HANDOUT:

Case Study Persona: Aoife O'Sullivan – Navigating Dyspraxia in Dublin

Introduction

Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), is a lifelong condition that affects motor skill development, coordination, and often impacts organisational and social abilities. For adults, especially women, dyspraxia can present a unique set of challenges and strengths which are often under-recognised in society. This case study persona aims to provide a detailed portrait of a female adult living in Dublin, shaped for educational, therapeutic, or research uses.

Background Information

- Name: Aoife O'Sullivan
- Age: 34
- Gender: Female
- Nationality: Irish
- Residence: Rathmines, Dublin
- Occupation: Graphic Designer at a mid-sized marketing agency
- Education: BA in Visual Communication, Dublin Institute of Technology
- Relationship Status: Single, close network of friends

Early Life and Diagnosis

Aoife grew up in a suburb of Dublin, the middle child in a family of five. As a child, Aoife displayed signs of clumsiness and had difficulty with tasks like tying shoelaces, riding a bicycle, and handwriting. Her teachers noticed she was slower to pick up certain skills, particularly those that required fine motor coordination. Despite these challenges, Aoife excelled in creative pursuits such as drawing and storytelling.

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Her dyspraxia was formally diagnosed at age twelve after a referral by her school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator. The diagnosis provided some relief, both for Aoife and her family, clarifying why she found activities like sports and handwriting so difficult. However, at the time, awareness of dyspraxia in Ireland was limited, and targeted support was sparse.

Daily Life and Professional Experiences

Now in adulthood, Aoife has developed a variety of coping mechanisms to manage the effects of dyspraxia. She uses digital tools to circumvent issues with handwriting and organisation, such as voice-to-text software, reminders, and graphic software for work. Her workspace is meticulously arranged to minimise distractions and reduce the risk of spills or mishaps.

Aoife's job as a graphic designer allows her to utilise her creative strengths, although she faces particular challenges. For example, she sometimes struggles with time management, sequencing tasks, and quickly executing manual techniques, such as sketching layouts by hand or assembling physical mockups. Aoife has found that clear deadlines, checklists, and supportive colleagues make a significant difference in her ability to manage her workload.

Commuting in Dublin

Navigating public transportation in Dublin can be daunting for Aoife, especially during peak hours when crowds and noise overwhelm her senses. She compensates by allowing extra time for her commute, using transport apps to track bus and Luas schedules, and choosing routes with fewer transfers. Aoife avoids cycling in the city, as her balance and spatial awareness are affected by dyspraxia. Instead, she prefers walking or taking the bus.

Home Life and Self-care

At home, Aoife maintains routines to help her manage daily living tasks. She labels kitchen cabinets, uses colour-coded storage items, and keeps lists for shopping and chores. Cooking requires careful planning, as she finds following complex recipes and coordinating timing difficult. She prefers simple meals and often preps ingredients in advance to reduce stress.

Self-care is important to Aoife, though it comes with challenges. She sometimes finds it difficult to coordinate movements for yoga or exercise classes, so she opts for low-impact activities, such as walking in nearby parks or swimming at the local pool. She attends a monthly support group for adults with dyspraxia, which provides a sense of community and validation.

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Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Dyspraxia has shaped Aoife's social experiences. She is friendly and empathetic, but can be anxious in group settings, fearing awkward moments or unintentional clumsiness. She occasionally struggles to interpret social cues, especially in fast-paced environments like after-work gatherings or crowded bars. Friends describe her as creative and thoughtful, but aware that Aoife may need extra time or support for certain activities.

Aoife is open about her dyspraxia with close friends and colleagues, believing that transparency helps foster understanding. However, she sometimes feels frustrated by others' lack of awareness or misconceptions, such as assuming she is simply "careless" or "not trying hard enough." These moments can affect her self-esteem, but Aoife has developed resilience and self-advocacy skills over time.

Mental Health

Aoife has faced periods of anxiety and low mood, especially during times of transition or high stress. She sees a counsellor monthly, focusing on confidence-building, stress management, and practical strategies for living with dyspraxia. Mindfulness exercises and journaling help her to process emotions and maintain perspective.

Strengths and Abilities

Despite her challenges, Aoife possesses a range of strengths that she leverages daily:

- Creativity: Aoife's imagination and artistic skills are her greatest assets, enabling her to excel at her job and find joy in personal projects.
- Empathy: Her own experiences with adversity make her compassionate and understanding with others.
- Problem-solving: Aoife is adept at inventing strategies to overcome obstacles, from using adaptive equipment to rethinking how she approaches tasks.
- Resilience: Years of adapting to dyspraxia have made Aoife determined and resourceful.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite her achievements, Aoife continues to face barriers:

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- Motor Coordination: She finds manual tasks, such as DIY, sports, and even using kitchen appliances, more difficult than her peers.
- Organisation: Keeping track of appointments, deadlines, and personal belongings requires constant effort and technological support.
- Sensory Sensitivity: Crowded spaces, loud noises, and chaotic environments can lead to sensory overload.
- Public Perception: Lack of understanding about dyspraxia sometimes leads to misconceptions, affecting Aoife's confidence and relationships.

Accessing Support in Dublin

Aoife is proactive about seeking resources and support. She has connected with local organisations such as Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland, which provide information, advocacy, and peer support. Her GP is familiar with dyspraxia and assists Aoife in accessing occupational therapy and counselling. Her workplace has made small but important accommodations, such as flexible deadlines and ergonomic equipment.

Personal Goals and Aspirations

Aoife is ambitious and sets goals for herself, both professionally and personally. She aims to move into a senior designer role, advocate for greater awareness of dyspraxia in the creative industries, and eventually teach design to young people. Personally, she hopes to travel more, deepening her appreciation of art and culture across Europe.

Conclusion

Aoife O'Sullivan's story embodies both the challenges and triumphs that come with living as an adult woman with dyspraxia in Dublin. Through creativity, perseverance, and community, she continues to navigate a world that is often not built for neurodiversity—yet she finds ways to shape it to fit her own strengths. This case study persona offers valuable insights for educators, clinicians, employers, and advocates seeking to understand and support adults with dyspraxia.

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