A CAUTIONARY TALE
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Clare, a dyslexic student, gives an account of the difficulties she experienced when she began her university course, and how she overcame them.

Hello, I'm Clare -- I'm just coming to the end of a three-year psychology degree, and I've been asked to write a few words about how I've coped with my dyslexia at college.

The first thing to say is that I've known ever since I can remember that I have dyslexic difficulties. I was assessed very early on at school, and had some help and got extra time in examinations. By the time I reached the sixth form, I felt I was coping quite well with my difficulties, and didn't feel they hampered too much. In fact I tended to concentrate more on the positive sides of being dyslexic, like understanding things intuitively, and being creative.

Anyway, when I got accepted at London University for a Psychology degree, I just assumed I'd cope somehow. So I had a carefree gap year, travelling, working in the local wine bar, and ignoring my parents' advice to do some preliminary reading for my course.

When I arrived at college, I was pleased to find that my hall of residence was close to the main campus. So the first thing I did was to go out to explore – and the second thing I did was to get completely lost. I don't have much sense of direction, and the buildings all seemed to look the same. I'd been given a map but I had a problem understanding it. An annoying thing was that, even when I managed to find places, like the library, I would then lose them again.

After a week or so, I sort of got my bearings, and on the day that the first seminar was scheduled, I actually managed to find my way to the seminar room, at the right time, and to have the right books with me. It seemed like a good start.

There were about twelve of us at the seminar, and the subject was neuropsychology – a word I didn't really understand, and could hardly pronounce.
Anyway, it turned out to be about how the brain is wired up, and which parts of it do things like speaking and listening.

As the tutor talked about this subject, I began to think that the listening bit in my brain couldn't be working. The tutor kept explaining things, and other people were asking intelligent questions, but the whole thing seemed to be going right past me. I just wasn't taking in what the tutor said. The upshot was that, at the end of the seminar, I had no more idea about neuropsychology than I had at the beginning. I felt foolish and sort of inadequate, but I didn't like to say that I hadn't really followed anything.

Before leaving, the tutor gave us a list of journal articles to read for the following week's seminar. She said the articles would make clear to us what brain processes were involved in the skill of reading. So the next day I went to the library and settled down to read the articles.

At this point it became clear to me that the bit in my brain that was 'involved in the skill of reading' had somehow also gone missing. As I read through the articles, I found I couldn't really understand them. A lot of the words were long and unfamiliar, and it seemed to take an eternity just to read one article. The bit of my brain that did memory was obviously missing too, because I couldn't remember anything about what I'd read. I sat in the library for hours that week trying to read the articles, and getting more and more upset.

When the day of the next seminar came round, I felt a sense of dread. During the seminar I was relieved that I wasn't asked to say anything. Most of the other students had plenty to say or questions to ask, and there was a lot of general discussion. I just sat there not saying anything, and not really following anything. All I could think about was: Why is all this so difficult for me? What has gone wrong?

But worse was to come. At the end of the seminar, the tutor set us an essay on reading mechanisms in the brain, and suggested yet more articles we might want to look at. I won't prolong the agony by trying to describe to you the torments I went through in trying to tackle this essay because 'some of the events described might be too distressing to my readers'. All I will say is that, at the end of my first month at college, I was not having the marvellous carefree time I had anticipated. I was, as often as not, sitting depressed or crying in my room, feeling completely exhausted
and wondering whether there were any parts of my brain that were actually functioning.

Perhaps I would have given up and just gone off the course, but, fortunately, in this darkest hour, rescue came to me in the form of Deborah, the disability support tutor. I unexpectedly received an e-mail from her suggesting that we meet to discuss any difficulties I might be experiencing. Deborah hadn't magically divined my despair; it's simply that I'd ticked the dyslexia box on my application form without thinking much about it, and now she was following this up in a routine way by contacting me.

My meeting with Deborah marked the moment when things began to change for the better. At first I was quite emotional, sobbing and saying that I wouldn't be able to cope. But Deborah calmed me down, and assured me that lots of dyslexic students had major problems at the beginning of their course. She said she was sure I would cope once I got some help in place, and meantime she would let my tutors know I needed extra support. Basically, she said: just hold on, keep your nerve, things will get better.

She was right. I didn't turn overnight into super-student, but I felt that I could see some way forward, some prospect of things improving, of not being alone with my problems.

Looking back, I've asked myself how it was that everything went so horribly wrong in those first few weeks. With hindsight, I think it was a combination of things. It would have been good if I'd followed my parents' advice and done a bit of preliminary reading during my gap year. I hadn't done Psychology for A-level, so all the vocabulary used was unfamiliar to me. I think a second problem was that, when things did go wrong, I didn't ask anyone for help -- I just went on trying to deal with the situation myself, perhaps thinking that, if I couldn't, I was a failure. I think I also got quite frightened by the thought that I might actually not be able to continue the course. I didn't have a Plan B.

Also, if I’m honest, I have to admit that it could have been partly the fact that I had been a little bit arrogant. I’d always prided myself on coping well at school, and I just assumed – wrongly as it turned out – that I’d be able to cope at university too. I just hadn’t anticipated how much more reading there would be, how much more pressure I would be under to do things quickly. Hindsight, as they say, is a great thing.
Anyway, I did cope in the end, thanks to all the support I received, and of course through my own hard work – I did have to put in longer hours than most of my friends. The pay-off was that, by the second term, I had begun to actually enjoy my course, and now I feel it's the best thing I've ever done. In fact I've turned into an eternal student: I'm planning to go on to do a postgraduate course – in neuropsychology!

Further information

For general advice about dyslexia:

British Dyslexia Association 0845 251 9002 www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Books:


For general advice about dyspraxia:

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

Books:

* That’s the Way I Think – dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD explained. David Grant. David Fulton Books.
* How to Succeed at College and University with Specific Learning Difficulties. Amanda Kirby. Souvenir Press.

For general advice about ADHD:

Simply Well Being 020 8099 7671 simplywellbeing.com
AADD-UK aadduk.org
ADDiSS 020 8952 2800 addiss.co.uk
ADDAERS adders.org

Books:
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