

## Living with Dyslexia

Living with dyslexia is hard, frustrating, challenging. But it is also eye opening, insightful and an opportunity to learn a lot of patience.

I do not have dyslexia, my husband James does.

James and I have been married for thirty four years, and for many years his inability to read anything quickly, by my standards anyway, was a source of frustration for both of us. Books, letters, anything with the written word presented a challenge. When James has to read something, everyone in the house has to be quiet, any noise distracts him and it becomes impossible for him to read. Not easy when you have two children and a dog.

I love reading just about anything. I speed read most of the time and I did well throughout school and university. My inability to empathise caused endless stress. I just could not grasp the challenges James was faced with every time he needed to read something.

Imagine my surprise when James said he wanted to go to go back to school and do Year 12, having left school as soon as he could at 15 y.o. But he pushed on through all the difficulties and received his Senior Certificate. I was so proud of him.

Many years later, I was stunned when he said he wanted to go to University to do a Bachelor Degree in Security, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism. I encouraged him to do it, even though we knew it would mean twice as much time spent reading as most students. We thought that being a subject he was innately interested in, it would be easier. And so began our journey to obtain the B.A. After James received a great result for his first subject, he was very excited. Yes, one down, twenty three subjects to go ! So across many years James studied and finally received his B.A. with excellent results.

That is the good story, but what comes with it is the massive challenge he faced. Hours and hours of reading, research, editing and re-editing assignments. Papers that should probably take about ten hours work would take thirty. He has done all the research and written every paper. I have been James offside throughout this journey. I have read and re-read every assignment over and over to make sure all the words that were going through James' head were actually written on the page. Reading the assignments out loud to James to make sure what he had written is what he intended. Reading copious amounts of text books when he became so stressed that he could not focus on any words to find out where he had seen a quote. Through all this though I got a better understanding of how James's mind worked and the difficulties he was having. I could see all the non-visual words that he missed when writing an assignment. I could see the jumble of ideas with little clarity when on the page. I did not need to know or understand what he was writing about, I just needed to have it make sense.

Then there were the exams !! He could only study for these and of course exams mean pressure and pressure to someone with dyslexia only exacerbates the dyslexia. I think the extra work he did for his assignments got him through the exams. Having to read the same paragraph over and over to see the words correctly and to make sense, it actually embedded the information for later use.

A casual conversation with a family friend who worked in the Education system led to her running some informal tests with James. From this she established that James had dyslexia.

Thank goodness !!! We had a name for it. He was not 'dumb' or a class troublemaker, as described by many a teacher, he had real mechanical reading problems.

He could have received special help/dispensation from the University for his assignments and exams, but he refused to be labelled. So eventually after many years and a break in the middle when we had our two children, James got his BA. He says it is as much mine as it is his, but I am just so proud that he tackled the challenge head on and got through.

I thought that would be the end of it, but no, James was now addicted to study !!! Not the expected path for someone with dyslexia !!!

With a deep breath and some misgivings I agreed he should keep going. This time he wanted to do his Masters in Policing, Intelligence and Counter-terrorism. All while working full time and raising two children. Only eight subjects this time and all research based assessments. No exams ! That was a great piece of news. Only now the assignments were at least three times as big.

Somewhere during this time the idea of getting officially recognised as having dyslexia was discussed and that is how James got in touch with Brenda Baird. Oh my goodness ! Life changing ! Brenda gave James a book to read. "The Gift of Dyslexia" by Ron Davis. I read the book first and it was like someone had written the book with James as the subject. It described James EXACTLY. I had never read anything like it.

It was such a relief to both of us. James still did not tell the University about his dyslexia, but he had renewed vigour to prove you can get a fantastic education even with dyslexia. Finally at the end of two very long years, he received his Masters.

Yes it is A LOT of hard work, but it can be done. His assignments were regularly described as "Insightful", a "great read", "exceptionally detailed". Discussions with Brenda and the great feedback from his lecturers made James realise that dyslexia truly is a gift.

Just as James has 'systems' to help him with dyslexia, I too have found myself changing the way I respond to situations. I find myself automatically reading subtitles on the television out loud because I know James just does not even see them. Documents and school notices come to me to read and then I tell James the short version.

As most people know, "War and Peace" by Leo Tolstoy is a very long book. James became determined to read it. It took him two years, between Uni and life to get through it, but he did. As with the research he did, he would have to read paragraphs over and over until he saw all the words and have it make sense, and from this he got so much out of the book. He loved it, it would have to be his favourite book he has ever read.

I have learnt to be patient with dyslexia and with our children's schooling as well. Not everyone reads and writes like me and I have to remember that when I am helping with primary school and high school homework. James says he feels sorry for people without dyslexia, and I can understand that now. So we live with dyslexia, but it certainly is not a label or a disability that hangs over James. It is just a part of him.

Now James wants to do a PHD. There is no stopping him, and I could not be prouder.

- Leigh Lukac