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# What Is a Language Processing Disorder?

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By [Devon Frye](https://www.additudemag.com/author/devon-frye/)Medically reviewed by [ADDitude’s ADHD Medical Review Panel](https://www.additudemag.com/contact-us/adhd-specialist-panel/) on November 12, 2019



Girl with language processing disorder whispering secrets

**What is a Language Processing Disorder?**

A language processing disorder (LPD) is an impairment that negatively affects communication through spoken language. There are two types of LPD—people with expressive language disorder have trouble expressing thoughts clearly, while those with receptive language disorder have difficulty understanding others.

One person with a language disorder might find it difficult to speak extemporaneously or outline what they are thinking, while another person might struggle to understand what others are saying, to follow directions, or to maintain attention.

You know the feeling: You’re in the middle of telling a great story when suddenly the word you’re looking gets stuck “on the tip of your tongue.” Or you’re 10 minutes into a conversation before you realize you haven’t taken in a word the other person is saying. For most people, these brief mental slipups can be annoying, but for someone with an expressive or receptive language disorder, they can be a constant reality. And the cumulative effect of a lifetime of [communication difficulties](https://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/1039.html) can be devastating.

Language disorders are [more common than you may think](https://www.additudemag.com/slideshow/207/slide-1.html). Experts estimate that up to 5 percent of children in the United States have some type of language disorder — though many remain undiagnosed — and currently more than 1 million children are receiving special education specific to language disorders in the U.S. public school system.

If a language disorder isn’t caught early or is misdiagnosed, it can create wide-reaching complications in a person’s life — complications that often extend from childhood to adulthood. Social situations, for example, can be challenging for someone with either a receptive or an expressive language disorder. Difficulties with self-expression or with comprehension of what others are saying can cause someone to withdraw or endure being ostracized. In severe situations, a child with a language disorder may become so frustrated at his inability to make himself understood that he lashes out at adults or other children — earning him the label of “bully” or “problem child.”

**Types of Language Processing Disorders**

There are two types of language disorders: expressive and receptive. People with expressive language disorders have a difficult time expressing their thoughts. Those with receptive language disorders struggle to understand what others are saying or to follow a conversation. It’s also possible to suffer from a combination of expressive and receptive language disorders.

Language disorders are most often developmental, like other learning disabilities. However, they can also start to manifest as a result of a neurological illness or a traumatic event affecting the brain, such as a stroke or a head injury. When language disorders are caused by specific damage to the brain, they’re referred to as aphasia.

* Have difficulty getting jokes
* Seem shy or withdrawn

If someone exhibits symptoms from both lists, it’s possible he or she has a combination expressive/receptive language disorder.

**What Do Language Processing Disorders Look Like in Adults?**

**The symptoms of expressive or receptive language disorders can vary from person to person. Read this general guideline to see what symptoms may indicate that you should seek a diagnosis.**

[Language processing disorders](https://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/12281.html) are brain-based conditions that make it difficult for someone to express himself or make sense of what is being said to him. Expressive [language disorders](https://www.additudemag.com/screener-language-processing-disorders-symptoms-test-children/) are diagnosed when an individual struggles to produce language, speak in grammatically correct sentences, or translate thoughts into speech. Receptive language disorders can cause a person to misinterpret instructions, ignore when she’s being spoken to, or take simple jokes too seriously. Researchers cannot yet pinpoint the exact cause of language disorders, but existing research indicates that genetics are most likely involved: up to 40 percent of those with a family history of language disorders have the condition themselves — compared to just 4 percent of those with no family history of language disorders.

Language disorders can be developmental, meaning [they are present from birth](https://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/12282.html) — though it’s certainly possible for someone to reach adulthood without being diagnosed. In other cases, however, they develop as the result of a traumatic brain injury or a stroke. Regardless of how they developed, symptoms of language processing disorders in adults look largely the same.

**Symptoms at Home**

Language processing challenges will likely interfere with your home relationships, and may even cause arguments or misunderstandings. Symptoms can include:

**Expressive Language Disorder**

* Finds it hard to come up with exact words to say; substitutes “stuff” or “things” frequently, even for commonly used words
* Substitutes related words, even when they don’t mean the same thing (says “couch” instead of “chair” or “beef” instead of “chicken”)
* Frequently switches sounds within words, seemingly without noticing
* Uses made-up words frequently when the correct word can’t be produced
* Often says sentences that don’t make sense
* Forgets words or says them out of order
* Misuses idioms or says them incorrectly

**Receptive Language Disorder**

* Doesn’t understand jokes; takes everything very literally
* Finds it difficult to focus on what someone is saying, particularly if there is background noise like a television
* Often seems disinterested in conversations, even with friends or loved ones
* Can’t answer questions about what was just discussed

**Symptoms at Work**

Difficulties with language can impact your career by making it difficult for you to finish tasks or get along with coworkers. Symptoms in the workplace could include:

**Expressive Language Disorders**

* Anxiety about having to speak in front of people or give a presentation
* Trouble answering a direct question from your supervisor, even if you know the answer
* Struggles to keep up with office small talk
* Unable to master the “vocabulary” of your workplace, often saying the wrong word in work-related situations

**Receptive Language Disorders**

* Can’t keep up during meetings, especially if more than one person is talking
* Misinterprets friendly conversation as rude or confusing
* Unable to answer questions during meetings
* Trouble following multi-step verbal instructions; prefers to receive all assignments via email

**How to Treat Language Processing Disorders**

**Language disorders are serious learning disabilities, but they are highly treatable — especially if you start early. Read on for different approaches to tackling language disorders with speech therapy — at school, at home, and in the workplace.**

For [adults with language disorders](https://www.additudemag.com/adhd/article/12285.html) and good insurance — as well as parents who want to seek treatment outside of school — private practice speech therapists are also an option for treating language processing disorders. Private therapists pride themselves on being able to accommodate each patient’s specific needs, and will usually suggest seeing you or your child once or twice a week (compared to once a week at most in the public school system). As an added bonus, private therapists can often accommodate busy schedules without removing a child from the classroom or an adult from the workplace. A private therapist may also be able to suggest at-home exercises, and can reach out to a child’s teacher to suggest classroom strategies to help encourage language development.

**Academic Interventions for Language Processing Disorders**

* Speak slowly and clearly
* Allow tape recorder for note taking
* Write main concepts on board
* Provide peer tutor or support person
* Use visualizations to enhance listening and comprehension
* Use of graphic organizers for note taking
* Practice story mapping
* Draw out details with questions and visualization strategies

**Workplace Interventions for Language Processing Disorders**

Language disorders can make it difficult for adults to know what’s expected of them at work or to communicate with their colleagues. If you have a language disorder, your employer can assist you by providing accommodations, including:

– **Provide meeting agendas ahead of time.** Receiving the meeting agenda in advance will help you mentally prepare and avoid feeling blindsided by a question from your supervisor.

– **Give notice when the employee will be required to speak.** If it’s necessary for you to give a presentation, ask that your boss give you a warning ahead of time so you can prepare your remarks and anticipate any questions that might come your way.

– **Allow written responses instead of verbal responses.** Whenever possible, ask that your boss send you questions over email, instead of approaching your desk, so you can compose a well thought-out written response.