

Reboot Your Brain: Doing Research as we Age

Presented by Jean Wilcox Hibben; PhD, MA, <www.circlemending.org>
circlemending@gmail.com; Riverside County, California

909-994-6114

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As we age, it is not unusual to find certain things to become more difficult: seeing, hearing, writing, understanding, and remembering can all get a little fuzzier over time. Often this is due to just the body wearing out in places, but sometimes it is a matter of physiology – a vision impairment, a hearing deficit, an arthritic hand, a stressed brain . . . all or any of these can make a person elect to back off of doing genealogy – especially when it involves research (doing or reporting it). Don't let a learning disability become a reason to cut off your ancestors! They still need you!

Definitions

A “learning disability” (aka “learning disorder”) refers to the group of disorders “that affect a broad range of academic and functional skills including the ability to speak, listen, read, write, spell, reason, and organize information.” Such a disability should not be confused with a low level of intelligence; in fact, many with learning disabilities have average or even above average intelligence levels. Learning disabilities may be caused from any number of things but amount to some [temporary or permanent] “. . . deficit in the brain that affects the processing of information.” (Wikipedia)

If you are a person with (note: not a “victim of”) one or more learning disabilities, keep in mind that, while they are most noticeable when people are young and in school, they do not go away when those children become adults (National Center for Learning Disabilities).

Dyslexia – A disability involving written material (particularly related to reading);

e.g., seeing letters or words backwards, inverted, exchanged, or similarly incorrect

Dysgraphia – A disability involving written material (particularly related to writing);

e.g., misspelling words, writing letters or words backwards or in incorrect order, etc.

Dyscalcula – A disability involving numbers and mathematics; e.g., having problems doing calculations, writing numbers incorrectly, inverting numbers, etc.

Checklist (from the Learning Disabilities Association of America)

You may have a learning disability, even if you did NOT have it in childhood, if you experience one or more of the following:

- perform similar tasks differently from day to day
- read well but not write well, or write well but not read well
- are able to learn information presented in one way, but not in another
- have a short attention span, are impulsive, and/or are easily distracted
- have difficulty telling or understanding jokes
- misinterpret language, have poor comprehension of what is said
- have difficulty with social skills; misinterpret social cues

- find it difficult to memorize information
- have difficulty following a schedule, being on time, or meeting deadlines
- get lost easily, either driving and/or in large buildings
- have trouble reading maps
- often misread or miscopy
- confuse similar letters or numbers, reverse them, or confuse their order
- have difficulty reading the newspaper, following small print, and/or following columns
- have ability to explain things orally, but not in writing
- have difficulty writing ideas on paper
- reverse or omit letters, words, or phrases when writing
- have difficulty completing job applications correctly
- have persistent problems with sentence structure, writing mechanics, and organizing written work
- experience continuous problems with spelling the same word differently in one document
- have trouble dialing phone numbers and reading addresses
- have difficulty with math, math language, and math concepts
- reverse numbers in checkbook and/or have difficulty balancing a checkbook
- confuse right and left, up and down
- have difficulty following directions, especially multiple directions
- are poorly coordinated
- are unable to tell what has just been said
- hear sounds, words, or sentences imperfectly or incorrectly

Hint: If you have, or suspect you have, a learning disability (temporary, permanent, adult-onset, or lifelong), admit it; people usually are understanding and you will experience freedom from keeping “the secret” that caused shame when you were a child in school or embarrassment as an adult in genealogy meetings and classes. Honesty about it reduces stress.

The differences and misinterpretations, misunderstandings, etc. are a matter of perception, which differs from one person to the next. What is helpful for one person might not work for another, but some ways that might be considered are in the next section.

First, recognize

Differences in Learning Styles

- Listening (like lectures, recorded books, etc.)
- Reading (“how to” books, research, directions, etc.)
- Seeing (photos, objects, TV, PowerPoint, etc.)
- Doing (interactive. computer, etc.)

Ways to manage reading, writing, and hearing difficulties

- Obtain computer software or smart phone apps (see online references for specifics on available programs and apps)
 - Use vocal assistance for word processing and emailing
 - Turn on spelling assistance
 - Employ word recognition help
 - Obtain a magnifier (free smart phone app for reading small print)
- Use color
 - Change type color
 - Change background color
 - Copy documents onto colored paper
 - On screen: try dark background with light lettering

- Adjust type (size and/or font)
 - Learn the fonts that are hard for you to read and avoid them
 - Increase size of font and/or margins to make reading easier
- Work during your optimum time
 - If you are a morning person, set aside morning time to do research
 - If you work better at night, late afternoon, etc. research then
- Recognize your attention span and work with it (take breaks!)
- Avoid disruptions/distractions during your “work time”
 - Disconnect telephone; turn off cell
 - Turn off your email program, Facebook connection, etc. during work time
 - Have a quiet, isolated (if possible) work area
 - Let others know to leave you alone during your work time
- Use check lists use for everything and mark off accomplishments
- Have note paper on hand to write down distracting thoughts so you don’t keep focusing on them, such as
 - People to contact
 - Things to do
 - Things to buy
- Learn your limitations and the word “no” (without saying “never,” unless that’s what you mean) to those who ask you to do things you know will extend yourself beyond your abilities or comfort

Suggestions:

Working with computer information (websites)

- Copy material from a website into your word processor and, to aid in reading the information, manipulate
 - colors
 - fonts
 - font size
 - margins
- Adjust the viewing options
 - turn down brightness
 - use a colored Mylar sheet over screen
 - wear dark or yellow-tinted glasses
 - print the data for reference instead of using the screen image

Working with microfilms

- Use a yellow (or other color) Mylar sheet on the microfilm reader
- Take breaks to get air, rest your eyes, refresh your brain
- Write film numbers with commas (not 1058321; try 1,058,321)

Working with documents

- Use the buddy system: ask someone else to read the document and compare findings
- Highlight a photocopy using yellow or other (not orange) light color noting
 - dates
 - names
 - places
- Photocopy document onto colored paper
- Read document backwards (sometimes you find what you missed when reading it forwards)
- Rewrite (or outline) the document (that will help you identify important data)

- Read the document out loud

Writing reports

- If possible, spread the work over a period of time; take breaks
- Use the “spell checker” option in your word processing program
- Make lists of what you want to include; check off items as they are used
- Write the report in a large type, then reduce the size for the presentation/publication
- Give a few days between writing and proof-reading
- Enlist assistance of an editor (friend, family) to check your work

Listening to/Viewing Webinars

- Download software/program in advance
- View “How to” YouTube videos on the program
- Download handout/syllabus ASAP
- Test program in advance, possibly with YouTube video playing on second monitor, computer, or smart phone
- Know where volume control is located (tablets & computers are different in control locations)
- If a training session is offered, attend it
- If viewing a previously recorded video, use your controls to pause and/or rewind to be sure you have understood everything
- NEVER download video unless you have been invited to do so – it is an infringement on the intellectual property rights of the presenter, creator, and/or sponsoring entity

A FEW PLACES FOR HELP ON THE WEB:

LD Online - <http://ldonline.org/indepth/adults>

Learning Disabilities Association of America - <https://ldaamerica.org/>

Learning Disabilities Research Center - <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/ldrc>

National Center for Learning Disabilities - <https://nclcd.org/>

National Institute for Literacy - <https://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/national-institute-for-literacy>

Natural Ways to Improve Your Memory - <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/ways-to-improve-memory>

Healthy Lifestyle-Aging - <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/healthy-aging/in-depth/memory-loss/art-20046518>

Healthy Aging - <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/how-to-improve-your-memory.htm>

National Institute on Aging - <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/cognitive-health-and-older-adults>

Cognitive Abilities in the Elderly - <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Improving-Cognitive-Abilities-in-the-Elderly.aspx>

Center on Aging: Cognitive Training -

<https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Cognitive%20Training%20for%20Older%20Adults%20Nov%202014.pdf>

As you learn to manage and work with, not against, your disability, you will gain confidence and, hopefully, find those elusive ancestors; you may discover that your learning disability is genetic (often the case) and that some of your beloved forebears also had problems with writing (the disorder most easily detectable in documents) or hearing, remembering, etc. Best wishes in your roots pursuits!