

Learning Disabilities

What is a Learning Disability?

**The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada: LD Defined 2015*

“Learning Disabilities” refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition (input), organization (making sense of information), retention (memory), understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information (output). These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that alters brain functioning in a manner which affects one or more processes related to learning.

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making).

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- Oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- Written language (e.g. spelling and written expression)
- Mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving)

Documentation

Students with a learning disability must provide a psycho-educational assessment completed within the last five years by a Registered Psychologist. The assessment report needs to clearly state a diagnosis of a learning disability meeting the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. With this documentation clients may be eligible to access appropriate support services and possibly adaptive technology to reduce barriers to learning.

Learning Disabilities...

...may also involve difficulties with organizational and social skills.

...are life long and affect a person's social, emotional, family, and career life. With appropriate support and intervention, students learn to compensate and can achieve success in all areas of their life.

...may co-exist with various conditions including attentional, behavioral and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions.

If someone has a learning disability it means that they may not learn things as quickly as other people and they may need more help and support to learn.

Some Misconceptions

Learning disabled students often have one or more areas of strength, just as they have one or more areas of weakness. They usually have average or above average intelligence. This can lead to thinking that the student isn't really trying, as he/she may show very inconsistent or irregular performance. **For example, a student may do very well in class discussions, showing a good understanding of the material, but do very poorly on a written test; or may excel one day, and do poorly the next.**

Learning disabilities should *not* be confused with intellectual disability, autism, deafness, blindness, and behaviour disorders. **None** of these conditions are learning disabilities. Students whom have had a lack of educational opportunities (frequent changes of schools or attendance problems), or students who are learning English, do not necessarily have a learning disability.

Attention disorders and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but the two disorders are not the same.

Student Strategies and Accommodations

- Meet with Accessibility Coordinator several months before starting your course. They can help you plan, provide support and possibly assist in accessing adaptive technology. It is your responsibility to provide appropriate documentation.
- Consider taking a reduced course load to decrease stress.
- Work with Counsellors, Accessibility Coordinator and/or the Learning Assistance Instructor to develop strategies for study skills and time management. Regular appointments help you monitor goals and accomplishments.
- Break assignments down into small parts and set deadlines for each part.

- Make sure your study area is free from any distractions.
- Take frequent breaks. Stretch, move and then get back to your task.
- Use highlighters to mark key concepts.
- Use a Daily Planner to organize yourself. Write in all projects, exams, and appointments at the beginning of the semester.
- Activities like yoga or t'ai chi settle your mind and help you learn deep relaxation and breathing strategies that you can use when you are agitated.
- During class sit close to the instructor so you are not distracted.
- If an assignment or project is to be given in a format that is difficult (i.e. written), request from the Instructor to use an alternative format for presentation (i.e. video taped) well ahead of time.
- Work with a tutor and/or study groups for additional academic support.
- Appropriate accommodations may include:
 - Extra time and/or a quiet setting to write exams.
 - Record lectures and/or photocopy notes from a class mate.
 - Use of a computer with spell check to write an exam.
 - Use of calculator
 - Clarification on exams
- Find your own personal strategies that help you concentrate and retain information and use them consistently!

*These are suggestions only -- you are the best judge of what will work for you.

Instructor Strategies and Accommodations

- Be clear in course outlines, deadlines and expectations. Unexpected changes to routines cause stress.
- Allow processing time between the question or direction given, and the response time of the student.
- Provide an outline of the lecture before class.
- Write the main concepts on the board.
- Appropriate accommodations may include:
 - Extra time and/or a quiet setting to write exams.
 - Record lectures and/or photocopy lecture notes.
 - The use of a lap top with spell checker during lectures and exams.
- Be patient with student who checks in often for clarifications and explanations.
- Give clear, but non-judgmental feedback to student if interruptions are excessive.

Links

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/index-e.asp>

Learning Disabilities Association of America <http://www.lidaamerica.org/>

LD Online <http://www.ldonline.org/>

National Center for Learning Disabilities <http://www.nclد.org/>