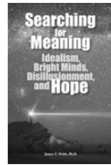
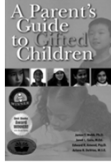


# Idealism, Stress, Unhappiness, Depression, and Resiliency



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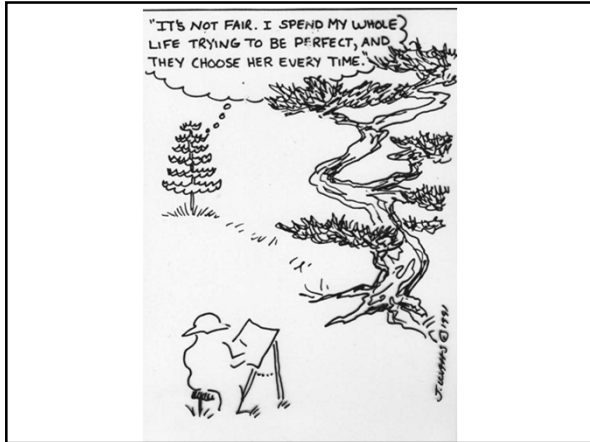
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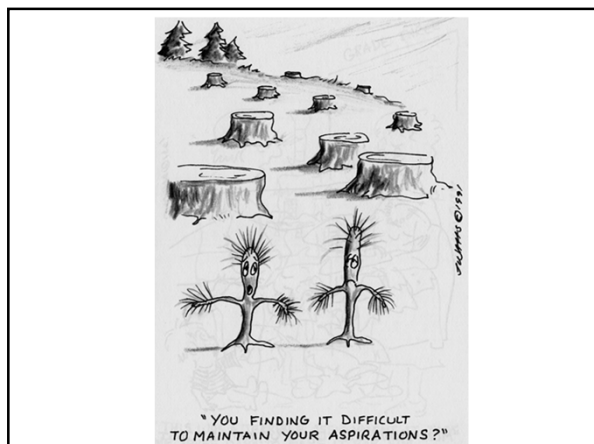
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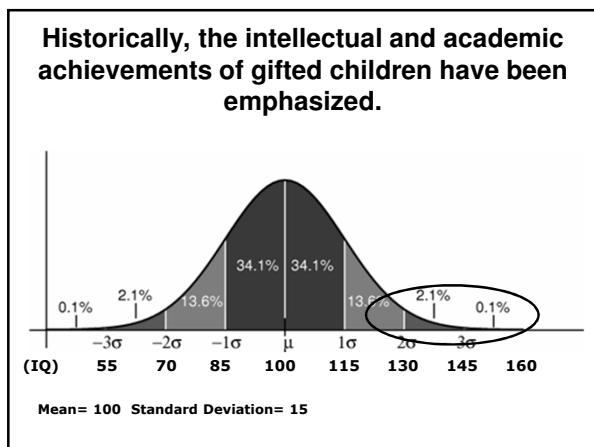
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**Social and Emotional Factors**

Although we often recognize their idealism (high expectations, concern with fairness and rules, etc.), other related areas have been overlooked, such as their:

- Stress
- Perfectionism
- Unhappiness
- Depression
- and the Need to Develop Resiliency

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**Children Prone to Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression Are Those Who:**

- Are in a toxic educational setting or a toxic family.
- By inborn temperament are pessimistic, unhappy, unsociable, disorganized, unusually sensitive and particularly intense.
- Have not learned to be resilient and who have low self-esteem, poor self-concept, and strong self-doubt.
- Are intense and quite sensitive ("overexcitabilities") in their feelings and reactions.
- Are idealists, and whose idealism can actually increase the likelihood of depression.
  - Often frustrated in their idealism and vision of how things should be.
  - Their ideals for how things "should" be is not necessarily shared by those around them.

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**Some Characteristics of Gifted Children Can Increase Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression**

- Intensity and sensitivity of gifted children make it difficult to receive criticism, modulate their behaviors, and promote over-commitment.
- High ideals result in feeling of obligation (pressure) to make contributions to the world.
- Perfectionism. Low tolerance of gap between their ideals and their own abilities to perform.
- Sense of space limitations (want to be everywhere at once to do more things). Sense of time pressures/limitations (can't fit in everything they want to do).
- Feeling a lack of fit with environment (school, peers).
- Curiosity and wide range of interests can cause them to feel different, unfocused, scattered, and disorganized in ways that prompt criticism from others.
- Desire to belong, be accepted; they may camouflage their abilities even though they have a sense of being untrue to themselves.

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**Characteristics of Gifted Children that Can Increase Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression (cont.)**

- High ideals result in feeling of obligation (pressure) to make contributions to the world.
- Their apparent high potential leads others to expect more of them.
- High aspirations lead to "goal-vaulting."
- High ideals/aspirations lead to a need to be "on top" in grades; desire to please parents and teachers.
- Accelerated thought processes, high expectations, and intensity lead to impatience with others.
- Tradition breaking/questioning leads to discomfort, rejection by others.
- Rejection of traditions (e.g., identity as "nerd") leads to feelings of isolation.
- Androgyny.
- Their judgment lags behind their intellect.

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### Four Factors Particularly Influence the Expression of Giftedness, as Well As Educational, Social, and Emotional Functioning

- 1. Level of Giftedness
- 2. Asynchronous Development
- 3. Thinking Styles
- 4. Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities



➤ The higher the child's overall ability level, the more these variables influence the behaviors and can result in stress, perfectionism, and depression.

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### Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression Have a Common Underlying Basis--"Self-talk" Combined with "Irrational Beliefs"

- Their idealism about themselves and others is intense
- Their idealistic self-talk contains an excess of "shoulds"
- Their thoughts and actions assume irrational beliefs are not reasonable
- Their self-talk that incorporates many irrational beliefs
- They frequently make self-talk errors ("bad bookkeeping" and "proportionality")
- Intensity can cause a person to "catastrophize"

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### Some Irrational Beliefs

- You must do perfectly in all respects.
- A person who acts badly is a bad person.
- You must be liked, loved, and approved of by everyone.
- Behaviors that worked for someone else, or which once worked for you, are what must be followed.
- It is terrible, horrible, awful and absolutely catastrophic when things aren't going the way you want them to.
- People and things should be different from what they are, and it is an awful catastrophe if perfect solutions cannot be immediately found.
- Your individual happiness is caused by other people or events, rather than by how you think or talk to yourself.
- If something is unpleasant, you should be preoccupied and continually upset about it for long periods of time.
- Things that happened in the past are all-important, need to be continually worried about, and limit your possibilities for the future.

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### How Can We Help? Here Are Some General Guidelines

- > Don't ignore stress, perfectionism, or depression. They will not just go away by themselves.
- > Very often, gifted children feel that they are the only ones who have ever felt this particular way, and they need to be assured that someone understands them.
- > You cannot argue or reason people out of being overly stressed, being perfectionistic, or being depressed.
- > Sarcasm and ridicule do not help; they only make matters worse. The child not only feels belittled, but also may adopt sarcasm and ridicule as ways of interacting with others.
- > Try to avoid unintentionally reinforcing non-adaptive or maladaptive stress, perfectionistic, or depressive behaviors.

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### How Can We Help Children Manage Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression?

- > Help them understand and accept aspects of giftedness such as intensity and sensitivity.
- > Teach them that "self-talk" exists; then teach them how to use it to work for them, rather than against them.
- > Point out common errors regarding self-talk
  - "Proportionality" error
  - "Bad bookkeeping" error
- > Highlight the irrational beliefs that people base their lives upon
- > Help them understand that "blaming others" leaves one helpless because it implies that any solution lies with others.

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### Teach Resilience

- > Model your own resilience.
- > Teach them to challenge their self-talk by looking for evidence.
- > Teach them to avoid or manage catastrophizing by considering:
  - What is the worst possible outcome?
  - What is the best possible outcome?
  - What is the most likely outcome?

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**Teach Resilience** - continued

Nurture the “Seven Components of Resilience” (Seligman)

- Emotion regulation –the ability to stay calm under pressure
- Impulse control –the ability to delay gratification
- Empathy and the ability to read nonverbal cues of others
- Optimism, though not false optimism
- Causal analysis of adversities that are causing the person stress
  - Personal: “me – not me”
  - Permanent: “always – not always”
  - Pervasive: “everything – not everything”
- Self-efficacy –our belief that we can successfully solve problems we are likely to experience
- Reaching out –taking risks to solve problems or have relationships

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**The ABCDE Model**  
(adapted from Reivich, & Shatté, 2002)

- Adversity (the failure or stressful situation)
- Beliefs (your thoughts and beliefs that generated your reactions)
- Consequences (your emotional and behavioral reactions)
- Disputing (the arguments you make to counter your beliefs)
  - Gather evidence
  - Generate alternative ways of viewing the situation
  - Examine the “what ifs” of the adversity in order to decatastrophize
    - What is the worst possible outcome?
    - What is the one thing you can do to help stop the worst thing from happening?
    - What is the best possible thing that could happen?
    - What is the one thing you can do to help best thing happen?
    - What is the most likely thing that will actually be?
    - What can you do to handle the most likely thing if it happens?
  - Develop a plan of action
- Energization (Act on your new way of looking at the situation)

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**Managing Stress** - continued

- Model your own self-talk, and how you manage it. (Establish partnerships to help manage self-talk).
- Establish problem-solving strategies to:
  - Help them feel a sense of control over themselves and their life
  - Teach goal setting and prioritizing (avoid “goal-vaulting”)
  - Prompt them to action (rather than just thoughts)
  - Teach them to use successive successes with themselves
  - Teach them to decide on actions using “cost-benefit analyses”

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### Managing Stress – continued

- Attempt to achieve some agreed-upon perspective and goals concerning what "needs to be changed", and then establish a "helping alliance."
- Construct a sense of perspective.
  - Point out the "catastrophizing"
  - Question "Whose problem is it?" (Are they buying into others' expectations)
  - Use humor (note the relationship between tragedy and comedy)
  - Have them write a daily journal and review it periodically
  - Compare their situation with other events (to promote priorities)
  - View mistakes as stepping stones for success, rather than as defeats
  - Use role-playing; role-reversals; role-stripping to separate sense of self as distinct from one's roles
  - Use guided readings/bibliotherapy/cinematherapy to see patterns in others and then in themselves

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### Managing Stress – continued

- Teach compartmentalized thinking (problems in one area need not spill over to all areas), and active ignoring.
- Use immediate calming or stress-prevention techniques before trying to produce insight. (Don't try to teach navigation skills in the middle of a hurricane).
  - H.A.L.T. (Hungry, angry, lonely, tired)
  - Meditation (undercuts self-talk; can distract you from worry)
  - Relaxation (you can consciously control this)
  - Breathing (you can control this; helps prevent CO2 imbalance)
  - Massage; bath; exercise
  - Music
  - Sleep

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### Managing Stress – continued

- Change the environment to "get the child out of his/her head."
  - Engage in sports activities
  - Go camping
  - Nature walks
  - Outward Bound programs

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## Perfectionism

Perfectionism is like cholesterol. There are two kinds – good perfectionism and bad perfectionism.

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## Perfectionism

- > Restate "shoulds" as "I am choosing to..." Explain the non-realism of media role models (particularly for girls).
- > Use bibliotherapy; read about others with high ideals and/or perfectionism
- > Model self-talk and your own imperfections. Daydream, relax, "goof off;" model how you learn from your mistakes.
- > Give paradoxical instructions (e.g., "You cannot be perfectly human unless you are able to be imperfect; so be as perfectly messy as you can" or "Make a mistake, but to do so in a way that I am the least likely to discover it").
- > Gently refuse to talk about the child's excessive self-criticism; focus on how people don't always need to compare, evaluate, or examine for inferiority.
- > Spend "special time" with undivided attention doing what the youngster wants to do except it cannot be a competitive activity. This prompts cooperative activities, sharing, admiring, or just being with the person – not for what they do, but for who they are.

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## Depression and Suicide in Gifted Children

- > Gifted children – in general – appear no more likely than others to commit suicide.
- > There may be specific types of gifted children more at risk for depression and suicide, however.
- > Some professionals have observed that highly gifted children, however, may be more at risk; more research is needed.
- > Some controversy exists whether gifted children are more frequently depressed than children in general.
- > Depression is not, however, always a bad thing; unhappiness reflects dissatisfaction, and can lead to personal growth and commitment toward change (Dabrowski's Positive Disintegration)
- > On the other hand, depression can lead to cynicism, despair, and "learned helplessness."

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### How Widespread is Depression?

- *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, in its five most recent annual surveys, found:
  - 4% of these high achievers attempted suicide
  - 25% considered suicide
  - 19% knew someone their age who committed suicide
  - 43% knew someone their age who attempted suicide
- These surveys also showed that children seldom shared their thoughts about suicide with their parents.
- Depression Is Increasing
  - 2.5 percent of children and 8 percent of adolescents in the United States suffer from depression.
  - The incidence of depression has increased in each generation over the last ten decades—not just in the United States, but worldwide.
- Suicide
  - From 1952 to 1992, suicides among adolescents and young adults increased nearly 300%.
  - From 1980 to 1992, the rate of suicide among adolescents ages 15 to 19 years increased by 28%, while suicide among children ages 10 to 14 years increased by 120%.
  - Suicide is the second leading cause of death in 10-24 year olds.

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### Depression

- Some depression is biochemically caused (inborn temperament differences), but most seems to be caused by the environment.
- Depression can occur at any age. Younger children (particularly boys) often show "depressive equivalents" of bullying, temper outbursts, poor school performance, acting out, bed-wetting, withdrawal, somatic complaints, narrowing of interests, withdrawal into daydreaming, etc., often with little apparent sad mood.
- A few gifted children have reactive hypoglycemia and/or allergy problems. These can look like depression (or ADHD).
- A sensitive gifted child often is more susceptible to depression in a toxic family or toxic classroom (sarcasm, ridicule, guilt-inducing behaviors, feeling of being trapped and unimportant, etc.).

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### Sources of Depression

- Genetics and environment
  - There is genetic predisposition to pessimism and depression
  - Toxic environments because of sarcasm, ridicule, guilt-inducing behaviors, feeling of being trapped and unimportant, etc.
    - Toxic family
    - Toxic classroom
    - Toxic peers
- Idealism, perfectionism, disappointment, and disillusionment
- Interpersonal alienation
- Existential concerns (particularly for highly gifted) about the absurdity of life, values; search for human meaning
- Underlying all of these is anger ("It should not be this way!") either at oneself or at a situation that seems unchangeable.
- "Where there is anger, there is hurt underneath!"
- The anger is what prompts the depressive equivalents (truancy, bullying, temper outbursts, poor school performance, vague illness, withdrawal into daydreaming)
- But in learned helplessness a passivity (sometimes passive-aggressive) is often present

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### Gifted Children at Risk for Suicide

- Particular danger signs:
  - Withdrawal from others
  - Sudden decline in achievement
  - Narrowing or lessening of interests
  - Recent loss of friends or family
  - Changes in eating, sleeping, or social habits
  - Depressed mood
  - Giving away possessions
  - Drug or alcohol abuse
- Evaluate lethality. Does the child have a specific plan and the means?
- Strategies:
  - Ask, "Are you thinking of suicide?" This does not implant the idea in a young person's mind. If you are concerned enough to ask, it is likely that the thought has at least crossed the child's mind.
  - Virtually always, the child takes it as a sign that you care enough to ask.
  - If the child denies thinking about suicide, but looks as if he might not be completely honest, you might ask, "Would you tell me if you *were* thinking about it?"
  - Refer to a mental health practitioner if needed.
  - Make a "contract" with the child to stay alive at least until then.

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### Helping Gifted Children Who Are Depressed

- Don't ignore stress, perfectionism, or depression. They will not just go away by themselves.
- You cannot argue or reason people out of being overly stressed, being perfectionistic, or being depressed.
- Sarcasm and ridicule do not help; they only make matters worse. The child not only feels belittled, but also may adopt sarcasm and ridicule as ways of interacting with others.
- Be aware of "learned helplessness" and how it often prompts depression.
- It is important to avoid accidentally reinforcing non-adaptive or maladaptive stress, perfectionistic, or depressive behaviors.
- Highlight the irrational beliefs that people base their lives upon, and the notion that "blame" leaves one helpless.
- Re-state their depressed feelings as anger—either at themselves or at a situation where they feel powerless.
- Teach resilience and action. "By emphasizing how a child feels, at the expense of what he does—mastery, persistence, overcoming frustration and boredom, and meeting challenge—parents and teachers are making children more vulnerable to depression." (Seligman, 1996)

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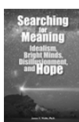
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### Helping Gifted Children Who Are Depressed

(continued)



- Teach them to be detectives.
  - What is the worst possible outcome?
  - What is the best possible outcome?
  - What is the most likely outcome?
- Very often, gifted children feel that they are the only ones who have ever felt this particular way, and they need to be assured that someone understands them.
- Accept their feelings, but state your own different view of them ("I'm sorry you see yourself as being so worthless, because I see you as being very worthwhile in many ways").
- Foster physical closeness; touch them.
- In existential depressions, suggest specific readings. See *Some of My Best Friends are Books*, by Judith Halsted (2003).
- Older children and adults may benefit from reading, "Dabrowski's Theory and Existential Depression in Gifted Children and Adults" ([http://www.sengifted.org/articles\\_counseling/Webb\\_dabrowski\\_s\\_theory.shtml](http://www.sengifted.org/articles_counseling/Webb_dabrowski_s_theory.shtml))

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### Key Points: Idealism, Unhappiness, Depression, and Resiliency

- Most gifted children are idealists, yet their idealism can actually increase the likelihood of depression.
- Gifted children are often frustrated in their idealism and vision of how things should be.
- They are exposed to internal and external stresses that could make them more at risk for unhappiness and depression.
- Some are unhappy and depressed.
- But on the other hand, gifted children are resilient and often are better at coping.

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### Depression Is Often Related to Idealism...

© 1998 Randy Glasbergen. E-mail: randy@glasbergen.com



"Sometimes you get a brainstorm, sometimes you only get the clouds."

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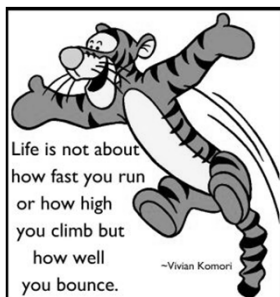
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### and Resilience Is Needed



Life is not about  
how fast you run  
or how high  
you climb but  
how well  
you bounce.

—Vivian Komori

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### Bright People May Be More Likely to Experience Compassion Fatigue and Burnout



- Bright children and adults tend to be idealists.
- They can see alternatives.
- They see the difference between how things are and how they might be.
- The result is dissatisfaction, ambivalence, disillusionment, and conflict.
- Cynicism, anger, and depression may result.
- Your old ways of thinking and feeling begin to disintegrate.
- Will it be negative disintegration (staying the same), or will it be positive disintegration and growth?
- Blame and despair can leave us feeling helpless.

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### Stress vs. Burnout

#### Stress

- Characterized by over-engagement
- Emotions are over-reactive
- Produces urgency and hyperactivity
- Exhausts physical energy
- Leads to anxiety disorders
- Causes disintegration
- Primary damage is physical
- Stress may kill you prematurely, and you won't have enough time to finish what you started.

#### Burnout

- Characterized by disengagement
- Emotions are blunted
- Produces helplessness and hopelessness
- Exhausts motivation and drive, ideals and hope
- Leads to paranoia, detachment, and depression
- Causes demoralization
- Primary damage is emotional
- Burnout may never kill you, but your life may not seem worth living

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### Our Kids Need You!



- Our gifted children are prone to disillusionment and burnout, too.
- They need you to be energy givers!
- You are more influential than you realize.
- Torrance's study of teachers who make a difference.
- Inoculation ratio of 1 to 7.
- We must preserve hope for others.

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### Seven Guiding Principles

1. Nurture yourself
2. Set realistic, attainable goals
3. Emphasize successes, not failures
4. Focus on the process more than on the result
5. Join with others who are idealists
6. Keep a time perspective
7. Don't take it personally

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