

Fourteen Percent of American Adults Are Functionally Illiterate

Approximately 33 million American adults (one in seven) are functionally illiterate. These are individuals who get by with 2nd – 5th grade reading and writing skills. Odds are that you know someone with literacy issues: someone who manages but cannot live up to their full potential for lack of reading skills.

What is Literacy?

“The power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write, but rather in an individual’s capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life.”¹

Often those who are not fully literate are referred to as “illiterate” (which means completely unable to read or write). Most are more appropriately called “functionally illiterate”. A functionally illiterate person has a literacy level that is insufficient for most work and normal daily situations. This individual often has had some elementary education and reads at or below the 5th grade level. They can usually “get by” and are often very adept at hiding their condition. More often than not, functional illiteracy is a deficiency of skills and has little to do with a person’s intelligence or work ethic

Signs and Symptoms of Low Literacy

1. Has extremely poor spelling skills.
2. Uses excuses like, “I forgot my glasses.” when asked to read.
3. Tends to go to the same few restaurants and order the same thing.
4. Orders what someone else has ordered or ask the server for suggestions at unfamiliar restaurants.
5. Carries a book, newspaper or magazine, but doesn’t read it.
6. Avoids filling out forms or asks to take the form home to fill out.
7. Conducts most business in cash and often prefers to pay bills in person.
8. Uses directory assistance, rather than a phone book or finding the information online.
9. Resists writing lists or notes instead relies on memory
10. Foregoes promotion opportunities at work or avoids looking for another job
11. Stays in a comfort zone: shops the same stores, buys the same products, and travels the same routes.
12. Shows up really early or too late because they cannot read a calendar or appointment card.
13. Avoids social situations, feels a sense of desperation or shame.

Here is the good news: YOU CAN HELP!

1. Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of low literacy. A functionally illiterate person will exhibit more than one or two of the above behaviors.
2. Find a caring and supportive way to broach the subject with the individual
3. Encourage them to contact the Literacy Council. In everything we do, we act with care, compassion and determination by:
 - treating all individuals with dignity and respect and by maintaining a caring atmosphere where the needs of our students can be met while being sensitive to their concerns
 - maintaining highly qualified volunteers and staff and providing a comprehensive set of technical learning programs
 - protecting student confidentiality throughout our organization

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