

Labels and LDs: A Snapshot

About Labels and Labelling.

There are a lot of labels and labelling issues in the field of learning disabilities. There are questions about the word “disability”, there are questions about the specific names of specific LDs, and to make things even more complicated, the terms mean different things in different places. Here are some of our thoughts about the issues, the terms, and ways of thinking about them.

“Learning Disabilities?”

Right off the top, many people wonder whether “learning disabilities” is the best label to use. Some say “disability” is not an accurate label, since people with LDs are not unable to learn – they learn just fine, when they’re taught appropriately. Many people prefer the phrase “learning differences” instead.

We acknowledge that the term “learning disabilities” is not perfect. We use it as an organization because using one label makes it easier to communicate with other people when we’re talking about LDs, and because the term is recognized in Canadian and provincial human rights legislation.

However you choose to label your LDs, we suggest you get at least a little comfortable with the term “learning disabilities,” because it’s the term used in medical, employment and educational settings.

Specific Labels.

Underneath the umbrella of LDs, there are many more labels - and arguments about them. Some specific types of learning disabilities are given very specific names, and those names are not always agreed upon: dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and central auditory processing disorder each refer to specific types of LDs. Each of the specific names introduces more controversy for some people and clarity for others.

For example, it might really help a young girl to know that her issues with learning math are called dyscalculia, but some people use the term dyscalculia to refer to all math disabilities, while others use the term only for calculation difficulties, so this can be confusing. Similarly, dyslexia can refer to problems with both reading and writing, or only to reading difficulties.

Awareness

Because of such inconsistencies in the use of these labels, at LDAO, we tend to use broad descriptions – like “language-based LD”, or “LD that affects reading” – when talking about categories of LDs. When we talk about specifics, it’s often useful to simply describe the way a particular person learns, based on their assessment.

Why Don't the Labels Just Stay the Same?

Historically, the labels we use do not tend to stay the same. This change happens in all areas of life, but seems to happen most in new fields, like the field of LDs (only about 40 years old). As our understanding of things changes, the labels we use changes to reflect new knowledge. As we learn more, the labels we use probably will reflect this change.

Here's an unrelated example – The planet Pluto is no longer called a planet! Pluto itself didn't change. What changed was our knowledge: When astronomers discovered hundreds more Pluto-sized objects in our solar system, they had to decide whether we should include all of them and hugely increase the number of "planets" we have, or change the label of tiny Pluto. (It's called a "planetoid" now.)

The Bottom Line.

The important thing to keep in mind is that labels are constructs: we humans make them. That means that they can change, and evolve, depending on how we need to use them. It also means that the labels shouldn't determine how we understand people, and that labels given to groups of people shouldn't be used to predict how those individuals will be. My LD and your LD may be very different. Calling them both LDs is useful for studying and talking, but that doesn't change how unique we both are.

More information on this and related topics can be found online at www.LDAO.ca. This snapshot was created in Summer 2007. Please share freely, but do not reproduce for purposes of resale.