

Using Assessment Reports to Promote Self-Advocacy

By David R. Parker, Ph.D.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? If you are a high school or college student diagnosed with a learning disability (LD), ADHD, Asperger's, anxiety, depression, or another mood or learning disorder, that "mirror" may be your diagnostic assessment report. For many students, the idea of reading such a report can be daunting. The idea of reviewing it with another person can trigger fears of being "found out" as a person with many weaknesses. Who would want to look into *that* mirror? In truth, there are many important and positive insights you can gain from these reports. They can help you better understand yourself, how you think, what your strengths and weaknesses really are, and what you can do to enhance your academic success.

There are many misconceptions about diagnostic assessment reports. More school systems are moving away from even conducting formal assessments to determine why students struggle to learn. This trend is unfortunate, because formal assessment is the first step in identifying the cause of a student's ongoing struggles with learning, attention, or mood regulation. If this trend continues, fewer and fewer students will have reports they could turn to for clear explanations of these issues and suggestions for effective coping techniques and support services.

I have worked with students with disabilities at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Connecticut, and Washington University at St. Louis. These positions have allowed me to have one-on-one conversations with hundreds of college students about their assessment reports. More recently, I have had these conversations at CRG with numerous high school and college students, too. In almost every case, students have reported a sense of relief when they were diagnosed. Rather than feeling embarrassed or ashamed, they were glad to finally have a name (and explanation) for the challenges they have faced. I am struck by how curious students are about what is actually in their report. Their deepest fear has often been that they had insurmountable character flaws; that they were fundamentally lazy or just not very smart. The assessment process, and the report that describes the outcomes of that process, help them reframe this. By reviewing test scores and clinical observations, and hearing how their strengths and weaknesses compare to other students, students begin to reframe a sense of who they are. Over time, returning to the report also helps them better understand what they can accomplish in life.

When I meet with students to review their report with them, we typically address these topics:

- *What is the name of my disability?*
- *Briefly, how can I describe that disability to another person?*
- *What are my strengths as a learner or thinker?*
- *When I am studying or trying to learn something new, what is the best way for me to do that?*
- *How is my disability likely to affect me in the classroom?*
- *How is my disability likely to affect me when I take tests?*
- *What accommodations or services could help me in school?*

One of the most important reasons to review a diagnostic assessment report with a student is to promote his or her self-advocacy. “Self-advocacy” refers to knowing what you need to succeed in school and how to ask for it. It is imperative to help high school students learn how to self-advocate. Growing numbers of high school graduates with disabilities now attend some form of postsecondary education. Nearly 10% of college undergraduates report having a disability. The largest sub-groups are students with LD, ADHD, and/or psychiatric disorders such as anxiety or depression. By law, college students with disabilities have to self-advocate in order to receive accommodations or services. Unlike high school, colleges are under no obligation to seek out these students or serve them unless the student (not the parent) asks for this assistance.

So...look in the mirror. Find an informed adult who can sit down and review this report with you. A well-written diagnostic assessment report will use clear language to integrate your history with comprehensive assessment data to tell an incredibly important story. And, while each story is unique, keep reading. The next two articles will share the experiences that two students (and one parent) had when thorough diagnostic assessments helped them look in the mirror, too.