MODULE 30: Managing dyslexia

This module is about ways to make day-to-day life easier for the person with dyslexia. This is not a substitute for working hard to improve reading and writing skills, but a matter of knowing how to bolster self-esteem, manage the expectations of those around you, how to seek help, enjoy books, and cope with emails. As a Dyslexia Therapist you need to be aware of these options in order to suggest those which can most assist the dyslexic person.

30.1 Adaptive technologies

30.2 Alphabetic orthography

30.3 Support systems

30.4 Self-advocacy

30.1 Adaptive Technologies

What are adaptive technologies?

The following are all examples of adaptive technology: glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs, and apps that convert the written word into speech.

Do you see the common thread? A person with poor eyesight improves their vision by wearing prescription eyeglasses. Someone with hearing loss can boost their listening ability with a hearing aid. A disabled person with mobility issues can get around using a wheelchair. And a person with dyslexia can compensate for reading difficulties by using technology that converts text into speech.

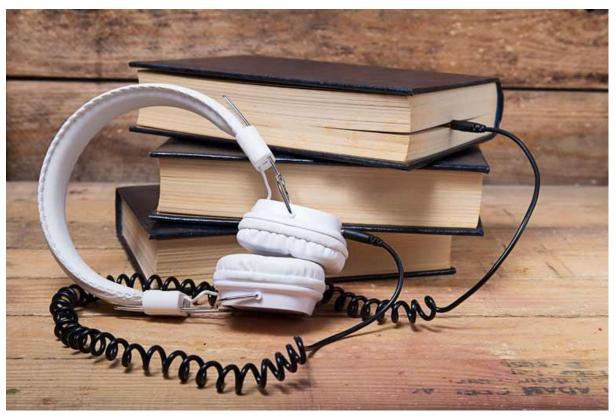The definition of adaptive technology is:

"A device, piece of equipment or system that helps bypass, work around, or compensate for an individual's specific learning needs."

International Dyslexia Association

30.1.1 Adaptive Technologies - How adaptive technologies might help people with dyslexia

To see how adaptive technologies might help a person with dyslexia, think of the child who has difficulty reading but has good listening skills. For a school assignment, instead of agonizing over a text book, it is a more effective use of his time to get that same information by listening to an audio book.

However, this is not a replacement for the remedial work in reading and writing that you are undertaking with the dyslexic person. It is something to ease the frustration when things are not moving along fast enough, and the person with dyslexia is being pressured to keep up at work or school.

With the wide availability of highly capable devices such as smart phones, eReaders, and tablets, there has never been a better time to use adaptive technology. The other bonus is that most people enjoy using these devices and there is no stigma attached.

30.1.2 Adaptive Technologies - Matching Technology to Need

Part of your job as a Dyslexia Therapist lies in selecting the right tool to meet the individual's needs. The key to this is understanding the person's weaknesses (where they need the help), their strengths, and the nature of the task involved (such as reading emails, or taking notes).
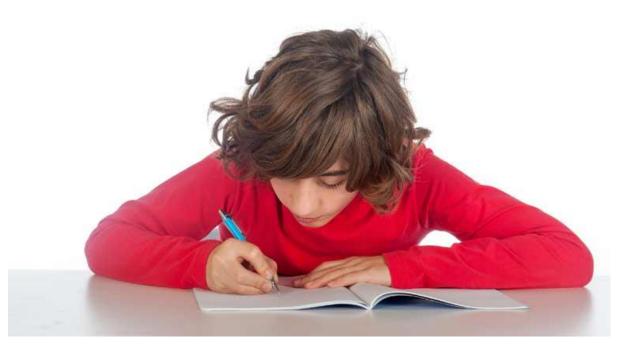
As well as your personal assessment and knowledge of the dyslexic person, you can attain information about their capabilities from school records, their dyslexia assessment, and interviews with people involved with the individual such as parents, teachers, boss or friends. It is important to speak directly to the person with dyslexia. Indeed, you can use the interview, in which you talk about adaptive technologies, as an exercise in self-advocacy. (See Module 4.4)

Be sure to assess how comfortable the person is with the particular type of technology you have in mind. Are they already confident at using a tablet? In which case, a program on a tablet could plug into their confidence for using the device and promote a "can do" attitude with the individual. However, if he has no experience with tablets and is not receptive to change, you might consider an alternative such as an MP3 player with an audio program for listening to eBooks.

30.1.3 Adaptive Technologies - Weigh up the Task

Be aware of the enormous scope of these technologies. Just because the technology is a "writing aid", does not mean it is solely used for spelling or grammar. There are different programs to cover all aspects of the writing task, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, organizing ideas, and memory skills. Choose the program carefully so it meets the needs of the dyslexic individual.

For example, a person has worked hard and his spelling and grammar skills have steadily improved. However, he struggles to write essays that are coherent. This is because of his short term memory deficits, and poor organizational skills.

What this individual needs is a writing tool that helps him get the "big picture" and gives an overview of the structure of his work. A tool designed to improve his "mapping and planning" skills to help him keep track of the arguments he has already written, and those he still has to write.

30.1.4 Adaptive Technologies - Observe the Student

You selected the adaptive technology, and now you will obseve the dyslexic person using it. Watch to see if he picks things up quickly or struggles. Does he seem comfortable or on edge? Does it indeed use his strengths to bolster his weaknesses? Can the person use the device on his own or does he need assistance?

These are all good and valid points that you should know the answers to. Be sure the person has the best tool for the job in order to make progress.

30.1.5 Adaptive Technologies - Consider the Setting

It is necessary to consider the setting in which the device is to be used. For example, speech recognition software may work well in the quiet of a bedroom, but be useless in a noisy classroom or office. The extraneous background noise interferes with the technologies ability to pick out a single voice.

30.1.6 Adaptive Technologies - Areas that Adaptive Technology can Help

We know that dyslexia is a syndrome, which means that different people struggle in different areas. Fortunately, there are a wide and growing range of adaptive technologies that can help. Typical areas requiring assistance for the person with dyslexia include:

- Reading e.g. audio books
- Writing e.g. specialized color coded keyboards
- Listening e.g. Computer pens that play back recorded speech of a highlighted section
- Planning e.g. Mapping software

- Math e.g. Talking calculators that verbalize the number
- Memory e.g. Electronic "jotters"

This list is merely a sampling. The programs are imaginative and far-reaching in order to help the dyslexic person. There is also more information on Adaptive Technologies in Module 7: Dyslexia in the Workplace.

30.2   Alphabetic Orthography

In terms of managing dyslexia, this is an area that is subject to ongoing research. In terms of practical applications, the outcomes are still unclear.

As a Dyslexia Therapist, it is important to be aware of the ideas and concepts of alphabetic orthography. This is both in terms of understanding dyslexia and also in methods of management which may come about in the future.

What is alphabetic orthography?

This question is quiet challenging. It is the union of two different but related entities; alphabets and orthography.

30.2.1 Alphabetic Orthography - Orthography

The definition of "orthography" is:

"The art of writing words with the proper letters and spelling, according to accepted use."

Orthography is the rules that govern the spelling. Orthography represents the rules that have been developed and refined over the centuries to govern how we spell words in each country.

In the English language, the rules of spelling (orthography) are incredibly complex. There are even differences between UK and US spelling. To prove a point, just think about the plural of "lady", which is "ladies". And that in the possessive form (that lady owns an object) the spelling is different again e.g. the lady's hat. For the dyslexic person, this means they not only have to recognize one word "lady", but three – all for the same thing.

You will need to understand graphemes and phonemes. Here are the definitions:

Graphemes: Are the smallest unit of the written word. In English, graphemes are letters whereas in Chinese they are characters, and in ancient Egypt they are hieroglyphics. (Still following?) This, in the word – Cat – the letters C, A, and T are all graphemes.

Phoneme: The easiest way to think of a phoneme is the smallest group of graphemes (in the English language this is the letters) that make a coherent unit. This is where we get the idea of phonics from. It is these small units that we link to sound and pronounce as a phonic.   For example, the word – Cat – is made up of two phonemes, C (pronounced "ka") and "at" (pronounced "-at").

Again, one of the reasons this is relevant to people with dyslexia is because letters are pronounced differently depending on the letters around them. Thus the letter "C" is pronounced one way in the word –cat- another in the word –church- and differently again in -ice-. It can get complicated.
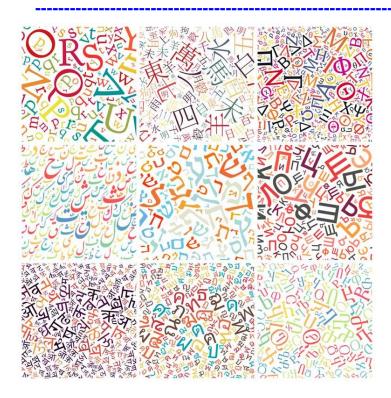
30.2.2 Alphabetic Orthography - Alphabet

An alphabet is:

"A series of letters that occur in a set sequence, and are used as the building blocks for words."

Most countries have their own alphabet. More significantly, they produce each letter differently from other countries. Therefore, the English alphabet differs from the Greek or Russian alphabet in the arrangement and forms of the letters. It differs from the French alphabet in how those letters are pronounced.

30.2.3 Alphabetic Orthography - What is Alphabetic Orthography?

There is a form of dyslexia in which the individual displays a puzzling array of symptoms. They are often proficient with phonics and are able to break down complex words phonetically, and spell them. However, they struggle to recognize common words with non-logical spellings that do not obey phonetical rules, such as who, there, their, or what.

For example, a person with this type of dyslexia is able to spell a word like "brandish". The words that trip them up are those with a seemingly random selection such as "who". There is no way of predicting from the sound, how the word "who" is spelled. This is referred to as "orthographic dyslexia", and requires a different approach to spelling than pure phonetics.

A person without dyslexia builds up an image library of words such as "who" so they recognize them without breaking the word down from scratch each time it is used. This does

not happen with orthographic dyslexics. They lack this mental dictionary, and encountering the word is like seeing it anew every time.

30.2.4 Alphabetic Orthography - Helping the Orthographic Dyslexic

The key to overcoming orthographic dyslexia is helping the dyslexic person to learn two things:

1)   Spelling of words is based on their meaning first, and phonics follow (i.e. How a word is pronounced and it's phonics, does not always reflect the spelling)

2)   An understanding of the origins of words and how they are assembled can help the dyslexic person process a difficult word.

This all sounds rather confusing, so let us look at an example in the word "every".

- The orthographic dyslexic will use phonetics and spell the word: "evry"
- Teaching this person that the word "every" derives from "ever" helps him make sense of the word.
- Then teaching the person to add a –y on the end, enables him to discover a path to correctly spell "every".

This all sounds very complicated, but remember individuals with dyslexia are intelligent. They lack the neurologically derived ability to process certain words. Give them the tools to understand and make sense of words, and they will thrive. It is much easier to have them fix a problem with the right tools and hard work, than to continue using an incomplete solution.

30.3 Support Systems

Without support, a person with dyslexia may struggle to keep up at school or have difficulty coping in the work environment. As a Dyslexia Therapist, you are helping shape the future by using your skills and understanding to change these attitudes and turn things around. Indeed, in your position as a therapist you are supporting individuals with dyslexia.

But support does not end there. We have mentioned adaptive technology, and while many of the apps are free, many are not. Tablets, and sophisticated devices such as computer-pens or variable speed recorders will cost money. It is possible that the dylsexic person may be eligible for a grant. They may apply grant money towards the cost of such items, as part of the support offered by the government.

The more support the person has, the more likely he is to show improvement. Let us look at some of the options for support that may be available to an individual with dyslexia.

30.3.1 Support Systems - Support in School

In the US, there are an estimated 6.5 million children who are eligible for government assistance because of a disability. This ranges from physical disabilities to learning difficulties, including dyslexia. The laws governing who is eligible were set under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA also sets the rules for public agencies and states.

In the UK there is a similar law, the 1993 Education Act. This makes it a legal right to have in-school support for persons with mild dyslexia, and outside help, such as one-to-one, for more severe cases. It is also this law that allows young people to have their dyslexia taken into account during examinations and extra time granted.

30.3.2 Support Systems - Initial Assessment: Help in School

The starting point to accessing support services is getting an approved assessment for the individual. (Covered in Module 2: Diagnosis.)

By reaching a diagnosis of dyslexia, and having this learning difficulty officially recognized is a huge benefit to the individual. It is an important part in getting help. With children in school, and workers in the workplace, the report may put in a place an IEP and a 504.

There are two important aspects to consider with regards for getting official support.

1) The Individual Education Plan or IEP: This plan is designed to identify the specific needs of a child with learning difficulties and sets realistic learning goals. This binds the school to help the child achieve those goals by giving appropriate support. This includes accommodations and modifications that the individual requires (such as extra time for assignments, changing what the child is expected to learn, or making classroom changes which enable the child to learn.)

2) 504: The 504 refers to a civil rights law, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This makes it illegal to discriminate against anyone in a program that has federal funding because of a disability. If an individual qualifies under the jurisdiction of a 504, then he is entitled to specialized support or equipment provisions that will enable him to take part in that program.

If a student meets the requirements for an IEP, the school may then provide one-to-one learning assistance, a speech therapist, or adaptive technologies for use in the classroom.

30.3.3 Support Systems - Support in Higher Education

In America, many colleges and universities pride themselves on having strong support services available for individuals with dyslexia. When transferring to a higher education institution, it is worthwhile for the dyslexic person to do some research about their chosen college. Ask specific questions about the level of support the college will provide.

These services require documented proof of a learning disability in order to be accessed. Examples of what might be provided include scribes, in-class note takers, audio books, or readers.

In the UK, the student is able to apply for additional funding through the Disabled Students' Allowance to purchase extra equipment.

30.3.4 Support Systems - Support in Employment

Comprehensive legislation exists in most developed countries that make it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of a disability, including dyslexia. In America, this is called the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. In the UK, it is the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. No employer can reject your job application based on dyslexia alone, as long as the dyslexic person can complete the essential functions of the job.

In addition, the employer is expected to make any "reasonable adjustments" to working conditions in order to facilitate the individual with dyslexia in the work place.

30.3.5 Support Systems - Literacy Support

It may seem that much of the support and teaching is geared toward children and young people. However, adults with dyslexia can also seek support. An Adult Education Organization is the first port of call. Be aware that many adult literacy programs are not suitable for people with dyslexia. Specific programs can be accessed once the nature of the reading difficulty is identified and understood.

30.3.6 Support Systems - Personal Support

A very important aspect of obtaining support services for individuals with dyslexia involves a holistic approach. This means looking after the person's mental and emotional welfare. It can be difficult and stressful coping with life as a dyslexic person. Suffering from dyslexia may also impact a person's self-esteem and self-confidence. It is tremendously helpful to realize that you are not alone. There are other people coping with the difficulties of dyslexia.

There are a large number of organizations designed to provide information to people with dyslexia, including local support groups. These organizations are great resources to look for information about reputable groups in your area.

American Dyslexia Association

British Dyslexia Association

Dyslexia Association of Ireland

International Dyslexia Organization

30.4 Self-Advocacy

A good Dyslexia Therapist helps people with dyslexia feel good about what they accomplish, rather than focusing on the person's shortcomings. An important extension of this is teaching the dyslexic person to identify those areas that they easily cope with, and recognize thsoe tasks that frustrate them. This is not so the dyslexic person passes judgment on their own work, but so he understands it is natural to find certain jobs more difficult than others, therby reducing or eliminating his feelings of failure.

This is known as self-advocacy. It is a powerful tool for any person with dyslexia. It helps them recognize their strengths, and helps them recognize when they need to ask for help.

 Definition of self-advocacy: Wehymeyer 1996

"Acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's life free from undue external influence of interference."

Teaching the dyslexic person to self-advocate has a number of benefits:

- It teaches the person to trust his instincts and develop self-confidence
- It shows you trust his judgment and others will too.
- It gives him better self-awareness
- It helps him understand when it is time to ask for help

30.4.1 Self-Advocacy - Teaching Self-advocacy

As important as teaching reading and writing strategies, it is important to help the student understand more about the nature of their dyslexia and raise their self-awareness. This enables them to think through the problem, thus avoiding frustration and feelings of failure. Indeed, it can be empowering as they learn to explain to people why they are having difficulties. They can ask for help, rather than appear stupid or slow, and have people wrongly judge them.

Self-advocacy is best taught as an open discussion, led by you as a Dyslexia Therapist. Plan ahead, and ask questions that challenge the person to think about what dyslexia means to them and how it affects their life.

You might ask:

- How does your dyslexia affect your day-to-day life?
- How does being a person with dyslexia make you feel?
- How do you learn the best?
- What do you find most difficult?
- Do you tell people you have dyslexia?

For older pupils it is also appropriate to ask:

- How much do you know about your IEP or 504?
- What are your learning goals?
- What is stopping you from achieving those goals?
- What helps you to learn?
- What makes it difficult to learn?
- What would make a difference to your learning?

- Are you aware of your legal rights with regard to education and learning disabilities?
- How do you handle people who are impatient with your reading or writing?

Obviously, there is much to discuss and it is better to take one point per session and discuss it in depth for 20 -30 minutes, than rattle through the whole list on one session.

30.4.2 Self-Advocacy - If the Pupil is Not Forthcoming

Not everyone is gifted with the ability to self-analyze. A way around this is to make observations, and ask if the child thinks it applies to them or not. For instance:

"Dyslexia affects people differently. Some people find it difficult to keep up in class. Does this sound like you?"

Or

"Some students with dyslexia find it difficult to listen in class or take notes, and regularly miss deadlines for handing in assignments. Do any of those things apply to you?"

The idea is to get the person thinking about his dyslexia and the impact it has on himself and those around him. And ultimately, to learn new ways to utilize strengths and cope with weaknesses.

The tone of your response is important when a person with dyslexia replies to questions. Acknowledge the good points made by the person, which then validates his opinion and adds to his self-confidence. For example you might say:

"That really helps me to understand, to know you feel like that. Perhaps if you explain that to your teacher, it would help her to understand you feel rushed and frustrated in class."

30.4.3 Self-Advocacy - Help the Pupil Understand the Outside Perspective

People jump to all sorts of assumptions, and that includes the person jumping to conclusions about the attitudes of others. The person with dyslexia may assume that everyone understands his issues, whereas all they see is an intelligent person who does not turn his assignments in on time.

The self-advocate dyslexic has to have the confidence to explain dyslexia to others, so they can realign their expectations. Part of learning self-advocacy is being aware of when people do not understand, and they need to be educated about the condition.

As a Dyslexia Therapist, it may be helpful to coach the dyslexic person on what words to use, so that he is not struggling to express himself in the heat of the moment. For example he might say:

"I have dyslexia which means my brain is wired differently. This means I'm good at [list the positives] but it takes me longer to [list the problem areas.]"

For a child in school, try role-playing with you acting as the school teacher. This will allow the child to express themselves in a safe situation, and give him confidence in the classroom.

30.4.4 Self-Advocacy - Identifying Strengths

Being a self-advocate is not about making excuses, it is about accentuating the positives.

Try and encourage the dyslexic person to identify those areas where they do well, and which learning methods work best for them. For instance, they do not have to learn purely by reading. They can listen to audiobooks or recorded lectures, or by using colors or visual maps.

Experiment with different learning aids and adaptive technologies. Suggest ways of incorporating what works best into their learning and work schedule, such as taping a lecture instead of taking notes, audio supports for written documents, or giving a speech rather than a written assignment.

The important take home message is to develop a "can do" attitude, where the person with dyslexia thinks broadly, rather than battering away with the same old methods that make him increasingly frustrated.

EXAM LINK