psychologist who specializes in helping individuals struggling with learning disabilities and related emotional difficulties. Over the past decade, she has been a frequent speaker at academic institutions and civic organizations and has been interviewed numerous times on radio and television in an effort to increase public awareness and sensitivity to learning disabilities. Dr. Tessler is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Philadelphia affiliate of RFB&D, and has served on its National Advisory Council. She has also been a long time member of IDA, and will be a presenter at this year's Conference in San Francisco in November.

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