

Chapter 21

Understanding Nonverbal Learning Disabilities in Postsecondary Students with Spina Bifida

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning to life after high school can be challenging for most young adults, even more so for individuals with a nonverbal learning disability (NLD). However, careful planning can lead to success. Friends, family members, employers, college instructors, therapists, and other service providers need information and methods to support individuals with NLD, particularly those with spina bifida (SB). A review of NLD characteristics, effects on student learning, non-awareness and misconceptions of NLD, and effective supports for individuals with NLD (e.g., accommodations, agendas and checklists, assistive technology) will be illustrated via the example of one young college student with NLD and SB. MAP (Making Action Plans) and PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope)—research-based strategies and tools for transition planning and progress monitoring of teens and young adults with NLD and SB—as well as methods to self-advocate to obtain assistance from others academically, physically, socially, and emotionally will be demonstrated.

INTRODUCTION

Caitlyn, age 18, returns home from her full day of classes as a college freshman. She does not yet have a driver's license, so her father transports her in their wheelchair-accessible van. She glares at her mother with her dark eyes, reporting that she got lost on campus today. Close to tears, she relays that they also had a substitute professor in orchestra, and they had not set up a wheelchair lift to the stage for the pre-concert practice. The substitute professor told her to go to a practice room or sit and watch the rest

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1213-5.ch021

of the orchestra practice. On top of that, her dad was a few minutes late to pick her up, and she had a paper to write that night on a topic that was confusing for her—intelligent design. Caitlyn continues to ruminate over these things and gets even more upset. Her mom knows that unless she intervenes, Caitlyn will continue to perseverate on these events in her mind until she gags and throws up. She encourages Caitlyn to take deep, slow breaths and breathes along with her while talking about what's for dinner, what came in the mail, and plans for the weekend. Caitlyn calms down a bit, but throughout the evening, she continues to bring up each of these events that were changes from her normal routine. While trying to focus on her paper, Caitlyn expresses that she feels confused and overwhelmed by the events of the day. Her mom, careful not to let her get too upset, listens but is ready to intervene with more controlled breathing, if needed. She repeatedly cues Caitlyn to stay focused on her paper until she finally completes it, after which they resume their evening routine, which is what Caitlyn needs most. As Caitlyn gets ready for bed, she reviews her day again with frustration and some tears. Her mother listens, reassures, and reminds her that things should be better tomorrow. Caitlyn soon falls asleep, exhausted.

Change comes easier for some people than others. The events that were out of routine for Caitlyn might frustrate any student during the day. Any college freshman may share these experiences and be upset (although not all would be excluded from a class experience due to lack of wheelchair accessibility). However, the interpretation and response to people's actions and events of the day differ for students with NLD (nonverbal learning disabilities). New, novel, and out-of-routine events can be overwhelming, even exhausting. Caitlyn, who thrives on routine, could not "let it go." Her response was much more intense and long lasting than would be the case for a student without NLD.

One of Caitlyn's doctors summarized this challenge by stating that Caitlyn uses her full energy—physically, neurologically, and emotionally—just to make it through her day. Changes (even seemingly small ones) take longer to process neurologically, cause anxiety and fear, and are generally avoided if possible. Routine is essential. Although Caitlyn copes better with change than she did in elementary and high school, substantial mental and physical energy is still needed just to manage the variations of her day. Adding to that are the physical challenges that come with having spina bifida (SB) and other medical conditions. Caitlyn is often fatigued by evening, even on a typical day. When the routine changes, she may be able to "hold it in" for the day, which also requires much energy, but the emotional explosion occurs once she is home (Tyler & Russell, 2005).

Caitlyn is not alone with her daily challenges; these experiences and reactions are common for individuals with NLD. This chapter provides information about NLD in general as well as characteristics of NLD specific to individuals with SB. Also included are explanations about how NLD impacts learning and all areas of development in addition to various tools, supports, and resources to optimize these students' learning experiences. Postsecondary educators, college administrators, professionals in other disciplines, family members, and students with NLD themselves would benefit from knowledge about this learning disability and the use of strategies, tools, and resources referenced. Students with special needs can best advocate for themselves if they have full knowledge of their disability, how it impacts their learning and daily needs, and how best to convey this information to others. Self-disclosure is also essential to obtain appropriate supports. Postsecondary faculty, staff, administrators, student support providers, and family members must recognize the neurologically based nonverbal learning needs in students with NLD and appropriately support them to foster their success in the postsecondary learning environment and in life. This chapter will provide the following:

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