

What is a Learning Disability?

A learning disability is a neurological disorder that results from a difference in the way a person's brain is "wired." Students with learning disabilities are as smart or smarter than their peers, but they may have difficulty reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, recalling and/or organizing information if left to figure things out by themselves or if taught in conventional ways. A learning disability can't be cured or fixed; it is a lifelong issue. With the right support and intervention, however, students with learning disabilities can succeed in school and go on to successful, often distinguished careers later in life.

Educators can help students with learning disabilities achieve such success by encouraging their strengths, knowing their weaknesses, understanding the educational system, working with professionals and learning about strategies for dealing with specific difficulties.

Not all great minds think alike

Albert Einstein couldn't read until he was nine. Walt Disney, General George Patton, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had trouble reading all their lives. Whoopi Goldberg and Charles Schwab and many others have learning disabilities that haven't affected their ultimate success.

Facts about learning disabilities

- Fifteen percent of the U.S. population, or one in seven Americans, has some type of learning disability, according to the National Institutes of Health.
- Difficulty with basic reading and language skills are the most common learning disabilities. As many as 80% of students with learning disabilities have reading problems.
- Learning disabilities often run in families.
- Learning disabilities should not be confused with other disabilities such as autism, intellectual disability, deafness, blindness, and behavioral disorders. None of these conditions are learning disabilities. In addition, they should not be confused with lack of educational opportunities like frequent changes of schools or attendance problems. Also, children who are learning English do not necessarily have a learning disability.
- Attention disorders, such as [Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#) (ADHD) and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but the two disorders are not the same.

Common learning disabilities

- [Dyslexia](#) – a language-based disability in which a person has trouble understanding written words. It may also be referred to as reading disability or reading disorder.
- [Dyscalculia](#) – a mathematical disability in which a person has a difficult time solving arithmetic problems and grasping math concepts.
- [Dysgraphia](#) – a writing disability in which a person finds it hard to form letters or write within a defined space.
- [Auditory and Visual Processing Disorders](#) – sensory disabilities in which a person has difficulty understanding language despite normal hearing and vision.
- [Nonverbal Learning Disabilities](#) – a neurological disorder that originates in the right hemisphere of the brain, causing problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative and holistic processing functions.

Common Signs of Learning Disabilities

The good news about learning disabilities is that scientists are learning more every day. Their research provides hope and direction. If parents, teachers, and other professionals discover a child's learning disability early and provide the right kind of help, it can give the child a chance to develop skills needed to lead a successful and productive life. A recent National Institutes of Health study showed that 67 percent of young students who were at risk for reading difficulties became average or above average readers after receiving help in the early grades.

The following is a checklist of characteristics that may point to a learning disability. Most people will, from time to time, see one or more of these warning signs in some students. This is normal. If, however, you see several of these characteristics over a long period of time, consider the possibility of a learning disability.

High School Students and Adults

- Continues to spell incorrectly, frequently spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Trouble summarizing
- Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Works slowly
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Misreads information

What Is Executive Function?

Executive function refers to a set of mental skills that are coordinated in the brain's frontal lobe. Executive functions work together to help a person achieve goals. People with poor executive function skills can't:

- manage time and attention
- switch focus
- plan and organize
- remember details
- curb inappropriate speech or behavior
- integrate past experience with present action

When executive function breaks down, behavior becomes poorly controlled. This can affect a person's ability to:

- work or go to school
- function independently
- maintain appropriate social relationships
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Types of Executive Function

Executive function can be divided into two categories:

- organization
- regulation

Organization involves gathering information and structuring it for evaluation. Regulation involves taking stock of the environment and changing behavior in response to it. For example, seeing a piece of chocolate cake on the dessert cart at a restaurant may be tempting. But that's where executive function can step in. It will help remind you that based on your experience and prior knowledge, the supersized portion is likely to contain hundreds of calories. And your executive function would also remind you that eating the cake conflicts with goals like eating less sugar and [losing weight](#).

Executive Function in Students in Classrooms

Problems with executive function can run in families. They may become most apparent during a child's grade school years, when they interfere with the ability to start and complete schoolwork on time. The good news is that the brain continues to develop well into adulthood. A person's executive functions are shaped by physical changes but also by ongoing experiences. Early attention to problems with executive functioning can help students outgrow and compensate for weaknesses.

Warning signs that a student may be having difficulty with executive function include trouble in:

- planning projects
- estimating how much time a project will take to complete
- telling stories (verbally or in writing)
- memorizing information
- initiating activities or tasks
- retaining information while doing something with it (for example, remembering a phone number while dialing)

Diagnosing Problems With Executive Function

Executive function involves a set of interrelated skills. So there's no single test to identify trouble. Instead psychologists, teachers, speech-language pathologists, and therapists rely on different tests to measure specific skills. Problems identified by individual tests can't predict how well adults or children will function in complex, real-world situations. Sometimes, careful observation and trial teaching are more valuable ways of identifying and improving weak executive function.

ADHD

Many people think of rowdy kids who can't sit still when they think of [ADHD](#). But many adults continue to struggle with symptoms of ADHD. Lots of adults with ADHD don't realize that many of the problems they face, including staying organized or being on time, are symptoms of [adult ADHD](#).

What Causes Adult ADHD?

While experts don't know for sure what causes ADHD, they think genes may play an important part. Environmental issues, such as exposure to cigarettes, alcohol, or other toxins while in the womb, may also play a role.

Unlike other psychiatric disorders, including [anxiety](#) and depression, ADHD doesn't begin in adulthood. Symptoms must have been present since childhood for a diagnosis of adult ADHD to be made.

10 Problems That Could Mean Adult ADHD

The conventional symptoms doctors look for to diagnose ADHD are based on how the condition shows itself in children.

These symptoms include forgetfulness and excessive daydreaming, as well as an inability to sit still, or constant fidgeting with objects.

Yet many experts think adult ADHD symptoms show themselves differently and more subtly. This can make it hard to recognize and diagnose adult ADHD. Because some possible symptoms -- like poor concentration or motivation, or interpersonal problems -- also could be signs of other psychiatric conditions (like depression or substance abuse), it's important that you get examined by a trained and experienced mental health professional.

Here are 10 potential warning signs of adult ADHD:

No. 1: Trouble Getting Organized

For people with ADHD, the responsibilities of adulthood -- bills, jobs, and children, to name a few -- can make problems with organization more obvious and more problematic than in childhood.

No. 2: Reckless Driving and Traffic Accidents

ADHD makes it hard to keep your attention on a task, so spending time behind the wheel of a car can be hard. ADHD symptoms can make some people more likely to speed, have traffic accidents, and lose their driver's licenses.

No. 3: Marital Trouble

Many people without ADHD have marital problems, so a troubled [marriage](#) shouldn't necessarily be seen as a red flag for adult ADHD. But there are some marriage problems that are likely to affect the [relationships](#) of those with ADHD. Often, the partners of people with undiagnosed ADHD take poor listening skills and an inability to honor commitments as a sign that their partner doesn't care. If you're

the person with ADHD, you may not understand why your partner is upset, and you may feel you're being nagged or blamed for something that's not your fault.

No. 4: Extremely Distractible

ADHD is a problem with attention, so adult ADHD can make it hard to succeed in today's fast-paced, hustle-bustle world. Many people find that distractibility can lead to a history of career under-performance, especially in noisy or busy offices. If you have adult ADHD, you might find that phone calls or email derails your attention, making it hard for you to finish tasks.

No. 5: Poor Listening Skills

Do you zone out during long business meetings? Did your husband forget to pick up your child at baseball practice, even though you called to remind him on his way home? Problems with attention result in poor listening skills in many adults with ADHD, leading to a lot of missed appointments and misunderstandings.

No. 6: Restlessness, Trouble Relaxing

While many [children with ADHD](#) are "hyperactive," this ADHD symptom often appears differently in adults. Rather than bouncing off the walls, adults with ADHD are more likely to be restless or find they can't relax. If you have adult ADHD, others might describe you as edgy or tense.

No. 7: Trouble Starting a Task

Just as children with ADHD often put off doing homework, people with adult ADHD often drag their [feet](#) when starting tasks that require a lot of attention. This procrastination often adds to existing problems, including marital disagreements, workplace issues, and problems with friends.

No. 8: Lateness

There are many reasons for this. First, adults with ADHD are often distracted on the way to an event, maybe realizing the car needs to be washed and then noticing they're low on gas, and before they know it an hour has gone by. People with adult ADHD also tend to underestimate how much time it takes to finish a task, whether it's a major assignment at work or a simple home repair.

No. 9: Angry Outbursts

ADHD often leads to problems with controlling emotions. Many people with adult ADHD are quick to explode over minor issues. Often, they feel as if they have no control over their emotions. Many times, their anger fades as quickly as it flared, long before the people who dealt with the outburst have gotten over the incident.

No. 10: Prioritizing Issues

Often, people with adult ADHD mis-prioritize, failing to meet big obligations, like a deadline at work, while spending countless hours on something insignificant, such as getting a higher score on a video game