

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 16

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: Welcome to episode 16 of let's talk, learning disabilities. This is Laurie

Abbey: this is Abbey

Laurie: And today we are going to talk about standardized testing and why people get denied for accommodations. So, first Abbey, let's talk a little bit about accommodations. And what is, first of all, what standardized tests are we talking about?

Abbey: So a standardized test, for example, the LSAT exam, the bar exam, the MCAT exam, any type of standardized tests that you need for a certification or for a GRE, uh, grad graduate entrance exam, or SAT/ACT. Exactly.

Laurie: We've even had some students that are getting, um, There, um, what do you call it? The, um, AP exams. So those are considered standardized accommodations for any type of certification exam. We have someone right now we're working with, it's wanting to get, um, accommodations on the ASE, which is for the auto, um, Technician can't remember what that stands for now, but anyway, those kinds of tests. Right. And so what happens is, is that people with learning disabilities, so dyslexia, ADHD, um, math disabilities, they're able with the right documentation to get accommodations like...

Abbey: Like extra time on the test, extended time, time and a half. Um, being able to test in a testing center or a quiet in environment or get individual administration of their test.

Laurie: Sometimes they can get them read to them too. Right?

Abbey: Sometimes they can get them read to them. A lot of individuals with dyslexia can be found eligible for oral administration, but she's awesome. Yes. Um, extra breaks, longer breaks, extra breaks. Yes. Un-timed breaks.

Laurie: We've had a couple of students too, that are diabetic and are able to have food in the, or, um, snacks, snacks. Right. Um, so the use of a calculator, right? So what we have found though, is that we see a lot of people that come to us that have been denied those accommodations. They've applied, they've applied to take the test, they apply for accommodations, and then they get the letter says, you don't get anything.

Abbey: Right. They've even submitted the appropriate documentation sometimes or so they think they've submitted.

Laurie: What is the, what does that mean? What is the appropriate documentation? It's different for every test, a little bit. Isn't it?

Abbey: It is. And usually the. The website that's affiliated with that particular test outlines the requirements to request accommodation. So you go to the website, make sure you're looking to see what the appropriate documentation is. Um, oftentimes it is filling out paperwork that documents an application and then proof that you have a disability and that proof can be through an evaluation report.

Laurie: So a lot of times when you read that stuff on the website though, I mean, obviously you and I know what it means, but to somebody else who, who is reading that it's, it's confusing. And I think a lot of people just assume that I have dyslexia. I've had it all my life. It doesn't go away. Why do I need to prove to them that I have dyslexia? And I think it, you know what we try to explain when we're talking to them before they come in for their, for their evaluation, is that it's not about proving that you still have dyslexia

or ADHD or a math disability. It it's about proving how it impacts your ability to take a test. So they're not questioning that you have this disability, they're questioning the need for the accommodation. There are a lot of people with ADHD that have never received a single accommodation in their life and still don't need one. Right. Um, so you have to prove that you need this accommodation, and they're usually very specific about how we go about doing that.

Abbey: That's right. And they want that data, that documentation to be current. Right. So we hear a lot of individuals calling. I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was in elementary school. I know it never goes away. They won't let me submit my evaluation report from when I was in third grade or fourth grade or fifth grade or even middle school or high school.

Laurie: Because it proves I have it.

Abbey: Yes, exactly.

Laurie: But, how it impacts you now versus how it impacts you then can look very different. Especially when you were first diagnosed. You have to assume that somebody who was diagnosed in elementary, even middle school, they've gone through some help, they've had tutoring. They've had what we call remediation. So they've, they've implemented strategies. So they're reading, it doesn't look like it did when they were first diagnosed. Right. And it's hard sometimes to wrap your head around that, because at the end of the day, you still have dyslexia.

Abbey: And with ADHD, you can have ADHD. Have characteristics or symptoms of ADHD and it not impact your learning. So they want to see that it's impacting your learning and how it's impacting your learning and where it's impacting your learning.

Laurie: Especially if you take medication.

Abbey: Exactly. Yeah, you might be compensated, and not need it.

Laurie: The verbiage that they often refer to as par under ADA, which is the Americans with disabilities act, um, about how it has to impact a major life function. And so when we talk about the major life functions, I think we talked about this in one of our earlier podcasts, but, um, we're talking about things like. Walking and reading and taking out the things. Yeah. The things that apply to us. I mean, obviously there are other, there are other major life functions, but as far as test taking goes, so we have to prove...

Abbey: A significant impact in a major life function. It impairs you in a way, way that, um, you can't do this test without the accommodation.

Laurie: And it's really interesting. Some of the tests also require that you've had this accommodation before. Especially on the higher level test, but even at sat and act, they want us, they want to know, well, are you getting it in school right now? Because if you're not, then why now, which I can understand kind of. I mean, taking the SAT is not like taking an algebra test.

Abbey: That's exactly right. I agree.

Laurie: It's got frustrating. It's a much harder test, but more rigorous. It is. So they do require that you prove that you've had that accommodation and have been using it.

Abbey: Right, using it effectively.

Laurie: Right. Um, right now I think, uh, ACT, I'm not sure what SAT, you have to have been using it for. Okay, which I think is interesting. It's an odd time for me, whatever. Um, I have had a handful of students that have been able to slip through without that, but it's very, very rare. And we really try to explain to families when they come to us that we'll do the testing and we'll prove that they need it. But if they haven't been getting it and using it, there's no guarantee you'll get an accommodation. Now, interestingly, those upper-level tests like your MCATs and your LSATs, I think those, if I'm not wrong, they rely a lot less on your opinion on your previous history.

Abbey: That's true. They're not necessarily wanting you to prove a history of implementing these accommodations or using these accommodations, but they have

those two major criteria that they're looking for, which are evidence of a disability and that major life impairment that impact on. Um, a major life function such as learning. So there's really two essential criteria. You may have the disability and we may do even a current evaluation. That's still that proves you have the disability. However, if you are average in all of your abilities or above average in all of your academic achievement skills and abilities, it's hard to show that it is impacting you. Um, impacting your learning. And so that's where I think a lot of people are struggling with, um, thinking that I just fill out the application. I show evidence that I have a disability and, and I should be able to get approved for accommodations for these high level standardized tests.

Laurie: I'm glad you said that because we had a student come back to us. She was applying for Mcat, I believe. And her, her denial letter literally said. Your scores on your, on your evaluation for your disability are all within the average range. And even though she's super bright to her average, isn't good enough. Right. But to them, it is. So the goal of the accommodations is to level the playing field. Not help you not give you a leg up, that's where you can do, right or so they're setting their expectations for everyone.

Abbey: So they're expecting you to be able to perform relevant to your peers or equal to your peers. Average, and passing at a 70% is what's expected of all individuals. So that's all that should be expected of you as well. But most people want to achieve higher than a 70%, of course.

Laurie: Right. Right. Especially if they are going on to one of these graduate level courses, programs, I think the other frustrating thing that we find is that. There aren't any really good tests out there for us as examiners to use, to help people, to help show that, um, at that level they really do need the support. I feel like the test that we have to do that with are they're easy. Right? And we have, we have a lot to do the reading is much easier than what they're confronted with on those standardized tests or even in graduate school or in graduate school. But sometimes so it does, we do have to really get creative in how we do it. Um, to help them cause we have students that we know for sure need these accommodations. Proving it sometimes it's tricky.

Abbey: It is tricky. And that's where maybe sometimes isn't it and documenting it is tricky because the extra time piece is what almost everybody's going for. Right. That's the big one.

Laurie: But sometimes if we can help them get more frequent breaks or extended breaks or, um, I, my favorite alternative is being able to take it in a room by yourself where you can read the test out loud to yourself. Sometimes those things will happen. You know, with the time issue, right. So maybe if you don't get the extra time, but you can take it in a room by yourself with extra breaks, you can read it out loud. Oh, maybe then you can finish it in the time limit.

Abbey: Yeah. Hopefully you can finish it successfully within that time limit. In fact, the individual that you were mentioning, I think. Was the Mcat trying to get approved for Mcat accommodations, she was approved for partial accommodations. So we recommended several extended time, oral administration, extra or frequent breaks, untimed breaks, things like that. And she was denied. The extended time for the Mcat, but she was approved for untimed frequent breaks and untimed breaks.

Laurie: Have we heard back? Cause we helped her do a, um, appeal and appeal.

Abbey: We have not heard back from her. We'll keep you posted on that. Yeah. I'm kind of hoping that no news is good news. We haven't heard back yet.

Laurie: So the interesting part is you can make an appeal. You get denied. You can appeal their decision. And sometimes it means, you know, we've had people come back and we've done a different test or we've added additional data. Sometimes it's just writing a letter to explain, look, I realized that the scores might be averaged, but these tests are really not appropriate. You know, they're a little bit easier. It's not like what she's going to see on the CAD or in graduate school or medical school for that matter. And it has worked in the past.

Abbey: It has, and sometimes part of that appeal is like you mentioned giving some additional tests, adding some testing data, even beefing up the background, building more of a history of their struggles and their use of

different accommodations over a long period of time. Um, sometimes beefing up the history within a report can be part of that appeal process.

Laurie: I do think that showing along time, along a long-term or long time struggles is important because. And unfortunately, I think so much of this stems from, I mean, it was here before, but that the whole college admission scandal thing, part of that was people, um, paying someone to write a report saying somebody needed accommodations without them ever getting it. So you really do have to prove that you've had a history. This didn't just, you didn't wake up this morning and you're like, wait, I can get extra time. Well, what do I need to do? What disability do I need to have that you've really struggled with is all of your life. And if you've had those accommodations, all of your life, then you are almost guaranteed to get it on one of these exams. If you have. That becomes a little trickier and I get them.

Abbey: That would be really hard to not get the accommodations if you're used to being right. Given those accommodations is if every test you've taken was you've had extra time, right? I mean, how unfortunate for you to now have to start taking a huge high stakes test without the extra time. So keep in mind. I think it's important for everyone to know if, if you are going to be requesting accommodations for one of these types of exams, um, give yourself plenty of time, start early, um, knowing that it is a, a tricky situation and you have to tread carefully and leave yourself enough time that if you were denied to still have time to go through the appeal process. So start early in working on her co requesting accommodation.

Laurie: That is huge because how many times do we get calls that they want to take the test in two months or a month in a month? And we need to get the testing done, but I've got to have a done by next week because the deadline is coming.

Abbey: Yeah, we get a lot of clients like that with CrunchTime deadlines.

Laurie: I think the other thing that's kind of interesting too. As you look forward to going to either college, you know, pass the act and sat graduate school, medical school, law school. Oftentimes if you do get denied for one of these tests, it doesn't mean that you'll get denied in that school. Right. So

just as you get extra time on the act doesn't mean you won't be able to get it in college.

Abbey: Good point.

Laurie: Um, it's and I just find that interesting that there are different, you know, Different guidelines that the testing to be so much more, um, strict, but then when you get to school, it seems like it's so much easier to get those accommodations. Um, and I also think too, when we're looking at some of those licensing exams, which is like a fine, you know, you're taking that and you're done, there is no school after that. I do feel like we've had more luck with people getting accommodations regardless of, you know, their past history, because it is that last piece that they need. Um, again, depending on what they're getting licensed for, we had someone with, uh, um, it was on one of the medical licenses. I probably can't osteopathic medicine. Right. Anyway, but she had come to us because she had been denied. Because her testing wasn't thorough enough. She had seen a doctor, they had kind of written her a letter, done a little, a couple of surveys. She had terrible ADHD. Um, and while they did address major life function, they didn't really prove it with any standard, with any scores without testing. So we, we were part of her appeal and we did this assessment and then we had to, we were very careful about how we worded everything we had to justify every single accommodation.

Abbey: That's an important point you make too, is. That recommendation for accommodations. We can't just say we recommend extra time, depending on the exam. Um, the certification be whichever exam you're going after. Sometimes they really want a thorough justification of why it is a recommended accommodation, why you're requesting this accommodation. So you want to go to an evaluator that is going to take the time to know what is necessary. In the evaluation report and in that documentation, um, so that you do have everything you need, you got your ducks in a row and you can meet that criteria.

Laurie: Yeah. Sometimes it's just restating everything you just said in the report. Right. I sometimes, I feel like when I'm doing that, it's like, are these people just too lazy to read the whole report? We go back, and list all the reasons, the history of the low scores in certain areas, things like that. But yeah, that part is really important. And I think we've, we have seen

people get denied. Because there wasn't a good justification, right? So it's, it's really interesting to see the different, um, we've had several people come through as we've helped them with the appeal.

Abbey: and then some test boards are easier to get, you know, it's easier to prove and they have less stringent policies and procedures, and it is much easier to get approved for accommodations, whereas others. For example, the Mcat, they are very strict and they want to see hard data that it is substantially impacting a major life function. They want justification for those recommended accommodations.

Laurie: Interestingly, I think. Has been one of the easier ones than now. They are very specific about which test they want us to administer as part of the, um, disability documentation. But I do feel like most of the people we've had maybe one that I can think off the top of my head, most of the people get approved if they show, if they show that their disability continues to impact a major life function, like concentrating, or reading. So I do feel like you're right. It's it varies between the different tests. At the end of the day, all you can do is present all of the right documentation. But I think, like you said, it's important to know that. Timeline is crucial. You want to leave yourself room for an appeal and you know what, if you don't get it and you need to wait and either take the test without the accommodations and just see how you do or wait until the next round.

Laurie: Sometimes it's better just to wait till it's not worth taking that chance. I think some of these tests are also really expensive and so it's not worth. A time. If you know, you need that accommodation, but you know, if that's something you're thinking about, even doing start investigating that process now. If you're in the high school and you're doing the sat or act, oftentimes your counselor is the one that will help you through that process. But if you're a homeschool student or you go to a private school, sometimes they're not as knowledgeable, there is a way to go through and do it independently. Both have portals, you go through to apply for accommodations. But again, they're going to ask for a lot of documentation really quick. One thing that I don't know that we talked about on our other podcast was about high school accommodations when you're being homeschooled, because you don't have a plan, right? Even if you don't have a formal accommodation plan to show them that you've been getting it. And so it's okay to write a letter as the

teacher. You know, um, and say, we allow extra time on every exam, you know, up to 50% extra time, but you, you can do that. And if, even if you haven't had a formal plan in place and you're in a private school, you can have teachers write letters and say for every single test, the student. At least, you know, 50% extra time. Um, and so it doesn't have to be on his chest, read to him. Exactly. It doesn't have to be some kind of formal 504 plan. It can be just proof that you've been getting it and using it, whatever that looks like. And so it's important to know that if you're homeschooling, it doesn't mean you just don't get those accommodations because you don't have any kind of formal plan. There's a way to still prove that you've been getting approval documentation.

Abbey: That's a good point.

Laurie: So, okay. I have to say I'm really excited. I think our sound is really good. We've really, um, kind of updated our podcast room and just in talking, I feel like it's so much, um, I dunno, I'm excited to have, it sounds as good, but it sounds much better for everybody.

Abbey: We have, um, a new and improved pie. The studio with extra soundproofing time. Yes, we are big Tufts in 16. We hit the big time excited look forward to listening to the future episodes because I think they're going to sound better than ever.

Laurie: I know, cause especially cause our last couple, when we had extra people in here and we were sharing microphones and we didn't have the fancy stuff on the walls and right now I'm hoping this sounds a lot better. So anyway, I had to throw that in because I'm sure everyone listening is thinking, wow, this sounds really good.

Abbey: Hopefully we're crisp and clear and come into your, straight into your ear. Well, thank you guys for joining us today and for listening and hopefully this has been informative.

Laurie: If you guys have questions, please don't hesitate to go to our website, which is diagnostic-learning. We'll put some posts in the show notes to different tests, straight to their disability page, where it talks about accommodations. So if you want to check out that, we'll put the big three or

four that we work with. Um, and then, um, if you have questions or would like to make a suggestion for a future episode, don't hesitate to email us at letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com.

Abbey: Yeah.

Laurie: All right. Well, you guys have a great day. Thanks, Abbey.

Abbey: Thank you, Laurie. All right, we'll see you guys.

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.

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