

DYSLEXIA AND THE DSM-5

I ran into this issue again and I wanted to share some facts with people regarding the use of the term “dyslexia” and the DSM-5.

The popular narrative has been that the DSM-5 got rid of dyslexia as a diagnosis, or dropped the term in a way that harmed those who advocate for others with dyslexia. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most of the people repeating these claims have never seen a DSM and if they have, they never read it. As far as I can tell, this version of reality was popular for a time on social media and lots of people have accepted it as true.

The DSM-5 uses the term Specific Learning Disability, and then requires a second code to specify the nature of the disability. One of three options is to code “with impairment in reading.” That is the preferred way to use the DSM-5, however, it specifically states in that same section:

“Dyslexia is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities.” (p.67, DSM-5)

Dyslexia is an acceptable, equivalent, alternative name for the same condition.

The popular narrative also implies that the condition was called “dyslexia” previously, but the DSM-5 changed that in the latest version. I have the previous version of the DSM and it didn’t use the term dyslexia anywhere, either as the preferred term or as an alternative. Older versions I’ve found were the same. The popular narrative that dyslexia is being eliminated as a term is wrong. The current revision has not eliminated the term. If anything, it has become more acceptable and formalized. The DSM-5 diagnostic standards for SLD with impairment in reading are excellent and reflect the latest advancements in the field. Dyslexia has not been weakened or gone away in the DSM-5.

Some groups and individuals have used the false but popular claims about the DSM-5 to argue that we shouldn’t be talking about dyslexia, or that dyslexia is an old and misleading term. They’ve tried to argue that the best practice now is to diagnose SLD without being more specific, and to avoid a focus on reading and what we used to call dyslexia. These groups and individuals are either ill-informed or willfully ignorant. In either case, they’re wrong. If you encounter any, I hope these few facts help you brush them aside.

This post comes courtesy of Steve P. Dykstra, Ph.D., Psychology. He is a founding member of the [Wisconsin Reading Coalition](#) and a member of the [Wisconsin Read to Lead Task Force](#).