

Why Does My Stomach Hurt? How Individuals with Learning Disabilities Can Use Cognitive Strategies to Reduce Anxiety and Stress at the College Level

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For most students, college is a time of unprecedented academic and social development; however, for students with learning disabilities (LD), it can be a nightmare. When these students enter college they are not only beginning an unexplored and unfamiliar way of life but embarking on a journey that threatens their established motivational drive, need for order, compensatory skills and social relationships. It is no wonder that so many students with LD suffer from emotional and physiological problems at the college level. To reduce the anxiety and stress inherent in adapting to college, these students must understand that *thoughts* and *attitudes*, not external events, create their feelings. By recognizing their anxious feelings, somatic reactions to anxiety, specific thoughts in anxiety-provoking situations, and coping strategies, students with LD can change the way they think, feel and behave.

As a student with learning disabilities at Brandeis University, I have developed several cognitive strategies to overcome the negative thinking patterns that lead to my anxiety. The first step in experiencing greater self-esteem, intimacy, and productivity is understanding that negative feelings result from negative thoughts. Individuals with LD often fail to recognize that thoughts such as "I'm a failure because I didn't achieve a personal goal" or "MY mind will go blank when I introduce myself to those people" lead to their depression and anxiety. One of the most destructive, negative thought patterns students can fall prey to is the fear that they will lose the respect of others when their disability is discovered. Fear of losing face with peers and professors may stimulate students with LD to mask their secret shame and avoid situations in which they have to perform in their weak areas (Smith, 1991).

In my determination to achieve academic and social success at the college level, I often fall victim to negative thoughts. For example, the thought that I may lose respect when other people find out that I have a learning disability can lead to such feelings of shame that I protect my self-esteem by putting on a mask of supercompetence and activity. By pretending that I can talk my way out of anything and seeming to be always on the move, I attempt to exude an aura of self-confidence and stability that will hide my weaknesses. My determination to avoid the anxiety associated with fear of rejection and feelings of shame is often so intense that it prevents me from recognizing that these negative feelings are the result of distorted thoughts. These unrealistic thoughts include discounting the positive, dwelling on a single negative detail, minimizing the importance of my desirable qualities, assuming that my negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are, and holding myself personally responsible for events beyond my control.

To overcome the anxiety and depression that often result from negative thought patterns, individuals with LD must first be willing to recognize their distorted thoughts. One of the most difficult obstacles is the tendency to repress distorted feelings of anger and frustration. People who suffer from anxiety and depression nearly always have unexpressed negative feelings about some problem in their lives (Burns, 1989). For those with LD, recognizing unexpressed negative feelings is often

extremely difficult because of years of repression. Although we try to feel better by avoiding our problems, denial and repression don't alleviate negative feelings, they exacerbate them. In their determination to achieve equal respect with peers, in what they see as an extremely "critical society," individuals with LD often keep stored years of repressed negative thoughts and emotions. Unfortunately, they frequently transform their feelings of shame, resentment, and frustration into anxiety. They concentrate on their anxiety rather than the problems that are responsible for it. People with learning disabilities must confront the psychological causes of their problems in order to reduce their anxiety.

Learning to alleviate by recognizing negative thoughts and repressed feelings is an extremely difficult process. Those who understand their negative thought patterns and repressed emotions still seem to fail to change the way they think, feel and behave. They often fall victim to overorganization and overintellectualization. Research suggests that although learning disabilities have been attributed to, among other causes, specific skill and ability deficits, poor performance may be due to problems with organization and task-appropriate strategies (Kendall & Panichelli-Mindell, 1995). These findings indicate that the use of cognitive-strategy training can enhance the performance of individuals with LD (Kendall & Panichelli-Mindel, 1995). Organization and cognitive strategies are two of the most important compensatory skills these individuals can master. One must recognize, however, that there is a point where organization and intellectualization become counterproductive. Because college students with LD tend to focus enormous amounts of time on the development and utilization of various compensatory skills, they often feel that they are forced to "incessantly problem solve." Those who are successful find efficient ways to solve their problems; others may struggle for years and never discover ways to overcome their differences. The students with LD who learn and become cognitively aware of effective problem-solving and compensatory strategies deserve tremendous credit. They also are worthy, however, of warning: that incessant rationality and organization can lead to a vicious cycle of overintellectualization that may prevent them from reducing their anxieties.

In my experiences at the college level, I often find myself the victim of overorganization and excessive problem solving. Whether I'm preparing to visit the dean, writing or thinking about a term paper, arranging materials in my room, or having a conversation with a friend, I always feel I need to be organized and intellectually prepared. For years, I thought my organizational and rational skills were an effective and efficient means for compensating for my learning disabilities; only recently have I noticed their counterproductive force. After endless self-scrutiny, I'm finally beginning to recognize that my compensatory skills have the power to hamper my social happiness. This self-realization manifested itself when I finally recognized that I take on an extremely bossy an/or assertive role in my social relationships, and tend to cling too tightly to the few friends that I have. Some theorists suggest that children with LD are unusually bossy because they need to feel some control in their lives, because they feel they have very little control in school (Osman, 1982). Many students with LD who are successful in school, however, still behave in controlling fashions.

Although I feel academically secure, I often feel the need to be in absolute control of every aspect of my life. These controlling tendencies may be the result of years of rejection and negative feedback in grade school; they are also part of a much larger problem -- my excessive organizational and problem-solving skills. For

example, when I go to a social gathering, such as a party, I continuously ponder what I want to accomplish there, and the possible strategies for achieving that goal. I find myself so busy thinking and organizing ways to be "cool" and "enjoy" the party that I'm unable to actively pursue that positive experience. These incessant thought patterns, which are mostly negative, lead to further negative thoughts, ultimately resulting in a vicious cycle of rationality. No wonder most of my friends at college describe me as an extremely practical and goal-oriented individual.

Because my social life suffers the most from the negative thoughts I associate with my learning disabilities, I will discuss the general value and application of the cognitive strategies I use to reduce my social anxiety. "*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association defines a social phobia as 'a persistent fear of...[social] situations in which the person is exposed to possible scrutiny by others and fears that he or she may do something....that will be humiliating or embarrassing'" (Burns, 1989). In social situations, such as parties and dates, I tend to experience the same fears that many of my peers with LD struggle to overcome, including the anxiety associated with saying foolish comments, failing to answer questions or make conversation, and being the target of laughter and humiliation. My social activities, however, are also the result of self-defeating attitudes I have constructed over the years, especially regarding my learning disabilities. I often feel that I have to put on a show to get people to like me, that my feelings of shyness and anxiety will be noticed and judged negatively by others, and I hold stereotyped ideas about what is "cool" and what is "shameful." Although I recognize that my self-defeating attitudes cause me unnecessary fear of criticism and social anxiety, they also have a hidden benefit: they fuel my motivation to succeed.

My intense drive to prove to others that I'm competent and worthy of respect, however, is sometimes perceived negatively by others. My peers tend to criticize the amount of time it takes me to accomplish certain tasks; they call me single-minded or stubborn, and obsessed with being successful, rather than complimenting me for doing a job well done. They fail to understand that "neurological immaturity or dysfunction" can make it difficult for individuals with LD to integrate several things at once (Smith, 1991). What often appears to be stubbornness is in reality my need to concentrate most of my effort on one thing at a time so that I may do it well. Unfortunately, my incessant drive to achieve equal respect has required as much time and effort over the years that I've been unable to allocate the proper amount of time to my social experimentation. I often find myself pretending to be someone I'm not and avoiding social risks to evade the "shame" I associate with my social immaturity--a tendency that only intensifies my negative feelings.

Only by recognizing my negative thoughts and feelings and developing cognitive strategies to deal with them have I learned to relax and enjoy a less stressful life. These strategies include expressing to my peers when I feel anxious or shamed, positive imaging, playing out realistic worst-case scenarios, confronting my sources of anxiety, getting in touch with my feelings, and accepting my learning disabilities and social vulnerabilities. For example, if I experience anxiety before going to a dance party (or, even worse, at the party), I try to express my social anxiety in a constructive manner. I may ask the people I'm going with whether or not they ever feel anxious at these parties. Regardless of whether they say yes or no, I respond by saying, "That's funny I almost always experience butterflies at a dance party." Usually, one or more of the people I'm with can relate to the way I'm feeling, and

this immediately helps reduce my anxiety by establishing that I'm not "different" or "shameful." This strategy also provides an excellent topic of conversation, a means to break the ice and begin new relationships. I also try to imagine the positive things I want to do at the party. If I'm feeling anxious about getting out on the dance floor, I picture only the positive outcomes of engaging in this action, such as meeting a nice girl or simply dancing like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. Along with positive imaging, I also play out realistic worst-case scenarios in my head. Rather than distorting reality by imagining that if I get rejected by a girl on the dance floor everybody will laugh at me, I imagine realistic scenarios, such as dancing like a fool and having a few people snicker at me, or being rejected by one girl and moving on to another one.

I'm aware that most of my anxiety is caused by fear of social criticism and failure to achieve equal respect, so I try to reduce these negative feelings by actively exposing myself to stressful social situations. Because an individual's problem is usually not his or her fear of a situation but negative thoughts and feelings about it, one must test out those thoughts and feelings (Burns, 1989). I've learned that experimentation is an effective way to reduce my anxiety, and I often refer to this method as "playing the game." For example, if I'm at a party I force myself to try out various strategies, or "game plans" to begin successful conversations. I talk about academic and social experiences even if this involves disclosing that I feel nervous or have auditory-processing difficulties. Persons with LD may recognize their negative thoughts and feelings, but in order to change the way they think, feel and behave, they must learn to confront their problems in a bold and shameless manner.

"What makes you so special that you need extra time on tests?" Learning to answer this type of question in a nonconfrontational manner is an extremely difficult challenge for people with LD. It often requires getting in touch with painful repressed thoughts and emotions. Only recently have I begun to respond to this question in a straightforward manner, without feeling ashamed. I disclose that I have documented learning disabilities, and that extra time on tests helps me compensate for those differences. In the past, I've too often bragged about getting extra time, and described it as a clever means of using the system and getting ahead of others, rather than as a necessary accommodation. I didn't recognize that I was deceiving both myself and my peers, repressing my true feelings and alienating those I needed to make friends with. When I accept my learning disabilities and recognize that they are not shameful, I'm able to get in touch with my true feelings, express them to others, and feel good about myself.

Individuals with LD can have a positive college experience. In order to experience freedom from the fears and anxieties that plague them, they must learn to confront their negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Repression, denial, and the magnification of weaknesses and vulnerabilities do not solve your problems. People with LD are not stupid, incompetent, or shameful. Those who have learned problem-solving strategies and compensatory skills are as competent and successful as non-learning disabled students. Although the road to greater self-confidence and stability is bumpy, we can learn cognitive strategies to make it smoother. There is no single approach to achieving happiness; individuals with LD must understand the importance of pluralism in their struggle to reduce the negative thoughts and feelings that lead to anxiety and depression.

