Dyslexia
Unlocking the secrets

"Now I think it's something to be proud of..."
NZ actress Morgana O'Reilly

PLUS
A dyslexic CEO shares his strategies for success

"I still can't read
Hairy Maclary to my kids ..."
In their right mind

At least one in 10 New Zealanders are thought to have dyslexia, and their right-brain emphasis could make them a real asset in the workplace — provided they survive their school years. BY JOANNE BLACK

Meggan O’Rielly recalls sitting on the mat at primary school and admiring the way the adults around her were moving their lips as they read silently to themselves. She liked the way they looked, so although she could not hear what they said, she copied them. “I would look at the pictures in my book but mouth false words, so the teachers thought I could read,” she says.

In fact, until she was 15, she didn’t read. “I hated it because I couldn’t do it,” she says. “It found it really hard and could not process texts into information.”

However, perhaps revealing her innate talent — she is now an accolade-winning actor — she was very good at distrusting her difficulties and even remembers receiving certificates for reading based solely on her skills in copying others on the mat.

Although she has to all intents and purposes successfully overcome her mild case of dyslexia, her school story will be familiar to many of the estimated 10% or more of the population who suffer from the neurological condition that, in layman’s parlance, means the brain is wired differently from that of a non-dyslexic.

The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, which predicts the wider “spectrum view” of dyslexia to the narrow focus on literacy difficulties, says brain research has shown that whereas most of us use the “left” side of our brains to understand words, dyslexic people use the “right” side.

In the UK, the condition has been officially categorised as a disability but our Dyslexia Foundation shies away from that approach. “Academics and researchers want to put dyslexia inside a very tidy and quite small box that relates dyslexia to literacy,” says Foundation chairman Guy Pope-Mayes.

“That’s understandable, but the reality for dyslexic individuals is that although literacy does present difficulties and is a core component of what it means to be dyslexic, it’s certainly not the whole story.

“The mind of dyslexic individuals not only presents difficulties in literacy, but can also present difficulties in a number of other areas and, at the same time, present strengths and talents. So the big picture for dyslexia is a spectrum of difficulties, differences, advantages and talents.”

Dyslexia is popularly associated with left-right confusion (and sometimes upside down confusion), but both are much rarer than difficulties with reading, writing and spelling.

O’Rielly’s story would be all too familiar not only to dyslexics who tried hard at school to mask their problems, but also to acclaimed US dyslexia researcher Jim West, who says the perception that more males than females have dyslexia is incorrect. He suspects that one reason this belief is prevail is that girls are better at covering up than boys.

“They used to think there were four dyslexic boys for every dyslexic girl and this belief was repeated for about 100 years,” West says. Eventually they did some serious studies, including taking one dyslexic individual and testing everyone in that family, and realised the girls were simply better at hiding their dyslexia than the boys. The girls had better social skills and were more mature.

“The net result is that boys simply got frustrated, angry and acted up, so were sent off to the psychologist to get tested. You’re only testing the bad boys because they are the ones who come to attention.”

In fact, West says, the gender balance of the population who would, if tested, appear somewhere on the spectrum of dyslexia ranges from 19% to more than 30%, but the Dyslexia Foundation presents the most cautious estimate.

However, Pope-Mayes is much more conservative when estimating how many dyslexics feature in some of the country’s worst social statistics. “There is research in certain areas within New Zealand, and internationally, showing that in any situation you look at as a negative within society, whether it’s unemployment, court appearances or whatever, up to 50%
of those individuals will be dyslexic.

The literacy difficulties that frequently accompany dyslexia are not the only things that makes dyslexics more likely to be unemployed. Equally important is their experience in the school system where even if their IQ is high, their confidence may be stifled by repeatable public failure.

"Imagine having thinking skills that are four or five times as high as your basic skills, so you can think as ably and maybe even better than the person beside you. But what you're being judged on at school is the paragraphs you've written about the visit to the museum," says Pope-Mayell. "You know what went down, you may even know the intricate details of the life cycle of a spider, but you can only manage to write 'We went to the museum. We saw some spiders. I had fun.'"

"The guy beside you writes two pages and if you could, you'd have written five pages in detail. That's incredibly frustrating and the constant judgment of our kids about their basic skills leads to very low self-esteem."

"Reilly says her own diagnosis with dyslexia at age 15 was a turning point. Her mother, chorister, Mary Jane O'Reilly, had doubted that her daughter had dyslexia until she spoke to an optometrist when Morgan claimed that words sometimes seemed to change order on the page. "Of course, I had perfect vision, so it wasn't about that," O'Reilly says. She then went to a specialist who diagnosed dyslexia."

"If anything, my diagnosis was something to be proud of. I could think, 'Okay, I'm not stupid,' and it meant I could recognize what was happening and simply say, 'Oh, my God, I just got those words totally mixed around, but not because I'm a dumb-ass, but because that's dyslexia.' If it hadn't been picked up when it was, I would have been much more worse. My pride would have got in the way of trying to fix it myself."

"Once I got diagnosed into it, I almost immediately started reading and got better and better at it and now ... I can read aloud pretty fluently, which is really good for my career," says Reilly. She says that she still gets some letters mixed up, and when learning a difficult script to visualize it on the page, "seeing the words as a picture, rather than as an equation."

The Dyslexia Foundation wants to concentrate on the talents and creative elements that come with dyslexia but Pope-Mayell says the tough reality for the majority of dyslexic individuals, including many who are successful in their careers, is that they carry a deep sense of shame and fear from their experiences at school.

"It describes what happens to dyslexics at school in even more dramatic terms. In many cases, it's really child abuse for 12 years," said O'Reilly.