

What is a Learning Disability?

[Mencap](#) define a learning disability as a 'reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities - for example household tasks, socialising or managing money - which affects someone for their whole life.' Mencap add that 'people with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people. [NHS England](#) state that a learning disability affects the way a person learns new things throughout their life and that a learning disability is different for everyone. No two people are the same. It is not always clear why a person has a learning disability. Sometimes it is because a person's brain development is affected, either before they are born, during their birth or in early childhood. This can be caused by things such as the mother becoming ill in pregnancy; problems during the birth that stop enough oxygen getting to the brain; the unborn baby having genes passed on from its parents that make having a learning disability more likely; and illness, such as meningitis, or injury in early childhood.

Further Information

There are many service offers that people with a learning disability can access in Oldham including those offered by [Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust, Oldham Council](#), and [Northern Care Alliance NHS Foundation Trust](#). [VoiceAbility](#) provide advocacy for people with learning disabilities in Oldham. More guidance and support about learning disabilities and learning difficulties can be found via [Mencap](#), the [Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities](#), [Learning Disability Matters](#), the [NHS](#), [HFT](#), [British Institute of Learning Disabilities \(BILD\)](#), and [Beyond Words](#). Take a look at a [short video from OPAL all about Annual Health Checks](#).

Learning Disability Register

A GP Learning Disability Register is an 'all ages' list including babies, children, young people and adults registered at their local GP practice who have a learning disability (not a learning difficulty). Being on the register does not depend on level of learning disability or a person's needs. If a person does not join the register it means their GP practice may not know about the learning disability. The register alerts the GP practice which of their patients have a learning disability so they can put the appropriate support in place for people and invite them to the relevant check-ups they are entitled to. This might mean reasonable adjustments such as longer appointments at certain times of the day, quieter waiting rooms, support to successfully access health interventions such as immunisations, screening, or blood tests. People with a learning disability have poorer health outcomes; the average age of death is 63 for adults with a learning disability compared to adults without being 82 for men and 86 for women. Anybody on the Learning Disability Register age 14+ is entitled to a free Annual Health Check. Annual Health Checks help early identification of any health needs a person may have. Being on the Learning Disability Register also entitles a person to free Flu and Coronavirus vaccines. The person's carers will also be invited for their vaccines. To find out if a person you support is on the Learning Disability Register you can contact their GP. If the person needs to be added they may need to attend an appointment.

The [Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities](#) state that a person with a learning difficulty may be described as having specific problems processing certain forms of information. The term 'learning difficulties' can often be confusing because there are several different explanations about what a learning difficulty is. The most common types of learning difficulties involve problems with reading, writing, math, reasoning, listening, and speaking. Specific examples are [dyspraxia](#) involving difficulties with movement and coordination; [dyslexia](#) involving difficulties with reading, writing, and speaking; and [dyscalculia](#) involving difficulties with understanding numbers. It is not always easy to identify learning disabilities because of the wide variations, there is no single symptom or profile that can be considered. A person may have more than one learning difficulty and other conditions may also be experienced alongside each other (dyslexia and dyspraxia are often encountered together). There is no definitive record of how many people have learning difficulties due them being hidden disabilities, meaning that the condition is not immediately obvious to others, or even to the person.

Mental Health

If a person has a learning disability, they are more likely to experience mental health problems. There are lots of reasons for this. For example, they may experience negative things, such as abuse. Or face negative attitudes from others. These things could affect their mental health. They may find it harder to get a diagnosis for a mental health problem or to have a mental health problem taken seriously. Professionals may think mental health symptoms are part of the learning disability and people may confuse learning disability with other conditions such as autism.

Importance of a Learning Disability Diagnosis

The majority of people with learning disabilities do not have a formal diagnosis. Diagnosis can be really important and helpful, it ensures that a person can access the correct health interventions and support. For example, annual health checks, vaccinations, specialist services and support if the person is going into hospital. Diagnosis usually happens in childhood. If undiagnosed, a person can become more frustrated and their life can be impacted in terms of their confidence and decision making. A lack of diagnosis can affect how services and professionals respond to people and their behaviours; in some cases, it can lead to criminal pathways being pursued. In cases involving a person with a mental impairment, use of a diversion panel can be explored to see if better partnership working can support the person and meet their needs, rather than the person being criminalised. The [Association for Real Change](#), state that around 10% of the prison population has a diagnosed learning disability and up to 60% have a learning difficulty or communication needs.

Learning Disabilities and Learning Difficulties

What are the Differences?

Distinguishing between learning difficulties and learning disabilities is a complex issue. A learning difficulty does not affect general intelligence, whereas a learning disability is linked to an overall cognitive impairment. Intellectual ability is impacted with a learning disability. A person can have both learning difficulties and disabilities; support needed will be different for each person. People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with others, whereas a learning difficulty is a focus on one aspect of learning such as reading or maths. Trialling different learning styles, methods of providing information and giving them more time to understand can lead to a person with a learning difficulty completing the same tasks as a person without a learning difficulty. People with learning disabilities can live independent lives but may need support to overcome barriers. This could be support from a person or service and may include equipment or communication aids.

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