



U3AM at Home

DYSCALCULIA

When I was 10-years-old I had a teacher who sometimes taught maths. She was nice, in the way aunts you don't see often are nice and she smelt of ginger. But she didn't like me.

Lazy - you're lazy, Katelin.

In those moments I was tiny. My face lost its colour. The palms of my hands sweated. Heaviness sat in my tummy. I wanted to cry, scream, hide under the table.

I was terrified, but not of her.

It was numbers - subtraction, division, fractions - that frightened me. They seemed to grow in my exercise book, looming large until I couldn't think straight. I used to curl the ends of the paper with my fingers, ripping the edges slowly, because it was infinitely easier than trying to work out the maths sums.

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I drew digits on the page and stared at them, face beet-red. I tried frantically, heart pounding, turning my page every which way, hoping the answer would suddenly reveal itself. But no matter how hard I pushed my dark brown eyes together, begged my brain to get one answer right, I couldn't.

I didn't know what I was looking at. I could see the numbers weren't the same but they looked the same. I knew I wasn't stupid but I also knew I was never going to get the answers right. In the end, I didn't know what to do so I didn't do anything.

After a lifetime of struggling with numbers and not understanding why, I discovered the existence of dyscalculia in my mid-20s. Dyscalculia, a little-known learning difficulty, is rarely identified early, and hard to diagnose, particularly as an adult. Finding out about the disorder, reading stories from others who struggled in the same way, allowed me to put the pieces together, helped me realise why I was the way I was. The disorder is defined as including 'all types of maths problems, ranging from an inability to understand the meaning of numbers, to an inability to apply mathematical principals to solve problems'.

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Suddenly, everything made sense. Some people liken dyscalculia to dyslexia but children with dyslexia are more than a hundred times more likely to receive a diagnosis and educational support than children with dyscalculia. Having said that though, dyslexia and dyscalculia are expected to be equally common.

When my teacher said I wasn't trying hard enough, I was confused. How could she not see how hard I wanted to get the answer right? Her frustration was almost visceral, the way it spun out in front of us. But everything confused me: printed symbols and signs, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, clocks, money, graphs, tying my shoelaces, reading maps and telling my right from my left.

As an adult, I still have weak mental arithmetic skills and still count on my fingers. I often have no sense of whether the answer I've arrived at is right or not. Sometimes I can't explain why I think an answer is correct and if I think about it for too long, my head clouds over. I used to think I was lacking some vital piece that everyone else had. On my low days, even though I know intellectually this is not true, I still think it.

Definitions of dyscalculia are still being developed, and research and techniques on how to best deal with it are still in infancy stages. While awareness has grown, there's not enough discussion surrounding the disorder and its impacts.

My teachers often disregarded my feeble attempts for help. They saw me as a difficult child, simply not putting in the work because, after all, maths is hardly the most popular subject. It's natural that some kids would act out because they find it dull, uninspiring. But what I struggled with was more than just being bad at it; the lessons were deep and impossible tasks.

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When I was younger, this struggle was an identity I carried but refused to acknowledge. This has led to a lifetime of doubt, self-hate, and pain. I felt sure people could see this gap inside me, that when they looked at me, it was obvious. And so I lived to a soundtrack of confusion and hatred. How could I be like everyone else, function in the world, when I couldn't even do simple things like read a map or calculate a simple sum?

At this moment in time [there's no cure for dyscalculia](#) and most children won't grow out of it. It's taken me a long time to realise this is not something I have to grow out of. Self-acceptance can be painful and difficult to navigate. I'm slowly realising that it's okay to sit in an in-between place. To oscillate, swing, between acceptance and uncertainty. Self-acceptance isn't fixed or stagnant; it isn't something that happens one day and is then inside of you forever more. It can be something more subtle.

Recently, I went for a job interview. It was a group interview and I felt confident, poised. I was sure I'd be invited back for a second interview. Near the end, the hiring manager brought out a stack of papers. A maths test.

Underneath my crisp ironed shirt, I shivered. I took the page slowly and scanned it, knowing there was no point. The world felt like it was closing in around me. I scribbled something down so that I would look busy.

I left the interview with dry eyes. My partner, who was waiting in the car, said I looked assertive walking out. But as soon as I saw him, I burst into tears, trembling into his arms.

Later, I was certain everyone in the room could tell I didn't know the answers. I told myself they were laughing at me, judging me silently. They weren't. But how do you let go of a lifetime of feeling that way? How do you move past those feelings that have plagued you your whole life?

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Dyscalculia, like most things in life, doesn't affect everyone the same way. For some, it may be mild, a minor annoyance, a slight ache in the brain but nothing more. For others, they may struggle with remembering telephone numbers and postcodes. Some may find it debilitating and need daily assistance when shopping or doing their banking. Dyscalculia is varied because people are varied. It's important to remember that.

I've concealed my dyscalculia for years. I prayed at night, even though I didn't believe in a higher being, asking God to make my brain work the way it was supposed to. But God didn't answer my prayers and my dyscalculia has never gotten better.

So, this is something I must live with, must learn to be okay with.

While there aren't any official guidelines on how to best support a person with dyscalculia, there's no doubt more needs to be done to help those struggling. Early diagnosis is important, because, as Ketchell writes, '[missing the basics of mathematics makes it difficult for learners to follow subsequent topics](#)'.

I used to believe my dyscalculia meant I was a loser – I had lost something – and would always be irrevocably broken. But you can't lose something you never had. I will never get 'over' dyscalculia and will never live 'after' it. It's something I live with and maybe that's okay.

It's imperative we acknowledge the reality of dyscalculia and that we work to remove the stigma. We need to listen when people – no matter what age - tell us they're struggling. I don't have any answers but sometimes I wonder about my childhood. Maybe, if my childhood teacher hadn't been so quick to label me lazy, I wouldn't have spent so many years berating myself.

As trite as it might sound, we need to practice patience, compassion, and empathy.

Katelin Farnsworth is a freelance writer. You can follow Katelin on Twitter [@ktnworth](#).