

Dyslexia, Anxiety & Self-Esteem

Dyslexia affects literacy, but repeated experiences around reading, writing and spelling can also shape how a person feels about themselves. A child who repeatedly sees classmates finish first may decide they are less intelligent. An adult who spends years hiding spelling difficulties may become anxious whenever they have to write in front of someone. The original difficulty is real, but the emotional consequences often develop through experience. Understanding both matters because practical literacy support alone may not undo years of shame.

When dyslexia becomes a judgement about yourself

A person may begin with a specific difficulty - perhaps slow reading, inconsistent spelling or difficulty organising written work - and gradually turn it into a global belief: 'I'm stupid', 'I'm not academic', 'I always get things wrong' or 'People will realise I can't do this'. These beliefs can remain even when the person is successful in other areas. Separating the processing difficulty from the person's identity is an important part of rebuilding confidence.

Anxiety around reading

Reading can become associated with threat when someone has repeatedly been asked to perform in front of others, corrected publicly or hurried. Unexpected reading aloud may trigger a racing heart, blankness, sweating, shaking or an urge to escape. The person may understand the material perfectly when reading privately. Anxiety in the performance situation is not evidence that they have failed to learn; it may reflect years of anticipating embarrassment.

Anxiety around writing

Writing can bring its own fear. Someone may know exactly what they want to say but become preoccupied with spelling, punctuation or how their writing will be judged. Emails can be rewritten repeatedly. Forms may be postponed. A short message can take a long time because the person is checking every word. Speech-to-text, templates and supportive proofreading can reduce the mechanical load and create room for the person's actual ideas.

Overthinking and checking

Checking is useful, but anxiety can turn checking into an exhausting loop. A person may reread the same email repeatedly without becoming more confident that it is correct. Text-to-speech can provide a different proofreading route, and a clear checking limit can help: check the meaning, check key names or dates, run the agreed spelling support and then send. The aim is reliable accuracy rather than impossible certainty.

The impact of school experiences

Many adults can still remember being asked to read aloud, receiving pages covered in corrections, being kept behind or being told to try harder. Some remember classmates laughing when they mispronounced a word. These experiences can shape adult reactions to paperwork, training, meetings and written communication. A current task may be relatively safe while the body responds as if an old humiliation is about to happen again.

Masking

People may hide dyslexia by avoiding particular tasks, memorising information, asking someone else to write, choosing simpler vocabulary or spending extra hours preparing. Masking can protect against immediate embarrassment but it also creates fatigue and reinforces the message that dyslexia must be hidden. Supportive environments allow tools and adjustments to be used openly without treating the person as less capable.

Low confidence

Confidence can become narrower over time. Someone who struggles with literacy may begin to doubt decisions that have nothing to do with reading or spelling. They may avoid courses, promotions, applications or social situations because they expect written demands. Rebuilding confidence involves noticing where dyslexia genuinely creates a barrier and where fear has spread beyond the original difficulty.

Pressure and expectations

Comments such as 'It's only a short email', 'You should know that word' or 'Just read it quickly' can increase pressure. A task that appears small may involve decoding, working memory, spelling, organisation and proofreading simultaneously. Support begins by recognising the hidden workload. Reducing unnecessary speed demands often improves both accuracy and confidence.

Perfectionism

Some dyslexic people respond to earlier criticism by trying to make every piece of written work perfect. They may spend disproportionate time checking small details because a mistake feels dangerous. Perfectionism can become another form of protection against shame. A more sustainable goal is appropriate accuracy: decide what genuinely matters for the task, use reliable checking tools and allow ordinary human mistakes to remain ordinary.

Avoidance

Avoidance brings short-term relief. Not opening a letter, delaying an application or avoiding a training course means the feared literacy task disappears temporarily. Unfortunately, repeated avoidance can make the task feel even more threatening next time. A graded approach can help: start with a manageable task, use the right support, complete it in a calm setting and build from successful experiences rather than forcing the hardest situation first.

Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance does not mean pretending dyslexia causes no difficulty. It means being able to acknowledge a real processing difference without turning it into a verdict on personal worth. Someone can say, 'I read slowly and use text-to-speech' without adding, 'because I'm stupid'. Accurate self-understanding creates space for practical action.

Strengths without pressure

Dyslexic people are sometimes told they must compensate by being unusually creative, entrepreneurial or visually gifted. Positive stereotypes can still create pressure. People with dyslexia have varied strengths, personalities and interests. Confidence grows from

recognising the individual's actual abilities rather than requiring them to possess a special 'dyslexic gift'.

Practical strategies that reduce anxiety

Use text-to-speech for long documents, speech-to-text for drafting, predictive text and spelling tools for writing, templates for repeated communication and written prompts for tasks with several stages. Ask for material before meetings when possible. Break long forms into sections. Complete important literacy-heavy tasks when energy is higher. These strategies reduce the number of opportunities for anxiety to overwhelm working memory.

Changing the internal language

Replace global self-criticism with specific descriptions. Instead of 'I'm useless at writing', try 'I need longer to organise written information'. Instead of 'I can't read properly', try 'Dense text takes me longer and audio helps'. Instead of 'I always mess up', try 'I sometimes miss spelling errors, so I use a checking system'. Specific language identifies a barrier and leaves room for a solution.

A confidence rebuilding exercise

Situation: identify one literacy task that creates anxiety. **Old message:** write the thought that appears automatically. **Actual barrier:** name the specific difficulty - reading speed, spelling, memory, organisation or fear of being watched. **Support:** choose one practical tool. **Small action:** complete a manageable version of the task. **Evidence:** record what actually happened rather than what anxiety predicted. Repeat before increasing the challenge.

Supporting children

Protect the child's dignity. Do not use reading aloud unexpectedly as a test. Avoid comparing speed with classmates or siblings. Praise ideas, persistence, problem-solving and effective use of strategies. If homework repeatedly causes distress, communicate with school rather than turning home into another place of correction. A child needs regular experiences of competence that are not dependent on spelling or reading speed.

Supporting adults

Adults may minimise dyslexia because they have survived for years without formal support. Ask which situations require the greatest effort and what they already do to cope. Offer practical help without taking over. If someone asks you to proofread, clarify whether they want spelling checked or the whole message rewritten. Respecting ownership is important for confidence.

Therapeutic support

Therapy may be useful when literacy experiences have become linked with persistent shame, panic, avoidance or low self-worth. Therapeutic work can explore earlier experiences, challenge global negative beliefs, reduce fear of judgement and support gradual re-engagement with avoided situations. Therapy does not remove dyslexia; accessible literacy tools and educational or workplace adjustments may still be needed.

When anxiety is broader than dyslexia

Not every anxiety experienced by a dyslexic person is caused by dyslexia. If worry, panic or low mood occur across many areas of life, they deserve consideration in their own right. Similarly, ADHD, autism or other learning differences may contribute to overwhelm, memory or organisation difficulties. Good support looks at the whole person rather than forcing every experience into a single explanation.

A message to take away

Reading slowly, spelling differently or needing technology does not make you less intelligent. You are allowed to listen to a document, dictate an email, ask for extra time and check your work. You do not need to hide dyslexia to prove competence. Confidence can grow when you stop measuring yourself against the method other people use and start building reliable ways to access the things that matter to you.

Further support

If dyslexia or its emotional impact is affecting education, work or daily life, specialist dyslexia organisations, learning-support services and appropriately qualified assessors can provide further information. Where anxiety or self-esteem difficulties are significant, appropriate psychological or therapeutic support may help alongside practical dyslexia strategies and reasonable adjustments.

Space to Breathe Therapy