

# **Learning Difficulties**

*and Associated Conditions Explained  
with YOGA CASE STUDIES*

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## ***Foreword***

Many of the causes of learning difficulties are not known at this time and some are simply the result of the individual falling at an extreme end of what is known as a normal distribution. But what is becoming increasingly clear is that no matter what the difficulty, it is possible to learn and most importantly, it is possible to learn to learn better.

A lot of work in Special Education is now beginning to focus on strategies for helping individuals become better, more effective learners. I believe YOU & ME Yoga has a definite and valuable contribution to make here, providing a framework for most disabled to access the proven and profound benefits of Yoga.

This handbook deals with some of the more common situations associated with learning difficulties. References are given for general information and to provide contact addresses for the various charities and family network groups.

Tom Williams

Chartered Educational Psychologist

## ***Preface***

This text was originally published for the YOU & ME Trainers' pilot-project in 1995-7. Trainers included a Community Nurse, Occupational Therapist, Day Services Officers, teachers, a Gateway Club Leader and volunteers. This material proved to be of value to the members of the interdisciplinary team. Community Nurse Elaine Harding said: "I learnt more from this material about people with learning difficulties than I ever knew before during my 20 years nursing career, it is clear and very informative."

In the early days of my career, I was unfamiliar with the different physical types of persons with Down's syndrome and Autism, yet gained valuable knowledge through years of working with those with such special needs. My reason for writing this book was to provide future yoga trainers with essential information about these different types of learning difficulties, along with associated conditions such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, aural and visual impairment, and challenging behaviour problems. The book provides case studies by practitioners and qualified YOU & ME Trainers who have used the system in their work place. The case studies are presented in the individuals' personal styles and according to their own experiences.

This book provides YOU & ME Yoga trainers with the necessary health and safety requirements of the Open College.

Maria Gunstone

## **Part One Down's Syndrome**

### **Atlanto-axial joint instability**

This joint is between the first two vertebrae of the neck, just below the skull. Due to ligament laxity this joint can become unstable. If this is the case, the degree of neck movements needs to be limited to avoid damage to the spinal cord...

### **Communication**

Many of the students have problems knowing the names of the body parts and they pick this up quickly through YOU & ME Yoga. This is useful as they may need to explain what is concerning or hurting them. For example, if they can name whether their tummy hurts, or their chest, or their elbow, or their palm, or even which finger hurts them - it helps improve their communication...

## **Part Two Autism**

People with autism share a common difficulty in making sense of their life, environment and experience. They have an unusual interpretation of life, and this can be imagined from the view-point of "I'm watching you" really meaning to them "You're watching me." As infants they show no desire to be cuddled, nor do they give any sign of recognition. The young do not play with other children, and adults do not relate to their peers. Many of them neither use nor respond to speech, and they also have difficulty with non-verbal communication, being apparently unable to interpret the messages and signals most of us take for granted, such as facial expressions, gestures and tones of voice...

These children usually find it hard to watch each other while working as a group. The breathing and the Postures encourage them to do this...

Lack of motivation to do any form of physical exercise, despite the fact that they have no physical disabilities and are mostly robust and healthy-looking, makes autistic children generally very unfit. They are lethargic, and their Posture and general muscle tone is poor. Yoga gives them regular exercise in a controlled stress-free environment, and helps to improve their Posture and muscle tone, as well as giving them control over their breathing, which in turn helps blood circulation and lung function...

### **Part Three Cerebral Palsy**

Cerebral palsy means paralysis of the brain, caused by damage to a maturing brain up to the age of two. It is not known to be inherited. It especially affects those parts of the brain which control the movement of arms and legs, so that the limbs are either very floppy, or, more often, very tight and tense...

We can all see improvements in Jane especially in that she hasn't found it so tiring. When we first started, half-way through we'd have to stop since we couldn't do all seven movements. In the beginning we only tried to practise a movement once, and we have gradually worked up to practising a full sequence of seven movements, six times each. And originally her Postures did not look nearly as good as they do now. In the beginning, Jane's arms and legs were flying all over the place, whereas now she can consciously relax completely during the relaxation period, keeping her whole body perfectly still...

### **Part Four Deafness and Visual Disabilities**

There are three major types of deafness these are conductive, sensorineural or mixed a combination of the previous two. Deafness can be present from birth or acquired later in life. It is also categorised in degrees of severity from profound to partial. The deaf community has two distinct cultures; people who sign, and people who speak. There are many variations in between such as people who speak and sign...

- Minimise background noise. Echoes, numerous sounds and talking can be very confusing...
- Make sure you know about the learner's functional hearing e.g. if the learner hears better on one side than the other, sit or stand on this side when explaining or giving support...

According to RNIB Multiple Disability Services approximately 500,000 people with learning difficulties could be registered as blind or partially sighted. A further 50,000 would benefit from the use of spectacles or contact lenses...

- YOU & ME Yoga provides a clear structure which can be very helpful for a person with learning difficulties and visual impairment. Make sure that this structure is emphasised initially. When learners are familiar with the structure, they can often understand and predict the sequence of movements that follow, make choices about positions, or lead a partner or group...

## **Part Five Multiple Disabilities**

Elaine Harding, Community Nurse reports: ‘To compensate for the various degrees of multiple disabilities among this large group of eleven clients, I requested advice from Diane Young, Occupational Therapist, and also support from at least one Day Service Officer from the Centre...’

‘On the teaching video you can see one of the clients, John who had no speech, limited mobility with feet turned, hardly able to stand to walk at all. He is now able to walk and talk better and even his understanding of language ability to follow instruction has improved immensely, thereby empowering him to attend classes at West Cumbria College with a support worker. In fact, most of my clients who appear on the video, who did the YOU & ME Foundation Level 1 programme are now attending mainstream classes at West Cumbria College, Lily Hall, in Distington...’

## **Part Six Challenging Behaviour**

Special Needs trainers are frequently confronted with all types of challenging behaviour. The following cases are given by three trainers. One who works in a college and the other two who work together in a daycentre...