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It's All About Me

Social skills are the foundation for all relationships, but people with learning disabilities are often at a disadvantage in this department. Problems begin in childhood and continue on into adulthood and this carries a whole host of problems. Our writer explains what social skills are and suggests some solutions.

"Why does he do it?" She moans as she brushes tears away, "How can he keep being so mean to me!" How indeed? The most heart wrenching point is that he probably isn't even aware that he is doing something wrong or being mean!

Everyone dreams of having a happy and healthy relationship with someone. For adults with learning disabilities (LD) relationships - short and long-term - are very hard to find and harder still to maintain. It becomes even more difficult when someone has low or underdeveloped social skills. Many broken hearts, failed friendships and employment setbacks can be directly traced to a person's social ineptitude and his/her inability to use a defined set of social skills to communicate clearly with other people.

SOCIAL SKILLS: WHAT THEY ARE AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Quite possibly social skills and the capacity to utilize them to their best advantage are the most important set of abilities that a person can have. They determine how we interact socially with other humans and we are judged accordingly. How often have you heard someone say that he/she has "great people skills"? Or perhaps, "He is such a good listener!"

Not understanding social skills can lead to social isolation, under-or-unemployment, depression and even imprisonment. The functionality of these skills is to aid us in socializing, communicating and relating to other human beings. The ability to interpret voice inflections, sarcasm, and to be able to correctly read body language are crucial to the success or failure of social interactions. Communication forms can be both nonverbal and verbal.

Knowing what to say, when to say it and most importantly who to say it to, are considered to be good verbal skills. Interrupting conversations, being aggressive or speaking in an overly loud voice are some examples of inappropriate verbal skills. Remember, socially we are often judged not only by the things that we said but when we said it. Always try to put the brain in gear before putting the mouth in motion.

Nonverbally you need to make and keep eye contact with the person you are speaking with, if culturally-appropriate. Smile not only with your eyes but with your mouth. Try to stand straight and tall (if you can) and keep any gesturing that you may do, appropriate to the discussion. Show good

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rapport with the other persons by maintaining a small buffer zone between you and them, many people like to keep a "personal space" around them.

To demonstrate that you are actively engaged in and that you understand what is being said occasionally contribute a quick comment - "I see", "uh huh", etc. or nod your head appropriately. Another way is to offer up direct feedback to what you've heard - "She said that to them? Then what happened?" Showing that you are not only paying attention but that you are participating will make your conversation partner feel much better about you and it will demonstrate great social skills on your part.

RELATIONSHIPS

- TYPES AND HOW WE DEAL WITH THEM

Relationships can come in many shapes and sizes:

- **Personal** - which includes your family, friends and dates or mates
- **Social** - acquaintances you know (people you are on a nodding and hello basis with), people you interact with (store clerks, bus drivers, etc.), strangers, etc.
- **Professional** - co-workers, bosses and health care personnel, etc.

How you define, develop and maintain your relationships says a lot about you and your social skills. After all, you interact differently with a co-worker than a family member. You also relate differently to your doctor than you would a neighbour. Even social interaction with a stranger, no matter how fleeting, still calls for some form of relating on your part.

Relationships, dating or otherwise, involve many means of subtle communications with lots of verbal and non-verbal negotiating going on. On the best days, with nothing going wrong, it can still be very stressful to some people. You with your LD may at times become completely overwhelmed by the whole process.

As a result of this overwhelming or overloading you could lose focus on the relationship and all its complexities. Occasionally, when we are most stressed we may say or do things (consciously or sub-consciously) that we come to regret later. "You always hurt the one you love!" is not only a song title but also a true sidebar to love and relationships.

Your attention may wander from your partner and they may feel left out or completely ignored. Here is where you need to control your impulsive behaviours and to alleviate some of your anxiety by focusing on your partner. You should find concentrating on their needs and wants will reward you with an increase in your own comfort levels.

As discussed earlier good communication is vital to a healthy relationship. You need to be able to talk about yourself, your disabilities and your personal challenges with your partner. The more open you are the more they understand just how unique a person you are.

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND HOW THEY RELATE TO SOCIALS SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps you were diagnosed with a learning disability as a child, teenager, or as an adult. Additionally you may have been informed that LD, a result of a nervous system dysfunction, would affect your ability to learn, to process and carry out everyday tasks. Time erodes lessons learned and you may no longer remember that LD is for all intents a "hidden" disability and that its probable impact could be life-long. People with LD also:

- Tend to forget or misinterpret conversations or things that were just said to them
- May be impulsive, become easily distracted with a short attention span
- Are usually late for dates, appointments or functions and may have trouble following directions
- Experience trouble in dialling phone numbers or in reading addresses which may cause them to put off doing things

FINAL THOUGHTS

As an adult with LD you will have many different relationship challenges to face. You also have many choices to make and you may decide to face the challenges on your own. However, you are ONLY alone if you choose to be. Family, friends and yes hopefully - a significant other - can help you cope with your challenges. There are many options available for people who have no one close to them.

Sometimes fear of failure will stop people from trying. From trying to make new acquaintances, friends or even finding that special someone. Keep trying and you will discover that, as you improve your social skills, it will become easier to develop relationships and you might even find that special someone!