

## **Misdiagnosis of the Gifted**

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Gifted individuals face many challenges. One of them may be in getting correctly identified by psychotherapists and others as gifted.

It's well known among researchers of the gifted, talented and creative that these individuals exhibit greater intensity and increased levels of emotional, imaginal, intellectual, sensual and psychomotor excitability and that this is a normal pattern of development. It is because these gifted children and adults have a finely tuned psychological structure and an organized awareness that they experience all of life differently and more intensely than those around them.

These characteristics, however, are frequently perceived by psychotherapists and others as evidence of a mental disturbance because most of the population lacks accurate information about the special characteristics of gifted individuals, couples and families. Most people don't know that what is considered normal for the gifted is most often labeled as neurosis in the general population and as a result, the gifted are personally and emotionally vulnerable to a variety of unique relationship difficulties at home, work, school and in the community.

Since the gifted function with relatively high levels of intensity and sensitivity, when they seek therapy they are frequently misdiagnosed because therapists receive no specialized training in the identification and treatment of persons who have advanced and complex patterns of development.

Therapeutic assessment of gifted persons with asynchronous development, heightened levels of awareness, energy and emotional response, and an intense level of inner turmoil often results in their developmental transition being mislabeled as a personality or attentional disorder. Histrionic, dysthymic, cyclothymic, borderline, narcissistic, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) are a few of the diagnostic labels mistakenly used to describe normative stages of positive disintegration.

The results of this type of misdiagnosis can range from benign neglect to misguided counseling strategies that invalidate and attempt to 'normalize' the complex inner process of the gifted. When misdiagnosed gifted clients are prescribed medication to suppress the "symptoms of giftedness" there is the danger that the wonderful inner fury of the gifted process will be neutralized, thus minimizing the potential for a life of accomplishment and fulfillment. As a result, those who have the most to offer society are the least likely to get their therapeutic needs met.

For the gifted, inner conflict is a developmental rather than a degenerative sign, because it drives the gifted person forward to replace current ways of thinking and being with those of higher level development. This type of positive disintegration is characterized by an intensified inner tension between what one is and what one could be. This dynamic tension is what fuels the creative person's complex inner life and provides the impetus for growth and development. Any therapist who works with a gifted population must be familiar with these internal processes, which are utilized to develop advanced potential - otherwise, the therapist risks inflicting further psychological damage.

When working with the gifted, a therapist must address the following intrapersonal issues: the internal stress of being gifted; the emotional trauma of rapid development; the effects of intro

version, intensity, perfectionism and extraordinary sensitivity on self and others; the recognition of the symptoms of insufficient mental engagement; the importance of interacting with other gifted persons, and channeling and focusing an abundance of physical, sensual, intellectual and emotional energy.

Unique interpersonal challenges that gifted individuals, couples and families encounter during their life span include learning to interact in the mainstream world; manage expectations and pressures to fit the norm; defuse unconscious hostility, resentment, antagonism and sabotage directed at them because they are perceived as intellectually, creatively or personally advantaged; set appropriate boundaries for the utilization of their abilities; collaborate with others, and manage the daily dilemmas of giftedness involving relatives, bosses, co-workers, neighbors, counselors, teachers and other members of the community.

The challenges that the gifted must face in order to achieve their advanced potential and maintain their health are many. One of the greatest gifts a therapist can give gifted, talented and creative people is a genuine valuing of themselves and their abilities. Professionals who are willing to learn about the gifted will certainly accomplish this.

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