

Tell Me About

BY DI'YIM

Health At Large

A difficult *read*

TOM Cruise has said publicly that the practice of medicating children is wrong. He was reportedly diagnosed dyslexic when he was seven years old. The psychiatrists wanted to put him on drugs but his mother refused. And today, he says, "Had I been put on those drugs, I would never be here today ... having the career that I'm having." What is dyslexia?

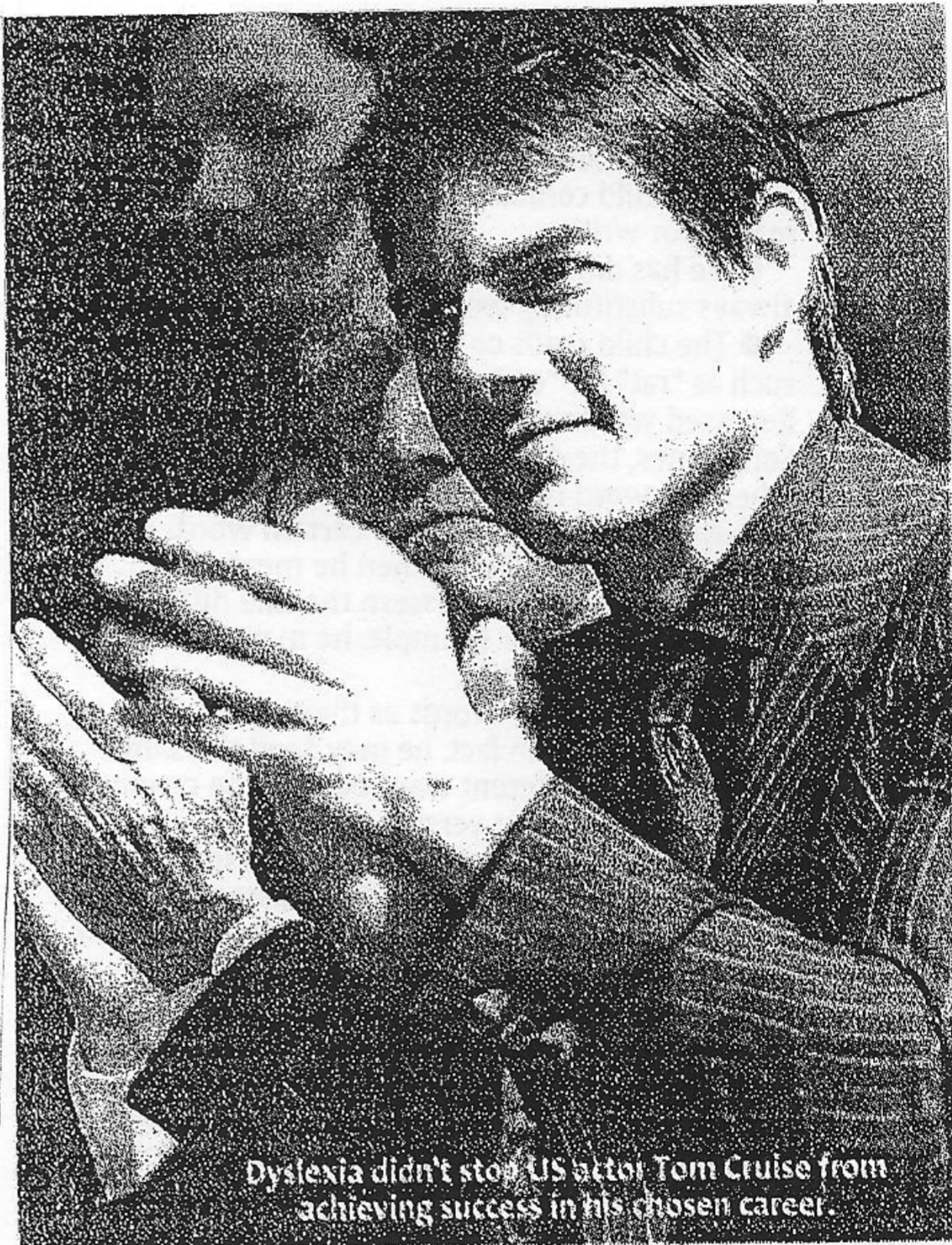
Dyslexia is a neurological learning disability. There are still a lot of theories and speculation about its origins. A dyslexic's brain is different from that of a "normal" brain. But after many years of research with CT scans, MRI, PET scans and SPECT scans, everyone is still not certain which area of the brain is the root cause of dyslexia.

In fact, to this day, everyone is still unsure as to whether an abnormality in the brain causes dyslexia; or it is dyslexia itself that causes the abnormality in the brain.

The word 'dyslexia' was coined in 1884 by a German ophthalmologist - "dys" = ill or difficult; "lexis" = word.

When you have dyslexia, you have difficulty recognising words accurately or fluently. You might also have poor spelling and decoding abilities. Basically, you will have difficulty in reading.

Dyslexia is more prevalent in boys than girls, and in cities rather than rural areas.



Dyslexia didn't stop US actor Tom Cruise from achieving success in his chosen career.

I have heard that a lot of geniuses were dyslexic. Is dyslexia then a precursor to genius?

Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Auguste Rodin, Leonardo da Vinci, Hans Christian Anderson, George Patton and Woodrow Wilson were thought to be dyslexic. However, modern theorists have debunked some of these myths.

Thomas Edison did not get to learn until he was eight and a half years old because he was sickly. And when he finally went to school, he was not actually a poor reader. He simply had no patience to share his books with the rest of his slower classmates.

As for Einstein, the myth maintains that he did not talk until he was four years old and could not read until age nine. While it was true that Einstein was a late speaker, biographers recently suggest that this was because he was a shy, withdrawn boy. He attended school at age six and actually did very well, scoring first in class frequently. When he was 12, he was already reading physics.

Einstein did indeed fail his college exams the

first time he took it, but this was not because he was dyslexic. Most people fail to mention the fact that he took this exam when he was 16 years old. And he also did not study for it, just to spite his father.

So there is no evidence that dyslexia is a precursor to genius.

How will I know if my child has dyslexia?

Dyslexia means having difficulty in reading. But sometimes this is not obvious in a child. However, there are certain ways to look out for it:

- The child confuses the letter "b" and "d" when reading or writing.
- He has difficulty pronouncing words or is always substituting words.
- The child reads or writes words in reverse, such as "rat" for "tar" and "won" for "now". Reversed words are extremely common in dyslexia. Sometimes, the dyslexic person can also read "cat" when the word is "cart".
- The child reads or writes certain words in the wrong order - like "left" when he means "felt". The dyslexic child may not discern the fine difference between words. (For example, he may write "pin" when he means "pen".)
- The child spells words as they sound, like "nite" for "night". In fact, he may spell the same word in many different ways because he cannot recognise the correct version.
- The child reads very slowly, word for word. He might constantly lose his reading passage, miss out entire paragraphs or read the same passage again and again.
- The child cannot comprehend or remembers very little of what he read.
- The child writes very slowly, or has poor handwriting. A severely dyslexic person may write a sentence with poor grammar and punctuation, which can be completely unintelligible to the teacher or parent.

If my child has dyslexia, is he doomed never to have good grades? Will he never be able to go to college and have a good career?

There is no cure for dyslexia. However, a child can learn ways to approach and combat it by undergoing enhancement programmes.

These programmes are designed to improve concentration, perception, memory, reading and writing skills as well as math. Many dyslexics have gone through these programmes successfully.

Results may vary with different children, of course. But there have been success stories aplenty. Some people have even recovered completely by the time they reached their teens or adulthood.

It is important to remember that should your child never recover from dyslexia completely, there is no reason why he should not be successful. For instance, he may be skilled in the arts and technology.

Many successful actors (Cruise, Keanu Reeves, Anthony Hopkins) had dyslexia and now have no problems reading a script. Highly acclaimed authors such as John Irving and Agatha Christie have no problems writing entire books.

Having dyslexia also does not mean that you don't have a head for business (entrepreneurs like Richard Branson, Ted Turner and Anita Roddick of the Body Shop are all afflicted).

In fact, for all these successful people, it would appear that having dyslexia spurred them on to work even harder to overcome their difficulties.

■ *Dr YLM graduated as a medical doctor, and has been writing for many years on various subjects such as medicine, health advice, computers and entertainment. The information contained in this column is for general educational purposes only. Neither The Star nor the author gives any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to such information. The Star and the author disclaim all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*