



Existential depression in gifted individuals

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It has been my experience that gifted and talented persons are more likely to experience a type of depression referred to as existential depression. Although an episode of existential depression may be precipitated in anyone by a major loss or the threat of a loss which highlights the transient nature of life, persons of higher intellectual ability are more prone to experience existential depression spontaneously. Sometimes this existential depression is tied into the positive disintegration experience referred to by Dabrowski (1996).

Existential depression is a depression that arises when an individual confronts certain basic issues of existence. Yalom (1980) describes four such issues (or "ultimate concerns")—death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Death is an inevitable occurrence. Freedom, in an existential sense, refers to the absence of external structure. That is, humans do not enter a world which is inherently structured. We must give the world a structure which we ourselves create. Isolation recognizes that no matter how close we become to another person, a gap always remains, and we are nonetheless alone. Meaninglessness stems from the first three. If we must die, if we construct our own world, and if each of us is ultimately alone, then what meaning does life have?

Why should such existential concerns occur disproportionately among gifted persons? Partially, it is because substantial thought and reflection must occur to even consider such notions, rather than simply focusing on superficial day-to-day aspects of life. Other more specific characteristics of gifted children are important predisposers as well.

Because gifted children are able to consider the possibilities of how things might be, they tend to be idealists. However, they are simultaneously able to see that the world is falling short of how it might be. Because they are intense, gifted children feel keenly the disappointment and frustration which occurs when ideals are not reached. Similarly, these youngsters quickly spot the inconsistencies, arbitrariness and absurdities in society and in the behaviors of those around them. Traditions are questioned or challenged. For example, why do we put such tight sex-role or age-role restrictions on people? Why do people engage in hypocritical behaviors in which they say one thing and then do another? Why do people say things they really do not mean at all? Why are so many people so unthinking and uncaring in their dealings with others? How much difference in the world can one person's life make?

When gifted children try to share these concerns with others, they are usually met with reactions ranging from puzzlement to hostility. They discover that others, particularly of their age, clearly do not share these concerns, but instead are focused on more concrete issues and on fitting in with others' expectations. Often by even first grade, these youngsters, particularly the more highly gifted ones, feel isolated from their peers and perhaps from their families as they find that others are not prepared to discuss such weighty concerns.

When their intensity is combined with multi-potentiality, these youngsters become particularly frustrated with the existential limitations of space and time. There simply aren't enough hours in the day to develop all of the talents that many of these children have. Making choices among the possibilities is indeed arbitrary; there is no "ultimately right" choice. Even choosing a vocation can be difficult if one is trying to make a career decision between essentially equal passion, talents and potential in violin, neurology, theoretical mathematics and international relations.

The reaction of gifted youngsters (again with intensity) to these frustrations is often one of anger. But they quickly discover that their anger is futile, for it is really directed at "fate" or at other matters which they are not able to control. Anger that is powerless evolves quickly into depression.

In such depression, gifted children typically try to find some sense of meaning, some anchor point which they can grasp to pull themselves out of the mire of "unfairness." Often, though, the more they try to pull themselves out, the more they become acutely aware that their life is finite and brief, that they are alone and are only one very small organism in a quite large world, and that there is a frightening freedom regarding how one chooses to live one's life. It is at this point that they question life's meaning and ask, "Is this all there is to life? Is there not ultimate meaning? Does life only have meaning if I give it meaning? I



am a small, insignificant organism who is alone in an absurd, arbitrary and capricious world where my life can have little impact, and then I die. Is this all there is?"

Such concerns are not too surprising in thoughtful adults who are going through mid-life crises. However, it is a matter of great concern when these existential questions are foremost in the mind of a twelve or fifteen year old. Such existential depressions deserve careful attention, since they can be precursors to suicide.

How can we help our bright youngsters cope with these questions? We cannot do much about the finiteness of our existence. However, we can help youngsters learn to feel that they are understood and not so alone and that there are ways to manage their freedom and their sense of isolation.

The isolation is helped to a degree by simply communicating to the youngster that someone else understands the issues that he/she is grappling with. Even though your experience is not exactly the same as mine, I feel far less alone if I know that you have had experiences that are reasonably similar. This is why relationships are so extremely important in the long-term adjustment of gifted children (Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan, 1982).

A particular way of breaking through the sense of isolation is through touch. In the same way that infants need to be held and touched, so do persons who are experiencing existential aloneness. Touch seems to be a fundamental and instinctual aspect of existence, as evidenced by mother-infant bonding or "failure to thrive" syndrome. Often, I have "prescribed" daily hugs for a youngster suffering existential depression and have advised parents of reluctant teenagers to say, "I know that *you* may not want a hug, but *I* need a hug." A hug, a touch on the arm, playful jostling, or even a "high five" can be very important to such a youngster, because it establishes at least some physical connection.

The issues and choices involved in managing one's freedom are more intellectual, as opposed to the reassuring aspects of touch as a sensory solution to an emotional crisis. Gifted children who feel overwhelmed by the myriad choices of an unstructured world can find a great deal of comfort in studying and exploring alternate ways in which other people have structured their lives. Through reading about people who have chosen specific paths to greatness and fulfillment, these youngsters can begin to use bibliotherapy as a method of understanding that choices are merely forks in the road of life, each of which can lead them to their own sense of fulfillment and accomplishment (Halsted, 1994). We all need to build our own personal philosophy of beliefs and values which will form meaningful frameworks for our lives.

It is such existential issues that lead many of our gifted individuals to bury themselves so intensively in "causes" (whether these causes are academics, political or social causes, or cults). Unfortunately, these existential issues can also prompt periods of depression, often mixed with desperate, thrashing attempts to "belong." Helping these individuals to recognize the basic existential issues may help, but only if done in a kind and accepting way. In addition, these youngsters will need to understand that existential issues are not ones that can be dealt with only once, but rather ones that will need frequent revisiting and reconsideration.

In essence, then, we can help many persons with existential depressions if we can get them to realize that they are not so alone and if we can encourage them to adopt the message of hope written by the African-American poet, Langston Hughes:

***Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.***

***Hold fast to dreams.
For if dreams go,
Life is a barren field
Covered with snow.***

Langston Hughes

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