

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 11

Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities with Laurie Peterson and Abbey Weinstein. Laurie & Abbey spend their days talking about dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and ADHD. They talk to parents of struggling students and adults who have had a lifetime of academic challenges. They want to share those stories, along with their own insights with you. So, *let's talk learning disabilities*.

Laurie: Hey, everybody. Welcome to today's episode of let's talk, learning disabilities. This is Laurie.

Abbey: Hi, and this is Abbey. Welcome.

Laurie: We're excited. You guys are here. So today we're going to jump right in and talk a little bit about processing issues. Kind of a generic term, isn't it?

Abbey: It is something we hear a lot that is generic.

It's very generic, but it's kind of a way to encompass a lot of issues. So we have parents that call and they'll say, I think my child has a processing issue or, I think I have a processing issue.

Abbey: Right. And what, what do they exactly mean by processing issues? Well, when you get down and dirty and get to the nitty gritty, what are some of their concerns?

Laurie: Right, So when they call in and say, or when we hear those concerns, it's typically things like, um, uh, my child needs. Extra 20 minute, 20 minutes extra, or works two times as hard as their peers that they're up all night, doing homework while everyone else is finishing it in, you know, an hour, they're working twice as hard. Um, they have to read things a hundred times before they can comprehend them. You know, they read it through once.

They don't know what it says. They got to go back and read it again and again, um, sometimes they're just slow to respond. Like. You ask somebody a question and it's like, hello, anybody home? They're just staring at you, staring at you. Oh yeah. And then they have trouble sometimes maybe finding the words that they need or putting their thoughts together. Um, a lot of times it's that they seem like they know all the material for a test and they study and they go through the flashcards and they're nailing it. And then the test shows up and they vomit and they're like, but none of the questions that I studied were on, you know, that I started reading on the test and they can't make those connections. Um, their daily grades are really good, but they're bombing tests. So again, the same concept they're doing very well day to day, um, in the concepts. But then the test comes. They can't take the test. They can't pass the test and demonstrate their knowledge. They can not demonstrate their knowledge. Um, sometimes they're slow to take notes. You know, they feel like they're always three steps behind their peers. In class. The teacher has got notes on the board and they're going to the next page and they're like, wait, I don't have it. And then they just get frustrated and give up, um, you know, things, things that really show up in their ability to demonstrate what they know, whether it's demonstrate, they understand what they've read, demonstrate they understand concepts they learned in class. Um, and then sometimes all of those come together to force somebody to take four hours to finish an assignment or to finish homework. Um, and so when it, when, when they see that, they just think, okay, it's something in the way they're processing, there's gotta be something in the processing.

Abbey: So you're right. We do hear that a lot. Do you hear a lot of concerns with processing? So really when we talk about processing issues, when we as diagnosticians, talk about processing issues or processing. Um, we are really referring to different cognitive processes, such as your working memory skills, your visual processing skills, your auditory processing skills, your verbal reasoning. Skills, your nonverbal reasoning skills, your short-term memory versus your long-term memory. Um, your ability to retrieve information from that long-term memory, long-term storage and retrieval. So there are actual cognitive processes that we are testing and looking at. And we're oftentimes trying to see if there are any processing weaknesses or deficits or processing disorders that are linked to some weaknesses that we're seeing as far as performance academically or in the classroom, or with conversations or remembering information and attending to information.

Laurie: So interestingly. There, right. There is a processing issue really. And, and what, what our goal is then is to say, okay, well, yeah, they, they have a great short-term memory. They can regurgitate it. And it makes you think that they understand it, but they have zero ability to move that information into their long-term memory. So an hour later, or a day later when they take the test, it's like, it was never there, but they have great. They have the ability to kind of spit it back at you, but they're not really digesting it. Um, and so it fascinates me too, that we can connect all of those struggles to one of those areas of processing. Sometimes more than one more than one reading comprehension. I mean, think about all of the, all of those things you just listed. All of those cognitive processes for reading comprehension. What are some of the things that you need to have adequate, um, ability to do in order to comprehend what you read?

Abbey: That's right. You need to really be focusing on, first of all, what you're reading and digesting it, holding it in, holding it in your working memory while you're reading through it, and then storing it into your long-term memory, using some different memory strategies and comprehension strategies so that you can store it easily so that you can fluently retrieve it easier from that little working file cabinet in your brain so that you can retrieve it later.

Laurie: But verbal abilities to, right?

Abbey: Yeah. You have to have the vocabulary and some verbal reasoning skills and language development and vocabulary development to comprehend long passages with vocabulary words that are sometimes difficult and high level. You have to have visual processing skills to be able to process the visual information you're seeing, um, problem solving skills, problem, solving skills, exactly those reasoning abilities.

Laurie: Because, if I don't know a word I need to figure out. I need to be able to problem solve my way around it. Um, and not just give up. But they want to see a lot of kids do.

Abbey: Even in math, you know, a lot of kids struggle with word problems and it's, you know, involves many different factors. Cause you have to focus on what you're reading. You have to comprehend it. You have to reason and problem

solve through what is, what, which of the information is important and necessary. And which of the information is not necessary to solve the problem and then choose the operation and the lot. And then think about the multiple steps in solving that operation and completing it. So there are many different problem solving abilities that are, um, utilized, utilized for math problems.

Laurie: So when we find that cognitive weakness, we feel great. Now we know that this is a weakness we can explain now to the parent or to the adult client. This is why you struggle with. You know, XYZ because your long-term memory is weak or because your processing speed is slow. We get that one a lot too. So processing speed processing and while, in many cases, that's great information, right. And great. Now we know what the problem is and we kind of, we, then we can make some recommendations on how to, how to quote unquote, fix it or, or make things better or accommodate it where I struggle personally and where I feel like it makes what you and I do a little bit different is that. I'm not okay at just stopping there like, well, but why, why can't they remember anything? Why is their processing speed weak? Why can't they regurgitate something? They just heard, you know, why are their verbal skills weak? So I feel like we dig a little bit deeper, take it to us to get to an answer. Yeah. Because I mean, It's all good, but what if we could go even further and figure out why? And we could actually literally fix that, you know? And interestingly, we talk a lot about ADHD, but that one has an impact on a lot of your skills.

Abbey: Sure does.

Laurie: Mostly because if you're not paying attention, no, can't remember what year.

Abbey: Yep. I was just working with a student. Had told me, you know, that he's struggling with comprehension. But when we got down into the test and we were doing a lot of the different reading tasks, he actually said, well, I rushed through my reading and I'm not really paying attention. So it's not necessarily that he can't comprehend what he's reading or that he, or that he has weak reading comprehension skills. It's that lack of attention and concentration. And he's. You know, rushing to get through and he's not letting that information. He's just word calling when he's reading, he's not letting

it sink in and digest it and let it really sink into that working memory and then transfer it to the long-term memory.

Laurie: He's not playing a movie in his head when he reads that's right. That's what I always ask them. I'm like, are you playing a movie in your head? Are you picturing what this looks like? Like I tell kids my, I am really keen about your thinking. Bingo. I have a really bad analogy that I use for this. I asked kids, I'm like, you know, if you were to sit down at the dinner table and you were to eat your entire meal without chewing your food. Okay. Now that would be weird, but let's just say you did that. And I asked you, well, how did it taste? You would say, I don't know what, but you ate it. Yeah, it's gone. I ate it, but I don't know how it tasted. That's what it's like when you read and you don't think about you just word call, you read the passage. No, one's going to deny you that. But did you taste it? Did you digest it? Did you think about it? No.

Abbey: That is a great analogy.

Laurie: You really got to get them to learn to slow down and we're going off into a whole nother. Topic, but, you know, break it into little chunks and taste it, chew it up, digest it. Um, and it's amazing just that, that flipping that switch for them. They're like, Oh yeah, that's exactly what I'm doing.

Abbey: Even during oral instruction in class when teachers are teaching. Whether it be, you know, elementary, secondary GRA college post-grad level, you have to be attending and really focused on listening and processing that information, letting it sink in and digest it and then writing it down. And there's so many different things you have to think about when you're writing, but it all involves a lot of attention and focus and concentration, and really, um, a lot of kids struggle with taking notes in class. And I think, you know, it's not just that they aren't processing what they're hearing. It's that they're not really. Focused and attending to what they're hearing, not at all.

Laurie: And I think when you, we hear about the kids that are taking eight hours a night to do homework, well, if they're not managing their time and they're spending, you know, 30 minutes on Snapchat, and then they're going back and reading something a couple of times, but then they don't understand

it. So they put it away and they get up their math. Cause they know they can do that quickly, but then they get interrupted by a text and then, you know, yeah, that's going to take you four hours. So there's some time management issues there too. So. Outside of ADHD though. There are other things that can impact your processing skills. So, you know, when we find somebody who has trouble with visual puzzles or doing visual tasks, we often find they have a visual processing disorder, which we've talked about on one of our other podcasts. If you haven't listened though, because it's great information, but we can fix that. We can improve that. So that doesn't, that's not really something they live with. Right.

Abbey: Even if they have an auditory processing disorder that can be improved on as well. There are different therapies that help with auditory processing information, or even when they have difficulties understanding language, or they have a language impairment that is not just. And it's not even affecting how some people think about speech and language and they think you only have a speech and language impairment. If you struggle, if someone struggles to understand you, or if you can't form your T H T H's. And that's more of an articulation problem that does fall under a speech impairment, but there are also a lot of language impairments that affect individual's ability to process what they're hearing to understand what they're hearing to synthesize, what they're hearing or to put all their thoughts together into a coherent sentence and to express themselves verbally. And so there are speech therapy, um, remediations or therapy techniques that can help with that language processing and those language impairments. And so there are different strategies and therapies for the visual processing disorders, the auditory processing disorders, of course, the attention deficit disorder. There's a lot we can do for that.

Laurie: What about if they suffer from anxiety?

Abbey: That's a good point. A lot of. A lot of individuals now, especially more and more these days, it's common that there's anxiety difficulties going on. They worry a lot and they get anxious when they're in class or when they're taking a test. And so what does that look like? And you're a, you're an LPC also, or a licensed professional counselor. I'm curious to know what is, how does anxiety look? I mean, how is that something that we can see and spot.

Laurie: Yeah. I mean, it's, it's almost overthinking about your thinking, right? Because usually the kids that we see, it's an anxiety, a performance-based anxiety, like they're so they want to be perfect, you know, and they get so anxious about something or because they've done poorly on it before they're bending. They're more susceptible to worry and to be anxious. And so it can affect the speed that they work because they go super slow trying to be perfect, or they're going back and erasing and rewriting their universes. Or they end up having to read something 10 times. Not because they're inattentive or not, because they don't understand it because they're almost overthinking it. Like, have you ever read something and thought, okay, I've really got to read this and I really need to make sure I understand it. And you're because you're thinking those thoughts. You read it and you don't have any idea what you just read. Right? They tend to overthink about what they're doing. Math anxiety is a real thing. And a lot of the cognitive processing, especially in the problem-solving and working memory requires a little bit of math. But as soon as those, those individuals see numbers, they're like, I'm out. I suck at math. I can't do it when really they can. But there's not much, you're going to be good at your initial instinct or your, your instinct is to say, Oh, I'm terrible at terrible. It's really hard to. Power through that. So getting them to kind of overcome some of that and say, look, you know, you've, you can do this and just reassuring them can sometimes be helpful, but I can always tell when that math anxiety is there, because it's like any time you present a number, they're like, no, thank you, I'm out.

Abbey: And then it clouds their thought processes and judgment, and they can't really use their mental energy to focus on what they're doing and to think about the appropriate steps they need to follow.

Laurie: Right. And the same thing with like a lack of competence. Right. Just kids who have just performed poorly and are struggling. And we're trying to get to the root of the problem. Well, sometimes that repetitive struggle causes them to not perform at their very best, because they're just like, why bother? Like, I'm terrible at this. They're going to find out I'm not smart.

Abbey: They've given up before they've even attempted it basically.

Laurie: And so when you really dig into it. I feel like there's a lot of reasons why, why kids have processing issues? Not just that they have them,

but why they have them. And we can address the why's and help them strengthen those muscles. Right. So that then their processes are better and they can work more efficiently and perform better on tests and things like that. And occasionally there are some very specific strategies we want to talk to them about that, that require study skills. Cause that's gonna, you know, your long-term memory. If you're doing, if you're using good study skills, then you're gonna be able to get that information moved from your short-term to long-term memory. You gotta have strategies. Can't just. Osmosis doesn't work. And you can't hope that if you read it 500 times that you've got it right. And that's what a lot of kids think. So weak long-term memory outside of a brain injury is really about how they're packing that information away for later. That's why parents will always say things like. Well, they can remember a vacation from when they were five years old, but they can't remember something from yesterday. And I'm like, right. Both. Exactly. Think about the vacation. It was an experience. It was a multisensory. There were emotions tied to it. There was so of course it is remembering there's nothing meaningful about the history test. There's zero emotion. It's boring. Th they're just reading it. There's no, there's no physical activity happening. There's nothing going on outside of just reading and trying to remember. So you have to help them create strategies so that they can then remember the stuff that's less entertaining. Um, okay. So. Some of the treatments we've kind of already talked about. There are some other things like different therapies. Um, we've we actually, in our, in the Dallas Fort worth area, we've tapped into a great test anxiety program, um, through a local counseling center that has this amazing test edge program that's all about count, uh, uh, anxiety test anxiety, and we'll put some of the links for some of this stuff in the show notes. If you guys want to read about it, there's Cog Med, which I've got, have heard mixed reviews on, but do you know much about Cog Med

Abbey: I don't know much about it, except that it's supposed to improve working memory and processing skills

Laurie: And working memory is that ability to multitask, right.

Abbey: Right, to hold multiple things in your mind at one time or to manipulate information while you're holding it in your mind, do mental numbers do mentally or take notes?

Laurie: You gotta read it? You gotta hold onto it. Then you gotta write it. That's working memory, right? There's um, interactive metronome therapy, which is one, a lot of people haven't heard about. And we'll put this in the show notes as well, where, um, it uses the metronome and it's this whole system on the computer where kids do different activities. The metronome is there to sort of set the pace, but it's meant to create some new pathways in the brain to help with things like memory. Focus. Um, it helps with, um, recall of information, right? You might have that information back there, but then you can't find it. And you're, you're one of those people that are like, wait, what's the word? What's the word? Or you're looking at your math problem and it takes you more than a second to remember what five plus three is, you know, that recall. So it helps some of the recall. Um, and I've actually seen kids prior to doing the therapy. They go to interactive metronome therapy. And then at some point they have to be reevaluated for college or whatever, and I've seen working memory improve processing speed, improve.

Abbey: That's cool. Awesome. Yeah. I think I've heard a little bit too, that it helps the right side and the left side of the brains work together more efficiently.

Laurie: Yeah, I, I'm wildly impressed by what I've seen from it. There's, you know, like we talked about the study skills, there's ADHD, coaching, there's tutoring and helping, you know, remediate the foundation skills. Cause all of that's important. Some of the things that we haven't probably had, you know, there are a lot of programs out there that sell you a program to help with some of these things. And I think those are not, we have not seen as much efficiency or effectiveness from those as we have some of the ones we've mentioned. So be very, um, as you go out and look for ways to improve some of these skills, be diligent in your research, you know, reviews, tell you a lot, um, see how who's doing the therapy and how well they're trained in these things.

Abbey: If it's supported by research I think, would be important too, because a lot of these therapies that we've mentioned have some research studies behind them to support their efficacy.

Laurie: Agree. So agree is important along with all of the therapies and the tutoring and the study skills. There's just some accommodations we can put in place in the interim while they're building these, um, processing skills while they're working those muscles and making them stronger. What are some of the things we recommend as far as how can these kids be accommodated in the classroom?

Abbey: Well, for sure, a lot of kids and individuals can benefit from extra time. Extra time to do assignments, extra time to process the information, extra time for taking their tests, extra time to respond to directions. Um, they also, you know, orally administering their tests and assignments, reading everything to them that can help with processing the information and attending and focusing and, and verbally, or auditorily really, um, digesting the information, also individual testing or small group setting, testing, you know, filter out a lot of the distractions and the stimulus going on around

Laurie: The anxiety of seeing someone else turn in their tests before you.

Abbey: That's what I was going to say, or even, uh, wanting to start rushing through the test because you see others starting to turn it in before you. So testing in a small group is a really good way to accommodate a lot of different individuals, um, with the visual processing deficits and weaknesses. Really, um, one of the characteristics we talked about in our visual processing podcast is that they really struggle with copying. So having to copy anything from the board or an overhead, or even from a piece of paper on their desk, from paper to paper, copying is, is a challenge for individuals that struggle with visual processing. So reducing the copying tasks is a good accommodation. Give them preprinted work or pre printed notes.

Laurie: The notes provided ahead of time so they can focus on the lecture and not so much on just trying to get all those. Notes written down. Exactly. Um,

what about giving them an opportunity to present what they know in a different way?

Abbey: That is a great accommodation for, for many individuals, no matter where their struggles are, being able to demonstrate their knowledge in. Various ways, a presentation or a project instead of taking the test paper, pencil test right now. And I think when recording themselves, you know, really speaking into an audio recorder about what they know or presenting a project, that's a great idea.

Laurie: What about, um, you know, for kids who struggle with getting the language, right? They don't, this one is in a process of language, sometimes pairing. That information is like a visual or a, or an example or something that they can look at to help make sense of the language message, the verbal message, um, that will often help, um, reminders to stay on task. Um, that's kind of like, that's an easy one word bank. We laughed when we were talking about this one earlier. Cause someone didn't know what that meant, but if you have trouble recalling information, it's there, but I can't find it, sometimes a word bank being able to choose that word from a list. You're like, Oh, there it is. I got it. That's what it was. It's not. It's not making it any easier. It's just helping you work more efficiently because sometimes kids could stare at that blank space for hours for hours. But if you just give them a prompt.

Abbey: a prompt, kind of triggers their memory and then they can come to that conclusion that find that answer on their own. So it is good to give them some choices of words to choose from. And also. Writing out steps to follow, you know, a lot of individuals that struggle with multitasking and working memory and processing quickly and efficiently, they struggle with remembering multi-step directions and multi-step processes for solving problems. So giving them a little. Sticky note or a piece of paper that has steps written on it to follow steps, to solving algebra or steps to solving long division or even steps to completing a task. A lot of individuals struggle with getting started on tasks. And really getting that task initiation, fire lit up. So giving them those visual reminders and steps is important. Um, also, you know, with the problem solving, we talked about some of the processing weaknesses and problem solving, which is important for all academic tasks sometimes and model the best ways to problem solve. Um, it's, it's hard to teach problem solving skills, but you can model it and you can talk someone through the steps and

problem solving, and you can again, write steps down into, you know, first you need to think about this and second, you need to look at this and then third, you need to write this down or write notes about what you've just read.

Laurie: I think we assume oftentimes that, especially with problem-solving. But in all these areas, language processing speed. So often we just assume everybody else has got it. Right. Like they're thinking like we're thinking or the teachers will think that, or even their peers. And so you're right. Helping them, walking them through that while for me, you know, would be, I don't need that, but. But people need that. They need to know the steps and giving them and giving them the information in little bitty pieces is so helpful. Um, it can make a world of difference to an individual who's struggling. And I feel like kind of to circle back, you know, we started out talking about kind of this overlaying issue of processing issues and really that's exactly what they are. Right. There's lots of ways to figure out what they are, why they're struggling and then how do you help? And, and I think, you know, the therapies are great ways to help strengthen those issues. But then the accommodations are kind of the bandaid that we put on between in the interim, while we're working to strengthen that muscle, I'm going to use my crutches, those what the accommodations are, and then the goal being that eventually you don't need those accommodations anymore. That you've strengthened that muscle in a way. That now you're okay to do it without them. It's okay. If you still need them, but do you know, the goal would be to not need them. Right. You know?

Abbey: Even individuals with the anxiety like you were talking about, it seems like, you know, they could benefit from having extra time and that small group setting for testing, even having an escape from the setting that they're in, being able to be able to, you know, raise their hand and say, can I take a break or can I escape to that quiet, calm, serene room or whatever office to get office. So there are a lot of accommodations that can help support individuals throughout all their different challenges with processing while you, like you said, in the interim, while they're waiting to get. Some remediation or some therapies done. Um, some individuals will just. You know, there's just this wiring in their brain that they're just always going to struggle with processing information quickly. They're just slower. And so that extra time may be needed always. And, and that's okay. Um, but there are, you

know, like we said, there are so many different therapies and treatments and strategies for, uh, really coping and compensating for those weaknesses.

Laurie: I feel like there's something to be said in just the peace of mind in knowing that. It's this, right? Like, you feel like there's, you know, I'm struggling or my child is struggling with processing and it's, it's overwhelming. And I see them struggle just to know that this is just a visual processing issue. This is just. You know, they're smart, they're capable. It's just this one thing. And we can show how it impacts all of the concerned areas, but the relief that the parent, the student, the adult, you know, that they feel was like, Oh, that's all it is like, okay, that's easy because they're thinking I'm just not smart enough. I'm just not capable. I'm in over my head. And so I really feel like. Giving it a name.

Abbey:

Giving it a name does give a lot of relief and it gives them hope too, that, okay, now I know what it is. And there are strategies to overcome and compensate and to cope. And that does give a lot of relief in that, in it of itself can help their performance really in so many areas.

Laurie: Absolutely. So we're going to, in the, in the show notes, we're going to include all of the links to the different therapies that we talked about. Um, and if you guys have any questions, please feel free to reach out to us. Let's talk, learning_disabilities@gmail.com. We'd love to take any questions that you have. If you have suggestions about some topics you'd like us to cover on future shows, we would. We would welcome that. Um, and then, uh, any other additional information that we've, that we find that we've got links for? We'll include that as well. So Abbey, thank you for today. This was great. I think this is kind of a generic kind of topic yet, we hear it all the time. So hopefully this was helpful. Um, You guys have a great day. Thanks so much for joining us and we'll see you next time on let's talk, learning disabilities.

Abbey: Bye.

Thank you so much for joining us today. In our show notes you can find information about today's talk, as well as links to the resources and other episodes. If you have questions about today's talk, have ideas for future

episodes or just want to stay connected, you can contact us through Diagnostic Learning Services on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. So, Let's Keep Talking Learning Disabilities. This podcast is sponsored by E Diagnostic Learning. You can find more information at www.ediagnosticlearning.com.

Length of episode 30:01