



Transitioning from High School to Post-Secondary with a Learning Disability

A Student-Informed Guide

This guide brings together real student experiences, research, and practical strategies to support your transition to post-secondary.

It is designed to help you better understand yourself, your needs, and the supports that can help you succeed.

How might your learning disability shape not only challenges, but strengths that support your next chapter?

Transitioning from high school to post-secondary is an important milestone that can bring both excitement and uncertainty. For students with learning disabilities (LDs), this transition often involves increased independence, new expectations around self-advocacy, and navigating accommodations in unfamiliar environments.

Unlike high school, post-secondary settings typically require students to take primary responsibility for accessing supports and communicating their needs. This shift can feel overwhelming, particularly when students are also managing stigma, self-doubt, or questions about disclosure. Grounded in research exploring student experiences, this guide combines practical strategies and student voices to support a transition that is academic, emotional, and identity-based.

How to Use This Guide

You may find it helpful to:

- Read through the sections that feel most relevant to you right now.
- Highlight or note strategies you may want to try in your own transition.
- Use the reflection questions to prepare for conversations with teachers, guidance counsellors, family members, or accessibility services.
- Return to this guide as your needs and goals evolve.

What Is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the idea that people naturally think, learn, and process information in different ways. Learning disabilities are one example of this variation. These differences can create challenges in some environments, but they can also shape strengths, perspectives, and growth.

Understanding neurodiversity can help you see your learning disability not only as something to manage, but as part of how your brain contributes to who you are.

What the Research Shows

Research on post-secondary students with LDs highlights that transition is shaped by barriers, supports, and opportunities to develop strengths. Students often report experiences of stigma, internalized doubt, and emotional challenges that affect confidence and well-being. At the same time, self-advocacy, supportive relationships, and access to accommodations play a critical role in navigating academic environments and fostering positive adjustment.

“Advocating and pushing for change normally ends in people listening... we’re the ones who know what we need best.”

Importantly, students also identify strengths connected to their learning differences, including resilience, creative problem-solving, and empathy. These findings suggest that transition is not defined solely by challenges, but by the development of skills, perspectives, and identities that support each student’s unique sense of self and long-term growth.

Barriers and Supports

1. Mental health during transition: navigating stigma, self-doubt, and identity

**“Feeling different impacts your mental health...
you know you’re not alone, but you feel isolated.”**

Transitioning beyond high school can bring significant emotional change for students with LDs. Alongside new academic expectations and increased independence, many students describe navigating stigma, uncertainty about disclosure, and internalized doubt that can affect mental health and self-confidence.

These emotional experiences are not indicators of ability. Rather, they often reflect broader societal expectations, misunderstandings about LDs, and pressure to meet normative definitions of success.

What Students Shared

Students frequently described feelings of isolation and self-doubt during their educational journeys. Some reflected on experiencing stigma and negative assumptions that shaped their self-perception:

- “I actively felt like an outsider, very lonely, and isolated.”
- “Seeing how people treated me made me doubt myself.”
- “Even if I was doing the best I could, it was never enough.”
- “I didn’t want to use my accommodations because I thought people would think it was an excuse to procrastinate or be lazy.”

Students also described connections between LDs and mental health challenges, including anxiety, shame, and questioning their intelligence:

- “Having a LD impacts your mental health... it can lead to a lot of negative feelings.”
- “Self-esteem goes beyond that – it can include depression and anxiety because of the stigma you face.”
- “It’s difficult not to internalize comments and have them affect your outlook on yourself and your future.”

Despite these challenges, students emphasized that emotional struggles are common and often shaped by external expectations rather than personal limitations.

Practical Strategies

Students and research highlight several ways to protect mental health during transition:

- Know that it is normal to feel a mix of emotions when facing change or uncertainty
- Spend time with friends and join clubs or extracurricular activities to meet new people and build connection
- Make an appointment with a counsellor or support service for a check-in, rather than waiting until you are in crisis
- Practice self-compassion and gently challenge self-critical thoughts

2. Accommodations: Tools for Equity

“I didn’t want to use accommodations because I thought people would think it was an excuse.”

Concerns about fairness and stigma often lead students to avoid using accommodations such as extra time for tests or assignments. Avoiding these supports can increase stress and academic pressure, particularly when students attempt to meet expectations without appropriate supports.

Accommodations are designed to provide equitable access to learning and assessment rather than offer an advantage.

One of the most significant differences between high school and post-secondary education is how accommodations are accessed. Many students are surprised to learn that supports are not automatically provided and must be requested through institutional processes. This shift can feel intimidating and may contribute to hesitation or avoidance.

What Students Need to Know

In post-secondary environments:

- Students must register themselves with accessibility service
- Accommodations are not automatic
- Professors are not informed unless you choose to share your accommodation letter

Importantly, accommodations:

- Do not lower academic standards
- Do not provide an unfair advantage
- Create equitable access and opportunity

Accommodations are equity tools, not shortcuts.

How to Talk About Accommodations

Step 1 – Register early

Contact accessibility services before or at the start of the semester to ensure supports are in place. Some post-secondary institutions might require an updated psychoeducational assessment.

Step 2 – Communicate with instructors

You don’t have to tell your instructors about your diagnosis. You can simply tell them that accommodations have been approved through accessibility services.

Sample Email Template

Subject: Accommodation Letter for [Course Name]

Hello Professor [Name],

I hope you are well. I am registered with Accessibility Services and have accommodations approved for this course. I have attached my accommodation letter.

I look forward to working with you this semester.

Please let me know if there are any additional steps I should take.

Thank you,
[Your Name]

3. Self-advocacy: Learning to Speak Up for Your Needs

**“It’s such a powerful thing...
no one else is going to do it for us.”**

Many students describe self-advocacy as one of the most important skills developed during transition. Unlike high school, post-secondary environments often require students to actively request accommodations, communicate needs, and navigate support systems independently.

What Students Shared

Students emphasized that advocacy helped them access accommodations and build confidence over time:

- “Advocating and pushing for change normally ends in people listening... we’re the ones who know what we need best.”
- “Getting that self-advocacy took a lot of time. It’s frustrating.”
- “Having to advocate for yourself constantly is annoying... but it’s powerful.”
- “Getting diagnosed and securing accommodations took a lot of advocating... I gained confidence.”

Peers and support networks also played an important role:

- “You learn so much from your peers... when I was uncomfortable going to teachers, my peers helped explain things a different way.”
- “It helps to not feel alone – talking openly with friends reduces isolation.”

Practical Strategies

- Learn about your accommodation rights in post-secondary or workplace settings
- Practice explaining your LD in ways that feel comfortable to you
- Reach out early to instructors, accessibility offices, or supervisors
- Connect with peers for shared strategies and support
- Remember that advocacy is a skill that develops over time
- Seek out the range of services offered by the college/university. For example, Library Services provide access to research assistance and writing supports and Learning Support centres offer tutoring, study skills, support and academic coaching

Embracing Strengths Shaped by Your Learning Differences

While transition often highlights challenges, students also describe strengths that have developed through navigating those challenges. Research suggests that resilience, creative problem-solving, empathy, and agency are not separate from learning differences, but often shaped by them. Recognizing these strengths can support confidence, identity development, and long-term growth.

1. Resilience and Self-Growth: Navigating Challenges While Building Confidence

“Disability makes you unique by not making you give up even when you want to.”

Students frequently described how navigating barriers associated with LDs contributed to resilience, patience, and personal growth. Rather than viewing challenges as purely negative, many reflected on how these experiences shaped perseverance and self-understanding.

What Students Shared

Participants highlighted growth through adversity:

- “When you have an LD, you go through a lot of self-growth... the only person you should be competing with is yourself.”
- “Having a LD has proven my strength and resilience.”
- “I would tell myself to be more patient with myself.”
- “Just because something is different doesn’t mean it’s your fault.”

Students also emphasized messages of hope and self-acceptance:

- “Having a LD is not something to be ashamed of.”
- “Be confident and talk to people.”

Practical Strategies

- Focus on personal progress rather than comparison
- Practice self-compassion during setbacks
- Reflect on strengths developed through overcoming barriers
- Reframe challenges as opportunities for learning and growth

2. Creativity and empathy: strengths shaped by diverse ways of thinking

“My LD has helped me think creatively and visualize things differently, giving me a unique perspective.”

Many students described their LD as contributing to creativity, alternative problem-solving strategies, and empathy toward others. These perspectives were frequently framed as strengths rather than deficits.

What Students Shared

Students highlighted creative thinking and perspective diversity:

- “I get to think a bit differently and have different ways of solving problems.”
- “My unique perspective became a source of inspiration.”
- “An LD allows divergent thinking and innovation.”

Participants also described empathy developed through lived experience:

- “I better understand other people’s struggles.”
- “Your empathy levels increase because people who don’t struggle won’t inherently understand.”
- “It inspired me to be a teacher and help others.”

Practical Strategies

- Use visual, creative, or alternative learning approaches that work for you
- Highlight creative thinking and empathy in applications or interviews
- Use your ability to understand different viewpoints to support collaboration, resolve misunderstandings, and contribute to inclusive group discussions
- Seek environments that value diverse ways of thinking

3. Agency and contribution: recognizing the value of thinking differently

“You can’t have progress without people who think differently.”

Students emphasized that neurodiversity contributes to innovation, advocacy, and social change. Rather than needing to “fit in,” many described the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping inclusive academic and professional environments.

What Students Shared

Participants expressed a desire to use their experiences to support others:

- “I want to make a difference in my community and be a source of light.”
- “If you encourage society to recognize difference, you will make a difference.”
- “Turning my LD from isolation into opportunity created empowerment.”
- “This journey is about growth and realizing your LD can be your superpower.”

Students also framed disability identity as a source of agency and purpose:

- “Don’t think of your disability as a disability - it’s part of who you are.”

Practical Strategies

- Embrace your perspective as an asset
- Seek inclusive environments that value neurodiversity
- Participate in advocacy or disability communities if desired
- Share experiences when safe and comfortable

Pause and Reflect: Journal Prompts to Help Navigate Your Transition to Post-Secondary

Take a few moments to reflect on your experiences, concerns, and strengths as you prepare for your post-secondary transition.

1. Self-understanding

What have your past experiences taught you about yourself as a learner? What are some challenges you faced? What were some skills you developed in overcoming those challenges? In what ways has this shaped who you are as a person?

2. Exploring fears and uncertainty

What worries or uncertainties do you have about transitioning from high school to post-secondary? What might help you feel more prepared or supported?

3. Mapping supports

What supports, strategies, or relationships may help you navigate this transition with greater confidence? What can you do to access these supports, implement those strategies, or foster those relationships?

Moving Forward

Transitioning to post-secondary education is not about becoming someone different. It is about learning how to navigate new systems while continuing to understand yourself more deeply. Many students with learning disabilities successfully pursue college, university, skilled trades, and meaningful careers. Success does not require perfection. It requires self-awareness, support, and environments that recognize your strengths. Your learning disability is one part of who you are. With the right tools, relationships, and self-understanding, it can be part of how you grow. If you are unsure where to begin, consider contacting your institution's accessibility services office to learn about available processes and supports. While systems vary, early communication can help you understand your options and advocate for what you need.

About This Guide

This guide was informed by qualitative research with post-secondary students with learning disabilities conducted by Peddigrew and Panda (2025).

You can read the [full open-access study here](#).

Author Bios



Dr. Emma Peddigrew holds a PhD in Child and Youth Studies and approaches her research with both personal and professional insight. Drawing on personal connections to learning disabilities (LD) and lived experience with mental health challenges, her work is grounded in a deep commitment to equity and justice. With academic training in education and Critical Disability Studies, Dr. Peddigrew views research as a relational and subjective process shaped through dialogue with participants. She is attentive to how research choices – what is emphasized, questioned, and interpreted – shape the knowledge produced. Her work seeks to foster a more relational, humanizing understanding of disability that moves beyond deficit-based narratives and centers lived experience, complexity, and strength.



Dr. Erin Panda is an associate professor in the department of Child and Youth Studies and co-director of the Developmental Neuroscience Lab at Brock University. As a neuroscientist, educator, and parent with personal and professional experience with ADHD and dyslexia, she brings a strengths-based, empathetic and outside-of-the-box perspective to her work. Her research and teaching focuses on understanding neurodiversity across development and on helping pre-service teachers and clinicians recognize and provide evidence-based support for students with diverse learning profiles.

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