

Dyslexia and dentistry



Claire Bennett¹ explores dyslexia: the

characteristic features, how it affects people and what it is like to work in dentistry and be dyslexic.

Author information

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One in five people in the UK has some degree of dyslexia, yet it is a very commonly misunderstood condition. Therefore, it is likely you are working in a dental setting alongside someone with dyslexia or you may indeed be dyslexic. Dyslexia affects people across various intellectual abilities and primarily affects learning skills involved in accurate and fluent reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.¹ Although dyslexia symptoms can vary from person to person, no two people have the same strengths and weaknesses. But, have you ever stopped and thought for a moment to consider what it is like to work in dentistry and be dyslexic?

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.² However, it does not only affect these skills. Dyslexia is actually about information processing. Dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear, affecting learning and acquisition of literary skills. Dyslexia can also impact other areas such as organisational skills.³ In dentistry, we continue to process new information daily, require accurate and

fluent written skills, excellent organisation skills and have committed to a lifetime of continuing education.

The Equality Act 2010 recognises dyslexia as a disability and you must not be discriminated against because you have a disability. Therefore, employers and educational settings have to make reasonable adjustments for people with dyslexia who would otherwise be at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled colleagues. Yet, some people with dyslexia struggle with being defined as having a disability.

I have dyslexia myself but do not associate myself with having a disability. I never tick the box on forms that ask if I have a disability. Does dyslexia mean I have a substantial, long-term physical or mental impairment? I process information differently, but I do not consider that to be a disability. The government suggests that learning disabilities do not include people with conditions such as dyslexia, where you have difficulty with one type of skill but not a more comprehensive intellectual impairment.⁴

Although I have struggled with acceptance, it may be associated with my personal experience and late diagnosis. If, like me, you received negative comments and experiences throughout your early education, which was very common in the 1980s, you probably wish to put the countless incidents behind you.

Dyslexia discrimination

If you are dyslexic unaware, you may be inadvertently discriminating against your fellow dental professionals with dyslexia and causing them a great deal of distress. In the past, I have been apprehensive in revealing my disability for fear of prejudice or open discrimination, and this appears to be a common trait with adults diagnosed at university.

Discrimination comes in many forms: age, sex, race, religion, disability, to name just a few. Thousands of disabilities are hidden, dyslexia being just one.

Dyslexia discrimination in dentistry is, I hope, often unintentional. I have also experienced harassment, a form of discrimination. I have been laughed at, told I am stupid and told I take too long to write notes by dental professionals. I have heard all the dyslexic jokes and comments 'that they could not spell either', in response to me informing an employer that I am dyslexic. Please do not get me started on the people who correct your spelling and grammar on social media in the hope of winning in a discussion.

I have received dental practice policies that prevent smartphone use in surgery which prevents me from accessing helpful, specialist software. I have sat in exams that ask for the correct spelling of medical terms; been expected to read policy documents or handouts, in unreadable fonts, on white paper; and been asked to read aloud and even take notes in lectures and meetings. Despite the lack of intention, it is indirect discrimination nonetheless.

Although dyslexia is one of the most common disabilities encountered in dental practice, it is poorly understood and overlooked by employers. Many adult dyslexics have felt ashamed or inferior; they become adept at disguising or hiding the problem, which does not help.

Reasonable adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 recognises dyslexia as a disability. As such, workers are entitled to 'reasonable adjustments'. Reasonable adjustments are made so that disabled workers are not at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled colleagues. What adjustments an employer makes depends on your situation and the size of the organisation.

Most adults have created strategies that enable them to do their job effectively and do not request reasonable adjustments. In fact, the decision to inform your workplace is a personal one, and you are not required to tell your work that you have dyslexia. It is your

disability and your choice as to who knows about it, especially if you feel it will not affect your ability to do the job.

Reasonable adjustments can be suggested or requested by either the employer or the employee and are usually simple, inexpensive changes that are easy to implement. What is considered reasonable will depend on an individual's difficulties, the resources and how beneficial the changes are.

Reasonable adjustments are the steps taken to help the dyslexic adult gain the most from their strengths and ability to think differently whilst helping to minimise the weaknesses. Sometimes the most straightforward changes can make the most significant difference. Reasonable adjustments will vary according to the individual adult's needs, job role, course of study, and environment. Any adjustments should not compromise the essential requirements of the job role, nor should they place an undue financial burden on the employer. The British Dyslexia Association suggests that a 'professional workplace needs assessment' is undertaken, which at £450 is an understandable roadblock to employees asking practices to make reasonable adjustment requests.

- Taking a complex medical history
- Verbally noting details without writing them down
- Arriving early to read through notes
- Finding medications in a British National Formulary
- Relying on template notes
- Writing notes in a timely fashion
- Printed documents on white paper written in a font that caused visual distress
- Dental software programs and the lack of spell check.

As an employer or a professional working alongside a colleague with dyslexia, the most important thing you can do is develop an understanding of dyslexia. Have an open mind and help maximise the benefits of working alongside a dyslexic colleague. You can make a difference simply by being open to new ideas, introducing reasonable adjustments, discovering different ways of working alongside an employee or colleague.

How you can support your dyslexic colleagues

Establish dyslexia friendly practice protocols or adjust existing protocols. Rather than

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What difficulties are experienced in the dental practice?

I recently interviewed a small group of dental therapy students with dyslexia about their university or past dental nurse experience in the workplace. The majority of students were well supported at university and provided specialised equipment such as recording devices, software that reads text out loud and one to one support mentors. Although each person is unique, so is everyone's experience of dyslexia. It can range from mild to severe, and it can coincide with other learning differences. I have discovered that there was a popular theme, beyond spelling and writing, that I have experienced myself but which never occurred to me as a result of dyslexia:

- The stress of pronouncing people's names in the waiting room
- Confusion with left and right

waiting for someone to request a reasonable adjustment, ask first. No one knows their struggles better than the person themselves. It does not matter which role you undertake in dentistry; by becoming dyslexia aware, you can prevent unintentional discrimination.

Here are some suggestions that you could consider to make you dyslexia aware:

- Give verbal as well as written instructions
- Provide all hard copies of resources on coloured paper
- Do not ask your dyslexic colleague to take minutes in a meeting
- Know how to change background colours on screens to suit individual preferences
- Supply anti-glare screen filter
- Back up multiple instructions in writing or with diagrams
- Organise the work areas and ensure they remain neat and tidy



- Ensure the team returns essential items to the same place each time
- Ensure work areas are well lit
- Change the standard computer settings such as changing the colour background of Word documents to blue or yellow rather than white
- Ensure important documents or handouts are distributed in advance and not just handed out in the meeting
- Support the use of technological aids such as computer packages, digital recorders and smartphones
- Consider your practice communication protocols; could you verbally talk to someone rather than send a written email?

Particular abilities associated with dyslexia are a valuable asset in the dental practice. 'Dyslexic skills' are often attributed to a 'right brained' approach to information processing and are typified by unusual creativity and innovation.² Areas of strength include creative thinking and troubleshooting, and an ability to visualise problem areas and resolve them and an intuitive (often untaught) understanding of systems - whether these be mechanical, electrical or sociological. A person with dyslexia can look at a task and develop a solution in an entirely different way.

Did you know that 80% of people with dyslexia have above average emotional intelligence? So, they are great 'people-people'.

Embedding this ethos benefits everyone, establishes an inclusive culture and prevents individuals from a great deal of distress, living with a fear of prejudice or being subjected to discrimination. Dyslexia awareness can ensure everyone fulfils their potential and also supports your dyslexic colleagues and patients.

The British Dyslexia Association offer a range of training options; these range from raising awareness of dyslexia in the workplace, learning how to screen for dyslexia, and provides further information on how to put in place reasonable adjustments: <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/services/training>.

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Simple measures can free employees from some of the effort involved in written work and routine organisation. I am grateful to my practice; they communicate verbally rather than bombarding me with emails. The nurses call the patients into the surgery, and I walk the patient to the desk after appointments. COVID-19 protocols have meant patients complete their medical history forms at home, in advance. The nurses take notes, and we have a system in place to ensure that I have not confused my left and right. I am then able to concentrate on the parts of my role that I do best.

Dyslexics are good at grasping an overview of the situation and not getting bogged down in detail. Dyslexic employees tend to be highly aware of their strengths and weaknesses, strengths like critical thinking, creativity and communication skills, making dentistry an ideal career path. After all, some of the most successful people in the world have dyslexia.

Dyslexia spans every job, every culture, every stage of life and every part of society. Being dyslexia aware makes good sense for any organisation. Alongside meeting legal requirements there are many benefits to raising the awareness of dyslexia in dentistry.

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