

**Kathleen Dunbar, MA, CHT, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #MFT 39880**

**Offices:** Throughout California and Florida via Telehealth; San Francisco; Marin **Phone:** (415) 668-5130

**Web:** [www.kathleendunbar.net](http://www.kathleendunbar.net)

**Email:** [kathleen@kathleendunbar.net](mailto:kathleen@kathleendunbar.net)

**Web:** [www.dyslexicselfesteem.com](http://www.dyslexicselfesteem.com)

## **About Dyslexia—for Healthcare Professionals Working with Dyslexic Clients\***

**You May Have Dyslexics in Your Practice and Not Know! 1 in 5 People Are Dyslexic**

**By Kathleen Dunbar, Certified Hakomi Therapist, MFT #39880**

**Offices throughout California via Telehealth, and in San Francisco and Marin**

**Website:** <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com>

**Website:** <https://kathleendunbar.net>

**\*For an in-depth guide to working with dyslexic, visit:** <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com/a-guide-for-therapists>

I am passionate about raising awareness about dyslexia and dyslexic clients we may have in our practices and not even know it—and our clients may not even know it themselves, only that they struggled greatly in school! Dyslexia is very prevalent—1 in 5 people are dyslexic. It is a learning difference—it is not a learning disability. There's a lot we can do as therapists to recognize and support the healing of our dyslexic clients, both adults and kids. I offer the following condensed article about dyslexia, which is one of my specialties. **There might be some info in this article that surprises you!** Please feel free to visit my website—**there's a lot of information, it's free, there's an audio on every dyslexic page** for those who would rather listen than read, and you can download all the audios for free. <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com>

Richard Branson, founder of Virgin, is one of many outspoken prominent dyslexics bringing awareness to the amazing gift of neurodiversity that dyslexia gives, and the lifelong emotional difficulties dyslexics have arising out of what is the common dyslexic experience of “the hell of school.” As he has spoken about in a recent video, the educational system hasn't really changed much since he was a boy! In addition to many teachers, even special ed teachers, not being in the know about the best way to teach dyslexics, I have found that many therapists aren't aware of what dyslexia really is, it's prevalence—new studies show 15%-20% of the population—and the profound and lifelong emotional impact of the education system on dyslexics.

We are not taught this in grad school. In fact, in our own field for instance in California, the CAMFT website search function offers many specific specialty options for clients searching for therapists, including autism, ADHD, etc., and NONE specifically for dyslexics, who are lumped into the category “LD.” I plan to make a suggestion to CAMFT soon to address this in their search categories. **One of the ways many dyslexics have learned to survive the school system is to become invisible as a protection.** It is important as practitioners that we reach out consciously and inclusively to understand who in our practice is dyslexic, who may be and doesn't know it, and the unique hurts and support needed by our dyslexic clients.

**Studies now show 1 in 5 kids is dyslexic.  
15% to 20% of the adult populations is dyslexic.**

That's a lot of folks. Some dyslexics don't know that they are dyslexic because they haven't been offered appropriate testing. Many dyslexics kids and adults don't know that, while having tradeoffs, **dyslexia is a gift that gives them distinct advantages. It is a learning difference, it is *not* a learning disability!** Sadly, some have come to believe the erroneous messages they got in school that they were “stupid” or “dumb.” They may not be aware of the long history of their dyslexic brothers and sisters whose creativity

and innovation have helped humanity. When dyslexics are supported to tap their potential, they thrive and shine. Their amazing thinking and ability to problem solve are needed even more right now with the many crisis our planet faces.

## The Dark Woods—Common Issues for Dyslexics

Schooling and peer perceptions can leave heavy wounds and distorted thinking. Even if someone has found their stride as an adult, they may often still struggle, especially at stressful times, with the following. Here is a list of struggles that dyslexics contend with. To learn more both about how that particular struggle may show up for dyslexics clients, and for some suggestions and help along the way, please visit the website at: <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com/self-esteem-and-healing-hurt>

- **Low Self Esteem**
- **Being Invisible and Difficulty Asking for Help**
- **Grief, Loss, Intense Sorrow and Almost Unfathomable Pain**
- **Anger**
- **“Imposter Syndrome”**
- **Anxiety, Fear, PTSD, Trauma and Panic Attacks**
- **Not Believing You Have A Positive Future, Not Knowing Who You Really Are**

## Neural Differences—How the Dyslexic Brain Works

### Reading and Handwriting

There are real differences in the dyslexic brain. One difference involves the left brain. For nondyslexics, it is in their left brain that words are “decoded” or read silently or aloud, and “encoded” or written. Dyslexics don’t use their left brain in the same way, and thus have **difficulty in phonetic decoding—turning symbols into a sound in the brain and then stringing them together to compose a word, and in encoding or writing.**

Reading and handwriting are about transfer of information, they are not about expression nor about intelligence. Dyslexics need a different approach to help them to read and write which plays off their strengths, especially their ability to see things three dimensionally. For example, making three dimensional blocks of letters, or using their arm and hand to write a giant letter in the air are a few of many helpful ways to learn the alphabet. Dyslexics benefit from being taught with methods that utilize their strengths.

Depending on the intensity of their dyslexia, dyslexics often reach a ceiling in their ability to read and with their handwriting. For example, some people with dyslexia may always have handwriting that is almost illegible even to themselves. Some successful dyslexics have never been able to read more than a book or two in their lives. However, these *same* people may become wonderful writers and produce great books, like naturalist and artist Jack Laws who has recently published the wonderful *Laws Field Guide to The Sierra Nevada*.

### Big Picture Thinking and “Minitowers”

Another difference is in **neural structure in the brain**. Neurons are set up in **columns, or “minitowers,”** in the brain. These tall thin neural towers, roughly parallel to one another with their tops pointing to the surface of the brain tissue they are located in, are spaced **farther apart** than the general population. This means that the **neural signals have to travel over a greater distance** to make connections between the synapses. This creates an **advantage**—an inborn, great ability to: get the “gist” of problems, dilemmas, creative ideas, trends and human interactions quickly and accurately; have 3-D or spatial thinking; be a creative and accurate big picture thinker, connect ideas, and think outside the box.

### Creativity, Insight and The Power of Daydreaming

Dyslexics have **an innate gift for insight**. Insights are those Eureka! or Ah Ha! moments where a relaxed right brain suddenly makes novel and perhaps distant connections to solve problems. While nondyslexics can do this, this strength is built right into the dyslexic brain. They naturally think this way. This is one of their amazing strengths. They combine their great pattern recognition (the gift of those long neural signals) and their natural ability to have insight to come up with unexpected answers and new ways of seeing. Think of Picasso's paintings, Einstein's theories, and Mozart's music. Dyslexics just "get it all at once" after a process akin to reflection, relaxation and daydreaming. This process is right brained. It's quite different than logical, cause-and-effect thinking. Dyslexics' dynamic ability to come up with answers in this way are often misunderstood by others, especially in school settings, as them being "lazy" or "not applying themselves." Others may see them "staring out the window" and not realize that this is how they process. This amazing right-brained-using learning difference is a gift.

## M.I.N.D. Strengths—Dyslexic Strengths Explained

**Brock L. Eide, MD and Fernet F. Eide, MD** in their book *The Dyslexic Advantage* describe four different thinking and processing styles that are found in dyslexia: **Material, Interconnected, Narrative and Dynamic Reasoning**. They have an acronym for the four styles: **M.I.N.D. Strengths**. Each dyslexic person has their own unique combination and degree of these styles and the tradeoffs that accompany them. I've drawn the information below from the Eides' great book—please listen to or read their book for an in-depth understanding. Dean Bragonier offers the following brief video describing the four strengths: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8ijgzCijw&feature=youtu.be>

### Material Reasoning and M-Strengths

Definition:

Great spatial or 3-D reasoning.

- Think of looking at a blueprint on a page. A **dyslexic with M-strengths will look at the blueprint and quickly be able to see it as a complete, three dimensional building**. While non-dyslexics can learn to do this, a dyslexic person will do this with ease and artistry, like world famous architect Richard Rogers. Some dyslexics are visual. Others are more kinesthetic and feel things. **Dyslexics with M-strengths can make a 3-D model in their mind and are able to "test" it out in their mind to find and correct flaws long before production!**
- A famous dyslexics with M-strengths is Einstein.
- M-strength dyslexics make great mathematicians, engineers, designers, architects, mechanics, contractors, surgeons, painters, sculptors, photographers, pilots, filmmakers and directors. Dyslexics can have great talent in sports which are essentially 3-D expressions of the body.
- Tradeoffs include symbol reversals and subtle language challenges. M-strength people may be late bloomers in the classroom (Einstein did poorly in math) but show amazing creativity outside school.

### Interconnected Reasoning and I-Strengths

Definition:

Seeing unique connections that others often miss.

Using different perspectives and approaches to create a big-picture view.

- Because of the greater distances that the neural signals travel in the dyslexic brain, **dyslexics with I-strengths are great at making unusual and creative connections between things**. The Eides write that people with I-strengths possess the "ability to see how phenomenon (like objects, ideas, events or experiences) are related to each other, either by *likeness* (similarity) or *togetherness* (that is, association, like correlation or cause and effect). **"They have the ability to see phenomenon from multiple perspectives and many disciplines and unite all sorts of information about a particular idea into a big picture view to "determine its gist."**
- Douglas Merrill, who struggled greatly with school, went on to Princeton where he did groundbreaking research about learning, decision-making and artificial intelligence. His incredible

problem-solving abilities lead him to eventually serve as an early CEO of Google.

- I-strength fields include computer or software design, all sorts of scientists, inventors, clothing and fashion designers, dancers and choreographers, musicians, actors, comedians, trainers and people in the fields of history, political science, sociology, anthropology and philosophy.
- Tradeoffs can include some difficulty with fast fine-detail processing.

## Narrative Reasoning and N-Strengths

Definition:

Being able to create vivid mental scenes to display important ideas and concepts from the past, present and future.

Having a great personal memory (a.k.a episodic memory).

Being able to write so vividly that others imagine it clearly.

- **Dyslexics with strong N-strengths turn experience into long term memories by using episodic or personal memory.** This means that they store factual memories in a form that supplies **context** to the facts. For them, remembering stimulates events, episodes or experiences that they've had. Remembering is like "restaging mental scenes" from bits of past personal experience. The Eides' definition: "Episodic memory has a highly narrative or 'scene-based' format in which concepts and ideas are conceived or recalled as experiences." **This is different than creating long term memory semantically or impersonally** as abstract data with no context or experience, as in remembering by rote fact that the Magna Carta was signed in 1216. A dyslexic using personal memory has access to an incredibly rich storehouse of personal experience. They excel not only at remembering the past but the ability to "imagine the future, solve problems, test the fitness of proposed inventions or plans, or create imaginary scenarios and stories." **They have the ability to assemble and re-assemble multiple aspects of experience and use their memory in unique recombinatory and artistic ways, for example to create poetry, novels and screenplays.**
- Pulitzer Prize winning poet Philip Schultz is dyslexic. Musician John Lennon was dyslexic. Anne Rice is a dyslexic who has used her N-strengths to write the twenty-seven books in her series that begin with *Interview with the Vampire*.
- N-strengths occupations include poets, songwriters, novelists, journalists, screenwriters, counselors and therapists, coaches, teachers, public speakers, game designers, attorneys, sales and marketing folks, and public relations.
- Dyslexics drawing from N-strengths may struggle to remember things by rote or "bare semantic facts" and instead excel when they store things by using episodic memory and personal experience.

## Dynamic Reasoning and D-Strengths

Definition:

Taking information and accurately making predictions about the past and the future.

The ability to notice patterns, even where some information is *missing*, and *correctly make predictions*.

Understanding how to deal with change and uncertainty from looking at qualitative data.

Having and following insight.

- D-strengths add an additional **predictive** ability to N-Strengths. **It is the ability to look at information and using episodic memory to accurately predict outcomes in the future** (very handy for things like predicting financial markets) **or the past** (as in the work of geologists and paleontologists) rather than using cause-and-effect linear reasoning. It is very helpful when chunks of information are missing or unavailable, as dyslexics with D-strengths not only get the "gist" but can understand outcomes and antecedents without having access to all of the information.
- Vince Flynn struggled mightily in school, but was determined to become a writer. He was author of twelve counterterrorism-themed novels. His ability to predict and express were so startling that after his publication of *Memorial Day* he was contacted by officials at the Department of Energy because they were certain he must have been fed classified information!

- D-strength dyslexics find occupations as entrepreneurs, CEOs, venture capitalists, small business owners, business consultants, tax planners and CFOs, economists, doctors (especially immunology, rheumatology, endocrinology, oncology), farmers and ranchers.
- Dyslexics with D-strengths use their powers of intuition. They may be seen as being “passive” or “daydreaming” while they “stare out the window” as nondyslexics may misunderstand the nature of the way they “work.” They arrive at accurate answers quickly, but sometimes must learn how to explain to others the steps to arrive at their surprising and accurate conclusions.

## Did you know:

- **Dyslexics excel in the fields of:**
  - arts and humanities
  - architecture
  - engineering and science
  - entrepreneurship .
- **Some statistics:**
  - **Dyslexia runs in families.**
  - **32% of students with dyslexia/LD** drop out of high school or do not receive a regular diploma.
  - **50% of youth in the juvenile justice system** have dyslexia/LD.
  - **60% of adolescents in drug and alcohol rehabilitation** have dyslexia/LD.
  - **35% of entrepreneurs** have dyslexia.
  - **At the nations top engineering school** dyslexia is known as the “**MIT Disease.**”
  - **40% of self made millionaires** have dyslexia.
  - **Over 50% of NASA employees** are dyslexic.
  - **80% of popular opinion** still associates dyslexia with some form of “mental retardation”—this is not true.
- **With the proper support**, dyslexics can discover their important gifts and find their sense of aliveness. They have gifts that can help transform the world.
- **Made by Dyslexia Pledge** Follow the link to read and share the Made by Dyslexia Pledge for companies, educators and governments to pledge to value dyslexic thinking, and to begin taking positive steps towards supporting dyslexia:  
<https://www.madebydyslexia.org/assets/downloads/MadeByDyslexiaPledge.pdf>

## What to Learn as a Therapist

Finding the right therapist-client fit is important. To support dyslexic clients to heal into discovering their gifts means learning more about what dyslexia is and common issues for dyslexics. Because of the lack of support and understanding in school and the shame they take on, dyslexics often learn to hide their neurodiversity. **They may not tell a therapist about being dyslexic until specifically asked about their experience in school and any learning differences they may have. Clients may not talk about school at all!** However, the impact of the school system on their self esteem and possible PTSD and trauma may be **very significant**. I recently learned about one highly successful dyslexic accompanying his friend to a group meeting in which a book was passed around for everyone to read from. It was profoundly triggering for him to have to say, “Pass,” because his reading is very slow. This was very activating for him for several days. And then there was the assumption by the group that everyone can read easily. As another example, actor Henry Winkler struggles every time he is reading through scripts aloud with fellow actors and he misses words, sees words that aren’t there, and is very slow. As practitioners we need to understand dyslexia, how widespread it is, and the particular needs of dyslexic clients.

### Important screening questions for prospective therapists:

I suggest the following questions for dyslexics to ask a prospective therapist. As a therapist, what would

your answers be to the following questions? Are you aware that if you routinely ask clients to give written responses to questionnaires and various forms pre- and post-session that it could be very triggering if they can't easily write the answers? Here are the questions:

- What is your understanding of dyslexia?
- What is your understanding of the dyslexic experience of school?
- Have you worked with adult dyslexics or youth?
- What kinds of approaches do you use with dyslexics?
- Do you have training in working with trauma?

## **Dyslexics Benefit Greatly from *both* a Therapist, and a Mentor/Coach who is also Dyslexic**

### **Team Players**

I'm a team player as a therapist, bringing in various kinds of professionals to support client treatment goals. Dyslexics benefit from therapy which supports their specific needs. **They also benefit tremendously when they have a mentor/coach who is also dyslexic who has succeeded.**

### **Therapist:**

I became interested in dyslexia because my partner, Joseph Feusi, is profoundly dyslexic and profoundly amazing. **In my practice I work with dyslexic adults in the SF Bay Area and throughout California via Telehealth. I am available worldwide as a consultant for professionals who work with dyslexic clients. Joseph and I have created a website specifically dedicated to raising awareness about dyslexia. Our website offers one of the most complete resources for dyslexics seeking to learn about the gifts and challenges of their neurodiversity.** In addition to information regarding what dyslexia is and how the dyslexic mind works, we include information on the emotional and psychological impact of going through the school system and growing up dyslexic. For example, dyslexics often experience a unique set of difficulties involving low self esteem, trauma and PTSD, can become "invisible," feel like an "imposter" when they are in fact quite brilliant, and experience great grief and loss. Our website offers information on each of these, and also suggestions for support regarding each. These aspects of the emotional impact as well as positive ideas for support for the dyslexic experience is needed in our therapeutic practices! You can learn many things in depth, for free, on our website dedicated to the dyslexic experience: <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com> and more about me at <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com/about-kathleen-dunbar-psychotherapist-and-consultant>

### **Peer Mentor/Coach:**

Eye To Eye has developed a **coalition of mentoring programs for students with learning differences by students who have learning differences.** Check them out at: <https://eyetoeyenational.org>

### **Professional Mentor/Coach**

**It can be a profoundly healing, transformative and life changing experience for someone who is dyslexic—youth or adult—to be mentored by another dyslexic who is successful and experienced.** The educational system, which is often to date not fully supportive for dyslexic kids, focuses on achievement and of course parents want their kids to learn. However, over and over, dyslexics suffer a huge hit to their self esteem. Joseph, a successful dyslexic himself, focuses on helping his dyslexic clients build self esteem. He knows this road from the inside out. He is great at inspiring and supporting his clients in practical step by step ways, and has a wealth of information, experience and intuition on tap to take them through to believing in themselves and achieving their dreams. **Joseph works as a Mentor/Coach with both dyslexic youth and dyslexic adults (as well as a general Mentor/Coach) in San Francisco, Marin, and Worldwide via phone, Skype and Zoom. He is also available as a consultant for professionals who work with dyslexic clients.** Joseph has been a Mentor/Coach since 1994. You can find out more info about his work with dyslexics by going to the following link: <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com/about-joseph-feusi-mentor-and-consultant>

Please feel free to let either Joseph or I know if you have any questions.

## **Kathleen Dunbar MFT#39880, Certified Hakomi Therapist**

**Offices in San Francisco and Marin, and throughout California via Telehealth**

**Available worldwide as a consultant for professionals who work with dyslexic clients**

**Specialties:** Experiential Psychotherapy, Mindfulness, Somatics, Hakomi, Healing Trauma, Attachment Work, Creative Expression, Continuum, Dyslexia, Parts Work, Psychodrama, Biodynamic Cranial Touch, The Tamura Method, Energy Work, Archetypal and Shamanic Work

**Phone:** 415-668-5130

**Email:** [kathleen@kathleendunbar.net](mailto:kathleen@kathleendunbar.net)

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**Web:** [www.kathleendunbar.net](http://www.kathleendunbar.net)

*If you ask me what I came into this life to do, I will tell you: I came to live out loud. —Émile Zola*

## **Joseph Feusi, Motivational Mentor since 1994**

**Available in the San Francisco Bay Area and worldwide via phone, Skype and Zoom**

**Specialties:** Mentoring for dyslexic adults and youth; consulting for professionals who work with dyslexic clients

**Phone:** 907-562-7353

**Email:** [joseph@motivationalmentor.com](mailto:joseph@motivationalmentor.com)

**Web:** <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com>

**Web:** <https://motivationalmentor.com>

*A mentor is needed whenever creativity needs a jump start and effort needs to be sustained. It has been my experience that people's dreams are more often possible than not. The adventure is to take your dreams from possibility to reality. Bringing a dream into the world is an adventure. It has more passion, risk, fear, excitement, fun and joy than anything else in life!—Joseph Feusi*