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Can't process spoken speech — which makes school difficult! ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have trouble following spoken speech. It's always made school difficult for me and now it's one of the reasons why I think I'll have to quit college (I'm on leave right now). I would listen to lectures or go to instructors for extra help, but my brain just wouldn't absorb anything it heard. This put a huge burden of self-instruction on me and it made it impossible for me to participate in class discussions.

I think this tendency affects me in other ways too. For example, I don't and never have been able to sit through movies or watch TV — I never know what's going on in them. In daily interactions I manage OK with processing short exchanges of information or instructions, but I don't have "conversations" at all unless it's absolutely necessary, and when I do it's exhausting and unpleasant (I speak VERY little and have never had a friend, so it's no exaggeration to say that I don't have conversations).

Until college, I was always able to compensate for this difficulty by just studying hard and teaching myself. I got high grades and was going to a reputedly good college. Can you suggest any explanation for a problem of this sort and how to deal with it so that I might be able to graduate from college?

Answer

Dear Reader,

First off, you definitely deserve kudos for your academic success. Excelling in high school and getting into college despite struggling to understand daily speech shows real determination. Based on your description, you may have a learning disability that involves difficulty with auditory processing. However, the best way to find out more is to be evaluated by a speech and language professional. With the right diagnosis, you'll be able to receive academic and personal supports to help you graduate college.

Problems understanding speech can be related to a condition called Auditory Processing Disorder (also known as Central Auditory Processing Disorder) or auditory comprehension deficit

(so-called "word deafness"). Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) is a learning disability that interferes with the brain's ability to process or interpret sound, including human speech. According to the [National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](#) [2], people with APD may have trouble remembering spoken information or following complicated directions. APD can also cause difficulties with reading, spelling, and vocabulary comprehension. A variety of treatments and supports are available for people with APD including headsets that reduce background noise, environmental modifications such as better classroom acoustics, exercises that build language skills, and different methods of auditory training. The [Learning Disabilities Association of America](#) [3] also has information about a variety of supports for APD and other learning disabilities.

Since many learning disabilities cause similar symptoms, a speech and language pathologist will be able to provide the best diagnosis and give you individual recommendations. Your health care provider can make a referral for a speech and language evaluation.

Although there are a variety of supports on many college campuses for students with disabilities, you are your own best advocate. Speaking up and asking for help can be difficult, but remember that "reasonable accommodations" are a legal right. The Americans with Disabilities Act protects the rights of disabled people, including students with learning disabilities. By law, colleges are required to guarantee you an equal opportunity for success. However, the ball is in your court to when it comes to seeking out the help you need.

You might find it helpful to learn about other students' experiences with learning disabilities by reading the related Q&As. It may seem overwhelming, but you've all ready taken a big first step towards getting the diagnosis and support you need to succeed academically. Best of luck in your college career!

Alice!

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