

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 35

Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities with Laurie Peterson and Abbey Weinstein. Laurie & Abbey spend their days talking about dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, & 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 Let's Talk Learning Disabilities. This is Laurie.

Abbey: And this is Abbey.

Laurie: Hey guys today. Um, well, first of all, today we're both having to podcast from home because it's time for another Texas snowstorm. So we're, we're stuck at home today, snowed in, but thanks to the miracle of technology, we're able to still record our podcast today. So while we're hunkered down at home, enjoying a little bit of, um, very little bit of snow and a lot of ice, we're going to have a really great conversation today. We have a special guest. I think every week we have a special guest, but today we have Markus Stefani. Markus, is a student and I'm going to let him tell a little bit about himself, but we're kind of continuing our series, Living With. It's actually, we're on episode number 35. And I think this is our, oh, Abbey helped me, is this our 4th Living With...?

Abbey: This is our 4th or 5th Living With... we did start one before the new year. And then I believe we've had 4 more.

Laurie: It's not really all that important, but I'm excited that we've kind of been able to pull in enough people from different backgrounds. And we've really kind of hit the jackpot with college kids, which is interesting. Cause it's not, when we started this, I would not have thought we would have had some, but I think all of them live in college kids.

Abbey: We had one high school student we had.

Laurie: Definitely, that's right. But that's right. That's right. Okay. So Markus, thanks for being here. Thank you for having me.

Markus: Absolutely.

Laurie: So first before we just kind of dive in, tell us a little bit about you, tell us where you're at and what you're doing and give us just kind of some basics.

Markus: I'm from California originally, but I'm in New York. Um, I go to NYU. I'm sophomore in college and, uh, I'm majoring in economics with a minor in business studies.

Laurie: Wow. What made you want to, um, go across the country to go to college?

Markus: Um, I mean, a couple of factors, my sister lives out here and had gone to NYU too. So even though it was far, I was somewhat comfortable with the, the area and I knew the school a little bit. And then also just the prestige and, uh, like notoriety and name of the school was a lot higher up than I was most of the schools on my list.

Abbey: Wow. Awesome.

Laurie: That's awesome. So how long does it take you to get home?

Markus: To California, um, going back six hours, coming here, four and a half.

Laurie: Wow. That's a long flight.

Abbey: That is a long flight. Do you go home often?

Markus: Um, not as much as my friends. I go home, uh, for winter break. I went home for a month and then last summer I lived out here, the majority of the

summer and this summer I'm living out here again. So I only go home about a month and a half a year. Yeah.

Laurie: Wow. I bet that makes your mom sad.

Markus: Neither of us live at home anymore, so...

Laurie: She is officially an empty nester.

Abbey: She is.

Laurie: So you have kind of a unique story. So we're going to talk about a few different things, but do you mind just kind of going back to, um, your first kind of experience than testing and getting diagnosed and what was that like and what was that for? Do you remember?

Markus: Yeah, so I think. I got formally tested. I was in fourth grade going into fifth, uh, when I was 10, I think. Um, and that was after I had decided, well, I've been, I'd say from about kindergarten to third grade, I didn't have any struggles in school. Um, It was like a straight A student in the younger years and really good at math and reading and English. And then when I hit fourth grade, I hit like a wall as algebra came in and more advanced, uh, things you have to learn like before junior high. Um, so I was struggling in school and I was, didn't really like the school I was at. I thought it was too structured and too traditional. So I was moving schools and with moving schools, my mom thought it would be a good idea to get tested, to see if there was something else. Um, and that was the first time. So 10, they diagnosed me with ADHD and then there was some other like subclinical things, but that was like the main big piece. Um, yeah. And then.

Laurie: So after that diagnosis, what happened? Did they put you on medication? Did they like where, what happened after that?

Markus: I don't, I didn't go on medication until I was older, so I wasn't on medication. I think we didn't really do much either involving like special, like the 504s or anything like that, because I was transferring to like a really small, uh, private school that was kind of already like, uh, Not like

alternative learning, but a lot of the kids that went there were like people from that wanted to go to a school that, uh, was more like creative and free thinking. So a lot of like for Sonoma county, like a lot of like artists, um, sons went there and things like that like musicians, so a lot of the kids probably at ADHD, it's tailored to ADHD in some ways.

Laurie: Not on purpose, right?

Markus: Yeah.

Laurie: Abbey, do you have a question?

Abbey: Oh, I was just going to say, what ADHD do you know? Is it combined type or predominantly inattentive or do you also have some hyperactivity and impulsivity?

Markus: Um, I think it, well, I think when I was first diagnosed, it was combined, but, um, and I think when I was diagnosed at 12 too, it was combined. Uh re-diagnosed but now it's probably, it's probably only an attentive. I'm not very hyperactive or impulsive at all.

Laurie: So how long did you stay at that school?

Markus: Two years. So. I went back to the school I left.

Laurie: Why, why, what happened? I mean, it was, it just started getting fit.

Markus: The school was so relaxed when it came to like rules and, and structure to fit like all brain types, I guess, that, um, it was, it did an increase, like my, I was learning less and still performing probably at the same rate. Um, and I realized that the structure portion of my old school I've been the only thing. That had helped me before fourth grade do so well.

Laurie: Hmm. That makes sense.

Abbey: Did you make me come to that realization on your own that you needed to go back to that other school? Or did your mom?

Markus: I think every time I've transferred schools, that's been my own decision to go.

Laurie: Wow. Very, very insightful.

Abbey: It is. You're very in touch with your own needs. So you definitely like structure.

Markus: Yeah.

Laurie: So after you went back to the original school, when was the next time you had any testing done?

Markus: Um, the next time I had big testing done would have been when I was 16. Yeah. 16. I went to a specialist in Santa Rosa.

Laurie: Was that what drove that, like where you needed to get reevaluated or was there, were you guys suspecting something else?

Markus: No, I just saw I'd gone to high school for my first year to public school and kinda like same thing. Grades were like horrible. And, uh, so I had just transferred to like an old, like a new private school in Santa Rosa, which is in an area like 20 minutes from where I grew up. And that was kind of like the catalyst to like see if it was cause my mom, I think at that point thought maybe it's more serious than we first thought, or maybe there's something more going on. So I went to a specialist in Santa Rosa and he did more of a, I mean, he did like the formal ADHD testing again, but he also just kind of did like one-on-one talking and did like different exercises through that to get a more holistic idea. And it was kind of the same thing. I think it was still combined at that point, but it was starting to lean less as like more so towards one side. And I also think he was the first one. Yeah. His report set on it that he thought maybe there was something like dyslexia, but it probably wasn't important to test for.

Laurie: Oh. Okay. Do you remember the kinds of things you were struggling with?

Markus: Yeah. Um, I may have struggled with math my whole life. Uh, probably since I've been old enough, like 10 or 11 to know, and then I think the big thing is. I mean, like, I wasn't even since like eighth grade and seventh grade, I did decent in that, but for the amount I did work, I still probably performed under what you would expect. And it didn't correlate to like my, like when we would do like, uh, I don't know what they're called in Texas, but like the STAAR tests.

Laurie: Standardized testing.

Markus: You do like those tests in eighth grade and seventh grade, I'd have like really high scores in reading and math or in writing and math. And then my actual. Math grade would be like a C minus. So there was some weird correlation wasn't like really happening.

Laurie: How were you with getting like homework turned in?

Markus: Oh, God horrible up until about 15. Yeah, probably honestly, probably most of high school. I was horrible at turning stuff in.

Abbey: Did you actually, so you do the assignments and just not get them turned in or did you also struggle with knowing what you had to do and when you had to do it?

Markus: I didn't miss that many assignments. I would say I just struggled with planning them. So would like, like when we'd have like in junior high, when we would have, um, like the science projects, the science fair and things like that, I would wait until like the last day to do like my actual studies. So I would have to go like interview my whole neighborhood and like an hour and then put together a project. And then my mom and my mom always had to end up like, we would it would end up like three in the morning. We're trying to figure out how to put this thing together. I would say. And then like day to day, I would say I lost a lot of assignments. I got to put something in a backpack or leave it at home or it would be so like crumbled up in the bottom that it wouldn't even be like usable.

Abbey: Yeah. So organizational skills. Yeah.

Markus: Yeah. Didn't have any, when I was young.

Abbey: Was your room really messy?

Markus: Yeah, when I was young, I think it was pretty messy. Um, yeah.

Laurie: When that doctor had mentioned maybe some mild dyslexia, do you remember ever struggling with.

Markus: Uh, no, but I also had no idea what struggling with reading like guess was because the only thing I had of reading was this, the reading test we would take in eighth grade and seventh grade. And in both of those tests, I tested in college for actual, like ability to like go actual reading speeds. But we never tested like actual comprehension or what you understood. We just tested out fast. You could say the words. So I kind of, I think, I assume that speed meant you're a good reader, but I never read like after fourth grade, I don't think I picked up a book once other than for school.

Laurie: Interesting.

Abbey: Okay. That is fascinating. You didn't like reading, is that why you didn't pick up?

Markus: I loved reading. And so I was in fourth grade. I mean, so somebody just slept like. 10 books a week when I was younger, I've read like when I was younger about all the Harry Potters and all that, but then I stopped reading completely.

Laurie: That's so interesting. What about spelling?

Markus: Yeah, same thing. I was a good speller until word's got more than like three syllables so I can spell, like, I think the spelling bee, I was good and until probably like third grade, because it was, you could memorize everything. But once it got to the point where it was like 20 letters or 15 letters in a word, I could not, I can't, I still can't spell certain words. Uh, like I just rely on auto-correct for a lot of things.

Laurie: So at some point along your journey, someone else had picked up also maybe some visual processing, which we talk a lot about visual processing on our podcasts, because it's something we see a ton of. When was the first time someone had mentioned that to you and your mom?

Markus: Um, I want to say both reports by fourth grade one. And the one I got at 16 had like a little tidbit or like a section, uh, or like a note from the person who did the testing, that there might be some sort of visual processing issue. But again, the fourth grade one, they thought it was more my eyesight. So I went to like a specialist to train my eyes, um, because they thought there was something that was wrong with my eyes.

Laurie: Weren't you reversing your BS and DS? Sorry to interrupt, but I feel like that was in one of your reports that maybe you were reversing your B's and D's. Do you remember that?

Markus: Well, my most recent report I got before, cause I got one before I came, I got the dyslexia report over the summer, uh, like a month before. And they had like a thing, like a test like that and I reversed like all the threes, I think it was yeah...all the Bs, Ps and Ms and NS.

Abbey: Okay. Wow.

Laurie: Which interestingly is what drove you guys. What drove your mom to reach out to me about doing further testing for dyslexia? And she was kind of really surprised when we explained to her that dyslexia really isn't about letter reversals, but you can still have dyslexia and have really a visual processing issue, which is more of what those letter reversals were. So that was really interesting. I'm glad that the person who did your testing. It was kind of unaware of what dyslexia really was. Cause that's how we ended up actually getting the right diagnosis. Not necessarily for the right reasons, if that makes sense.

Markus: Yeah.

Laurie: Um, okay. So fast forward to the summer when we did the testing and you now we found dyslexia, which I don't think anyone was super surprised

about. You definitely showed some gaps in your phonological awareness, your ability to sort of decode and pull up our words. I think you're one of those students though, that is incredibly bright and has developed some amazing compensatory strategies. And Abbey and I actually were being interviewed for a podcast earlier today, where we talked a lot about that, how it's easy to skate through, um, when you're just a really bright kid and you can, you know, mask, really any issues. So even you probably didn't realize that you were having the struggles because you didn't know any different and you just made it work and you're a good problem solver. And so, um, so since we did that testing, tell me a little bit about what's happened since then.

Markus: Um, yeah, I mean, a lot has changed because. I mean, I, I changed my majors and my major last year. So I had a whole change of like, the work I do is completely different. What, what was it and what did you change it to? So before it was performance studies, wanting to be in like music management. So the majority of my classes or watching like, uh, movies or music videos, and like analyzing like the social and like political ideas behind it or why they did this or why they did that. Um, so a lot of writing and a lot of reading. So my whole grades would be like 10 page essays, um, now, which was easier in some regards. Um, now it's now in econ, it's much more, especially at NYU, it's really heavy math, the econ program. So it's a lot of it's my whole days are basically just looking at graphs. And like algebra, like equations and supply and demand curves and all these kinds of things. So it's much more. Not as much, right. I don't write or read ever. I just spend, but I spend like almost all my week doing math. There's some variation of math.

Abbey: That's interesting because you've said that you've always struggled in math and now you're immersed in math and, but you're able to avoid the reading and writing, which is difficult for you as well. So how are you doing so far with your econ major?

Markus: Yeah. I mean, it's been kind of hard to, to judge because I'm taking a lot of like the NYU, like we call them like the GPA tankers, so you just want to get them out of the way. Um, so I took a lot, like I'm taking a lot of, like, the lot of our math has pre uh, like prerequisites just to take like advanced level econ courses. Um, so you're just trying to pass, but like the first math class I took, I passed, um, And like the actual econ courses, I've

been pretty straightforward. Um, and the only semi difficult part is the traditional math. Okay.

Abbey: I was going to say, do you have accommodations? Do you have an accommodation plan in place at school?

Markus: Yeah. So I have an accommodation plan. It's it's kind of interesting. Um, I mean last semester, I used it a little bit for the test, the testing portion, but I don't really use the, uh, extra time test ever because they've never had, they've normally affected my grades the opposite way, because I just have too much time to think about. And then I also have like an audio book and like those kinds of subscriptions. But the thing is, is I sometimes have to use that, but because of technology, almost a lot of my econ courses and math courses, we use an online program to do our homework. So our textbooks are through these programs and they have the same like reading features. So I just kind of use those when I need them. Um, and then, I mean, other than that, I'm trying to think.

Laurie: Do you get copies of notes or anything?

Markus: I'm not really. I can ask. I can ask if I want to, but I'm pretty good at notes. Like I, I a pretty organized now I'm super overly organized and like the ladder for like the last four years of my life. Um, so I like a pretty good organization of my notes. And I also take one of my friends is an econ major too. And we take a lot of courses at the same, like we're in a lot of the same courses. So that kind of helps with notes because if you miss something or he misses something, the chances are you have it.

Laurie: That's a good strategy. Did you ever work with like, um, like a dyslexia therapist or an ADHD coach? Have you ever accessed any of those kinds of services?

Markus: Um, I mean, no, I don't think so.

Laurie: I feel like I connected you with Melanie. Did you ever work with Melanie?

Markus: Yeah, so I think we talked to Melanie and then when we were gonna, we were going to wait until I think summer to start it or something along that lines. Once I had a gap in like actual classes, um, because my schedule is just so like weird and I spend most of my time just doing.

Laurie: And that was really, probably more for the dyslexia therapy than anything.

Markus: Yeah. Which to be the, yeah, we came to the conclusion too. I have no reading or writing for a little while right now.

Laurie: Do you feel like you've changed your major because of your diagnosis? Or were you already wanting to change your major?

Markus: I changed my major, I wanted to change my major about a week into being there.

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Markus: My original plan was to be a business or econ major if I went to any other school.

Laurie: And do you feel like that was because of the amount of reading and writing that you had to do? It was, it was taxing.

Markus: I think it's maybe partially that it's also because it's all problem solving. So I enjoy econ a lot. Cause I like to, and the like accounting and the other courses I take, I like having like, adding things up and that kind of stuff. And I also am a person that really hates theoretical. So I didn't like that made my old major because nothing had an answer and everything has an answer in math and in science. So it's very, like, I like to actually have like a final answer.

Abbey: More concrete.

Markus: Yeah. I don't like debatable things.

Laurie: That's a, that's a very ADHD thing. I feel like ADHD, people tend to be very black and white, right? Like there's no gray, like it's it is this, or it's not this, and there's nothing in between. And I think I see that as a common thread and when we talk to people, um, that have ADHD, so that's awesome. And I think then that also goes with your dyslexia because so much of the language arts and the literature side of things tend to be, how you interpret it and how you read between the lines and, and it takes a certain level of comprehension really, in order to, to be able to make sense of that. And so dyslexics typically are drawn to the black and white of math and science. So you kind of fit the mold perfectly.

Abbey: So I'm wondering Markus, you said that you used to not be organized and now in the last several years, you've become more organized, extremely organized. What was the turning point or how, how did you turn that around? How did you become more organized?

Markus: Yeah. Um, I mean, couple of factors when I was about the last time I transferred schools was my junior year. I transferred back to my, where I went to elementary school, the high school for, uh, my final senior year and at that point something, I think I went to Europe that summer to visit my, like God uncle and lived with him for the summer. And something about that trip made me realize I wanted to go to college because I wanted to like have chances or, have a better chance of being able to like visit places and do like more things. Um, so that trip was the first thing. So when I got back, I really wanted, I decided I kind of wanted to change my whole idea and actually apply for college, which meant I had to get my grades like much, much higher on my senior year. Especially that first semester I had to like boost my GPA by like a considerable amount. So I became really focused. And on top of that, that was the first time I took an econ class for the first time that semester. And that was like my favorite class I ever took in high school. And it's also like one of the most hated by the student body. So it's like, um, that, I think that kind of motivated me because I realized I actually, there was something I actually wanted to do. Um, but I also definitely, um, I'm much more like my dad than my mom and my sister, and my dad is super like time management, like always on time. And I've kind of, oh, I might've been missing like the organization, but I've always been someone who's 10 minutes early and like super I I've, I'm super like, um, like value time and try to make sure I'm like, always on the ball with that. But my, and my dad is similar. And it

kind of makes sense because my sister and my mom are now there. My mom is now in like a much more art, you know, like podcasting, like designing field. And my sister majored in performance studies. So she's like totally in that field. And then my dad is a finance major who does business. And I like that too. So we kind of have that similar, but each kid had its similarities to one of the parents and I feel like I've always been more like him. Um, and then I also think the last thing is, as I've got older, my ADHD has really dipped off, um, to the point where like I took, I took last year, I went on a Vyvanse prescription just for like when I had essays. And after about two months of just taking that, I didn't need it anymore. I eliminated itself, but I have one of my best friends here has ADHD. And like, that's what kind of made me realize I probably don't have it as bad anymore because I'm like, he's much more, you know, like an hour of work, he needs like 30 minutes break. I can work for like 10 hours straight.

Laurie: Even on something you're not interested in?

Markus: Yeah, I mean, I have to do a lot of classes that are just like pre-recs and I'm not really interested in. Um, yeah, I mean, I'm pretty, pretty focused. I also, I mean, I had a subclinical OCD when I was younger and I still think I have that. So that's kind of always been like a factor. I think that's kind of slowly eliminated the ADHD because I'm and I'm, and I also do all my work on my iPad, so I don't have to really worry about things like notebook organization.

Laurie: That's smart though. Those are great. That's a great way to compensate.

Abbey: It is definitely, you sound like you're doing awesome and you're very in touch with your own strengths and weaknesses and what works for you. So that being, um, self-aware of your own needs, you've probably developed different coping strategies or compensatory techniques without even thinking about it. You've been drawn to things that work well for you or that help you. Overcoming some of your other weaker areas, that's great.

Markus: Yeah, that's basically my whole life.

Abbey: So that's awesome because you're smart and you've got good problem solving skills. It pays off.

Laurie: So if you could go back to that fourth grade Markus, right. And tell him something now. Now that, you know, everything that you know, and you've been, you've experienced these last, you know, however many years, if you could go back and give one piece of advice to kind of make that journey a little bit, you know, easier or to go smoothly, what do you think you would tell him?

Markus: Um, I mean, this is probably kind of weird, but I probably would have not transferred that first time. Uh, I think that kind of set me back like two years or three years, and then I think I was kind of adjusted. Uh, trying to make up for what I lost every year. Um, yeah, so I, I, cause I, and I think that started the cycle of transferring so much. And I think if I never started that cycle, I probably would have been much more, uh, like not had as big of gaps in certain subjects and areas.

Laurie: I think too, I think probably you were looking for, you knew something was off and you didn't know what it was and you were thinking it was the setting. Right. So you were trying to look for that fix when really the fix was probably more the dyslexia, the ADHD, some of the visual stuff, but you didn't know about some of that and you were just looking for the school to make the difference when really it was something going on that nobody had picked up with you.

Markus: Yeah, I would agree. I At that point, like, my mom was still like a real estate agent, so she didn't really have much. She was like, she knew what ADHD and dyslexia and things like that were, but it was more like a hobby and something she thought maybe you have like, maybe I have that maybe no one else has. Um, and I also think, yeah, I mean, it's, it was a Catholic school. So I think your first thought is to go, well, Catholic schools are like really strict, so maybe, yeah. The strictness, maybe it's the fact that like, I have to learn religion while I'm at school, but it didn't really, it wasn't the Catholic school. And to be fair to Catholic school, the combined success eight years or nine years or eight years, I spent a Catholic school were my like most solid years in every aspect.

Laurie: You responded well to that structure, even though it was, it didn't feel good maybe, but it's what your brain needed and that's probably why you are doing so well now, even.

Markus: Yeah. I mean, yeah, if I hadn't gone to this high school for my last year, I don't know what I would have done.

Laurie: That's awesome. Well, I'm, I am so excited to hear that, you know, you've, you've figured out your major, you're on the right track. You have a plan and that's gotta feel really good. Do you know what you want to do when you graduate? Are you going to be done after your senior year? Do you want to go on for more school?

Markus: Um, so I mean, this summer, I'm doing an internship in New York for a, um, an intern, like a, a big, uh, international bank. Um, Working as like a finance, like as a financial analyst intern.

Abbey: Wow, good for you!

Markus: Um, I probably want to do, I want to do like, go, go into like investment banking, but more so like mergers and acquisitions is then goal, but I, uh, I'm also, I'm also thinking about maybe going back to school at some point for like a master's in economics.

Laurie: Good for you. So more school doesn't scare you?

Markus: PhD scares me, but not the master.

Laurie: Me too, Markus. That's awesome.

Abbey: That's awesome.

Laurie: Well, thank you so much for hanging out with us for a little bit today and just kind of sharing your story. I think it just helps other people to hear kind of different scenarios of what people have gone through and how they've kind of how they've found amazing success and, and ended up being,

finding those workarounds and those strategies. And I think the diagnosis can be really important sometimes, so...

Markus: Definitely.

Laurie: If you guys have any questions for us, you can always reach us at letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com. Thank you so much for being here today and thanks for listening and I hope you guys have a great rest of your day, Markus. Thank you.

Markus: Thank you.

Laurie: Thanks everybody.

Abbey: Bye everybody.

Markus: 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 31:38