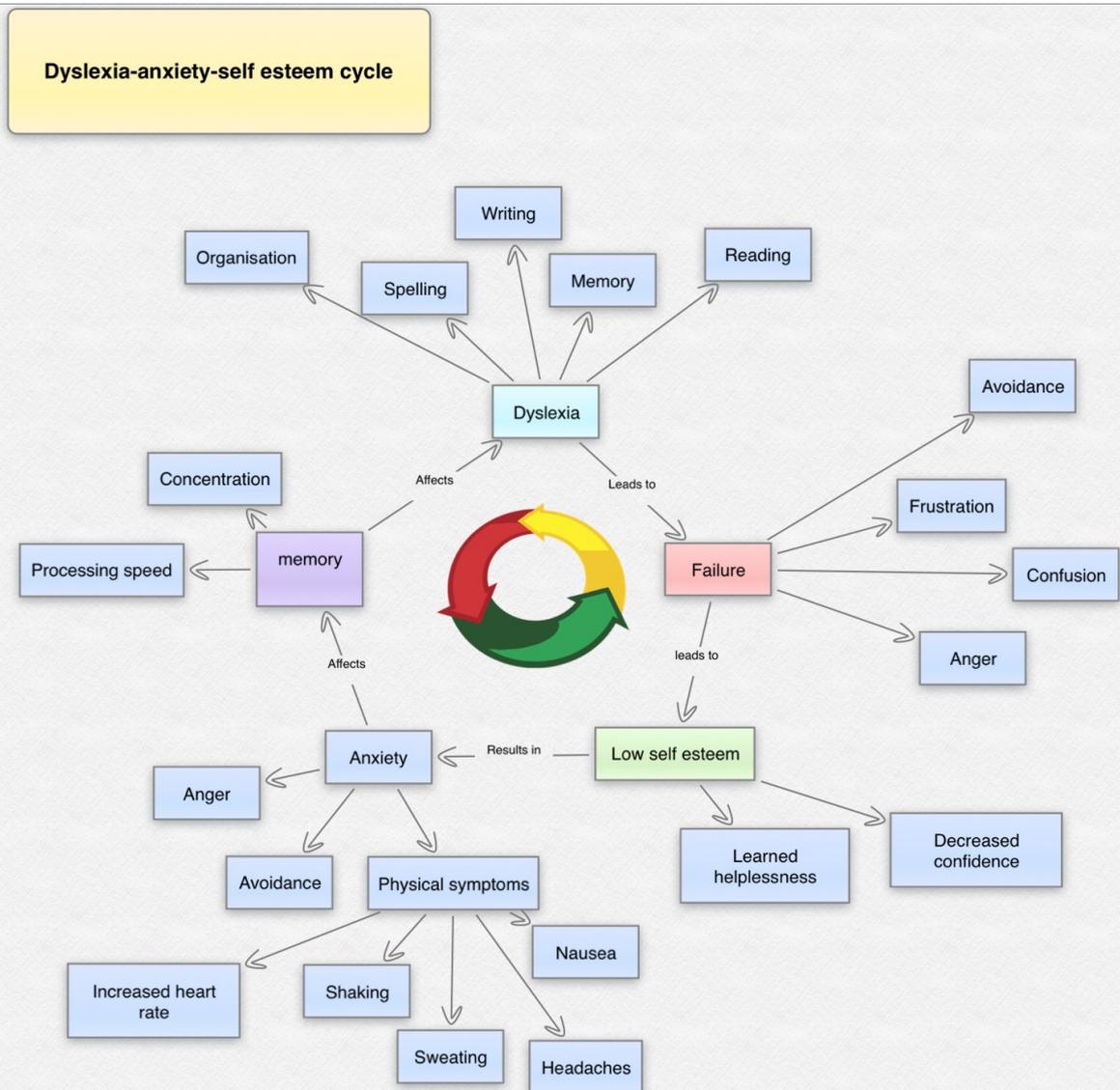


# Dyslexia -anxiety-self esteem cycle

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**Anxiety**

Anxiety is a normal human response to situations of stress. It is a flight or fight response to a fearful situation. If anxiety becomes out of control and starts to impact on daily life the anxiety becomes a mental health disorder.

## **Dyslexia and anxiety**

Research shows that as many as 20 percent of children with dyslexia also suffer from depression and another 20 percent suffer from an anxiety disorder (Willcutt, and Gaffney-Brown 2004). Studies show that most dyslexic preschoolers do not suffer from anxiety. Their anxiety develops as they enter school and experience difficulties fitting in with the learning environment and expectations of teachers and parents.

Anxiety disorders result due to a combination of biological and genetic factors. If you place a genetically predisposed individual in to an extremely stressful environment like a classroom for a dyslexic child and an anxiety will result.

Dyslexic children learn to respond anxiously in situations where they have failed in the past. They learn to anticipate failure and thus approach new situations with fear and anxiety. School anxiety is very common in dyslexics. They are constantly frustrated and faced with failure everyday at school.

Dyslexic children are always under constant stress as it takes them so much longer to master many basic skills. This increases fatigue making them more susceptible to anxiety.

Children require great resilience to resist the strain on their self-esteem. In school there is such a large importance placed on literacy, dyslexic children are faced all day with work that they can not do, whilst their peers in comparison learn quickly. This often results in feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, anxiety, anger, frustration and guilt.

Eventually a situation of learned helplessness results as the student will no longer even attempt to do something new or something they have failed in the past. They see no point in trying as they are convinced they will fail.

Anxiety will increase the impact of dyslexia leading to a vicious cycle of increased anxiety, decreased motivation, frustration and failure.

## **Symptoms of anxiety**

Many students with anxiety will be quiet and compliant to avoid attention so symptoms are often missed. Many students will hold onto their anxiety all day until they get into a safe home environment. Often parents will bear the brunt of the student's anxiety, anger and frustration.

Children often experience actual physical symptoms due to their anxiety and this in turn will lead to a decrease in their ability to learn or absenteeism from school.

- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Sleep disturbance
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Increased heart rate
- Shaking
- Avoidance behaviour and procrastination
- Perfectionism
- New situations cause distress
- Misbehaviour to avoid a task
- Lack of participation in class discussions or activities
- Negative talk about self
- Easily frustrated
- Seeks reassurance frequently
- Reluctant to ask for help
- Anger

## **Academic impact of anxiety**

- Anxiety affects a student's attention to a task.
- Anxiety utilises mental capacity and therefore greatly impacts academic achievement, concentration and ability to solve problems.
- When anxiety is experienced it is common to avoid the situation as a protective response. Avoidance behaviour can be interpreted as laziness or misbehaviour and may result in school refusal and learned helplessness.

### **IMPACT ON WORKING MEMORY**

- Studies show working memory is significantly impacted by anxiety and this is also an area of weakness common in dyslexic students.

- Students with poor working memory struggle with automatic recall of facts and problem solving as they are unable to hold information in mind long enough to manipulate.
- Students with poor working memory have trouble with organisation and doing two things at once.

### **IMPACT ON PROCESSING SPEED**

- It is common for students with dyslexia to have poor processing speed. Poor processing speed can also be the result of anger, stress, fear or anxiety.
- Anxiety about a task, particularly if it is timed may increase the impact of the dyslexia causing further anxiety, frustration and failure.

## **Classroom strategies for anxiety**

- Remember you may think the reaction to a situation is out of proportion but the fear and anxiety is real for the student.
- Comment on achievement using an individuals goals and standards rather than peers.
- Reward for effort not outcome.
- Develop realistic goals for the student.
- Allow use of stress toys and individually tailored coping cards.
- Avoid timed tasks or give extra time to reduce stress.
- Allow timeout if student is appearing stressed to a "safe place".
- Do not single student out for attention unless they volunteer.
- Do not treat anxious behaviour as misbehaviour.
- Encourage approaching fears in challenging steps.
- Conduct a unit of work on self esteem or anxiety as a class.
- Continual encouragement and praise can have an amazing result on a child's self esteem and should not be underrated.
- Exercise has been shown to have a significant positive effect on mental health.

## **Professional help**

- Link to an anxiety scale which is useful in determining whether a child may need professional help. <http://www.psychiatry.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/assessments/SCARED%20Child.pdf>
- An anxiety disorder may need professional help from a psychologist in the form of cognitive behaviour therapy which has been shown through research to be very effective. Cognitive behaviour therapy can result in significant changes in a few months.

- Initial referral to school psychologist.
- GP referral for private specialist child anxiety psychologist is recommended. Mental health plan (subsidised) or ATAPS (free) sessions.
- Early detection and treatment is extremely important in regard to both anxiety and dyslexia. Studies show that anxious children grow up to be depressed adults. Cognitive behaviour therapy is much more effective in children before anxious behaviours are ingrained. It is very difficult to restore a child's self esteem after years of continual failure and frustration at school.

## **coping cards**

- Coping cards are a set of small cards or a little booklet with strategies for the student to control their anxiety. These should be designed in conjunction with the student. For younger students a pictorial reference can be added. When a student is experiencing stress it is difficult for them to remember or initiate their strategies so coping cards are a good reminder and can also be considered a safety blanket for the student.
- Examples of coping cards. These need to be relevant to the child. They may have different coping strategies learnt in cognitive behaviour therapy.
  - A. Breathe in for 5 out for 5
  - B. Ask the teacher for help
  - C. Count to 10 slowly
  - D. Squeeze your stress toy (anything that is small enough to fit into a pocket and is squeezable like stretchy animals )
  - E. Ask to write in your journal (if able)
  - F. Ask to read or listen to a book
  - G. Ask for timeout in a safe place
  - H. Think about your safe happy place (include drawing or photograph). This might be anything from their bedroom to the beach
  - I. Put your hands on your head and take a deep breath

## **Resources and references**

[http://www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/DyslexiaStressAnxietyFact\\_SheetJuly13.pdf](http://www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/DyslexiaStressAnxietyFact_SheetJuly13.pdf)

[http://www.asasa.co.uk/documents/discussion/Anxiety\\_and\\_its\\_correlation\\_with\\_working\\_memory\\_-\\_the\\_implications\\_for\\_students\\_with\\_dyslexia.docx](http://www.asasa.co.uk/documents/discussion/Anxiety_and_its_correlation_with_working_memory_-_the_implications_for_students_with_dyslexia.docx)

[http://www.cheri.com.au/CHERIAxandEd\\_final.pdf.pdf](http://www.cheri.com.au/CHERIAxandEd_final.pdf.pdf)

<http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/mental-health-difficulties/anxiety/anxiety-how-anxiety-problems-affect-children>

[http://www.hi2u.org/Dyslexic/dyslexia\\_and\\_stress.htm](http://www.hi2u.org/Dyslexic/dyslexia_and_stress.htm)

## **Dyslexia Sydney support group**

Twitter :Dyslexia Sydney@sydney\_dyslexia

Pinterest boards :dyslexia information and resources, spelling, maths, reading/phonics, assistive technology, anxiety, guides.

<http://www.pinterest.com/bdekker0059/dyslexia-sydney-support-group/>

Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DyslexiaSydney/>