

An Usdaw  
guide to

# Dyslexia

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Pull out  
advice  
leaflet

inside

# Contents

	Page
What is dyslexia?	2
How does dyslexia affect people?	3
Can dyslexia be cured?	4
How do people deal with dyslexia?	5
What Usdaw reps can do.	6
Dealing with members' problems.	8
Performance and disciplinary matters.	9
Recruitment and promotion.	10
Harassment.	11
Health and Safety.	12

# This booklet is about Dyslexia

This booklet is for workplace reps,  
and aims to:

- ▶ Give you some straightforward information about a very complex condition.
- ▶ Help members with dyslexia and let them know what they can do about it.
- ▶ Give some guidance to union reps on helping a member when dyslexia is causing a problem at work.

The leaflet on the centre pages is detachable. You can either give it to a member who needs more information, or photocopy it to give you a stock of leaflets.

# What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia affects the way the brain works. It is not a medical condition like a disease or illness, it's a problem with the way the brain processes information. Perhaps the best way to describe it is that the connections in the brain have been wired-up differently, so that it processes information in a different way. The word 'Dyslexia' means 'a difficulty with words', and its most common characteristic is difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. However, the real problem is with processing and recalling information, so this means people with dyslexia can experience difficulty with a wide range of tasks that require the brain to process, organise and recall information.

It is not uncommon. About 1 person in 25 is seriously affected and about 1 in 10 mildly affected. This means that more than 17,000 Usdaw members are likely to be seriously affected and more than 40,000 Usdaw members are likely to be affected by dyslexia to some extent.

Despite the fact that dyslexia was first identified over 100 years ago, and that it is relatively common, many people with the condition don't know they are dyslexic. Those with literacy difficulties often keep it to themselves. Services and help tend to concentrate on children and education, rather than on adults and work, so it can be difficult getting help.

However, it is not all bad news. Many people with dyslexia have talents and abilities, such as being fast thinkers and good at problem solving.

# How does dyslexia affect people?

People with dyslexia may have a range of problems depending on the severity of the condition. The main problems experienced are difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. Other common problems include:

- ▶ Personal organisation difficulties, eg forgetting where things have been put.
- ▶ Getting number sequences mixed up, eg telephone numbers, accounts or barcodes.
- ▶ Short term memory problems, eg remembering a series of instructions accurately.
- ▶ Remembering appointments and peoples names, or taking messages accurately.
- ▶ Difficulties with concentration on repetitive tasks.
- ▶ Confusing things with a 'mirror image', eg 'b' and 'd', or things that look very similar.
- ▶ Coping with work reorganisation or repeated changes in the workplace.

All these things can be made worse if the person is under pressure, or there are other distractions in the workplace like noise. The condition can also lead to low self-esteem, lack of confidence and depression. This can also result in frustration and anger.

# It's not all problems

But it's not all problems. As well as experiencing some very real difficulties, people with dyslexia can also be extremely creative and innovative. Many people with dyslexia have special and uncommon abilities. They can be very good at:

- ▶ Working out what needs to be done and solving problems quickly.
- ▶ Lateral thinking and creative thinking.
- ▶ Team working.
- ▶ Using words, being articulate and expressing themselves.
- ▶ Thinking intuitively.

A person with dyslexia may display one or more of these characteristics, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the severity of their condition. Some of the characteristics of dyslexia may cause difficulties at work, other characteristics may help people with dyslexia to be high-flyers.

## Can dyslexia be cured?

Dyslexia isn't an illness, so the simple answer is "No". The condition is permanent.

However, people with dyslexia can be very good at developing strategies for learning things and getting around their problems. Having a dyslexia assessment can help. Understanding the way their dyslexia affects them is often the first step to developing good strategies to deal with their condition.

# How do people deal with dyslexia?

People with dyslexia often develop 'coping strategies' to deal with the problems their dyslexia poses. They remember lists with mnemonics, rhymes or other memory tricks. Visual images often help – for example colour coding charts and diagrams. For some, using coloured lenses and acetates can help. Often people with dyslexia have to work harder and concentrate harder, to get certain kinds of things done.

People with dyslexia become very skillful at concealing their condition. This can be because they fear that their employer may not understand their condition and could discriminate against them – or simply because of embarrassment. Tasks like filling in a form or remembering a list of instructions can be a nightmare for someone with dyslexia. They may deal with this by taking the form away, and completing it where nobody is watching. When they are 'put on the spot' to read or write, they may pretend to have forgotten their glasses.

The condition can simply make life at work more difficult and unpleasant than it would otherwise be – more seriously it can affect performance on the job, leading to disciplinary action. This is especially true in these days of constant change and reorganisation, and greater demands on literacy skills. It can also mean that promotion opportunities are denied.

# What Usdaw reps can do

The Equality Act 2010 (or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland) provides protection for disabled people, and requires that employers take steps to avoid discrimination against disabled people. Both the Acts provide a framework that can help workplace representatives negotiate improvements with their employer, and ensure fair employment practices. For more information about how the law can help, see Usdaw's *Supporting Disabled Members* booklet.

There is a lot that we can do to help dyslexic members.

- ▶ Our aim should be to create an environment where someone with dyslexia doesn't have to hide their condition and can get the support and assistance they need to cope with it.
- ▶ Members may need support to negotiate reasonable adjustments at work and to resolve problems when they arise. Shop Stewards need to be approachable and show understanding when representing members.
- ▶ Members may also need advice on how to get their dyslexia assessed and how to get assistance to deal with their dyslexia. The leaflet in the centre of this booklet can be copied and given to members with dyslexia.
- ▶ Further help may be available by contacting your local Training Officer or the Education Department at Usdaw's Central Office.



**“People have a general understanding that dyslexia is where you get your words mixed up. But unless you have direct experience of it you won’t understand how it impacts on your whole life.”**

Usdaw Area Organiser Shane Spitty knows only too well the problems associated with dyslexia. He has had to overcome a number of hurdles to progress with the Union and in life. Shane was born with a hearing impairment which went undetected for three years. He also struggled at school as his dyslexia went undiagnosed. “I found English difficult as my writing, spelling and punctuation were poor.”

After Shane left school, he found himself hindered by a lack of confidence. “I would try to find the most manual types of jobs as I had a massive fear of having to do paperwork, so I self-restricted my options quite a bit.”

“People have a general understanding that dyslexia is where you get your words mixed up. But unless you have direct experience of it you won’t understand how it impacts on your whole life”.

“My life changed dramatically when I joined Usdaw. I took on the role of store rep and attended my first training course. I was nervous about how much writing there would be but at the same time I was really enjoying the role and wanted to get the knowledge behind me. I spoke to the Usdaw tutor about my concerns, he was fantastic and said to ask for help as and when required”. It was the tutor who suggested Shane should be assessed for dyslexia.

Shane paid for the assessment himself which confirmed not only his dyslexia but also dyspraxia (a condition affecting physical co-ordination). “I can’t begin to say how good it made me feel, at long last I had an explanation as to why I’d struggled. It also made me realise how well I’d done because despite my learning difficulties I’d passed my GCSEs and completed an NVQ in retail after school”.

“I had the greatest support from Usdaw who encouraged me to become more active within the Union. In addition to being a Shop Steward, I was also a Health and Safety Rep, a Union Learning Rep and a Branch Secretary”.

“Having completed all the Usdaw training courses, I went on to complete a TUC Employment Law certificate and an Employment Law diploma. The continued support I received helped to push me towards achieving my potential.” All of Shane’s hard work paid off when he was offered the role of Area Organiser with Usdaw. “When I left school I never imagined I’d get as far as I have. I’m hoping my experience will be an example to others to say – never give up.”

# Dealing with members' problems

Members who are dyslexic are most likely to face problems related to:

- 1 Performance and disciplinary matters.**
- 2 Recruitment and promotion.**
- 3 Harassment.**
- 4 Health & Safety.**

The Equality Act 2010, or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland, makes it unlawful for an employer to treat disabled people less favourably because of their disability. It also makes it clear that employers need to take positive action to ensure workplaces are harassment free.

The main requirement of the Act on the employer is that they should make 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace to remove any disadvantages that the disabled person faces in doing their job. A key argument is that this is in the employer's interests, as it gets the best from the individual worker, and contributes to high morale in the workplace.

# 1 Performance and disciplinary matters

Problems often come to light after a reorganisation at work or after a new system is introduced.

- ▶ The member may need help, but be reluctant to inform the employer about their dyslexia. This needs to be handled sensitively and with care. It is important to let the member know that if they do not inform their employer of their dyslexia, the employer will not be under any duty to make reasonable adjustments.
- ▶ The key to successful representation is to negotiate for whatever 'reasonable adjustments' the employer needs to make to allow the member to perform effectively. Reasonable adjustments may also be needed to improve the quality of their working life.
- ▶ The member with the dyslexia will have lots of ideas about what would help to improve things. What is achieved on the job is more important than a rigid procedure for doing it. A little more flexibility can work wonders.
- ▶ Many adjustments can be made at little cost and no disruption. All that is required is a positive approach and some careful thought and planning by the employer, helped by the member identifying the problems and possible solutions.
- ▶ Adapting workplace communications to the member's needs can resolve many problems. For example, if the main problem is with reading, then instructions can be given verbally. If the problem is memory, then instructions should be given clearly and slowly, and written down in a simple way – demonstrations given etc. A confirmation check that the instructions or information is understood also helps.
- ▶ Establishing a system of work that helps the member overcome problems, and sticking to it. This helps to maintain consistency and avoids the need for constant re-learning.

## 2 Recruitment and promotion

Union representatives are more likely to represent members with problems related to promotion opportunities and procedures than recruitment. These issues can be dealt with through an effective equal opportunities policy and agreement.

- ▶ Make sure job descriptions and person specifications don't unreasonably exclude people with dyslexia.
- ▶ Keep application forms simple and clear.
- ▶ Make sure the procedure concentrates on a person's ability to do the job, not their success in written tests and assessments.
- ▶ Allow applications to be in electronic or word-processed form where appropriate to avoid written presentation and spelling problems.
- ▶ Use pastel coloured or off-white paper and typefaces of at least size 12 point for information and forms.
- ▶ Check if it is helpful to waive any aptitude or other tests, and substitute techniques such as questioning.
- ▶ If tests are essential, ask the candidate what adjustments are necessary to help them.
- ▶ Give clear verbal instructions for tests and allow extra time if appropriate.
- ▶ Wider objectives should be to ensure an effective equal opportunities policy and agreement covering:
  - Recruitment and selection.
  - Performance.
  - Promotion opportunities.
  - Monitoring.

# 3 Harassment

People with dyslexia are very skilled at concealing their condition. They know the problems that can result from public knowledge of their condition. If it does become public knowledge, it can result in harassment or bullying.

- ▶ Harassment is language and behaviour that is unwanted and offensive to the recipient. It can include:
  - Abusive language and ‘name-calling’.
  - Behaviour designed to belittle the recipient in front of others.
  - ‘Jokes’ and comments about a person’s ability.
  - Direct threats.
  - Unfair allocation of work.
  - Isolation and exclusion within the work group.
  
- ▶ Make sure that the harasser is told that their behaviour is a problem.
  
- ▶ Give the member concerned as much support and confidence as possible.
  
- ▶ Involve senior management as early as possible.
  
- ▶ Make sure that management inform everyone that this behaviour is unacceptable and will be considered a disciplinary matter.
  
- ▶ Ensure that supervisors and managers are properly trained.
  
- ▶ Use the provisions of an existing harassment policy and procedure, or negotiate new policies and procedures.

# 4 Health and Safety

Good Health and Safety practice should include:

- ▶ Give instruction and information verbally, and use practical demonstrations.
- ▶ Keep written instruction simple and clear – use bullet points to emphasise safe practices.
- ▶ Use diagrammatic posters and notices.
- ▶ Make sure risk assessments take potential difficulties with reading into account.
- ▶ Make sure that the work is adapted to the worker, rather than the worker having to adapt to the work.

## Further information and assistance

Specialist help and advice is available from Disability Employment Advisers (DEA). Contact details for your nearest DEA will be available from a Jobcentre.

Help with assessing needs and the provision of equipment may be available through the Government's Access to Work Scheme. Visit the GOV.UK website for more details.

*Assistance with any legal matters can be provided by Usdaw's local Area Organiser or by contacting Usdaw's Legal Department.*

# 10 dyslexia X

This booklet has been produced for BIFU & Usdaw with the help of the British Dyslexia Association, by Melanie Jameson. The booklet was paid for by a grant from the Union Learning Fund. However, Usdaw is entirely responsible for the contents of this edition of the booklet.

Further copies can be obtained from Usdaw's Education Department.

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and Allied Workers*  
[www.usdaw.org.uk](http://www.usdaw.org.uk)



## What is

# Dyslexia?

Dyslexia can affect:

- ▶ Reading and writing.
- ▶ Memory.
- ▶ Number work.
- ▶ Concentration for long periods on certain kinds of tasks.

Over 4 million adults are  
dyslexic

You are not on your own.

Dyslexia has not stopped these people from making it:

- ▶ Bill Gates
- ▶ Whoopi Goldberg
- ▶ Eddie Izzard
- ▶ Albert Einstein
- ▶ Jamie Oliver
- ▶ John Prescott

# Do You Think You

## **This is what people say about being dyslexic:**

“At school they said I was lazy and should try harder.”

“When I had to fill in the form, I just panicked.”

“My memory is like a sieve.”

“Some days I manage quite well - but on others, reading and spelling are impossible.”

“When I write down what I am thinking, it comes out all wrong.”

## **We all have some dyslexic type symptoms, maybe more when we are tired**

- 1** Do you tend to confuse left and right?
- 2** Is it hard to remember several instructions?
- 3** Do you ever muddle number order – eg when dialling phone numbers?
- 4** Do you have to think about getting your letters the right way round, especially b and d?
- 5** Are you generally forgetful?
- 6** Do you have problems recalling everyday words?
- 7** Do you keep losing your place when you read?
- 8** Can you pick a month and say which month comes before and after it?
- 9** Did you have a lot of problems with spelling and reading at school?
- 10** Do you have days when it is almost impossible to read, spell or concentrate?

Did you answer ‘Yes’ to at least half of these questions?

Do you want to know what to do if you think you are dyslexic?

If you do, please look at the information opposite.

# You Might Be Dyslexic?

How do I find out for sure?

You need an **assessment**

There are 5 ways you can get one.

## **1. Your Employer**

Some employers are prepared to pay for assessments.  
Ask your union representative to check with personnel.

or

## **2. Local College**

If you are on a course at a college, ask to see Student Services.  
They can refer you to a specialist tutor, or a psychologist.  
You can get help in class, or extra time in exams.

or

## **3. Job Centre**

Ask for the Disability Employment Advisor.  
They can do an initial assessment, and may refer you to an Occupational Psychologist.  
You may be able to get some special equipment to help you at work.

or

## **4. Your Doctor**

Explain that you think you may be dyslexic.  
The doctor needs to refer you to a specialist in adult dyslexia, through the dyslexia organisations.  
The doctor can treat you for associated stress, anxiety or depression, or may refer you for counselling.

or

## **5. A Private Assessment**

A private assessment would cost you between £300 - £750.

Your local Dyslexia Association may be able to suggest the best route in your area.

# Usdaw

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## Find out more



**Get informed,  
get trained,  
get organised  
and get learning!**

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[www.usdaw.org.uk](http://www.usdaw.org.uk)

Printed on environmentally  
responsible paper.  
Published by the Union of Shop,  
Distributive and Allied Workers.

There may be an

### **Adult Dyslexia Group**

meeting in your area.

Contact:

The British Dyslexia Association National Helpline:

**0333 405 4567**

email: [helpline@bdadyslexia.org.uk](mailto:helpline@bdadyslexia.org.uk)

**or**

The Adult Dyslexia Organisation

**[www.adult-dyslexia.org](http://www.adult-dyslexia.org)**

for advice, information and encouragement.

Sometimes your employer can help with the cost of an  
assessment or tuition from a specialist in dyslexia.

Ask your local representative to find out for you.

Discover how to:

- ▶ Appreciate your talents.
- ▶ Develop your coping skills.
- ▶ Overcome your dyslexia difficulties.

*The Equality Act applies to interviews, job descriptions, work  
situations and the unfair dismissal of adults with disabilities.*