

## **Promoting an Awareness of Visual Stress**

There are a few reasons as to why some students arrive at college unable to easily take part in activities that involve reading and writing, and I would like to talk about one of those reasons: visual stress. I feel that there are children at a very young age whose difficulties, as a result of visual disturbance, are being overlooked and, therefore, not addressed at a crucial time in their young lives.

In writing this piece, I hope to reach out and share my experiences of dealing with students who suffer from visual stress, and make teaching and support staff aware of the need to understand the condition and how it impacts on individuals' lives.

Visual stress is sometimes referred to as Meares-Irlen syndrome, scotopic sensitivity syndrome or Irlen syndrome. The symptoms of the condition include visual distress and visual perceptual distortion. A range of difficulties can include glare from the page, headaches when reading and sore eyes, and the distortions can consist of letters moving on the page, blurring, words doubling, flickering, and shadowy lines, shapes or colours on the page. Imagine the amount of effort required to try and focus on text that glares or is blurred or moves about. Individuals soon become very tired as a result of trying to focus on a piece of text that appears distorted. Indeed, I once worked with a learner who explained that the words in a piece of text would fall off the page!

As a dyslexia tutor, working with individuals with specific learning difficulties to include dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADD/ADHD, I feel there is more that can be done to help students at a much earlier stage in their lives.

Most young children really enjoy looking at pictures in a book, and start to recognise words and decode what is written. With time, children's reading skills develop and they are able to decode a greater range of words, with more complicated letter patterns, vowel digraphs and sounds that exist in our language. However, for some children this is a very difficult, if not impossible, task to undertake. Students whom I have assessed, as a result of experiencing visual stress, cannot believe the difference a simple coloured overlay, or a combination of colours, can make to their lives; they physically appear relieved and more relaxed. I have seen many students look at a piece of text – black print on a white background – often with difficulty due to eye strain, usually resulting in them being unable to focus for even short periods. The knock-on effect could result in incomplete coursework, or coursework and/or assignments of a poor standard, concentration difficulties, apathy, frequent headaches and a lack of attendance in class.

The overlay assessment pack contains questions that need to be asked, and noted down, prior to the overlay assessment being carried out. It goes without saying that individuals who experience visual difficulties should have their eyes tested, as the overlay assessment is not a substitute for an eye test. During the overlay assessment, I usually ask students how long they have had visual difficulties and all too often they reply "since I was at school" or "I can't remember – years". Imagine the number of years, throughout their schooling, that children have had to struggle to complete, or not complete as the case may be, reading and writing tasks in and out of class.

I, for one, would like to see all schools take part in visual awareness training so that all staff are able to understand the impact that visual difficulties has on a young child. If a child of average intelligence and development for his or her age group starts to fall behind in their reading, there is obviously a factor that is preventing them from progressing. The underlying difficulties could be

caused by a number of reasons which may include dyslexic tendencies, impaired hearing (perhaps the result of having an operation for grommets) or visual difficulties.

Of course, if a child is suspected of having visual difficulties, the first port of call should be to have the child's eyes tested by an optician. The optician may refer the individual to an orthoptist for further examination if they feel the individual requires coloured overlays or tinted glasses and/or eye exercises.

There are a variety of very useful websites to explain the condition in more detail, and to advise teaching staff of classroom practice to help any individual who suffers from visual disturbance.

I sincerely hope that this brief article will help people to understand the enormous difficulties faced by children, as well as adults – both young and mature, who struggle to read and write as a result of suffering from visual stress.

Thank you for taking the time to read my article.

Anne Unger

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