

The LDAO Definition of Learning Disabilities and DSM 5

The **LDAO Definition of Learning Disabilities** (2001) states “Learning Disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning^a, in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Learning disabilities are specific not global impairments and as such are distinct from intellectual disabilities.”

The recent fifth edition of **The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder** (DSM 5) published May 2013, now includes the diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorder. The DSM 5 diagnosis includes the exclusionary criterion, D. “The learning difficulties are not better accounted for by intellectual disabilities,”

The LDAO definition of learning disabilities and the DSM 5 criteria for Specific Learning Disorder both differentiate LDs from intellectual impairments, but the DSM 5 diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorder does not explicitly require average to above average intelligence.

However, as stated in the **LDA of Canada March 2015 Position Paper on the LDAC definition* and DSM 5:**

“The distinction between learning disabilities and an intellectual impairment has been considered a key issue as it can provide insights about potential for learning and types of interventions appropriate for each group. Individuals with intellectual impairment are not expected to manage the rigorous interventions appropriate for individuals with learning disabilities at the same level and rate of learning. Differential, targeted interventions and accommodations increase the likelihood of success for each group.”

The DSM 5 is a **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders** published by the American Psychiatric Association. Diagnoses such as Specific Learning Disorder, used in the medical field, are not necessarily the same as diagnoses such as ‘Specific Learning Disability’ in the US, or “Learning Disability/Learning Disabilities” in Ontario, which are used in the education sector. Dr. Larry Silver addresses this issue in his paper written for LDA of America, **Changes in DSM 5 and its Impact on Individuals with Learning Disabilities.**

In August 2014 the Ontario Ministry of Education released an updated **Policy/Program Memorandum 8, Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities.** In this PPM, the Ministry of Education definition includes:

“one of a number of neurodevelopmental disorders that persistently and significantly has an impact on the ability to learn and use academic and other skills and that:

- affects the ability to perceive or process verbal or non-verbal information in an effective and accurate manner in students who have assessed intellectual abilities that are *at least* in the average range;”

While this definition is for identification for special education programs and services, not for diagnosis, it is in line with the provisions of the **LDAO Recommended Practices for Assessment, Diagnosis and Documentation of Learning Disabilities**.

The LDAO definition of Learning Disabilities has been used in the postsecondary sector since 2001. Currently the use of the DSM 5 diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorder instead of the diagnosis of Learning Disabilities is causing some confusion. Access to accommodations in postsecondary studies is based on evidence of a disability, under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The definition of disability in the Code includes "a learning disability or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language".

In response to inquiries from offices for students with disabilities, the Assessment and Resource Centres (RARC and NOARC), issued a policy statement on DSM 5 in September 2014 that included the following:

”While a Learning Disorder diagnosis requires academic achievement less than the 16th percentile and cognitive intelligence above the 2nd percentile, it also requires that the individual has experienced unexpected learning failure. In the case of an individual with a low IQ, it may be that their academic achievement is consistent with their intelligence” and “As stated in the DSM-5 (pg. 25), a learning disorder is not necessarily a disability. As such, someone with a learning disorder (DSM-5) diagnosis would not qualify as a person with a disability without evidence of functional impairment.”

The September 2014 LDAO document, **LDAO Position Paper on Interpretation of the LDAO Definition of Learning Disabilities, 2001, in Postsecondary Settings**, states that “the concept of a *functional impairment* or *functional limitations* comes up often in the context of accommodation for disabilities. It is reasonable to expect that in order to access accommodations students with learning disabilities need to show a *functional impairment* in an academic area related to their deficits in *psychological processes*.”

The DSM 5 diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorder does not require deficits in psychological or cognitive processes, but LDAO documents contend that assessment of such processes is integral to the definition and diagnosis of Learning Disabilities.

The **LDAO Recommended Practices for Assessment, Diagnosis and Documentation of Learning Disabilities** requires in its list of Diagnostic Criteria for Learning Disabilities:

A: A non-random, clinically significant discrepancy* between otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning, and one or more of the specific psychological processes related to learning.

The definition in **Policy/Program Memorandum 8, Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities** also includes the statement:

- may typically be associated with difficulties in one or more cognitive processes, such as phonological processing; memory and attention; processing speed; perceptual-motor processing; visual-spatial processing; executive functions

After a review of current literature on learning disabilities and cognitive (psychological) processes, an LDAC Research Committee concluded:

“Even though there is not yet sufficient research evidence to substantiate all of the cognitive processes linked to academic skills, there are discernible clusters of cognitive and neuropsychological processing strengths and weaknesses associated with academic skills and research evidence that has been identified.”

One of their conclusions in the **LDA of Canada March 2015 Position Paper on the LDAC definition and DSM 5** was:

“If both an intellectual profile and a cognitive processing profile are no longer included in the evaluation to determine diagnosis of learning disabilities, critical information is lacking in understanding the strengths and weaknesses as well as determining interventions and accommodations that best meet the needs of the individual. Ultimately, the goal is to help individuals with learning disabilities maximize their opportunities for success.”

Summary

While there are similarities between the DSM 5 diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorder and the LDAO Definition of Learning Disabilities, there are significant differences that are important to consider.

*The LDA Canada definition of learning disabilities (2002) is similar in content and structure to the LDA Ontario definition (2001).

References

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM 5), American Psychiatric Association, 2013; pp 66-74.

[LDA of Canada Position Paper on the Official LDAC definition of Learning Disabilities versus DSM-5 Criteria](#), March 2015

[Changes in DSM 5 and its Impact on Individuals with Learning Disabilities](#), Dr. Larry Silver for LDA of America, 2014

[Policy/Program Memorandum 8. Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities](#), August 2014

[LDAO Recommended Practices for Assessment, Diagnosis and Documentation of Learning Disabilities](#), 2003

[DSM-5: Policy Statement and Addendum](#), Regional Assessment & Resource Centre,
September 2014

[LDAO Position Paper on Interpretation of the LDAO Definition of Learning Disabilities, 2001, in Postsecondary Settings](#), September 2014.

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
www.LDAO.ca