

# PLuS Perspectives

## Information about College Students with LD

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### What is the emotional impact of having a learning disability?

College is an exciting and somewhat stressful time for most students, as they learn how to balance greater freedoms with increased responsibilities, and function independently.

Students with LD and ADHD experience much of the same excitement that the rest of the student population does. However, they also face greater challenges and stress related to their disabilities. The increased stress and anxiety can have a negative impact on their emotional and social health.

*"When I went to my professors for help because I felt I couldn't write a paper, they just told me to relax and not to worry because I had good ideas judging from class discussions in which I participated. They had faith in me and urged me to 'just write down' my ideas. To me, however, this was an insurmountable task. Feeling threatened and lacking weapons for battle, I developed a defeatist attitude and my goal became simply turning in something, anything, on the due date."*

*- A DePaul Student*

#### The Roots of Emotional Stress

College students with LD and ADHD encounter four types of stressful situations for the first time:

- Problems with memory and organization as well as reading and spelling make it difficult to learn to navigate the complex bureaucracy of the university.
- Fear of losing respect when peers and faculty learn that they have a learning disability, makes it hard to advocate by themselves for accommodations and other services.
- The challenge of a demanding college curriculum means having to develop new ways of learning and new strategies to compensate for their learning difficulties.
- Attempting to meet these challenges means also having to learn to live with and manage the accompanying stress.

Adapted from: Reiff, H. B. et al. (2001) "The relation of LD and gender with emotional intelligence in college students." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 34.1, 66-78.



# PLuS Perspectives Continued

## Living with LD in College: What the Experts Say

Students living with LD may suffer from the effects of long-term stress. As Gregg et al., note, "Living with a learning disability is not a single event or trauma, but it is a trauma to the ego that could be considered outside the range of usual human experiences that would be distressing for almost anyone" (392). University students with LD often internalize their feelings, resulting in:

- Feelings of fear,
- Obsessive thoughts,
- Lack of self-confidence,
- Self-doubt, and
- Extreme self-criticism

These types of behaviors and thought patterns can have a direct negative effect on not only the student's academic performance, but his or her entire college experience.

Source: N. Gregg et al. (1992) "The MMPI-2 profile of adults with learning disabilities in university and rehabilitation settings." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25.6, 386-95.

### ***Universal Design for Learning Can Help:***

- ***Welcoming and Respectful Space.*** Make it clear that any student who wishes to talk about learning or learning difficulties will be listened to respectfully and with understanding.
- ***Varied Delivery of Instruction and Services.*** Design instruction and services so students can learn in a variety of ways. Access to course material, learning support, and university services should be non-stigmatizing, flexible, and equitable so students with LD and ADHD can maximize their strengths and minimize the need for accommodations.

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### **Living with LD in College: A Student's Perspective**

Philip Cohen chronicled his experiences as a college student with LD in his article, "Why Does My Stomach Hurt?". Cohen writes that after much self-reflection, he realizes that he copes with his LD by wearing a "mask." "... the thought that I may lose respect when other people find out I have a learning disability can lead to such feelings of shame that I protect myself by putting on a mask of super-competence and activity. By pretending that I can talk my way out of anything and seeming to be always on the move, I attempt to exude an aura of self-confidence and stability that will hide my weaknesses" (514).

Cohen describes how this unrealistic need to be "supercompetent" manifests itself in his social life: "When I go to a social gathering, such as a party, I continuously ponder what I want to accomplish there.... I find myself so busy thinking and organizing ways to be 'cool' and 'enjoy' the party, that I'm unable to actively pursue the positive experience." (515).

One strategy Cohen adopted to alleviate his anxiety was to confront his negative thoughts and feelings and admit his nervousness to his friends and other students. Often, he found that one or more of them felt the same way that he did, and this discovery helped to lessen his feelings of anxiety and isolation.

Source: Cohen, P. (1998) "Why does my stomach hurt? How individuals with learning disabilities can use cognitive strategies to reduce anxiety and stress at the college level." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 31.5, 514-6.

