

What is a learning disability?

Information for carers

Shining a light on the future



What is a learning disability?

The government states that a learning disability is a “significant impairment of intelligence and social functioning acquired before adulthood”.

This means that people with a learning disability will have difficulty with:

- Difficulties with learning new things, remembering, understanding and problem solving.
- Difficulties with communicating, looking after themselves, daily living skills such as cooking and cleaning, telling the time and managing money.

Acquired before adulthood means

- Some people are born with a learning disability, (this may be genetic or can be caused during pregnancy or birth).
- Other people’s learning disability is caused by illness or an accident during childhood.
- Sometimes there is no known cause.

At least two in every hundred people will have a learning disability.

What a learning disability is not

- **It is not an illness** – it is a lifelong condition, which means that people will always have some difficulty with learning. However, there is a lot that can be done to help people learn new skills and develop.
- **It is not a mental health problem** although some people with a learning disability can develop mental health problems. People with a learning disability are more likely to develop mental health problems.
- **It is not a specific “learning difficulty”** (like dyslexia) which affects a specific area of learning. School reports might say a learning difficulty but this is not the same as what is meant by learning disability.
- **It is not autism** – some people with a learning disability might have autism as well, but it is not the same thing.

Levels of learning disability

- **Mild** learning disability – might have problems in some areas but manage ok in other areas and need support some of the time.
- **Moderate** learning disability – might have problems in more areas and need support a lot of the time.
- **Severe/profound** learning disability – might have problems in more areas and need support most of the time. This includes people with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Why do people often not know they have a mild learning disability?

Some people might have had great difficulty at school, struggle to get a job and cope with life without the help they need.

This may be because their families have helped them, they may feel embarrassed or ashamed and this stops them from getting the help they need.

How we can help

- **Learning disability assessment**

We can find out if someone has a learning disability. If someone does have a learning disability, they will be able to get support from the team.

- **Screening**

We ask some questions to help us decide whether someone will need further tests, to see if they have a learning disability.

- **Further assessment/some tests**

A questionnaire about the person's skills.

- **A meeting to gain an understanding of the person's history.**

- **A test of the person's abilities.**

If you have any questions or want a referral

Ask your GP or get in touch with the **Community Learning Disabilities Team**

Tel: 0191 283 2583

References

- Department of Health, Signposts for Success – Mary Lindsey 1998
- Emerson and Hatton 2008
- Royal College of Nursing (2010). Mental Health Nursing of Adults with Learning Disabilities



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