

# FINDING OUR OWN WAYS: ADULTS AND LEARNING DISABILITIES

A guide for finding learning success



Metro Toronto  
**Movement**  
for **Literacy**

**EMPLOYMENT**  
**ONTARIO**

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## How to use this toolkit

If you are reading this toolkit on a computer screen, you will see some words that are [blue and underlined like this](#). This means that these words are a “live link” to a website. When you click on the “live link” words with your computer mouse or on the track pad on your keyboard, you will go to that web page on the Internet.

These “live links” are connections to helpful resources and websites on the Internet.

If you are reading this toolkit as a printed booklet, you will find a complete list of all the “live links” and website addresses in the Helpful Resources section at the back of the booklet. In order to access these resources, simply type the website address into the address bar of the web browser on your computer, when you are connected to the Internet.

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This toolkit is meant to be a helpful resource for adults who have or think they might have a learning disability (LD). Maybe you struggle to learn or remember things. You don't know what to call it, but you know that this specific difficulty happens to you over and over again. This toolkit is a guide to help you find ways to increase your learning success.

It is more common to hear about learning disabilities in children, but research shows that adults do not "grow out of" learning disabilities. The impacts of learning disabilities are lifelong: they usually disrupt early school experiences and make later success harder, and they can harm self-esteem in deep and complex ways. These things are true whether or not you receive an official diagnosis of a learning disability in childhood or later in life, or if you are diagnosed at all.

When you were a child or teenager, perhaps you always simply hated schoolwork or had to work so hard at it. Maybe you felt like you needed a lot of extra help or extra time to complete your assignments. Now that you are an adult, what made school so hard years ago might be making it difficult for you in other areas now. For example, finding or keeping a job, doing your banking and managing household finances, dealing with your own children's schooling, and participating in social situations.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY "LEARNING DISABILITY"?

**Learning disabilities have nothing to do with intelligence.** They affect people of average to **above average** intelligence, and vary in terms of how serious they are. They might interfere with learning and your ability to use numbers and language. Using language includes things like how you express yourself verbally as well as reading and writing skills. "Dyslexia" is a famous learning disability, where the letters and numbers "jump around" while you're looking at them. Some difficulties can go unnoticed until you need to use that particular skill. This can have serious impacts on people who have to change jobs later in life. Many people include ADHD when they talk about learning disabilities, and more and more people are also making connections between learning disabilities and anxiety. Read [this overview of adults and learning disabilities](#) by the **Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario**, and look around their whole [website](#). LDAO is a major resource of support and information on learning disabilities.

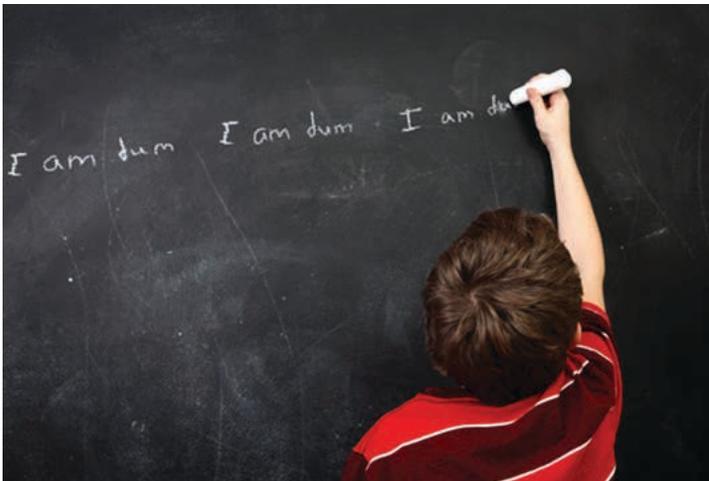
## FINDING THE WORDS YOU WANT TO USE

Does it matter what words you use to talk about your struggles with learning? Sometimes it does. **Labels can hurt:** they can open people up to being excluded or bullied, or just feeling “different”. **Labels can also help:** when you use certain words to describe yourself or your situation, this can ensure that you have access to services, supports, medications, memberships in groups, and more.

Whatever words you choose are okay, as long as you are in charge! You choose what label to identify with – and you choose what, when, and how much to tell others.

Identifying your learning disability is called “disclosing” in education and employment situations – and it can be risky. York University has a guide with some helpful [advice on disclosing your learning disability to an employer](#). This resource has role-play and case study examples to help you imagine how the conversations might go when you tell others about your learning disability.

The resource above starts off by saying “you have many talents” – and you do. But many people with learning disabilities feel stupid, which can be painful. Maybe you were told by teachers or others in the past that you were stupid or lazy or just not trying hard enough. These messages can deeply affect you and stick around for a long time.



Not only are adults with learning disabilities not stupid, often they are brilliant! Think about all the creative “workarounds” people come up with – tricks to getting tasks done in whatever way possible – often while hiding these strategies. And think of the resilience (the ability to bounce back and keep going through tough times) people develop. So many amazing people, from Albert Einstein to Jamie Oliver to Audre Lorde, have brains that work a bit differently.

## FINDING OUT ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS

It is the law that every education, training, and employment service in Ontario has a duty to accommodate people with learning disabilities. **Accommodation is part of your right to equal treatment and opportunities.** In order to “level the playing field”, it may be necessary to change the environment, the functions of a job, or the requirements of educational assessments. This means all people have the right to start from the same place, regardless of their differences.

The Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC) clearly names learning disabilities, and says that there is no set formula for how to accommodate. Accommodations must be individualized because “each person has unique needs and it is important to consult with the person involved” (OHRC, 2000, p.10). Click here to read to read the full [OHRC policy and guidelines on disability and the duty to accommodate](#).

By law, you have the right to talk to any service provider or employer about what you need. For example you may need extra time, assistive technology, a quiet space or a helper – anything you need to help you participate fully in any aspect of public life. You have the right to make these requests of a potential employer too – for example, when you are going for a job interview.

If you have questions or troubles with accommodations, read the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#), which helps private and public organizations (including education, training and employment services) make sure their practices are accessible. AODA standards are a set of enforceable rules that organizations must follow to prevent discrimination and remove barriers. **Just remember: when you ask for accommodation, you are not asking for a favour. It is everyone’s legal obligation.**

### IMPORTANT NOTE:

**In order to secure your right to accommodations, you may need to have a formal diagnosis of a learning disability.** A “psychoeducational assessment” is the main way to diagnose learning disabilities. This assessment must be done by a psychologist with training in learning disabilities. Other related testing may be done by a pediatrician, a psychiatrist or a neurologist. A high quality psychoeducational assessment is very involved and should be explained to you very clearly. This assessment can be VERY expensive, but in some situations the cost may be covered. Ask any service provider you work with for more information if you think you might benefit from a formal assessment.

# FINDING NEW WAYS TO THINK ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

Really, it's not about how smart you are – it's about **how you are smart**. Many people use the term “multiple intelligences” to talk about the diversity of how all people's brains work – how each person learns differently, and how they learn best.

Knowing your **learning style** will help you develop strategies to overcome or work around your weaknesses and to capitalize on your strengths. Find out more about different learning styles and multiple intelligence at the [Learning Disabilities \(LD\) Pride website](#). And find out more about your own learning style by taking this [online learning styles and multiple intelligences quiz](#).

When you know more about what comes naturally to you and what blocks you, you can tell others about what works best for you and what accommodations you need. For example, if you discover that it is easier for you remember things you *hear* instead of read, you might ask an instructor if you can record them speaking to the class, so you can listen again later. Or you might inform a boss that you work best when you can move around or take lots of breaks.

## How violence affects learning

Many of us who had a tough time in school have had tough times in other ways, like neglect from parents or caregivers or moving house frequently. These things made it hard to do well in school. Many of us have experienced violence inside or outside the home – and all kinds of violence impact learning in deep and complex ways. Individuals who experience violence and trauma often develop strategies and behaviours to help them cope with stress and anxiety. For example, some of us “**space out**” or start daydreaming. This means we stop paying attention to what is happening around us and go somewhere else in our mind.

Entering a new situation such as a new job or an adult education program can create stress and trigger the “spacing out” coping strategy. When this happens, we can miss all or part of a lesson, or miss important directions from an employer, and it becomes difficult to complete work or learn new things. This common coping strategy from a traumatized past gets in the way of learning in the present.

But there is hope. Anyone can learn and change, no matter what has happened in the past. Check out [these illustrated stories that explore how violence impacts learning](#). Understanding how violence and stress affect learning can help us move forward and develop ways of learning more effectively.

# FINDING NEW TOOLS, ADVICE AND SUPPORT

## Get help from others

If you are in an employment services, training or education program, ask for help from the people you work with. They will listen and connect you to a counselling office, a disabilities services office, a tutor, an elder or other helper.

You might be embarrassed and think something is wrong with you if you need to ask for extra help, or that this assistance is for people who are “stupid”. The opposite is true. Asking for help is smart.

In our society we get a lot of messages that it is important to do things for ourselves, all by ourselves. We worry that if we ask for help, we’ll be labeled as not normal, or that people will think we are a hassle or a burden. **Having helpers is completely normal!** Everyone needs help from others with various things in their lives. Think about Olympic athletes and how they need their coaches. One-to-one help for learning disabilities works, and it is usually available at colleges and community-based programs for free.

Don’t wait until you feel like you are sinking. In school, most students with problems wait too long to talk to someone. Find someone you can trust – and talk to them.

## What you can do on your own

There are also many different things you can do on your own. Here are some ideas to consider:

**Concentrating and focusing:** What do people mean when they talk about “learning to learn”? The website, [LearningandViolence.net](http://LearningandViolence.net) has a helpful resource titled [Spacing Out – Learning to Learn](#), that talks about two parts of learning - concentrating and focusing. This resource also provides exercises (both physical and mental ones) to improve both of these things.



**Study skills and remembering:** Many of us have already heard a lot of advice about how to study, and many of us have problems with forgetting things. Another resource titled [Old Patterns – Learning to Learn](#), provides advice on new ways to approach studying and remembering things, along with tips you might not have heard before.

**Being kind to yourself:** So many of us judge ourselves harshly. Putting ourselves down can really get in the way of learning and make it hard to be part of a group. Comparing ourselves to others, especially thinking the people around us are smarter, faster, or more highly skilled can make our heads so noisy.

*When you find that negative talk is taking over, look for something or someone else to concentrate on. Do an activity you enjoy, such as dancing, listening to music, cooking, or drawing. Find activities that completely absorb you so you can give the noise in your head a much-needed rest.*

When you just can't let go of the negative messages, ask yourself if something is bothering you for a good reason. Ask yourself if you need to speak up, start a conversation about the issue, or even leave the room for a little while to give yourself time to think and respect what you're feeling.

Try to be kind to yourself. Part of being kind is being fair – try not to say things to yourself that you wouldn't say to someone else.

Finally, be patient with yourself: If you promise yourself that you will stop putting yourself down, but you find this hard to do, be patient. This is a long process and there's no deadline. It's something we all work on our whole lives.

**You are not alone:** There are so many ideas, approaches and resources to help people who struggle to learn for any reason and at any age. The Learning and Violence website, [www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net) is a vast website that offers tons of concrete strategies for instruction and for learning. The [Student Kit](#) at learningandviolence.net is a curriculum resource for all adult literacy and essential skills learners. Among the many useful sections in the Student Kit, there is information on the following items:

- the impacts of past and present violence
- exploring how some individuals have trouble embracing complexity and get caught in "all or nothing" thinking
- a multimedia exercise module you can work through to help you learn strategies for successful learning

Also check out [Helping Myself Learn](#) for comfort, advice and support.

## New technologies

Computers are playing a bigger and bigger role in everyday life, and they bring new ways to help people with learning disabilities. There are a lot of online tools that may help you. Here are a few examples of helpful technologies for you to explore:

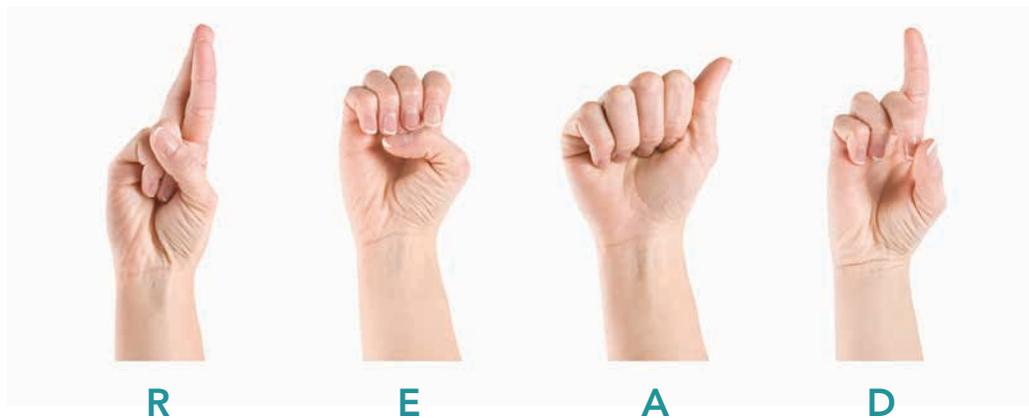
<b>Text-to-speech software</b>	<p>Text-to-speech software translates any written text into an oral format.</p> <p>* The program <i>Voice Dream</i> does this in 27 languages: <a href="http://www.voicedream.com/">http://www.voicedream.com/</a></p> <p>* <i>Natural Readers</i> is another <b>free, downloadable text-to-speech software program</b>, which you can try out at: <a href="http://www.naturalreaders.com">www.naturalreaders.com</a></p>
<b>Speech-to-text software</b>	<p>Speech-to-text software lets you dictate into to your device. <i>Dragon Naturally Speaking</i> allows for voice-commanded web navigation: <a href="http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm">http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm</a></p>
<b>The Kurzweil system</b>	<p>The <i>Kurzweil</i> system is a literacy technology that offers supportive reading and writing assistance; reinforces for retention and assesses skills: <a href="http://www.kurzweilededu.com/default.html">http://www.kurzweilededu.com/default.html</a></p>
<b>Screen readers</b>	<p>Screen readers are for people who need or want to hear whatever is on a screen, including its formatting. <i>JAWS (Job Access With Speech)</i> supports navigation and has output in Braille and speech: <a href="http://www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/Jaws">http://www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/Jaws</a></p>
<b>Livescribe Smart Pen</b>	<p>The Livescribe Smart Pen syncs handwriting to digital devices. The cost is approximately \$130. <a href="http://www.livescribe.com">www.livescribe.com</a></p>

Some assistive technologies can be extremely expensive. Individuals who are studying, training, or looking for a job, don't usually have a lot of extra money. There are low-cost and free versions of most tools, such as apps that come with most smart phones. If you haven't already looked into this and you own a smart phone, check out the accessibility features on your phone.

## Additional Supports

### Deaf resources on learning disabilities

Deaf individuals who have learning challenges face extra barriers, and identifying learning disabilities in deaf individuals can be extra difficult. Find support and online learning programs at the website [Deaf Learn Now](#).



### Native learner resources on learning disabilities

Native and aboriginal individuals who are learning, training and seeking employment in Ontario can find community, support and online courses at a website called [Good Learning Anywhere](#).

### Teaching styles and learning disabilities

Sometimes learning success depends on the teaching style of your instructor. Maybe you've found yourself thinking, "Slow down," or "Tell me again – and tell me differently." A helpful online resource is the [Khan Academy](#). Their slogan is "You can learn anything", and their lessons in language, math, sciences and more are varied, and come in many styles. For example, some people who have "never gotten algebra", have found ways to learn on this website.

### Tools for living with learning disabilities

The website [LDonline](#) has lots of helpful tools including the resource, [Tools for Living with Learning Disabilities](#). This site also includes more information about assistive technologies. Visit LDonline and read whatever interests you – they have a huge variety and number of resources, such as their [Finding Help](#) page.

### Learning issues and our personal life

Sometimes our learning issues – especially not being able to pay attention – affect our private relationships. Read [Nine Ways to Keep Your Challenges From Affecting Your Relationships](#). The examples used in this short resource are romantic relationships, but the advice can apply to all sorts of interactions with people you care about.

## Learning disabilities, mental health and addictions

[Good2Talk](#) is a free, confidential and anonymous helpline that offers professional counselling, and information and referrals for mental health, addictions and well-being to post-secondary students in Ontario, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

## Free online courses and learning strategies for students with learning disabilities

Finally, [The Learning Hub](#) is an Ontario-based online space that offers free courses on a variety of topics such as lifelong learning and goal setting. They also offer a course called “Learning strategies for students with learning disabilities and ADHD”. Visit the page of course listings for more details.

Having a learning disability does not make learning impossible – it makes it more interesting. Finding support and finding your own strategies are part of the adventure. Whoever you are, wherever you are, no matter what has happened in your life so far, and no matter what words you use to talk about your challenges with learning, you can learn, and you can even love it!



# HELPFUL RESOURCES

Here is a list of the resources mentioned in this toolkit. To help you find what you need more easily, this list of resources is organized according to the page and section where they are talked about in the toolkit.

## Resources on page 3 –

### What do we mean when we say “learning disability”?

- Learning Disability Association of Ontario website: [www.ldao.ca](http://www.ldao.ca)
- Overview on Adults and Learning Disabilities: <http://www.ldao.ca/introduction-to-ldsadhd/ldsadhs-in-depth/articles/about-lds/adults-with-learning-disabilities/>

## Resources on page 4 –

### Finding the words you want to use

- Advice on disclosing your learning disability to an employer. This article is called “Should I disclose my learning disability to an employer” by York University’s Learning Disability Services: <http://lds.info.yorku.ca/career-services/disclosure/>

## Resources on page 5 –

### Finding out about your rights

- Ontario Human Rights Code’s policy and guidelines on disability and the duty to accommodate: [http://www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Policy\\_and\\_guidelines\\_on\\_disability\\_and\\_the\\_duty\\_to\\_accommodate.pdf](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Policy_and_guidelines_on_disability_and_the_duty_to_accommodate.pdf)
- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) website: [www.aoda.ca](http://www.aoda.ca)

## Resources on page 6 –

### Finding new ways to think about learning disabilities

- Information on multiple intelligences and different learning styles: <http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm>
- “Take your learning styles test” - online quiz to find out your learning styles and multiple intelligences: <http://www.ldpride.net/learning-style-test.html>
- LD (Learning Disabilities) Pride website: [www.ldpride.net](http://www.ldpride.net)

## Resources on page 6 –

### How violence affects learning

- Illustrated stories on how violence impacts learning: <http://learningandviolence.net/easytoread/easy-impact.htm>
- Learning and Violence website: [www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net)

## Resources on page 7 – What you can do on your own

- Spacing Out – Learning to Learn resource: [http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/SpacingOut/Resources/SpacingOut\\_L2L.pdf](http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/SpacingOut/Resources/SpacingOut_L2L.pdf)

## Resources on page 8 – Study skills and remembering

- Old Patterns – Learning to Learn resource: [http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/OldPatterns/OldPatterns\\_L2L.pdf](http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/OldPatterns/OldPatterns_L2L.pdf)

## Resources on page 8 – You are not alone

- Easy to read and learner-friendly materials resource: [http://www.learningandviolence.net/learner\\_friendly.htm](http://www.learningandviolence.net/learner_friendly.htm)
- Student Kit – curriculum resource for adult literacy and essential skills learners: [http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/reception\\_desk.html](http://www.learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/reception_desk.html)
- Helping Myself Learn resource: <http://learningandviolence.net/helpself.htm>

## Resources on page 9 – New technologies

- Voice Dream text-to-speech software: [www.voicedream.com](http://www.voicedream.com)
- Natural Readers text-to-speech software: [www.naturalreaders.com](http://www.naturalreaders.com)
- Dragon Naturally Speaking speech-to-text software: <http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm>
- Kurzweil system – supportive reading and writing assistance: [www.kurzweiledu.com](http://www.kurzweiledu.com)
- JAWS (Job Access with Speech) screen reader: <http://www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/Jaws>
- Livescribe Smart Pen: [www.livescribe.com](http://www.livescribe.com)



## Resources on page 10 – Additional supports

- Deaf Learn Now website: [www.deaflearnnow.ca](http://www.deaflearnnow.ca)
- Good Learning Anywhere – resources for Native learners: <http://goodlearninganywhere.com/>
- Khan Academy – online lesson modules: [www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)
- LD Online website: [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)
- Tools for living with learning disabilities resource: <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6252/>
- Find Help section at LD Online: <http://www.ldonline.org/help>
- Nine ways to keep your challenges from affecting your relationships article: <https://www.understood.org/en/family/taking-care-of-yourself/do-i-have-learning-attention-issue/9-ways-to-keep-your-challenges-from-affecting-your-relationships>

## Resources on page 11 – Additional supports

- Good2Talk – free, confidential helpline: <http://www.good2talk.ca/>
- The Learning Hub – free, online courses including “Learning strategies for students with learning disabilities and ADHD”: [http://www.learninghub.ca/course\\_listing/courses.aspx](http://www.learninghub.ca/course_listing/courses.aspx)

NOTE: For a detailed list of references and sources in developing this toolkit, please see the reference section of MTML’s *Creating Pathways of Learning Support for EO Clients with Learning Disabilities: Research Report*. This project was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). All views expressed in this publication reflect the views and findings of the project research team, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the MTCU.

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

AODA	Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act
ATN	ATN Access Inc. (ATN Access For Persons With Disabilities Inc.; originally founded as the Audio Tactile Network)
DSO	Developmental Services Ontario
EO	Employment Ontario
ES	Employment Services
JAN	Job Accommodation Network
LBS	Literacy & Basic Skills
LD	Learning Disability
LDAH	Learning Disabilities Association of Halton
LDAO	Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
LDATD	Learning Disabilities Association of Toronto District
MTCU	Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (Ontario)
OHRC	Ontario Human Rights Code
SOAR	Searchable Online Accommodation Resource
UDL	Universal Design for Learning



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