

Five Psychological Cues* to Manage Life with a Learning Disability

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1. TAKE ACTION: It's Enough To Be On Your Way

Situation

You've just learned that you (or your child) have a learning disability. You're sad, filled with self-pity (Oh, poor me). You're angry, filled with self-pity (Why me?!). You're scared, filled with self-pity (I'll never be good at anything!)

What are you going to do? **Answer:** Take Action

Action One: Go ahead and grieve. It's normal and is even a healing process. It's okay as long as it is only a first step and not a permanent condition.

Action Two: Accept your situation and recognize that your learning disability needs attention. Also, put your learning disability in perspective. It is part of who you are, not the sum total of you. Understand that you have a perceptual difference; this difference gives you some perceptual advantages and some disadvantages. You will have to work hard. But your learning disability can be managed.

Action Three: Investigate. Research. Ask questions to find out all the help that is available to you. Call Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (1-800-221-4792). Call the National Learning Disability Association (412-341-1515) or The International Dyslexia Association (410-296-0232). **Pick the brain of someone else who has a similar problem.** There is a wealth of resources, but you must actively search them out. Parents, please note there is a direct correlation between early intervention and reading ability. With children, the earlier the diagnosis and remediation, the greater their achievement as readers.

Action Four: Set a goal for yourself. Use your dreams to create your goal. Dreams are like stars; even though you may never reach them, they will help you find your way. The only way to grow is to take chances, to push yourself. You'll never know how much you can achieve, if you don't challenge yourself by taking risks. Be sure to name your goal and make it something you can measure.

Remember too, that failure is an unavoidable and necessary part of growth. Therefore, expect some failures along the way; they are sure to occur. Regard each one as an opportunity to learn. When you make a mistake, it's one obstacle out of the way. You won't make the same error again. It is helpful to think of your imperfections in the same way we regard hand-made objects. Such items are cherished precisely for their imperfections. The human touch, with all its imperfections, makes an item unique and valuable. Regard yourself in the same generous way.

Action Five: Determine the first step you are able to take down the path to your goal. Promise yourself you're going to stick with this first step until it's done, and keep this promise. Self-esteem comes from keeping promises to yourself, being trustworthy. When you've completed the first step,

evaluate your decision to go down this path. It's okay to change your mind. But if this goal is still something you want to pursue, get started on the next step.

Looking too far ahead can be overwhelming, so don't do it. Break your big goal down into manageable steps that are in your control. For example, your goal may be to complete a certain course of study. **The grades your teachers will give you are not in your control.** What is in your control, however, is how much you study and utilize the help available to you. Achievement, satisfaction and self fulfillment come from completing each step and knowing that you did your best to accomplish that much. It's enough to be on your way.

2. Prioritize and Pace Yourself

Situation

Your learning difference slows you down; this is a fact of your life.

Yet life moves along at a very fast clip and you are expected to keep up. Teachers, parents, friends, employers and co-workers will have the same expectations of you as they do for everyone else.

How can you possibly get everything done? The simple answer is, you can't.

What are you going to do? Answer: Prioritize and Pace Yourself

- Once you accept that there is too much to do, it is important to stay calm. Prioritizing buys you a lot of time. Besides, life is long and the English language is finite. With practice and experience, you can improve at even the most challenging tasks. You'll never be the best speller or a great reader, but you can improve skills. It's a comfort to know there is no correlation between how long it takes to learn something and how well it is learned. The person who takes five or six years to earn a college degree can get as much from the education in the end as the person who does it in four.
- Sort out what you can do and what you need others to do for you or teach you how to do. **This process is key for most learning disabled people to achieve their goals.** Successful adults with learning differences frequently hire someone to do what they cannot do (i.e., typist, proof reader, etc.)
- Focus on what is most important. In doing this, you are just like everyone else. No one knows everything about a subject; that is impossible. Like everyone, you will have to learn to identify what is essential for you to study and absorb. A professional may be needed to help you figure out how to zero in on the essentials.
- Take as many breaks as you need to keep working toward your goals. **Taking a break is as important an "action" as every forward step.** Take time off when you start feeling bogged down or discouraged. Depending on the situation, a break may be an hour, a day or a year. The important thing is to regard it as "time off," not the end. You may be able to return to the task refreshed and ready to tackle problems, or you may need someone to help you over a hump. Whatever happens, make sure the break is part of your forward motion.
- **Calm yourself inside and be willing to take your time.** It makes a big difference. Accept your learning pace as your personal style. Allowing yourself to move slowly lets you be on your way. Every successful adult with a learning problem I have interviewed in my research realized this simple truth was essential to their achievements.

3. Maintain a Support System

Situation

You have accepted the fact that you need help.

What are you going to do to get the right kind of help? **Answer:** Build and Maintain Two Support Systems: Technical & Social.

SUPPORT SYSTEM ONE: Technical

Technical support includes the technology that makes life and learning manageable. A tape recorder to record a lecture or listen to a book on tape may be essential. A computer that reads aloud is an invaluable aid. Other tools used are Palm Pilot "Speak & Spell" calculator. **Technical support also refers to people who teach you** and help with various tasks. Your technical support team may include a coach, a tutor, reader, spell checker, typist, computer assistant, or others. These individuals must have your confidence and make you feel completely safe. The support system only works if you have people on board whom you feel good about.

SUPPORT SYSTEM TWO: Social

The role of family members in the support system is critical and difficult. The instinct for family is to protect the learner from pain; to make life easier; to solve problems and smooth over rough spots. **The instinct is to protect, not support.**

Family members must learn how to provide quality support. A fundamental guideline is to listen without saying too much. In other words, listen about 70 percent of the time. Validate the person's difficulties, but allow him/her to assume the role of doer, problem solver, independent thinker and self-reliant individual. It is the role the individual with the learning difference must assume to reach their potential.

Social support also includes friends. Friends are people you can trust because they accept you for who you are.

4. LOOK INSIDE – Like What You See

Situation

You've got a great support system; you've set up achievable goals; you're working very hard. Things go well at first. Then you start looking ahead and the end seems too far. Or, you come across what seems to be an insurmountable problem. You don't think you can sustain the level of effort needed to go on. You begin to think about giving up.

What can you do to avoid falling into this trap? **Answer:** Look Inside. Like What You See.

Everyone gets discouraged at times. It's a symptom of life, not of a learning disability. Those who have learning issues must judge themselves by appropriate standards. Your goals and achievements are your own and cannot be compared to anyone else's. Indeed, the happiest people are those who stay focused on their own game plan and measure today's success against yesterday's. Dissatisfaction arises from comparing your "self" to others. Since delayed gratification is part of your life, motivation and pleasure must come from within. Self-image is in your control, so figure out how to look inside and like what you see.

Here are a few tips to maintain a winning self-image:

- Notice small improvements and pat yourself on the back for them. **Learn to feel satisfaction from every step forward.** Make promises to yourself and keep them. If you tell yourself, "I'm going to read five pages every night," then do it! A winning self-image depends on honoring promises to yourself. Have integrity to yourself.
- **View problems and obstacles as feedback, never failure.** Bumps in the road are just road signs telling you to do things differently. Try another way, but keep moving. You will find something that works.
- **You need to find ways to soothe yourself when things are not going well.** A natural reaction to problems is to hurry through in order to get rid of the stressful situation. For the person, with a learning disability, this is disaster. At stressful times, you must stay true to your rhythm and slow down more than usual. Literally, stop to breathe slowly and deeply. Relax yourself back to what you were doing.
- You need to take breaks. **Do something physical such as running, playing ball, or taking a walk.** For some people, yoga or meditation is a good stress-reducer. Maybe you just need to talk to a support person. As we discussed before, taking breaks is necessary to keep going.
- **Develop a talent; something you're consistently good at.** Your talent doesn't have to be as an athlete, dancer, musician, or other great gift. Your talent is anything you're good at: baby-sitting, craft projects, an after-school job, or a million other things.
- **Humor smooths the way.** It's the lubricant for life. Apply freely.

5. Create Balance

Situation

You're working so hard at living with your learning difference, you are forgetting to just live.

What can you do? What must you do? **Answer:** Create Balance In Your Life.

Like everyone else, you need to eat well, exercise, develop hobbies, feel passionate about things, spend time with friends, keep appointments, and just live life. Because of the slow, laborious pace of working and living activities that serve the mind occupy a disproportionate amount of time. **You must make equal time to nourish your emotional self.**

Three principles that are important to creating balance:

- 1. To achieve, we need to organize.** Disorganization costs time and increases stress. Since it's overwhelming to tackle all aspects of disorganization at once, work on one problem area at a time. Develop a system of organization you can maintain. For some individuals, organization can only be achieved with a professional coach.
- 2. Do your most difficult or unpleasant tasks first.** For example, students should do homework before watching TV. Also be aware of your high and low energy periods during a day. Do your most difficult task first. As much as possible, do your hardest tasks first during your high energy hours.
- 3. Individuals with learning differences walk a "frustration tightrope."** Frustration is a motivator when it inspires you to work hard and to keep trying new ways to solve problems and handle difficult situations. On the other hand, if you encounter too much frustration, you're bound to give up. You need to strike a balance on this frustration tightrope. Each person must find his or her equilibrium; the level of frustration that spurs you to challenge yourself.

In Conclusion

Living with a learning disability is not easy. The above "cues" are guiding suggestions to help manage the endless obstacles that school, work and daily life place in your way. They are not a cure-all; nor are they a salve for the many pains and pitfalls you encounter. They are, however, based on years of study and personal experience living with a learning disability. They are presented with the absolute conviction that every person with a learning difference can achieve their potential.

Take a look again at these five cues: Take Action; Prioritize and Pace Yourself; Maintain a Support System; Look Inside - Like What You see; create Balance. It should be clear these cues are applicable to everyone and anyone. Those of us with learning difficulties face the same challenges as everyone else. The intensity of these obstacles is a matter of degree. The way we overcome them is a matter of personal style. One of the gifts of a learning disability is that if we manage it, it will make us stronger.

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