



# Specific Learning Disorder

When a Lifetime of Frustration Leads to Self-Medication

## What is Specific Learning Disorder?

**Specific Learning Disorder** is a neurodevelopmental condition that impairs reading, writing, or math abilities despite normal intelligence. People with SLD process information differently, leading to persistent academic struggles, workplace difficulties, and deep frustration that often goes unrecognized into adulthood.

## What Does It Look Like?

- **Persistent Academic and Workplace Struggles**  
Reading, writing, or math tasks take far longer and drain far more energy.
- **Avoidance of Everyday Tasks**  
Ordinary interactions feel high-stakes, as if every word will be scrutinized.
- **Chronic Low Self-Esteem**  
Years of falling short build shame they rarely talk about.
- **Difficulty Following Instructions**  
Multistep directions get lost, and they're blamed for not paying attention.

## How Does SLD Contribute to Relapse?

SLD creates years of shame and frustration that substances can temporarily silence.

- 1) Shame and Frustration Drive Use**  
Substances numb the pain of struggling to do what comes easily to others.
- 2) Short-Term Programs Lack Depth**  
Treatment that relies on reading and written exercises recreates the same failures.
- 3) Without Treating SLD, Relapse is Likely**  
They leave with the same unaddressed struggles and the shame that drove use.

### **Prevalence:**

**5-15%** of school-age children; persists into adulthood<sup>1</sup>

### **Co-Occurrence:**

**40%** of adults in alcoholism treatment show learning disability history<sup>2</sup>

### **Relapse Risk:**

**2x** more likely to re-use substances after treatment<sup>3</sup>

*Sources: <sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5*

*<sup>2</sup> Rhodes & Jasinski (1990), cited in SAMHSA TIP*

*29 <sup>3</sup> Agabio et al., Treatment of Comorbid Alcohol Depe(1990)*

## Treating SLD and Chronic Relapse at Burning Tree Ranch

SLD is often invisible, which is why it gets missed in program after program. Our **long-term, progress-based model** gives clinicians the time to identify learning differences and adapt treatment so clients actually engage with recovery. Clients advance when they demonstrate real behavioral change, not when a calendar says they're done.



*“When a learning disorder goes undiagnosed, deep shame develops. That shame becomes the emotional engine behind their substance use.”*

 **Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained**  
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch



## Dual Diagnosis Treatment for SLD Co-Occurring with Addiction

When SLD and addiction occur together, treating only the substance use ignores the frustration and shame that drove it.

- **Treating Both Conditions Together**  
Clients with untreated SLD may struggle or shut-down during treatment.
- **Adapting the Recovery Process**  
Treatment must match how the person actually learns.
- **Providing Enough Time**  
Identifying learning differences and skill-building takes months.

### Dual Diagnosis

The presence of both a **substance use disorder and a mental health condition** occurring together. Effective treatment for dual-diagnosis addictions must address both aspects simultaneously.



### Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at [www.BurningTree.com](http://www.BurningTree.com).

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