

Dyslexia and Driving an Automobile

By: Dale S. Brown (2006)

Tom, a handsome twenty-seven-year old man who had dyslexia faced serious problems learning to drive a car. He failed his driving test several times in high school. He worked on learning to drive in college, but never bothered to take the test again. Now as an adult, he realized he would have to learn driving the same slow, steady and disciplined way that he learned to read. He was determined to learn however.

He would have to drill himself on the location of the accelerator and brake. Learning park, reverse, neutral and drive would take extra practice. He would also have improve his navigation abilities, such as reading maps, and locating and reading signs quickly enough to use the information.

Learning to read took several tutors, lots of practice, and disciplined persistence. It was big step in his life. He thought reading would solve all of his problems! Well, it did help. He had a good job, was married, and had a child. But issues involving his learning disabilities kept on coming up. And his inability to drive was a major one, even though his home was a bus-ride away from his job. He knew that he would need to learn to drive - or depend on his wife and friends for mobility.

Tom has perceptual problems, which are a major cause of learning disabilities and sometimes co-exist with dyslexia. Perceptual problems can cause great difficulty in learning to drive. People with perceptual problems receive inaccurate information through their senses and/or have trouble processing that information. Like static on the radio or a bad TV picture, the information becomes garbled as it travels from the eye, ear, skin or the brain.

Many people with dyslexia do not have perceptual problems. As a matter of fact, many people with dyslexia have strengths in the areas of spatial relationships and/or eye hand coordination. They find driving an automobile easy. Some people with dyslexia are superior at driving and even take jobs such as truck driving. However, there are some dyslexics who find it difficult to drive. Tom is presented as a composite character of such a person.

For those people who can drive but have severe difficulty reading, the driver's test is a key barrier. Fortunately, it is often possible to take the test orally. The Americans with Disabilities Act can be used to make a strong request for reasonable accommodation.

Tom had bad memories of his experience in the driver's education class in his high school. Students went out with four other students and the instructor in a car to learn to drive. He found it overwhelming and scary. He felt as if there was too much going on at once. The seat shook, the car seemed to lurch forward when his foot touched the accelerator, and the road, the fence around the driving range, and the grass seemed to be moving quickly around the car. The car motor was roaring, the driving instructor was shouting, and his hands were slick with sweat from gripping the steering wheel. His fellow students calmed down after some initial nervousness and he did his best to keep his fears to himself.

Some of Tom's problems were due to his difficulty in controlling his attention. Most people automatically sort out the important sensations from the irrelevant ones. But Tom's brain could not do that with ease. He was paying attention to everything at once, which made him feel scattered and confused. He had to consciously slow his breathing, relax his muscles, and look and listen carefully. He had to work to be relaxed, alert, and aware. Some people with perceptual problems have the opposite reaction. They have to push themselves to pay enough attention an see and hear what they need to drive.

Tom also had trouble seeing accurately and associating the movement of the car with the actions of his hands on the steering wheel. As a youngster, he had difficulty learning to ride a bike and kept falling down. As a young adult, he had difficulty steering a canoe. He hoped that his hard work mastering the canoe would help him drive.

Tom looked for a driving instructor. He found that most driving instructors did not have experience with perceptual problems and dyslexia. Many commercial driving instructors do not have training in how to teach

driving. The job of driving instructor is often part-time and is sometimes used as a way of earning a salary between jobs. [First Class has two full-time Driver Rehabilitation Specialist who have taken well over 300 training hours for drivers with specific needs. Collectively, Mr. Bud and Ms. Jill have well over 50 years of adaptive specific needs training experience.]

It took a long time to find someone. He checked with local groups that worked with people who have dyslexia. Finally, he heard from a mother of a dyslexic teenager who had trouble learning to drive. He contacted the driving instructor. The driving instructor knew about dyslexia and had taught his dyslexic daughter to drive.

Tom was pleased to be able to work in a car that had dual controls. He could practice driving, but the instructor also had a brake and steering wheel and could take over if necessary. The instructor had him practice on a winding, flat road to learn to turn the steering wheel the right amount for each curve of the street. Then he practiced on a hilly but straight road to learn to keep a constant speed by pressing down on the accelerator when he went up a hill and releasing it a bit when going down. Then he practiced on roads that were both hilly and winding. This step-by-step learning process is the best way to teach many people with dyslexia. The driving instructor carefully taught him merges, passing another vehicle, backing up, right-of-way rules, parallel parking, and many other skills of competent driving.

Tom also had difficulty intuitively knowing left from right. That is why he had to work hard learning to reliably distinguish the accelerator from the brake. It took a lot of drill and practice. He practiced left and right turns over and over again to remember that right turns are close to the curve (right's tight.) And that left turns were away from the curve (left's loose). Sometimes, he stopped on corners while he was walking and scanned the environment as if he were a driver. He would imagine himself making left and right turns.

Tom spent a full six months learning to drive. He showed courage and determination, particularly when you consider his disability was invisible. Nobody but his close friends and the driving instructor recognized his extra effort. He was enormously proud when he finally passed his driver's test and received his license.

This story, written to illustrate the challenges and supports needed by some people with dyslexia as they learn to drive, is an optimistic one. Most learning disabled young adults struggle through many driver education efforts. Driver educators have not been exposed to current information on learning disabilities.

Tom and people like Tom can become safe and responsible drivers. Tom commutes to and from his job and drives his wife and small children on outings. In many ways, he still has to be careful, particularly in urban driving environments. He tries to get his wife or other passenger to navigate. He only drives when completely alert. If he is exhausted or upset, he finds another form of transportation. He sticks to the speed limit, unless he is obviously blocking traffic.

Many drivers with dyslexia over compensate and become better drivers than non-dyslexics.

About the Author

Dale S. Brown is the Senior Manager of LD OnLine. She is a nationally recognized expert on learning disabilities who has written four books on learning disabilities. She received the Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award for her work as an advocate for people with learning disabilities. This article was adapted slightly from an article that first appeared in "Perspectives" a publication of the International Dyslexia Association.

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