



Introduction to Learning Disabilities

In basic terms, learning disabilities (LDs) are **brain-based difficulties** that affect one or more ways that a person takes in, stores, recalls or uses verbal and nonverbal information.

LDs are **difficulties in processing information**, and they occur in spite of average or above-average thinking and reasoning abilities.

LDs are **not caused by environmental factors** such as cultural differences or socio-economic status, although such factors can compound their impact.

LDs can **interfere with learning basic skills** such as reading, writing, and math. They can also interfere with higher-level skills such as organization, time management and social communication skills.

Such difficulties reflect impairments in the ‘psychological processes’, for example:

- **Phonological processing** (identifying and manipulating speech sounds)
- **Working memory** (holding information in mind while also using the information)
- **Processing speed** (speed of taking in, using or pulling out information)
- **Language processing** (understanding and expressing information using words)
- **Visual-spatial processing** (perceiving or organizing visual information)
- **Executive functions** (planning and organizing)
- **Visual-motor processing** (carrying out hand-eye activities)

LDs are lifelong disorders. They do not go away, nor can they be cured, but people can and do learn to effectively cope with them. Accommodations at school, secondary education or work help with this.

Characteristics of individuals with LDs

The following descriptions may help you determine if a learner is at risk for learning disabilities. They may not exhibit all of them, but they will have some.

Reading Skills

- Breaking words down into their individual sounds
- Recognizing words
- Reading fluently
- Understanding what is read
- Remembering what is read
- Difficulty identifying important points and/or main ideas
- Difficulty recalling sequence

Written language skills

- Handwriting
- Putting thoughts on paper
- Organizing written work
- Spelling and grammar
- Difficulty with straight copying
- Difficulty with sentence structure
- Frequent spelling errors, including omissions, substitutions, transpositions

Oral Language Skills

- Difficulty concentrating and comprehending
- Difficulty expressing what the learner clearly knows, feels, or understands
- Oral expression better than written (or vice versa)
- Difficulty telling a story in proper sequence
- Difficulty answering questions or following what you say
- Tendency to misinterpret subtleties in language, tone of voice, or social situations

Social situations

- Interpreting facial expressions
- Understanding body language
- Understanding tones of voice
- Taking turns in conversations
- Impulsivity / hyperactivity / attention deficit
- Difficulty remembering names or recalling common facts in a conversation

Executive function

- Organizing
- Managing time

- Planning and decision making
- Problem solving
- Lack of spatial skills
- Poor coordination (gross and fine motor)

Memorization

- Inability to memorize the alphabet
- Inability to learn number facts by heart
- Inability to recognize sight words
- Problems with the retrieval of material that has already been learned
- Not knowing right from left

A few things to keep in mind when teaching learners with LDs

It is important to remember that each learner is different and will have their own unique combination of strengths and difficulties.

Learners may have a lot of difficulty in some areas but none or very little in others. This can be confusing to teachers, and even to the learners themselves.

Many learners with LDs may struggle with feelings of **frustration, a lack of confidence, and low self-esteem.**

Some learners with LDs may **appear** to be unmotivated or not trying hard enough, when in fact, they have become discouraged because they've been struggling so hard.

Learners with LDs CAN be successful

Learners with LDs CAN be successful when they have access to specific skill instruction, compensatory strategies, self-advocacy skills and accommodations.