

## **Embracing the Monster - Running from the Past and Into Reality**

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“Thinking back now to when I started college, I remember that feeling of overwhelming anxiety as I looked around me, trying to make sense of everything. It wasn’t the typical freshman anxiety; mine was caused by the fact that I couldn’t read the cards in front of the books to match them with my schedule. Perhaps you know the system- the bookstore hands identifying cards on the shelf in front of the book stacks listing the course number, the instructor, and the class. When I changed the names of some of the professors were too complicated to read, and I was afraid to ask for any help. I remember standing in front of a stack of books; my mind working as if it was twisted metal with an electrical current going through it with no way to get out. I felt hot; the embarrassment made my face red. I quickly found Kyle and explained that I couldn’t find the ‘dumb books’ so he jumped in to help. This was a lot less embarrassing than asking the clerk; I would just hang onto him like a ‘baby’ should and let him lead the way” (Crawford, 2000).

And so begins the mystery that surrounds the majority of students with learning disabilities dealing with college obstacles. Classes are just one barrier they have to confront as they enter their new life. We discuss transition into college from high school, yet the plan runs fatally short when we don’t consider that it evokes tremendous anxiety. This can lead to depression, causing students to miss classes, not use resource support, give up on themselves and drop out completely. Many turn to drugs, alcohol, become clinically depressed, or worse, commit suicide as a result of a difficulty in coping.

Why is it that so many young adults with these disorders drop out of college? Why is the prevalence of chemical dependency in Learning Disabilities (LD) so high? Why is it that so many individuals with LD are so anxious to avoid dealing with having LD? How come so many adults with LD have so many co-morbid conditions with LD? Finally what is the combination for success in an individual who has LD in college? These are questions that will be answered in this non-scientific paper.

When one looks at factors of learning disabilities and its impact on emotional development in the formative years it doesn’t take a genius to determine how damaged a person can become after years of going to school struggling with the same type of work day in and day out. Imagine for a minute having the same job for thirteen years, only each year the job gets harder. You have a different boss each year as well. And for some of you, you get relocated and have new co-workers, new bosses, and new environments. You have the requirement of learning the same basic tasks or skills (subjects) each year; however the one area you have the most difficulty in is the one where most of your time is spent.

Also, in school you are placed at the front of the class; and are removed from class during your favorite and most easy enjoyable subject for “extra help.” In addition, you have extreme difficulty with your memory and can only remember what you learn and retain it for about an hour, then it is lost. So while you are in your resource, you do great. You go out feeling good, come back the next day only to realize what you learned the day before is lost and has to be relearned, to get the next piece.

After years of doing this, you are exhausted, but somehow you got by, barely with a 2.2 GPA. But you are happy about it because you are articulate, you are a great critical thinker, and you will be able to go to college (according to your school counselor). You realize you will need

accommodations and that over the years you have learned many things about how to compensate for your disabilities. Your plan is to try to self-accommodate because you are tired about having to ask for “help”.

Many peers and teachers before have made you feel as though they were doing you a favor. In your high school transition plan to college it states you will be going to the local community college and you plan to major in business. The reality is you don't know what you want to major in, but they make you pick something because you have to do so according to their guidelines. So the guidelines clearly state that twelve credit hours will be taken each semester, disability services will be utilized, and accommodations will be set up as in a high school setting.

Many mistakes have already occurred with these students with this kind of history that are a potential for personal and academic failure:

- 1) The student is walking into the community college with no plan of action. There has been no consideration regarding how low the GPA was in high school. This person should likely not take anymore than six hours per semester to begin with (i.e. one difficult and one easy class). They should take a study skills class offered at most community colleges first, and someone should take them over to meet with disability services to find out ahead of time what they need to do to be prepared for college.
- 2) This student should be assigned a mentor and they should be shown how to register for classes. Many college disability services departments can do this for students. However, the first couple times they should be supported. A typical accommodation request is first selection of classes due to disability, if they meet severity criterion under ADA or section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- 3) The student should be shown non-disabled support services at college, writing lab, math lab as examples of alternative environments and resources.
- 4) The student should be shown the differences between college accommodations and high school accommodations. Without the right accommodations they will likely not be successful. Someone from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation or high school should attend with student to set up accommodations. Diagnostic reports should be updated according to AHEAD guidelines.
- 5) Graph out steps to being a successful college student. For a student that has sequential learning disabilities, these steps would include selecting classes, talking to disability services, the registration process, how to disclose to professors, and getting books. Do not take anything for granted, the first three semesters are a learning period, and without a plan of action, it's likely to come apart.

The incidence rate of chemical dependency and learning disabilities is staggering. However, we don't want to say it is the learning disability that causes the dependency, instead it is more likely that the impact of the disability causes the dependency to occur. Working as a practitioner over the last fifteen years and from my own personal experience of turning to substances to ease the pain of reality, substance abuse, the method most people turn to when they have no other outlets.

It's so easy to step into another world, get numb for awhile and forget that other painful world exists. If taking the simple steps to even get registered for college isn't something you can't do successfully, then how can you be a successful college student?

Too often researchers take the academic piece of LD as the gospel: “If we could just teach them to read it would be the answer to all of the problem they have, then they can go on and lead normal lives.” I have worked with many adults with LD who can read and comprehend just fine due to early intervention, but their processing of information, sequencing and structuring a complex sentence isn’t something they can do without accommodations. Their frustration grows because even with all the time they spent in school learning how to read and comprehend, they still didn’t master how to unscramble/decode their own thinking and how to apply it to a paper in a particular and logical fashion. But, hey they regurgitated the same information on a multiple choice test – but is that really learning they will ask of themselves. Off to college they go and during the first essay exam the fear sets in. They have lost their accommodations because of that early intervention success and the bomb drops! The demands in college are a bit more rigid.

There is no way you are going to ask for help; you are not going to admit you have LD not now, not ever. It’s an excuse to get what others can have, but still how are you going to survive? So anxiety and doubt builds just like in high school during essays and papers, but there you had friends who helped you. You begin to lose sleep at night and miss classes. That won’t work, so you seek out some professional help for sleep aides. The doctor decides you have an anxiety disorder. You had described your learning disabilities to him, and he encouraged you to get help, but you refused. You took the medication however, and thought, maybe this will calm me and things will get better. Denial sets in, the medication is being abused, and you surround yourself with friends, go to parties, drink, sleep late, and sabotage the potential success you might have had if you just sought out help. Subconsciously it is better to use the excuse to yourself, “I just got into partying due to my anxiety over school and messed up, things will be better next semester.”

It’s not surprising that most individuals by the time they get to adolescence have or are developing a co-morbid condition along with their LD. Anxiety, OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), Dysthymia, Mood Disorder, Personality Disorders, Chemical Dependency, and/or ADHD. Most of society has a hard time believing LD even exists, so if you hear it doesn’t exist, and you feel frustration each and everyday you are awake, yet others tell you that you are just lazy, stupid, unmotivated, or slow then you sure begin to question yourself. It would be easy to understand how a person would begin to develop other conditions to protect themselves or to climb into a very lonely world of their own. How might it be to always be in doubt about who you are and what you are as a developing child? Add the frustrations of the parent trying to either understand the child, fight for the rights of the child, or the worst case, causing the child to feel more worthless. Children with learning disabilities are no different than any other child who is tormented in terms of being harmed emotionally, they will either be resilient, or they will crumble. However, they do have a double edge sword, they grow up feeling less capable due to neurological disabilities that impacts major life domains. These disorders often affect judgment, problem solving, decision-making, and survival. This population may be extremely bright intellectually, but may not be able to understand the nuances of social interaction. These are the kinds of students in college settings who may appear to be able to navigate their way successfully through programs. They may appear to have things successfully managed, however the hours they spend pulling the puzzle together would surprise you.

The adults who succeed despite having severe learning disabilities have come to learn many things about themselves and are usually late bloomers. These adults have usually paid the

price emotionally, even being physically abused somewhere along their path of life, to get to where they are when you meet them at their point of achieving or having achieved success.

These adults have learned that first they must recognize who they are as people and through themselves must find internal strength and know that ultimately it will be up to them. Though they will need a mentor and tools to help them through, the inner strength will be what really counts.

Second, they will need to find a center in themselves that consists of healing. They do this full well knowing they will never forget where they have been and that the pain will never completely end. Likely as they age, it may get a bit worse from time to time. They will have to realize that they will be rejected by many colleagues and decide how they are going to deal with this prior to going into those situations because the pain will be tremendous. Third, they will have to reward themselves because no one else except others like them will really know the fullest extent of work they have had to do to accomplish this task. They can be proud, knowing they didn't cheat, that they aren't a phony, and no one can take it away from them now!

Fourth, that they will likely have to continue to be a workhorse and whomever they meet in a personal or intimate relationship must understand that this is the way it will be, not because we like to work 16 hour days, but may have to because we must to survive the competitive nature of a demanding workforce.

Finally, to rejoice that they have finally accepted themselves for who they are, using their accommodations when they need them, telling who they want to tell, and knowing there will be good days and bad, but its okay, it comes with the territory of having hidden disabilities.

#### Reference

Crawford, V. (2001). *Embracing the Monster: Overcoming the Impact of Living with Hidden Disabilities*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing Company.