



# Starting From The Positive Side Of Dyslexia [Premium]

by **DYSLEXIC ADVANTAGE TEAM** | | **ASSESSMENT, BEING DYSLEXIC, DYSLEXIA, DYSLEXIC ADVANTAGE MAGAZINE, EDUCATION, MIND STRENGTHS, NEURODIVERSITY, PREMIUM, PREMIUM CONTENT, STRATEGIES** | **0 COMMENTS**



Last week I had a chance to talk with Aillie McKeever of the Schwab Learning Center at Stanford.

In 2019, before COVID pandemic had fully taken hold here in the US, Stanford's Schwab Center had **decided to prioritize strengths in their approach to each and every student.**

**They announced a "paradigm shift" to a strength's based model of education. Every student would have a folder with a strengths section included in their assessment.**



Aillie McKeever, MFA Schwab  
Learning Center, Stanford University

Neurolearning shared its MIND Strengths Questionnaire with the center to examine the impact on students there.

From Aillie:

“In 2019, the MIND Strengths questions were included in this interview for every new student. Doing this seems to amplify students’ recognition of their strengths. As Learning Specialists leading the interviews, we noticed that students were more optimistic and demonstrated a greater sense of agency after they answered the MIND

Strengths questions. Students were coming to the SLC because of their challenges, and many were walking away with a new awareness of their strengths. One student said that it was not until he completed the MIND Strengths questionnaire that he realized he was gifted. The students we work with tend to have tremendous grit, and many have come to assume that it is only their hard work that has earned them a place at Stanford.

When we removed the MIND Strengths questions from our interview process, we lost some of the value that we can offer to students in defining their self-concept. Students often arrive at the question “What are your learning strengths?” in the oral interview and many answer “I can’t think of any.” The MIND Strengths questions balance students’ evaluations of themselves as learners, promoting an essential and missing component of positive self-realization.”

I found it interesting that from the very start, each student is given a folder with a strengths section in it. Then as the learning specialist meets with a student, they add to the section if they notice strengths in their discussion or when reviewing their work.

At the end of their time at Stanford, students are also given a copy of their folder in the event it may help them going forward.

So how common it is that a student’s learning folder includes a strength section?

It seems so basic and easy to include and has such an impact on a student’s esteem. Instead of meeting and dwelling on weaknesses, there is a balance and recognition the student’s particular strengths.

Even at Stanford, Aillie told me that when she asks students to tell her about their strengths, many students reply to her that they can't think of any. When I had spoken to Tabitha Mancini (now Landmark College, previously University of Connecticut), she had sounded a similar note.

Why can't students see themselves as having any strengths? One reason may be that when students seek help, this may reinforce negative feelings about themselves and imposter syndrome.

Because many subscribers of this magazine are parents of students or teachers or tutors, we thought this point could be timely because as much as we want to point out strategies that are likely to be helpful for students, a big help is pointing students toward their strengths. If your student hasn't already taken the MIND Strengths Survey for Young People, take it [HERE](#). We need all students age 5-17. Dyslexic students as well as non-dyslexic students because we are looking for many different types of patterns.

What about us? Where are we putting strengths first?

When we had an assessment clinic, we borrowed a practice that Betty Meckstroth (Guiding the Gifted Child) used when she tested our son who was then 7 years old. She invited him to choose something he wanted to bring to show to her – something that was an example of something that he liked or was proud of.

Over the years, in our clinic, we admired personal drawings, baseball pictures, Pokemon collections, pet pictures, you name it – it was a way to start the assessment in a more balanced way rather than looking and weaknesses, troubles, and precipitating events.

The beautiful thing about having a strengths focus is that it's a gift that keeps on giving. It strengthens your relationship, it provides insights to the student and parent or tutor, and it also broadens the scope of that person's world and future.

Last week I revisited Dr. Sara Agahi's [thesis](#) on the strengths of successful dyslexic adults at work and in college, and I found it interesting that many adults found their success in "unconventional careers."

It reminded me of something that one of our past Board Members, Erin Egan had said:

"I've never fulfilled a job description, and I've never applied for a regular job. I need a job that's never existed before, and I need to create it from scratch."

What? How can that be?

Today Erin is a principal business development lead at Amazon. Previously, she was director of strategy and business development at Microsoft. Before that (still in her 20's), she was a strategy and negotiations lead for Airbus.

I liked the fact that Aillie mentioned that when a student said, "Writing is something I don't have to worry about," she made a note of jotting down writing strength in her profile. Although writing can be very difficult for many people with dyslexia, it can also be a strength and resource they can refer to in many ways.

One designer that I interviewed told me that when he was in his 20's he worked in Congress writing press releases. Writing was a strength of his when it means being able to communicate concisely and recognize what was an important point and how to say it – but he needed someone else to proofread his work before it went out as a final message or social media post. Knowing what you're good (and not so good at) is a tremendous strength itself.

It's probably safe to say that the study of strengths among dyslexic people is still in its early stages. Some strengths are also aptitudes that need time and effort to be fully developed.

What it is a good reminder of is that we put strengths front and center when we meet and talk with students. Adults too, if they are planning to launch out in new directions or develop parts of themselves they may have overlooked in the past.

In my lab years during my medical training, I remember hearing how another lab group lead by a Nobel Prize winner had a playful tradition for their lab meetings. It was held a little bit like the old reality game show, "This is Your Life," where students and research fellows were encouraged to pitch their ideas and have more openness to how they show their personal interests and distinct voice they bring to their career.

It's not the conventional way to start with strengths first in areas such as ours, but it's never too late to start.

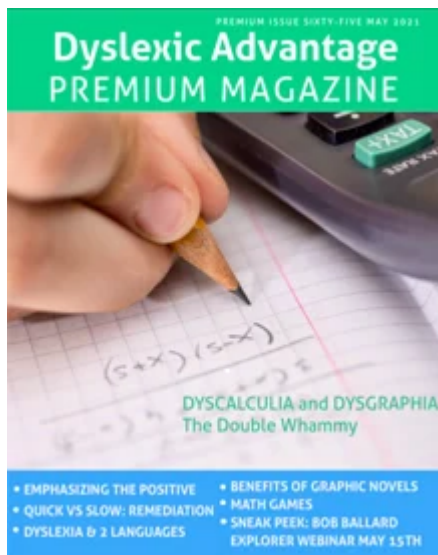
Below is a nice TEDx on the benefits of focusing on strengths.



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