Emotions and Dyslexia

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Preliminary note:
This article refers specifically to dyslexia, but the emotions described in it are also associated with other specific performance difficulties, for example dyspraxia, ADHD, specific maths difficulties.

Some dyslexic people see their dyslexia in a positive light: they feel that it gives them a creative edge and that, if somehow they were ‘cured’ of their dyslexia, they would also lose their creativity. Other dyslexic people see things differently: they do not feel their dyslexia has conferred any particular benefit on them, but think of it as at best an inconvenience and at worst a disaster for their lives.

Perhaps it is particularly people in the older age range who have a negative view of dyslexia. This group generally did not have their difficulties recognised when they were young and so have never had effective help for them. As a result, they have often spent a lifetime feeling confused about themselves and frustrated by their inability to achieve their potential.

In this article I shall consider the wide range of emotions, both negative and positive, that dyslexic people may feel about their difficulties and their situation. Although in real life, of course, different emotions combine – or conflict – with one another, in this article, for convenience, they have been separated out. In many cases, the descriptions are taken verbatim from the reports (written or spoken) of dyslexic clients. (In the non-narrative sections of this article he stands for he/she.)

Confusion and Bewilderment

Nowadays dyslexic difficulties are often recognised while a child is still at school. Thus, whether or not help is available, the difficulties are at least acknowledged and information about them can be sought from appropriate organisations. Until recently, however, this was not the case. All too frequently dyslexic children were regarded as stupid, lazy or just plain puzzling. All those children who left school with unrecognised dyslexic difficulties are now adults and their difficulties will not have gone away. It is unfortunately the case that a large number, probably the majority, of these dyslexic adults are still unaware that they have a
recognisable pattern of difficulties and that these difficulties can be significantly alleviated through the learning of appropriate skills and strategies. Often, therefore, dyslexic adults feel thoroughly confused about themselves. They seem to be bright and quick-thinking in some ways, but apparently quite slow and inefficient in others.

These feelings of confusion are well described by Annie, aged 32, who has recently realised that she is dyslexic. She left school without qualifications and now works as a filing clerk in a large company. She describes her view of her situation as follows:

Mainly I just feel I don’t know who I am. Sometimes I feel quite good about myself. Sometimes when people tell me things I catch on quite quickly, quicker than other people, and then I feel I’m okay. Other times I don’t understand what people are telling me and I make silly mistakes. I put files in the wrong place so that people can’t find them.

I don’t know how other people feel about me. When I’m talking to somebody at work, I ask myself: are they thinking ‘stupid git’ or are they thinking ‘she’s okay’? I don’t know who I am or what I’m capable of. I wish someone could tell me, I wish someone could sort me out.

Embarrassment, Shame and Guilt

Charlie has been unemployed since he left school five years ago, but he occasionally picks up a job as a waiter in a café. He doesn’t keep these jobs long, because an ever-present problem for him is that he finds it difficult to remember and accurately write down the orders placed by the customers. In Charlie’s words:

It’s embarrassing. If there’s three or four people at a table I don’t take in what they say and have to ask a second time. Sometimes I’m still not sure I’ve got it, but I feel I can’t keep on asking them. I just hope I’ve got it right. When the clients get the wrong food they complain and make a fuss, and then there’s a row. It always ends in the same way. The boss loses patience and gives me the sack. I often feel I’d like to try and explain my difficulty to someone, but really it just feels too embarrassing not to be able to do a simple thing – especially when I’ve got two A levels!

Feelings of embarrassment can deepen into shame, and whereas embarrassment is often specific to a particular situation, shame seems to seep through the whole personality and to colour the whole of a person’s life.
Deirdre, now a wife and mother, worked briefly in the customer services department of a large company, but was thankful to give up her job when she became pregnant with her first child. This is how Deirdre describes her feelings about herself:

It was a relief to stop working, really. I just felt I didn’t want to face people. I was getting by at the office as long as I could follow my fixed routine and nothing new came up. Just as long as there was nothing urgent. When I did make mistakes I’d find ways to cover them up, and when things seemed too difficult I was quite good at getting colleagues to do things. I’d pretend I was too busy, or not feeling well, or find some excuse.

As time went on, the situation seemed to get worse. All I seemed to do all day was to tell lies, avoid things or cover things up, and on a couple of occasions I even put the blame on someone else for something I’d done wrong. When I look back on it now, I can see that that’s what I did all day long – deceive people. It was as if that was my job. I spent my time getting more and more efficient in deceiving.

Things at home were relatively okay. Dave, my husband, looked after our financial affairs and wrote any letters that needed to be sent to the Council or whatever. I didn’t feel challenged at home in any way, I didn’t have to practise deceit on Dave, but gradually I did start to feel I was deceiving him too. Not with another man, that would have been almost straightforward! I felt I was deceiving him by pretending to be somebody that I wasn’t. I was pretending to be a working woman who was holding down a job and leading a normal office life.

But I wasn’t. I was this creature with a dreadful guilty secret. I felt I was just going through the motions – cooking, cleaning, even getting pregnant, and that it was all some sort of ridiculous sham. I wasn’t worthy to be anyone’s wife, I certainly wasn’t worthy to be a mother.

In the end it was like I wasn’t a person at all any longer. I was just a Guilty Secret, and I felt it was only a matter of time before somehow the whole thing would explode and I’d be exposed before the whole world as a fraud and a sham and a charlatan. It’s easy to look back now and think I got it all out of proportion, which I did, but at the time that was my life. I just felt like a criminal. The feeling of shame was so terrible. It took away all pleasure in life, all pleasure in meeting people, for a time it even took away my pleasure in my marriage.

The feeling of having a guilty secret is something that is very commonly reported by dyslexic adults. Ella, a successful potter (speaking of herself in the third person), describes it like this:
But she, Ella, had a secret inside her. Well, she could not say it was exactly a secret. But she kept ‘it’ in a box; and would only open the lid very cautiously as there ‘it’ always was, in the box. She was getting better at lifting the lid, and taking the bits out, having a look, and even keeping some of them out on top of the box. You may well laugh when you know the contents of the box, and join all those people who never quite believe Ella.

It was dyslexia: that word, that almost indescribable thing, lived in the box and pervaded almost every part of her life, but no one could see it. It was a living nightmare.

**Lack of Confidence, Low Self-esteem**

The emotions described above – bewilderment, shame, guilt – can deal a crippling blow to a person’s confidence and self-esteem.

Lack of confidence manifests itself both in relation to performing specific workplace tasks and in a more general way. A dyslexic person, whether or not his difficulties have been acknowledged and given a label, knows very well that he is inefficient in a number of aspects of his work. He dreads being assigned a task he knows he won’t be able to do.

This is an experience that a dyslexic person will have had from childhood, perhaps even from being a toddler. While other children seem to progress almost carelessly through their developmental stages – walking, talking, tying shoelaces, telling the time, reading, writing – the dyslexic child finds himself in difficulty. He is slower to develop these skills and feels he is not performing them well. Very early on a sense of inadequacy, even impotence, sets in – a feeling that he won’t be able to manage things, that he won’t get them right. And this conviction does not go away.

Years later, in adult life, in everyday tasks, in workplace situations, the question still remains: do I have the requisite abilities? When a simple task is performed – jotting down a telephone number or writing a letter – a nagging feeling persists: did I get that right?

In working life, this lack of confidence about the ability to perform specific tasks extends to a more general feeling of not being competent to hold down a job. Then there is the question of applying for promotion or applying for another job. In interviews, an applicant needs to appear confident, but how can a dyslexic person feel confident about how he will cope with a new challenge when he knows he’s failing to cope even with his current work?
The daily questioning of one's own abilities and capacities will slowly but surely erode self-esteem. Among all the problems, the difficulties, the inefficiencies, the traumas, where is the person who is of worth? Is there such a person in there somewhere?

Faced with such nagging questions, people tend to react in one of two ways: either they become withdrawn and defensive, or they become truculent and aggressive. Both reactions are distortions of natural coping strategies. Neither of them makes life in the workplace any easier.

The defensive person can easily become reclusive – an outsider, who shrinks from contact with his colleagues and seems permanently preoccupied. He is often perceived to be 'vulnerable', and people become afraid of upsetting him. Reservations about his work may not be openly expressed, and resentment against him may build up until one day there may be an explosion of anger against him.

The person who tries to hide his lack of confidence behind an aggressive exterior becomes equally isolated. People feel apprehensive of approaching him, yet he is an easy target for anger and can quickly become the office scapegoat.

When lack of confidence results in aggressive or defensive behaviour of this sort, the dyslexic person concerned is trapped in a pattern of interaction, or rather reaction, which imprisons him in his own isolated and distressing world.

**Frustration and Anger**

A sense of being imprisoned, trapped, impotent is often reported by dyslexic adults. George, a long-distance lorry driver, describes it thus:

> I felt I couldn't move in any direction. In my job I was always moving, going in all directions, but in myself I couldn't go anywhere. I was grounded. That's why I liked the driving – I would drive and drive and drive to try and get away from the frustration, but however far you drive, you can't get away from yourself.

Frustration soon turns to anger. For a child, frustration is a very common experience, and a child’s anger often has a specific target: a parent, teacher, particular adult or perhaps a sibling, who is perceived as frustrating the child’s needs.
For an adult, the situation may be more complex. In the case of a dyslexic adult who feels immense frustration at his inability to progress as he feels he should in his studies or in his work, who should his anger be directed against? Who is causing the frustration? Can he blame his tutor for failing him in an exam when he knows he did not finish the paper? Can he blame his boss for not promoting him when he feels incompetent to do even his present job? Can he blame his parents for somehow failing to bring him up properly? Or his teachers for not recognising his problems? How can he pinpoint where the failure lies?

In fact, all too often a dyslexic adult ends up being angry with himself. Or he feels an impotent anger against some impenetrable Fate or Destiny, which, for reasons unknown, has blighted his life. Victor, who struggled for years with low self-esteem and frustration at not being able to make progress in his career, writes as follows:

I have to say that I am a lot calmer than I was two years ago. I have a strong feeling that I would have ended up killing someone, just to get some of the frustration out of myself – who it would have been I don’t know, it would very probably just have been simply someone at random. When I went for an assessment it was the best thing I ever did – I can’t describe the relief I felt when the psychologist explained I was dyslexic. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t found out.

Anxiety, Fear and Panic

Whatever difficulties one may have in life, anxiety usually makes them worse, and this is certainly true of dyslexic difficulties. Adult dyslexics have often spent years worrying about their ability to perform certain tasks, worrying about whether they can manage an academic course or hold down a job. Often, as Deirdre wrote, they feel an acute anxiety about being ‘found out’. In the end, the anxiety about the difficulties is as much of the problem as the difficulties themselves. A vicious circle of anxiety and inefficiency is created from which there seems no escape.

Of course, anxiety and stress can also be the cause of physical symptoms: nausea, migraine, susceptibility to viral infections and to more serious illness. Being physically below par naturally further reduces efficiency, and so the downward spiral continues.

Sometimes anxiety intensifies into fear, even panic attacks. Hugo, who was an executive in a large advertising company, knew that he had dyslexic difficulties and had indeed discussed them with his employers, who were sympathetic. Nonetheless, he lived in a state
of constant anxiety that he would be unable to manage his work or that he would miss deadlines and let people down, perhaps be responsible for losing a client. A nagging feeling of anxiety had become a way of life for him: it was an everyday companion and he could no longer imagine life without it. He assumed it was the cross he had to bear, that he would continue in this way indefinitely, muddling on somehow.

But things got worse: he began to experience panic attacks, sometimes in the morning as he was dressing for work, sometimes on his journey to the office, sometimes – which was worst of all – at the office itself when he was dealing with clients or meeting with colleagues.

The attack always started in the same way: his heart began to thump, his hands felt clammy and he lost the immediate sense of his surroundings. He felt that he must be having a heart attack, that he was going to die, and, although the attacks began to recur frequently and he suffered no physical harm, each time he experienced one the terror of annihilation was just as great. He thought he must be going mad, cracking up, going to pieces. He felt unable to tell anybody about the attacks, assuming that they would think he was crazy. He felt that life was disintegrating around him, that he was going to lose everything and spend the remainder of his days locked away in an institution which catered for the insane.

Eventually, the situation became so bad that he was unable to go to work at all. In a way, this worsening of the situation proved his salvation. He was forced to visit his doctor and give some account of what had been happening to him. What had seemed to Hugo to be a hellish torture and madness, somehow brought on by his own weakness, was regarded in a much more matter-of-fact light by the doctor. Chronic stress and panic attacks were the diagnosis, and appropriate treatment was arranged with a clinical psychologist at the local hospital.

Hugo was soon able to resume his working life and, although it was several months before the worst of the panic attacks subsided, he was able, with help and support from the psychologist, to develop a better understanding of what was happening to him, both mentally and physically, when such attacks occurred, and to develop strategies for coping with the situation.

Despondency and Depression

This is Veena’s story:
I’m 32 years old now, living happily with my partner and our small son. I work part-time at a local play group and enjoy my work very much. I’ve got lots of interests – in particular I like music and outdoor activities. So, yes, now life is very good. People tell me I’m lucky and I think, yes, I am, but I don’t tell them that only two years ago I was so depressed about myself I didn’t care whether I lived or died.

I thought back to try and remember when it was that I started feeling miserable about myself but I can’t really remember the beginning of it. It seems as if as a child I always was miserable. And it wasn’t because we were an unhappy family, nothing like that, we were quite jolly and cosy at home and I just took it for granted that my parents loved me.

I think it was more at school that I used to feel wretched. I know I used not to want to go to school; as a small kid I’m told I had to be dragged there screaming. My main memory of school is sitting rigid at my desk with my head down watching all the children around me busily reading or writing or doing things and feeling that I couldn’t. I was usually bottom of the class. I wasn’t unpopular at school, though, I think because I was good at sport and I was always wanted on the team. In the end everybody seemed to be happy with saying, ‘Oh well, she’s good at sport’, and it was just assumed there was no hope for me academically.

I know I never accepted that though. I was quite a quick-thinking child and curious about the world and I wanted to learn, but I couldn’t, I was always shut out of it. I felt frustrated, angry sometimes, but I was a very well-behaved child – that’s the way I was brought up – I never made a fuss or showed that I was upset. I just kept sitting there sort of paralysed and wishing the nightmare would end.

I left school at 16 without qualifications, and the first thing that happened was that I lost all my former friends. They stayed on at school and eventually went on to college. They seemed to live in a cheerful and purposeful world that I just didn’t belong to. I just kicked around doing temporary jobs, but nothing that really interested me.

After a while I seemed to lose interest in everything and my energy was always low. I found that I was going home in the evening and bursting into tears. I kept sitting around a lot just staring into space and feeling everything was too much effort. I didn’t actually think of myself as being depressed in any serious way. After all,
everybody gets a bit down sometimes and I kept assuming that I was tired, working too hard or that it would pass. But it didn’t pass. I was preoccupied with gloomy thoughts. As I scanned my life, there seemed to be no part of it which had any direction. I couldn’t get any qualifications, I couldn’t get a decent job, I had no friends, I couldn’t respect myself any more.

I was working as a receptionist, but I lost my job because I kept not turning up for work. Somehow, when that happened it made me realise that something really was wrong. I’d always thought of myself as a very responsible and conscientious person and now I could hardly recognise myself any more. Was this person really me?

I started thinking about ending it all. I come from a Roman Catholic background and that sort of thing is thought of as a sin. But I thought, we shoot dogs when they’re suffering unbearably, so why not humans? I suppose things could have ended otherwise, but life took a turn. It was pure luck. I was chatting one day at church with a woman I knew very slightly and she happened to mention that she had recently been diagnosed as dyslexic. As she was describing her difficulties, I thought ‘That’s me!’ and I asked her more about it.

This was the turning point. It was as if somebody had suddenly given me the key that unlocked all the closed doors of my life. It led to me getting some help for my problems and this was the beginning of a long road that led me out of darkness and back into the light.

**Relief, Determination and Hope**

It perhaps seems as if this article has been full of gloom and doom. Yet all the emotions that have been described above are commonly reported by dyslexic adults, especially in cases where the difficulties have for a long time gone unrecognised. It is difficult for a person to go on feeling positive about himself when he is constantly tripped up, frustrated and humiliated by inexplicable inefficiencies.

However, once dyslexic difficulties have been recognised and strategies for dealing with them put in place, life can often take a turn for the better. All the energy that previously went into worrying about the problems and covering them up can now be channelled into developing effective ways of dealing with them, both practically and emotionally.
Many dyslexic adults find that simply having an assessment brings an enormous feeling of relief. It means that their ‘condition’ is not mysterious any longer: it is named, categorised, analysed and – perhaps most important of all – recognised.

Although people often approach an assessment fearing that it will bring them bad news, in fact the opposite is usually the case. This is because an assessment, as well as pinpointing weaknesses, points up areas of ability, and many dyslexic adults feel literally stunned when they see not only their difficulties but also their strengths, which are often great, laid before them in black and white.

It can happen that, though, that when the first surprise or shock at the diagnosis wears off, a variety of intense emotions can follow: elation at having got things sorted out, anger about the years of confusion, grief at the thought of the opportunities that have been lost through lack of understanding of the situation. In the end, however, what usually emerge most strongly are a sense of hope and a feeling of determination.

Victor, whose account of his angry feelings was given above, writes as follows:

The first thing that has to happen is for the dyslexic person to accept that they have the condition; once they have done that, they can move on. Confidence is built and a poor self-image slowly ditched. Also a lot of the frustration has now gone and I am starting to be able to express my creative side. For example, it is only since I discovered I was dyslexic that I have started to do marquetry, it is not only very therapeutic, it also helps the hand–eye coordination. Once you have discovered you have a condition called dyslexia, life becomes more comfortable, more relaxed and enjoyable.

Finally, Ingrid, a woman who only discovered that she was dyslexic in her 45th year, describes her feelings:

I felt as if the prison doors had been opened. I looked out and saw paths leading in all directions. I didn’t know which of the paths was mine. All I did know was that I would have a path in future and that the years of confinement were over.

Coping with Emotions

All the emotions described in this chapter are, of course, felt in certain situations by all human beings, not just by dyslexic people, and one of the difficulties in counselling dyslexic adults is knowing, as it were, where to stop. In practice, there are two main therapeutic
approaches: behaviour/cognitive therapy, which tends to focus on particular feelings and situations (e.g., stress and anxiety as a result of public speaking), and psychodynamic therapy, which is a much broader, ‘no-holds-barred’ look at a person’s emotional and imaginative life.

Resources

Help organisations
Dyspraxia Foundation  01462 459 986 www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk
Dyspraxia UK  01795 531 998 www.dyspraxiauk.com

Useful books
Living with Dyspraxia by Mary Colley. Jessica Kingsley.
That’s the Way I Think – dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD explained. David Grant.
  David Fulton Books.
(This is a general study skills guide also suitable for dyspraxic students.)

Help for emotional problems
Counsellors: www.counselling-directory.org.uk
Cognitive Behaviour therapists: www.babcp.com
Psychotherapists: www.bacp.co.uk
Therapists and counsellors who have specialist knowledge about specific performance difficulties: groOops.com

Further Reading

Chapter 9: Emotions.

Wiley-Blackwell.
Chapter 7: Emotions
