

Nurses with Dyslexia: Overcoming Challenges and Thriving in the Healthcare Profession

Introduction:

Nursing, as a profession, requires a unique set of skills that encompass effective communication, critical thinking, and organisational skills (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2014). However, for nurses with dyslexia, a learning difficulty (National Health Service (NHS) 2022) impacting reading, writing, and spelling (British Dyslexia Association n.d.), these challenges become even more formidable. This article focuses on the experiences of nurses with dyslexia, shedding light on the distinct challenges they encounter and the resilient strategies they employ to navigate their roles and excel in the healthcare profession.

Understanding Dyslexia:

Dyslexia, a major condition in the wider range of neurodiversity, affects a large part of the population, estimated to be 10% to 20% (Myhill, 2022). This learning difficulty is widely acknowledged to have a genetic origin, signifying that individuals often inherit it rather than acquiring it through environmental factors (British Dyslexia Association, 2012). Despite the common misconceptions, dyslexia is not a condition that is naturally outgrown (Munzer et al. 2020); instead, individuals develop and implement coping strategies to address their challenges throughout their lives (Kannangara 2015).

Research by the British Dyslexia Association (2012, 2021) highlights the hereditary nature of dyslexia, emphasising the importance of recognising and understanding its genetic components. This understanding aids in early identification and facilitates the development of targeted interventions and support systems. By acknowledging dyslexia's genetic background, educators, healthcare professionals, and families can collaborate to create tailored strategies that address the specific needs of individuals with dyslexia, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Figure 1 (adapted from Myhill 2022) presents potential challenges related to dyslexia, providing a visual representation of the multifaceted impact this learning difficulty may have. Acknowledgement of these challenges is essential in establishing comprehensive and effective interventions. Researchers and educators refine these strategies, ensuring that individuals with dyslexia receive the necessary resources to thrive academically and professionally.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that dyslexia is not a single experience but a spectrum with varying impact levels on individuals (Wagner et al 2020). Some individuals may experience more difficulty in specific areas, while others may possess strengths in other cognitive domains (Cowen 2024). This diversity within the dyslexic population highlights the need for personal and flexible support approaches.

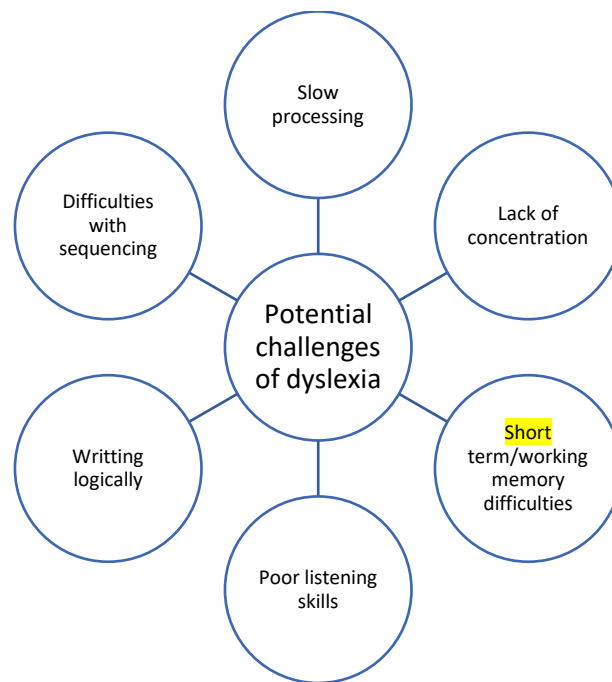


Figure 1 The potential challenges of dyslexia (adapted from Myhill 2022)

In addition to acknowledging the difficulties associated with dyslexia, it is essential to emphasise and recognise the inherent strengths that individuals with dyslexia often possess. Figure 2 provides a valuable visual representation, identifying these strengths and highlighting the positive aspects of dyslexia.

Research and anecdotal evidence consistently show that individuals with dyslexia often show strengths in creative thinking, problem-solving, and spatial reasoning. These cognitive abilities, sometimes referred to as the 'dyslexic advantage' (Eide and Eide 2023) demonstrate that individuals with dyslexia possess unique perspectives and abilities in various domains. Recognising and adopting these strengths is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and diverse society.

Creative thinking, a key component of the dyslexic cognitive profile, is characterised by innovative and out-of-the-box ideas (Cancer et al. 2016). Many successful individuals with dyslexia, such as entrepreneurs, artists, and scientists, attribute their creativity to their unique way of communicating. By acknowledging this aspect, we do not only challenge stereotypes but also encourage the cultivation of environments that possess diverse thinking styles.

Additionally, people with dyslexia often excel in problem-solving (Cancer et al. 2016). Their ability to address challenges from unconventional angles and consider alternative solutions is a testament to the adaptive cognitive abilities they possess. This strength is particularly advantageous in dynamic and complex areas where innovative problem-solving is a key factor of success.

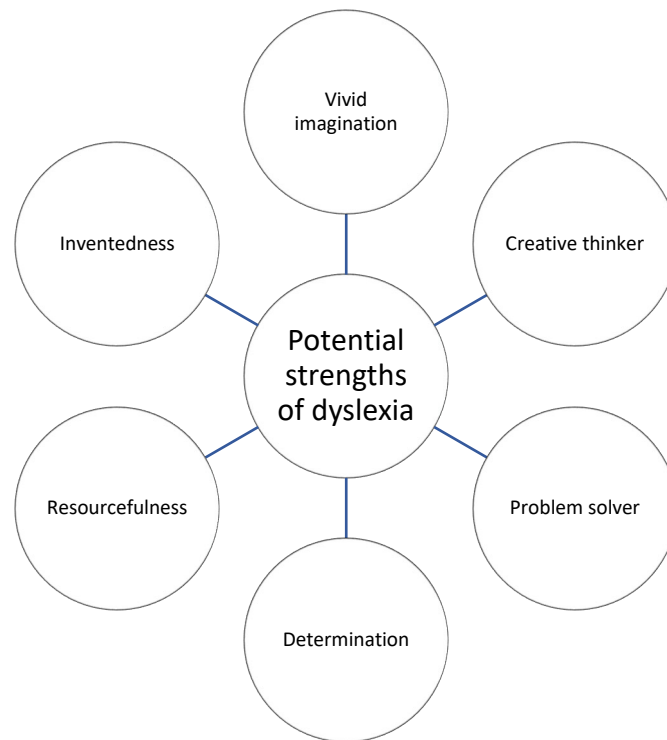


Figure 2 The potential strengths of dyslexia (adapted from Myhill 2022).

So how might dyslexia impact nurses:

Examining dyslexia's impact on nurses presents several challenges that may impact various aspects of their professional duties. Reading medical records and research papers is important for nurses, and for those with dyslexia, this can be a significant obstacle (Jelly, 2014). These documents require high precision, making dyslexia-related difficulties in reading and processing information a potential obstacle to providing optimal patient care.

Also, nurses with dyslexia may encounter written communication challenges, including preparing reports and patient care plans (Major and Tetley 2019a). This aspect is crucial because accurate documentation is essential in the health care environment to maintain continuity of care and ensure effective communication between the healthcare team (Jelly, 2014). The potential difficulties in this area can be exacerbated by communication with colleagues, further complicating the collaborative nature of health care.

Although the prevalence of dyslexia among nurses is not readily available, Major (2019) suggests that up to 70,000 nurses in the NMC register have dyslexia. This estimate highlights the need for increased awareness and support mechanisms within the healthcare industry to address the unique challenges faced by nurses with dyslexia.

Challenges extend beyond the professional role, affecting the quality and performance of nurses with dyslexia (Major 2019). The frustration and stress caused by difficulties in reading, writing, and communication can affect job satisfaction, reducing the enthusiasm and morale of these healthcare professionals (Jelly, 2014).

However, it is essential to recognise that with the implementation of appropriate support systems, accommodations, and a culture of understanding from colleagues and employers, nurses with dyslexia can overcome these difficulties. Providing tailored solutions, such as assistive technologies (Smith and Hattingh 2020), flexible work arrangements, and inclusive training programmes, can empower nurses with dyslexia to not only navigate their professional responsibilities effectively but

also thrive and excel in their chosen field (Jelly, 2014). This approach is not only beneficial to individual nurses, but also helps to foster an inclusive and diverse health environment that reflects the unique strengths each professional brings to the staff.

Coping Strategies for Nurses with Dyslexia:

Coping strategies for nurses with dyslexia are essential for ensuring optimal performance and well-being in the demanding healthcare environment. Implementing effective coping strategies enhances the nurse's ability to overcome obstacles associated with dyslexia and promotes confidence, job satisfaction, and high-quality patient care.

Self-Awareness and Acceptance:

The basis of effective coping strategies for nurses with dyslexia is self-awareness and acceptance (Crouch, 2019). Acknowledgement of dyslexia as a fundamental aspect of their identity marks the initial step towards developing adaptive mechanisms. A crucial aspect of this process is embracing the distinct strengths associated with dyslexia. Despite focusing solely on challenges, nurses with dyslexia often find empowerment in recognising their inherent strengths, such as creative thinking and skilful problem-solving abilities.

This approach is based on the broad concept of neurodiversity, highlighting the diversity of cognitive abilities within the population (Doyle 2020). Embracing self-awareness not only promotes a positive mindset, but also allows nurses with dyslexia to benefit from their strengths, contributing to a more holistic and effective nursing practice.

Doyle (2020) argues that a paradigm shifts towards understanding and appreciating diverse cognitive profiles can lead to the recognition and use of unique strengths associated with conditions such as dyslexia. By recognising these strengths, nurses with dyslexia can lay the groundwork for the development of coping strategies that use their cognitive abilities, improve their professional performance and job satisfaction.

The journey of coping for nurses with dyslexia begins with self-awareness and acceptance, laying the groundwork for embracing strengths that lead to their success in nursing. Through this comprehensive approach, nurses with dyslexia can overcome obstacles and thrive, bringing considerable diversity of thought to the healthcare environment.

Time Management and Organisation:

In nursing, where time management is essential, effective strategies become essential for nurses with dyslexia. Smith and Hattingh (2020) stressed the importance of structured organisational strategies for individuals with dyslexia, aligning with the notion that tailored approaches can significantly improve professional performance.

To manage their workload effectively, nurses with dyslexia often find it useful to include tools that streamline their daily tasks (Major & Tetley, 2019b). Calendars provide a visual representation of deadlines, appointments, and tasks (Smith-Spark & Lewis 2023). The use of scheduling and visualising tasks alleviates the potential stress associated with managing numerous obligations simultaneously (Stein 2022).

Furthermore, using to-do lists is advantageous in reducing complex tasks into manageable components (Myhill 2022). This approach enhances clarity and provides a sense of accomplishment as items are checked off. Prioritisation techniques enable nurses with dyslexia to focus on critical tasks, ensuring that their efforts are focused on high-priority tasks (Major and Tetley 2019b).

The use of such organisational tools aligns with the broader concept of hosting diverse learning styles and cognitive profiles in professional settings. By adapting time management strategies to the needs of nurses with dyslexia, healthcare organisations provide an inclusive environment that provides optimal performance and wellbeing.

Assistive Technology and Tools:

The implementation of assistive technologies is a transformative approach to assist nurses with dyslexia in overcoming challenges in their professional endeavours (Tumilson 2024). Smith and Hattingh (2020) emphasised these tools' effectiveness in addressing the unique needs of individuals with dyslexia, aligning with the broader framework of inclusive technology in healthcare.

Text-to-speech software becomes a powerful tool for nurses with dyslexia, converting written text into audio formats. (RCN 2024) This facilitates enhanced reading comprehension and provides an alternative information assimilation method. Speech recognition software offers a complementary solution by allowing nurses to articulate their thoughts, enabling efficient documentation without the limitations of traditional typing.

Electronic spell-checkers, which are tailored to the specific challenges faced by dyslexia, are essential in ensuring the accuracy of written communication. By providing real-time feedback and correction, these tools enable nurses to express themselves with confidence, reducing potential obstacles in conveying critical information (Wagner et al 2020).

The implementation of such assistance technologies is based on the principles of universal design, fostering a more inclusive workplace for nurses with dyslexia.

Memory Techniques and Note-Taking Strategies:

Recognising the impact of dyslexia on information retention, nurses with this learning difficulty often use memory enhancement techniques to improve their recall abilities. O'Brien and Yeatman (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of such strategies in assisting people with dyslexia, aligning with the broader context of cognitive interventions for enhanced learning.

As a powerful memory technique, visualisation becomes a powerful memory technique, nurses with dyslexia can create images associated with specific details. This enhances the encoding process and provides a unique pathway for retrieval. Another valuable tool involves creating associations or acronyms to help remember complex information. These memory aids the utilisation of patterns and associations, leading to the cognitive abilities of individuals with dyslexia (O'Brien and Yeatman 2020).

Repetition is an essential component of memory consolidation, and nurses with dyslexia often incorporate this strategy into their study schedules. Consistent information revisiting reinforces neural pathways, improving long-term retention (Zhan et al. 2018).

Structured note-taking strategies help nurses with dyslexia prepare and comprehend information. With their visual representation of concepts and relationships, mind maps provide a holistic view of information, facilitating both comprehension and recall. Bullet points provide a concise and organised notetaking format, facilitating clarity and accessibility during review (O'Brien and Yeatman 2020).

Collaborative Learning and Peer Support:

Collaborative learning environment participation is a crucial strategy for nurses with dyslexia, offering multifaceted benefits beyond traditional educational methods. There is a need for collaborative learning (Molina Roldan et al. 2021), aligning with the broader framework of inclusive educational practices.

Participating in group discussions and study groups promotes an environment where nurses with dyslexia can actively contribute and gain ideas from their peers (Major and Tetley, 2019b). The exchange of ideas fosters a deeper understanding of complex concepts and provides a platform for clarifying doubts and addressing potential challenges.

Mentorship programs are an essential component of providing targeted support to nurses and nursing students with dyslexia (Salkeld 2016). Establishing mentor-mentee relationships creates a space for personalised guidance, allowing experienced professionals to share insights and strategies for navigating difficulties associated with dyslexia. This mentorship dynamic enhances the mentee's professional development and helps cultivate a supportive and collaborative workplace culture.

Additionally, collaborative learning environments provide emotional support for nurses with dyslexia. The shared experiences within these groups create a sense of community and understanding, leading to a sense of belonging and support. This emotional support is crucial in fostering the well-being and confidence of nurses with dyslexia, resulting in their overall success (Major 2017).

After examining the various strategies and support systems available to nurses with dyslexia, it is evident that a multifaceted approach is essential to overcome the challenges inherent in this learning difficulty. Collaborative learning environments and peer support networks provide invaluable emotional and educational assistance, fostering a sense of understanding among nurses with dyslexia. However, the journey does not end there. For many nurses, such as myself, the integration of assistive technology and personalised coping strategies has been instrumental in navigating the challenges of nursing practice. Let me share my personal journey as a nurse with dyslexia, highlighting the transformative impact of these tools and strategies on my career.

Personal testimonial:

From the age of nine, I had always considered becoming a nurse. However, as someone with dyslexia, I encountered some unique challenges on my journey to accomplish that dream. Reading textbooks and nursing journals felt like deciphering a code and drafting patient care plans and records seemed like an impossible task at times. However, with perseverance and understanding of dyslexia, I have found my own coping strategies to navigate the complexities of my nursing career as a general practice nurse and now as an academic lecturer with confidence.

It was not until I began my master's degree at university when I was diagnosed with dyslexia. I had completed school, college, and my BSc in Nursing, and it was not identified. I was 5 years in my career as a general practice nurse when I started my master's and it was here, after submitting my first assignment that the lecturer suggested I might be dyslexic and recommended screening. I was shocked at this possibility, but it made sense. As I said, through my training reading textbooks and nursing journals, it was not easy to me, even though I enjoy reading fiction books for pleasure.

Receiving the diagnosis at university and at 27 left me with mixed emotions, with many questions, but it also explained a lot. It also provided me with the opportunity to find my own solutions to help me cope with the challenges I had been facing.

For me, the use of assistive technology has been a game changer. Speech recognition software let me document my assignments without typing, and even now in my role as lecturer, speech recognition helps when creating large documents of work. Electronic spell checkers tailored to dyslexia ensure the accuracy of my written communication, eliminating barriers and enabling me to express myself with confidence. Similarly, using certain dyslexic fonts has made reading larger pieces of text easier.

In addition to technology, I have embraced memory-enhancing techniques and note-taking strategies to enhance my learning and retention, as this is something I struggle with, remembering numbers three or more digits is particularly challenging. Visualisation has become an invaluable tool, enabling me to encode and retrieve information effectively. I have developed a systematic approach to studying and comprehending complex concepts through repetition and structured notes. However, the most significant source of support has been collaborative learning and peer support. Engaging in group discussions with others with dyslexia has also enriched my understanding of nursing concepts, as well as providing a sense of camaraderie and understanding. Peer support has enabled me to seek guidance from individuals who have similar experiences who understand the distinct challenges I face as a nurse with dyslexia.

Together, these strategies have enabled me to thrive in my nursing career despite the difficulties caused by dyslexia. Although the journey has not been without its challenges, I have learnt to embrace my strengths and leverage them to provide exceptional care to my patients. My experience is a testament to the courage and determination of nurses with dyslexia, and I am proud to be a part of a profession that values diversity and inclusion.

Conclusion:

Nurses with dyslexia face unique challenges in their professional lives, but with the right support and coping strategies, they can thrive in healthcare. Embracing their strengths, utilising assistive technology, and seeking assistance from peers and employers enable these nurses to overcome obstacles and provide exceptional care to their patients. It is essential for healthcare and higher educational institutes to recognise the needs of nurses with dyslexia and provide necessary support systems to ensure their success.

Coping strategies such as self-awareness, acceptance, integration of assistive technologies, and collaborative learning environments play a crucial role in empowering nurses to excel in their roles. Embracing the strengths associated with dyslexia, such as creative thinking and problem-solving abilities, promotes a more inclusive and diverse healthcare environment that values the unique perspectives each nurse brings.

By fostering a culture of understanding, providing tailored adjustments, and promoting collaborative learning, healthcare organisations can create environments where nurses with dyslexia can navigate their professional responsibilities effectively and contribute meaningfully to high-quality patient care.

The journey of nurses with dyslexia is one of resilience, determination, and empowerment. By embracing their strengths, utilising supportive resources, and fostering inclusive environments, these nurses not only enhance the healthcare profession but also inspire others with their remarkable contributions. Supporting nurses with dyslexia is not just about overcoming challenges; it is about enriching the healthcare field with diverse talents and perspectives, ultimately leading to better patient outcomes and a stronger, more empathetic healthcare system.

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