



#MyDyslexiaStory

Major Symon Smith

Major Symon Smith, 252 Signal Squadron, 22nd Signal Regiment, is the founder and Co- Chair of the Defence Dyslexia Network which he set up in 2022 to raise awareness and support for dyslexic individuals in the military.

The aim of the network is to change the narrative on dyslexia, to normalise the conversation and allow dyslexic individuals to thrive across the Armed Forces.

The network is going from strength to strength and already has over 1,800 members and 240 ambassadors, with well over a third of the membership being from the Army.

Tell us about your dyslexia – when were you diagnosed?

I was one of the few who gained a diagnosis early in year 7 of secondary school! My older brother showed traits of dyslexia during primary school and my parents fought extremely hard to get him assessed. They faced the usual pushback of assumptions of laziness explaining any perceived lack of ability.

I was extremely fortunate to follow in their hard work as when I showed traits, I followed in my brother's footsteps (although a much easier path). I have spent the remainder of my life never seeing dyslexia as a negative just something I have and forms a part of my unique skill set. I have my parents and brother to thank for being lucky enough to now have a huge number of coping mechanisms for any of my weak areas.

Do the armed forces employ lots of dyslexic people?

Dyslexia impacts around 10% of the population. Within the armed forces this figure may be closer to 1 in 5 which will include many who are undiagnosed dyslexics. To put that in some context, that's just under one whole Squadron in a Regiment. One whole squadron's worth that thinks differently to the rest of the Regiment.

One reason why the incidence of dyslexia may be higher is that the Army has naturally attracted those who weren't enjoying the educational environment. This will include many undiagnosed dyslexic individuals who found that education did not play to their strengths and chose to join the Army for a more 'hands on' occupation.

Is dyslexia a barrier to a career in the military?

No. Individuals with dyslexia can serve if they meet the selection, training and performance standards required. All new entrants must be able to demonstrate that they have the capacity to serve in all aspects of their role, ensuring operational efficiency and the safety of the individual and others. For dyslexic individuals considering an Army career, dyslexia should not be a barrier.

Are the armed forces a good fit for a dyslexic individual?

Dyslexic Strengths are a good match to those skills required in the military.

The armed forces, particularly the Army needs individuals who think differently. Those whose strengths include leadership, good communication skills, and analytical problem-solving skills are sought after. These are the skills that the Army train and teach their junior and senior non-commissioned officers.

Recruiting and supporting people with these traits means adding greater analytical thinking, problem solving etc, but there is still more work to do to find new ways to judge or assess these skills which do not rely on following processes or writing complex and long documents – the very things that many dyslexic individuals find challenging.

Put simply, the Army needs to find ways to exploit the top dyslexic strengths, and not focus on those areas such as reading comprehension, spelling and writing which many find challenging.

Inevitably there will be some tasks which are part of every role and dyslexic individuals may find challenging, and this is where the right support is important. This support will be different for everyone and so the Army must work with individuals to understand what support they need. The need to 'train as you fight' is essential and the ability to write briefs at short notice in custom styles will always be required. But without the support, specifically during courses, those with dyslexia will be doomed to fail when this ask is required of them back at unit.

The army needs to help these individuals develop their own set of coping mechanisms, especially those who have left school without a diagnosis of dyslexia and are still working to understand their dyslexia.





What support is available?

The Dyslexia Defence network is working hard to look at some of the common issues faced by dyslexic service personnel, including ensuring that a dyslexia assessment is available for everyone when they enter basic training; enabling the entitlement to support for all mandated courses, and increasing the psychological safety on these courses so people feel comfortable to ask for support. But we still have work to do to ensure that all our colleagues and line managers understand and can support dyslexic individuals.

What else does the network do?

The network runs a virtual monthly discussion event which is open to all service personnel, plus two in-person events every year. Additionally, the network provides direct support to line managers, and briefings across the Ministry of Defence which share positive messages of dyslexia. But its main function is in helping its members navigate securing the support they need. This may start with help in obtaining a dyslexia diagnosis, followed by on-going support in sharing hints and tips to help manage the specific challenges faced by dyslexic individuals in the Armed Forces.

Tell us about the Royal Signals – why are they a good fit for a dyslexic brain?

The Royal Signals are the British Army's communications experts, providing battle-winning IT, cyber and information systems expertise everywhere that the British Armed Forces requires. The complexity facing the future of the Royal Signals is ever growing and we must be prepared for this. Thinking differently to problems presented will be the only way we can protect our future as a Corps.

With the significant number of variables present with the future of the Corps, our best minds will likely include those dyslexic minds thinking outside the box.