

Dabrowski's Theory and Existential Depression in Gifted Children and Adults

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It's very hard to keep your spirits up. You've got to keep selling yourself a bill of goods, and some people are better at lying to themselves than others. If you face reality too much, it kills you. ~ Woody Allen

When people undergo a great trauma or other unsettling event—they have lost a job or a loved one dies, for example—their understanding of themselves or of their place in the world often disintegrates, and they temporarily "fall apart," experiencing a type of depression referred to as existential depression. Their ordeal highlights for them the transient nature of life and the lack of control that we have over so many events, and it raises questions about the meaning of our lives and our behaviors. For other people, the experience of existential depression seemingly arises spontaneously; it stems from their own perception of life, their thoughts about the world and their place in it, as well as the meaning of their life. While not universal, the experience of existential depression can challenge an individual's very survival and represents both a great challenge and at the same time an opportunity—an opportunity to seize control over one's life and turn the experience into a positive life lesson—an experience leading to personality growth.

It has been my experience that gifted and talented persons are more likely than those who are less gifted to experience spontaneous existential depression as an outgrowth of their mental and emotional abilities and interactions with others. People who are bright are usually more intense, sensitive, and idealistic, and they can see the inconsistencies and absurdities in the values and behaviors of others (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). This kind of sensitive awareness and idealism makes them more likely to ask themselves difficult questions about the nature and purpose of their lives and the lives of those around them. They become keenly aware of their smallness in the larger picture of existence, and they feel helpless to fix the many problems that trouble them. As a result, they become depressed.



This spontaneous existential depression is also, I believe, typically associated with the disintegration experiences referred to by Dabrowski (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Mendaglio, 2008a). In Dabrowski's approach, individuals who "fall apart" must find some way to "put themselves back together again," either by reintegrating at their previous state or demonstrating growth by reintegrating at a new and higher level of functioning. Sadly, sometimes the outcome of this process may lead to chronic breakdown and disintegration. Whether existential depression and its resulting disintegration become positive or whether they stay negative depends on many factors.

I will focus my discussion here on characteristics of people, especially the gifted, that may lead them to spontaneous existential depression, relate these to Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, as well as to other psychological theories, and then discuss some specific ways to manage existential depression.

Background

A Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski worked and wrote prolifically about his ideas in the years from 1929 until his death in 1980, living part of his life in the United States and in Canada, as well as in Europe. Nonetheless, he remains largely unknown in North America, despite his many publications and even though he was friends with prominent psychologists such as Maslow and Mowrer. Although his theory of positive disintegration is highly relevant to understanding existential depression—as well as many other issues—I myself did not become aware of Dabrowski's work until about 10 years ago.

But long before I knew about Dabrowski's theory, I knew about and understood existential depression. In fact, I knew it on a personal level, for I have lived it. Like so many leaders in various fields, particularly those men and women who have a deep passion for a particular "cause"—whether connected to religion, government, healthcare, the environment, or education—I experienced it because I saw how the world was not the way I thought it should be or could be. There were several periods in my life during which I was so "down" that it was truly an effort to see any happiness around me. The result is that now, whenever I think about existential depression, it rekindles within me, bringing into conscious awareness thoughts and feelings that, most of the time, I would rather ignore or avoid—thoughts of hopelessness and despair for our world.

I have come to realize that once one becomes aware of and involved in thinking about the many existential issues, one cannot then go back to one's former life. As the saying goes, "Once you ring a bell, you cannot unring it." Like so many others, I continue to strive to manage how these issues impact me, as well as the depression that often accompanies them. In truth, this low-grade and chronic depression is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, it reflects my underlying dissatisfaction with the way things are, with the way I am, and with the way the world is, and it leads me to continue striving to do better in order to give my life meaning and to help others find meaning. But I admit that sometimes I do envy people who have never experienced this kind of depression.

Dabrowski's ideas have given me a helpful cognitive framework for understanding existential depression, as I am sure they have similarly helped others. And although my relatively recent discovery of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is new when compared with my understanding of other theories in psychology, those other theories are also useful and provide a foundation for comprehending existential depression. After all, existential issues are not new; existential thought appears in writings of many past centuries.

I first became aware of existential issues as a college freshman when I was assigned to room with a student who was older than I—in his mid thirties. Having been in the Navy, he was far more experienced with many different kinds of people and many different ways in which people choose to live their lives. He was a thoughtful agnostic. I, on the other hand, had grown up in the Deep South in an insular culture that had limited vision and rigid beliefs; my loving parents were traditionally religious and tried to live conforming, righteous, and conventional lives. My father, a dentist, made a good living, and we attended church on Sundays. Until my college experience, I thought that my family's life was the way things were supposed to be; I thought that everyone should share those same values, behaviors, and world views.

My roommate, to whom I owe much gratitude, patiently listened as I tried to persuade him of the validity and righteousness of my limited views, after which he gently asked questions that required me to think in ways I had not considered before. He quietly pointed out the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of the many ways in which people, including me, lived their lives, as well as the inconsistencies and narcissistic grandiosity in many people's beliefs. He introduced me to Voltaire's *Candide* and to philosophers like Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. It was all quite a shock to me, because up to that point, I had thought I had the world pretty well figured out.

In my coursework I was also exposed to some of the well-known existential theologians—Paul Tillich (Protestant), Jacques Maritain (Catholic), Martin Buber (Jewish), James Pike (Protestant), and Alan Watts (Zen Buddhist)—all of whom were trying to make sense of life from a religious viewpoint. As I studied and learned, I began to see for myself the hypocrisies and absurdities in the lives of so many people around me, including my parents and myself, and I became quite depressed. Fortunately, a kind and caring psychology professor allowed me to meet with him for several sessions to talk about my angst and disillusionment, or I might have imploded. Thanks to this professor, who in many ways saved my life, I slowly began the process of learning to manage my discontent and depression so that it could work *for* me rather than *against* me. I changed my major to psychology, and in graduate school, I learned that many others before me—certainly those who were introspective and thoughtful idealists—had grappled with similar existential issues and existential depression throughout the centuries.

While I was in graduate school, the humanistic psychologist Rollo May edited a book titled *Existence: A new dimension in psychiatry and psychology* (1967). This book highlighted an entire area within psychology that centered on existential issues. May became one of the most widely known spokespersons on existential psychology, and the book continues to be a classic. It was built on the writings of philosopher Martin Heidegger, who emphasized phenomenology—the phenomena of being aware of one's own consciousness of the moment. Heidegger had written about *Dasein*, or “being there” in the moment with oneself and with how one perceives the world.

Other writers in May's landmark book focused on the applications of existential awareness to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, raising fundamental questions for therapists such as, “How do I know that I am seeing the patient as he really is, in his own reality, rather than merely a projection of our theories about him?” or “How can we know whether we are seeing the patient in his real world...which is for him unique, concrete, and different from our general theories of culture?” (May, 1967, pp. 3-4). Or, said another way, “...what is abstractly true, and what is existentially real for the given living person?” (p. 13). As therapists, we have never participated directly in the world of our patients, and yet we must find a way to exist in it with them if we are to have any chance of truly knowing them. We have experienced the world in our own way, with our own family and our own culture. In our attempts to understand others, we generalize from our own experiences and expect others to think, react, and be like us. How can we see the world as our clients see it?

Although many early existential psychologists and psychiatrists were neo-Freudians, they differed notably in focus from Freud. Instead of concentrating on a patient's past, pioneers such as Otto Rank also focused on the "present time." Karen Horney emphasized "cultural approaches" and "basic anxiety from feeling isolated and helpless." And Harry Stack Sullivan highlighted the importance of one's experiences in interpersonal relationships in the "here and now," as well as what one has learned from one's family environment. These neo-Freudians believed that only by considering the present and a person's current experience could we understand that person. In actuality, they were building off of even earlier concepts from philosophers and theologians who had struggled with the meaning of existence, as well as with how one's perceptions color one's life—philosophers from as far back as Socrates in his dialogues and Saint Augustine in his analyses of the self.

Existential Issues and Giftedness

It is well-known that many famous artists and musicians have experienced existential depression (Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel, & Hanson, 2004; Piirto, 2004). Eminent persons who have suffered from this kind of depression include Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Samuel Clemens, Henry James, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Isak Dinesen, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Eleanor Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, and Dag Hammarskjöld. In fact, the famous 17th century gifted mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) fully captured the experience of existential awareness when he said, "When I consider the brief span of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and behind it, the small space that I fill, or even see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces which I know not, and which know not me, I am afraid, and wonder to see myself here rather than there; for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there, nor rather now than then" (Pascal, 1946).

Yalom (1980), who is perhaps the most widely read current Western writer on existential psychotherapy, describes four primary issues of existence (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 that is inherently structured. We must give the world a structure, which we ourselves create. Thus, we have social customs and traditions, education, religion, governments, laws, etc. Isolation recognizes that no matter how close we become to another person, we will never completely know that person and no one can fundamentally come to know us; a gap always remains, and we are therefore still alone. The fourth primary issue, meaninglessness, stems from the first three. If we must die, if in our freedom we have to arbitrarily construct our own world, and if each of us is ultimately alone, then what absolute meaning does life have?

People are most often affected by existential issues as a result of their own experience of puzzlement from trying to understand themselves and the world, which then generates feelings of aloneness and existential depression. The people who worry over these issues are seldom those in the lower reaches of intelligence or even in the average range. In my experience, existential fretting, or for that matter rumination and existential depression are far more common among (though not exclusive to) more highly intelligent people—those who ponder, question, analyze, and reflect. This is not surprising since one must engage in substantial thought and reflection to even consider such notions. People who mindlessly engage in superficial day-to-day aspects of life—work, meals, home

duties, and chores—do not tend to spend time thinking about these types of issues. Brighter individuals are usually more driven to search for universal rules or answers, and also to recognize injustices, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies.

Other characteristics of gifted children and adults also predispose them to existential distress. Because brighter people are able to envision the possibilities of how things might be, they tend to be idealists. However, they are simultaneously able to see that the world falls short of their ideals. Unfortunately, these visionaries also recognize that their ability to make changes in the world is very limited. Because they are intense, these gifted individuals—both children and adults—keenly feel the disappointment and frustration that occurs when their ideals are not reached. They notice duplicity, pretense, arbitrariness, insincerities, and absurdities in society and in the behaviors of those around them. They may question or challenge traditions, particularly those that seem meaningless or unfair. They may ask, for example, “Why are there such inflexible sex or age-role restrictions on people? Is there any justifiable reason why men and women ‘should’ act a certain way? Why do people engage in hypocritical behaviors in which they say one thing but then do the opposite? People say they are concerned with the environment, but their behaviors show otherwise. Why do people say things they really do not mean at all? They greet you with, ‘How are you?’ when they really don’t want you to tell them the details of how you are. Why are so many people so unthinking and uncaring in their dealings with others? And with our planet? Are others really concerned with improving the world, or is it simply all about selfishness? Why do people settle for mediocrity? People seem fundamentally selfish and tribal. How much difference can one person make? It all seems hopeless. The world is too far gone. Things get worse each day. As one person, I’ll never be able to make a difference.” These thoughts are common in gifted children and adults.

As early as first grade, some gifted children, particularly the more highly gifted ones, struggle with these types of existential issues and begin to feel estranged from their peers. When they try to share their existential thoughts and concerns with others, they are usually met with reactions ranging from puzzlement to hostility. The very fact of children raising such questions is a challenge to tradition and prompts others to withdraw from or reject them. The children soon discover that most other people do not share their concerns but instead are focused on more concrete issues and on fitting in with others' expectations. The result for these gifted youngsters is conflict, either within themselves or with those around them. But as George Bernard Shaw once said, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

As they get older, gifted children may find that even their families are not prepared to discuss and consider such weighty concerns. They “may have to search far and wide to find others who share their sometimes esoteric interests or even to find someone who laughs at their sometimes quirky jokes. This challenge follows young gifted adults into the workplace, where the entry-level positions that they find themselves in can result in their being lost in the crowd, unable to find others with whom they otherwise might feel a genuine sense of connectedness” (Fiedler, 2008, p. 170).

Although they want to relate to others, gifted individuals often encounter what Arthur Jensen (2004) has described as an intellectual “zone of tolerance”—that is, in order to have a long-lasting and meaningful relationship with another person, that person should be within about plus or minus 20 IQ points of one’s ability level. Outside of that zone, there will be differences in thinking speed and depth or span of interests, which will likely lead to impatience, dissatisfaction, frustration, and tension on the part of each participant.

Gifted children and adults are often surprised to realize that they are different. It is painful when others criticize them for being too idealistic, too serious, too sensitive, too intense, too impatient, or as having too weird a sense of humor. Gifted children, particularly as they enter adolescence, may feel very alone in an absurd, arbitrary, and meaningless world, which they feel powerless to change. They may feel that adults in charge are not worthy of the authority they hold. As one child described it, they feel "like abandoned aliens waiting for the mother ship to come and take them home" (Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchak, 2005, p. 136). This alienation creates social and emotional issues for them with their age peers, as well as with their teachers, which only adds to the possibility of depression.

When their intensity is combined with multi-potentiality—giftedness in several areas—these youngsters may also become frustrated with the existential limitations of space and time. Although they try to cram 27 hours worth of living into a 24-hour day, there simply isn't enough time to develop all of the talents and interests that they may have. They have to make choices, but the choices among so many possibilities feel unfair because they seem arbitrary; there is no "ultimately right" choice. Choosing a college major or a vocation is difficult when one is trying to make a decision between passion and talent in areas as diverse as violin, genetics, theoretical mathematics, and international relations. How can one be all that one can be? In truth, one cannot be all that one "could" be in every area. This realization can be very frustrating.

The reaction of gifted youngsters (again with intensity) to these frustrations is often one of a righteous indignation—they feel, "It isn't right!" or "It isn't fair!" But they quickly discover that their anger is futile; they realize that it is ineffective when directed at "fate" or at other circumstances which they are not able to control. Anger that is powerless evolves quickly into depression. It is a type of "learned helplessness," a phrase coined by psychologist Martin Seligman (1991). "I'm helpless; I can't solve this."

In such depression, people typically—and often desperately—try to discover some sense of meaning, some anchor point that they can grasp that will allow them to pull themselves out of the mire and muck of injustice or unfairness. Often, though, the more they try to struggle out of—or wallow in—their depression, the more they become acutely aware that their life is brief and ultimately finite, that they are alone and are only one very small organism in a very large world, and that there is a frightening freedom and responsibility regarding how one chooses to live one's life. They feel disillusioned, and they question life's meaning, often asking themselves, "Is this all there is to life? Isn't there some ultimate and universal meaning? Does life only have meaning if I give it meaning? I am one small, insignificant organism alone in an absurd, arbitrary, and capricious world where my life can have little impact, and then I just die. Is this all there is?" Questions like this promote a sense of personal disintegration.

Such concerns are not surprising in thoughtful adults who are going through some sort of quarter-life or mid-life crisis. However, it is startling and alarming when these sorts of existential questions are foremost in the mind of a 10- or 12- or 15-year-old. Such existential depressions in children deserve careful attention, since they can be precursors to suicide.

Existential Issues and Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski implied that gifted individuals are more likely to experience existential depression; several concepts within his theory of positive disintegration explain why gifted children and adults may be predisposed to this type of depression (Mendaglio, 2008b). Fundamentally, Dabrowski noted that persons with greater "developmental

potential”—an inborn, constitutional endowment that includes a high level of reactivity of the central nervous system called overexcitability—have a greater awareness of the expanse of life and of different ways that people can live their lives, but this greater developmental potential also predisposes them to emotional and interpersonal crises. Persons with heightened overexcitabilities in one or more of the five areas that Dabrowski listed—intellectual, emotional, imaginal, psychomotor, and sensual—perceive reality in a different, more intense, multifaceted manner. They are likely to be more sensitive than others to issues in themselves and in the world around them and to react more intensely to those issues. To the extent that they have intellectual overexcitability, they are more likely to ponder and question. Their emotional overexcitability makes them more sensitive to issues of morality and fairness. Their imaginal overexcitability prompts them to envision how things might be. Overall, their overexcitabilities help them live multifaceted and nuanced lives, but these same overexcitabilities are also likely to make them more sensitive to existential issues.

Dabrowski also emphasized the role of socialization, which he called the “second factor,” as a key force influencing personal development, though the amount of a culture’s influence varies with each person’s inborn developmental potential. Nevertheless, the social environment often squelches autonomy, and “adjustment to a society that is itself ‘primitive and confused’ is a developmental [i.e., hinders development] and holds one back from discovering individual essence and from exercising choice in shaping and developing one’s self...” (Tillier, 2008, p. 108). Even so, when one becomes more aware of the scope and complexity of life and of one’s culture, one begins to experience self-doubt, anxiety, and depression; Dabrowski emphasized that all of these—as discomfiting as they are—are necessary steps on the path toward heightened development. Thus, as one becomes more aware of “what ought to be” rather than just “what is,” he or she experiences increasing discomfort and disillusionment, often leading to a personal disintegration that, according to Dabrowski, is a necessary step before one can reintegrate at a higher level of acceptance and understanding—a new level representing growth.

Reintegration at a higher level is not a certainty, though. Whether or not one is in fact able to reintegrate depends on what Dabrowski called the “third factor”—an inner force, largely inborn, that impels people to become more self-determined and to control their behaviors by their inner belief/value matrix, rather than by societal conventions or even their own biological needs. This third factor allows people to live their lives consciously and deliberately, acting in accordance with their own personal values. The dynamic of the third factor drives people toward introspection, self-education, and self-development, and it allows them to reintegrate themselves at a higher level so that they can transcend their surroundings in a highly moral and altruistic fashion. Some individuals, however, may disintegrate and fail to reintegrate at a higher level, or they may stay at the same level as before. Of course it is desirable to reintegrate at the higher level.

Dabrowski’s descriptions of integration and disintegration are important but are also complex, so I will provide only the highlights of those that are particularly relevant to existential depression. In Dabrowski’s view, there are two types of integration—primary and secondary—and four types of disintegration—positive, negative, partial, and global.

Primary integration characterizes individuals who are largely under the influence of the first factor (biology) and the second factor (environment). These individuals experience the human life cycle and may become very successful in societal terms, but they are not fully developed human beings. Persons characterized by secondary integration are influenced primarily by the third factor; they are inner directed and values driven. As fully human, they live life autonomously, authentically, and altruistically. Biological drives are sublimated into

higher modes of expression. Conformity and nonconformity to societal norms are principled. Movement from primary to secondary integration arises from positive disintegration. (Mendaglio, 2008b, p. 36)

Positive disintegration involves a two-step process. First, the lower primary integration—which involves little, if any, reflection—must be dissolved; subsequently, one must reintegrate to create a higher level of functioning (Dabrowski, 1970). During the first step of dissolution, individuals experience "...intense external and internal conflicts that generate intense negative emotions. Such experiencing may be initially triggered by developmental milestones, such as puberty, or crises, such as a painful divorce or a difficult career event or the death of a loved one. As a result, individuals become increasingly conscious of self and the world. They become more and more distressed as they perceive a discrepancy between the way the world ought to be and the way it is..."(Mendaglio, 2008b, p. 27). The way these persons view and structure the world is thrown into ambiguity and turmoil, along with the internal guidelines that they have thoughtlessly adopted from society to guide their daily behaviors. The external structure that they are steeped with becomes contradictory or meaningless when confronted with articulate, conscious individual experience.

Because people can only stand conflict and ambiguity for a relatively brief time, they will create a new mental organization as they attempt to reduce their anxiety and discomfort. However, this new mental schema may be only partially successful; these individuals may find themselves aware of inconsistencies and pretenses within their new way of thinking, though they may try desperately to convince themselves otherwise. They experience, then, only the dissolving part of the process—without reintegration at a higher level—leaving them with negative disintegration and the accompanying conflicts and negative emotions. Worse, they are unable to return to their previous unthinking way of being ("the rung bell"). Some individuals, usually those with substantial initial integration and limited potential to develop, will fall back and reintegrate at their previous level; others find themselves stuck in disintegration—a serious situation that Dabrowski said could lead to psychosis or suicide.

According to Dabrowski, some people are in fact able to complete both parts of the process—both disintegration and subsequent positive reintegration. They develop an acceptance of their self-awareness and self-direction in ways that allow them to select values that transcend the immediate culture and are from then on focused on more universal, humanistic, and altruistic values. They may select a new vocation in which they can use their altruistic vision or a new partner with whom they can share their important values. This higher-level mental organization allows more of a sense of personal contentment with a striving to continually improve, though these people will likely still experience episodes of disintegration, discomfort, and reintegration as their awareness continues to grow.

Other Psychological Theorists

There are several other psychological theorists whose writings provide concepts that support and/or extend Dabrowski's concepts, particularly as they relate to existential issues and depression. The psychologist George Kelley (1955) noted that humans do not enter a world that is inherently structured; we must give the world a structure that we ourselves create. Thus, we create psychological constructs, largely through language, to make sense out of our experiences of the world.

Man looks at his world through transparent templets which he creates and then attempts to fit over the

realities of which the world is composed. (pp. 8-9)

Constructs are used for predictions of things to come, and the world keeps on rolling on and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading. This fact provides the basis for the revision of constructs and, eventually, of whole construct systems. (p. 14)

The Gestalt theorists, such as Fritz Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, emphasized two central ideas: (1) we all exist in an experiential present moment, which is embedded in webs of relationships; (2) thus, we can only know ourselves against the background of how we relate to other things—i.e., a figure-ground relationship (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1972). They also pointed out that humans have an inborn tendency to seek closure and, as a result, have little tolerance for ambiguity. Similarly, the little-known theorist Prescott Lecky (1969) hypothesized that humans are born with an instinctual drive to seek consistency as a way of making sense of the world around them, a notion that is similar to Leon Festinger's (1957) observation that humans will strive arduously to reduce the uncomfortable psychological tension created by "cognitive dissonance" that arises if we have an inconsistency among our beliefs or behaviors.

The neo-Freudian Alfred Adler stated that people, in their attempt to gain mastery over their world, create "fictional finalisms"—invented concepts that cannot be proven, yet people organize their lives around them as though they are true (Hoffman, 1994). Since ultimate truth is beyond the capability of humans, we create partial truths about things that we cannot see, prove, nor disprove. Examples range from the lighthearted (e.g., Santa Claus) to serious sweeping philosophical statements (e.g., "We can control our own destiny" or "There is a heaven for the virtuous and a hell for sinners"). These fictional finalisms ameliorate our anxiety and help us feel more in control of our world. We prefer the comfort of dogmatic certainty to the chaos of questioning or of the insecurity and uncertainty of the unknown. As Freud noted, "All fantasies to fulfill illusions stem from anxieties" (1989, p. 16); these are attempts to feel in control of ourselves and the world around us.

The existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1957) made a similar observation about humans, which prompted him to redefine God and religion. According to Tillich, God was whatever a person was most ultimately concerned with, and religion was composed of whatever behaviors that person engaged in to achieve that ultimate concern. In other words, a person's God could be money, or religion, or power, or control, or fame—whatever a person created in order to try to organize his or her life.

All of these theorists would comfortably agree that people seek groups and partners who share their beliefs, which often leads to false but reassuring certainty. These groups might embrace religious or political causes, for example—all of which might be altruistic and benevolent, but yet all of which are likely to require a certain amount of conformity and fitting in at the expense of our individualism. Conformity can be comforting; being an individual, particularly if one is challenging traditions, is often uncomfortable. Dabrowski clearly believed that one cannot evolve into a fully developed and authentic person without developing an individualistic, unique, and conscious inner core of beliefs and values. He also understood that this road was arduous and fraught with discomfort and pain. One must first disintegrate before one can reintegrate at a higher level, and that the process of subsequent incremental disintegrations and reintegrations is likely to continue throughout one's entire life.

A Journey into Existential Depression

Most of us have grown up in families with predictable behaviors and traditions. Family members are like planets

in a solar system which have reached an equilibrium regarding how they interact with each other. The rules of interaction are reasonably clear, and family environment is predictable. It is in such families that we acquire expectations of ourselves and the world around us, and this is where we develop our values and beliefs of how things "should be."

However, our families are not always places of perfect acceptance and happiness; children do things that displease their parents, and parents do not satisfy all of the desires of their children (nor should they, necessarily). When children's feelings are hurt, they begin to withdraw into themselves and put up protective barriers. They are not as open as they once were; they are more evaluative and more cautious—all part of the process of becoming an individual, separate from parents and family.

As children grow, they become exposed to people outside of the family, and they discover that others do not share the same expectations, values, or behaviors. Questions arise. "Why? Which set of values and behaviors is better? Which is right? How shall I choose?" They see that some behaviors by others are entirely contradictory to the ways in which they themselves were raised.

The brighter that people are, the more likely they are to be aware of how their own belief/value system is inconsistent with that of others. They may also see inconsistencies within their own belief/value system—their values are out of sync with the way they feel! Tension and discomfort arises. They may experience an approach-avoidance conflict about such awareness. On the one hand, they want to become more aware of these inconsistencies and absurdities in order to be fair and consistent and to learn better ways of being, yet on the other hand, they want to avoid such awareness because it makes them uncomfortable and challenges them to examine themselves—not always a flattering activity—as they try to live a more thoughtful, consistent, and meaningful life. These individuals adopt one or a combination of basic coping styles first described by the neo-Freudian Karen Horney (1945): (1) moving toward—accepting society's traditions; conforming; working the system to become successful, (2) moving away from—rejecting traditional society via withdrawal; being nontraditional and arcane, and (3) moving against—rebelliously rejecting society; being angry and openly nonconforming.

As these people gain more life experience, their perspectives shift. They recognize that Socrates was right when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Yet examining life can be discomfoting. For many, certain life milestones are awakening experiences—for example, birthdays (turning 21, 30, 40, etc.) and anniversaries; school and college reunions; weddings and funerals; estate planning and making a will. People find that they want to change their way of living so that they are not simply playing out the roles that others expect of them, but it is difficult to give up old traditions and habits, as well as the connectedness that these customs and practices offer.

People find that whenever they challenge or violate a tradition, it makes others uncomfortable. We want people to be predictable, even if it means that they are behaving in illogical and nonsensical ways. Most people vacillate in their thinking and behaviors; they can see how they might be and how they actually are, but making a leap forward to change is difficult. They may also find themselves feeling angry because they feel powerless to make the changes that they see as needed.

As people grow older, the developmental challenges that they encounter make them progressively more aware of existential issues and increase the likelihood of existential depression. Erikson (1959), Levinson (1986), and Sheehy (1995, 2006) have described a series of adult life stages, each of which has developmental tasks associated with it. A blended summary of the relevant adult stages is as follows:

Age 18-24 "Pulling up roots" – Breaking away from home *Age 25-35* "Trying 20s" – Establishing oneself as an adult; making career choices; coming to grips with marriage, children, society *Age 35-45* "Deadline decade" – Authenticity crisis; realization that it is the halfway point in one's life; re-evaluation of oneself and one's relationships; making choices about pushing harder vs. withdrawing vs. changing one's life *Age 45-55* "Renewal or resignation" – Further redefinition of priorities; changing or renewing relationships; roles change; children leave home; parents age or die; physical changes in self; further realization of own mortality *Age 55+* "Regeneration" – Acceptance/rebellion at prospect of retirement; friends/mentors die; evaluation of life's work; new relationship with family; physical changes; self-acceptance or rejection

Although most people go through these stages during the ages listed above, it is my experience that gifted adults usually encounter these life stages earlier and more intensely than others. As they grope with these issues, they are likely to experience related problems involving marital rapport and communication, expectations and relationships with their children, dissatisfaction with co-workers, and discontent with themselves. In Dabrowski terms, they experience disintegration, with existential depression as a main component.

It is evident, then, that being bright does not necessarily mean that one will be content, happy, and successful—and certainly not during periods of disintegration. More than 30 years ago, psychologist May Seago (1974) composed a table in which she listed characteristic strengths of gifted children on one side, and then on the adjacent side, she listed possible challenges or problems that are likely to arise from those very strengths. Table 1 is a similar table for gifted adults.

Table 1. Characteristic Strengths and Associated Difficulties and Challenges for Gifted Adults

Characteristic Strengths	Associated Difficulties and Challenges
Able to see potential; has high expectations of self and others; thinks critically	Need for success and recognition; intolerant of others; may seek excessively high standards; ahead of the times
Acquires and retains information quickly	Impatient with slowness of others; may be seen as "know it all"
Large store of information in advanced areas; diverse interests and abilities; multi-talented	Career decision problems; frustrated over lack of time; feeling different from others; existential aloneness; may be seen by others as always in control
Intense and intrinsically motivated; high energy level; persistent, goal-directed behavior	"Type A" personality; difficulty relaxing; resists interruptions; may neglect others during periods of focused interests; stubbornness
Independent and self-reliant; creative and inventive; likes new ways of doing things	Difficulty in delegating and trusting others' judgment; rejects what is already known; disrupts customs or plans of others
Seeks meaning and consistency in value systems and behaviors of self and others	Overly self-critical, perhaps depressed or cynical about others; sometimes bossy or domineering
Sensitive to others; desires intense emotional relationships	Oversensitive to peer criticism; intense mentor relationships result in keen disappointment
Focuses on cause and effect; insists on supporting evidence and proof	Difficulty with non-logical human aspects, such as feelings, traditions, or matters to be taken "on faith"
Strong sense of humor; able to laugh at self	Humor may not be understood by others; may focus on absurdities of situations; humor may be used to attack others or hold them at a distance

These strengths and associated difficulties lead most gifted adults to experience at least some existential conflicts that they struggle with throughout their life (Jacobsen, 2000; Streznewski, 1999). Four of these conflicts occur with particular frequency and serve as underpinnings for personal disintegration, creating significant anxiety and depression for the individuals who struggle with them. They are:

- Acceptance of others vs. disappointment and cynicism
- Acceptance of self vs. excessive self-criticism and depression
- Necessity of feelings vs. the efficiency of logic and rational approaches
- Finding personal meaning vs. tangible achievements

To reach positive reintegration, one needs to reach some resolution, or at least a level of comfort, concerning ways to manage (not to satisfy) the issues listed in the bulleted items above.

Learning to Manage Existential Issues and Depression

How does one learn to manage existential issues? First, people must undertake to know themselves. Gifted adults commonly have the experience of being “out of sync” with others but not understanding how or why they are different. Jacobsen (2000) describes how people came to her in her clinical practice with a vague sense that they were different; others had told them repeatedly that they were “too-too”—that is, too serious, too intense, too complex, too emotional, etc. However, as these gifted adults came to understand that such behaviors were normal for people like themselves, their anxiety about it lessened.

Along with knowing oneself, it is important to come to grips with three truths pointed out long ago by the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (2004). He emphasized the importance of knowing and developing ourselves, stating that: (1) what we have as material goods are temporary, transient, and not able to provide us with lasting comfort; (2) what we represent in the eyes of others is as ephemeral as material possessions, since the opinions of others may change at any time; besides, we can never know what others really think of us anyway; and (3) what we are is the only thing that truly matters. Polonius, in Shakespeare's Hamlet, says, “This above all: to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day,/Thou canst not be false to any man.” Certainly, knowing oneself, including our weak areas, is important. Knowing our thought patterns is also important. As Yalom (2008) noted, “*Inner equanimity stems from knowing that it is not things that disturb us, but our interpretations of things*” (p. 113). What is our self-talk as we look at the world and at situations in our world?

Next we should understand how we relate to others. Many years ago, Luft and Ingham (1955), recognizing that all of us have “blind spots” when it comes to how we see ourselves, developed a simple matrix which they called Johari's Window as a tool to help people understand themselves, their blind spots, and their relationships with others. To use Johari's window, a person is given a list of 55 adjectives and instructed to select five or six that describe his or her own personality. Peers of that person are then given the same list, and they each choose five or six adjectives that describe the subject. These adjectives are then put in the appropriate “window” below. The person discovers which of the adjectives match what others have listed, as well as which adjectives they listed that others did not. The results can be extremely helpful in gaining self-understanding, including how one is seen by others.

Table 2. Johari's Window
(Luft & Ingham, 1955)

	Known to Self	Unknown to Self
Known to Others	A [Open]	B [Blind] Decrease our "blind spots" through feedback from others
Unknown to Others	C [Hidden] Decrease the items in this window through self-disclosure	D [Unknown] Decrease this window through introspection

It is not enough, though, to simply know oneself. We must also accept ourselves and find ways to nurture ourselves. Below are some guiding principles I have found to be helpful and have shared with others:

- Your life focus should be on principles and values rather than people.
- Developing yourself will likely require self-focus and probably some narcissism, but know that there is a difference between healthy narcissism and pathological narcissism.
- Your development will likely involve periods of disintegration and reintegration as you move toward increasingly positive disintegration.
- Your journey will probably make you and others around you uncomfortable.

When people experiencing disintegration know what they might expect, as in the list above, the experience itself is not so intimidating or frightening. There is hope that the individual will reintegrate in a positive way, though the experience will be uncomfortable for a time. In addition to this understanding, there are several coping strategies that can be helpful, as well as other behavioral styles that may appear helpful but really are not.

Coping Styles and Strategies

Coping with an ongoing awareness of existential issues and the accompanying low-grade depression can be distressing, and few people can directly confront their existential depression for very long. As Yalom (2008) wrote, quoting François de La Rochefoucauld from the 1600s, "You cannot stare straight into the face of the sun, or death." How do people try to manage these complex and often painful issues? Some coping styles are clearly less adaptive than others, especially when they involve narrowing of thought and high activity levels. Some frequent but not-so-effective styles are:

- **Becoming narcissistic.** Some individuals deal with painful issues in their life through narcissism. Their thought pattern is something like this: "I can protect myself (temporarily) from having to confront my own mortality by

convincing myself of my own importance and that what I am doing is extremely important to the world.”

- **Knowing the “truth.”** Likewise, some individuals convince themselves that they are “right” and know the “truth.” Religions often facilitate such an attitude. Their thought pattern goes something like this: “If I can convince myself that I know the ‘truth’ about life and the universal meaning of existence, then I can gain comfort.” Often, this illusion is accompanied by an intolerance for others’ questions, beliefs, or style of living.
- **Trying to control life, or at least label it.** Another strategy is control. “Perhaps if I organize myself and my thinking in controlled, logic-tight compartments, then I can control life.” Labels help, because they give an illusion of control. If I have power over things around me, then I have power over my life and my destiny.
- **Learning to not think.** Still another pattern is to be non-thinking. “Sometimes it is simply less painful if I choose to just not think about things that matter, and certainly to avoid using critical thinking skills. I will selectively ignore areas of my life.” This allows blind spots to develop or exist.
- **Learning to not care.** I have known children and adults who have convinced themselves not to care; it is less painful that way. Unfortunately, many times this “numbing of the mind” is accomplished via alcohol, drugs, or other addictions.
- **Keeping busy.** Some individuals avoid facing difficult personal issues by keeping busy. Their inner voice tells them, “If I stay frantically busy in a hypomanic fashion, then I don’t have time to think about things, or about the meaning of my behaviors.” Sometimes these people are “trivial pursuers” in that they focus on possessing, creating, or developing minutiae or pleasant pastimes with little regard to whether their efforts are trivial or harmful. Others seem to have a compulsion to utter or to act to overcome their “horror vacui”—their fear of empty space or time, during which they might be forced to face their issues.
- **Seeking novelty and adrenaline rushes.** The psychologist Frank Farley (1991) has described a type “T” personality, in which the “T” stands for thrills through risk taking and seeking stimulation, excitement, and arousal. Some of these people may develop addictions—substance abuse, gambling, sexual addiction, and others. In some respects, type “T” behaviors are beneficial because, by pushing the limits of tradition, these individuals can promote creative behaviors. On the other hand, type “T” behaviors can easily become a substitute for authentic close relationships or for meaningful self-examination.

Other coping styles are more adaptive. They help maintain a personal balance that increases the likelihood of successfully managing disintegrations and existential issues. These include:

- **Coming to know oneself.** An individual must “separate the wheat from the chaff” when it comes to his or her values and perception of the world. One’s unique characteristics and personality must be recognized, valued, and accepted. External mores and externally based perceptions and understandings of the world—the chaff—must be winnowed from one’s own—however flawed and undeveloped—sense of the world.
- **Becoming involved in causes.** People who get involved with causes are almost always idealists. “When I am in a cause with others, whether the cause is academic, political, social, or even a cult, I feel less alone.” Sometimes, though, existential issues lead individuals to bury themselves so intensively in causes that they neglect to look at themselves.
- **Maintaining a sense of humor.** It has been said that if you push a tragedy far enough, it becomes a comedy. The everyday tragedies that we experience in our lives can be burdensome, but through comedy, we get a

sense of relief and perspective. While life's absurdities can be frustrating and distressing, finding humor in them (oftentimes by imagining them pushed to extremes) can prompt a more pragmatic—and sometimes realistic—view of things. Being able to laugh at a situation is a valuable asset; being able to laugh at oneself is even more important. Thus, a sense of humor can ameliorate our feelings of hopelessness about existential issues.

- **Touching and feeling connected.** One potent way of breaking through the sense of existential 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 is 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 youngsters suffering existential depression and have advised parents of reluctant teenagers to simply say, "I know you may not want a hug, but I need a hug, so come here and give me 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, tangible connection. Hugging and touching is very important in all cultures. Regrettably, our society seems increasingly wary about people touching each other.
- **Compartmentalizing.** It is not so much events that disturb us, but our interpretations of those events—our "self-talk." Intense negative self-talk about a situation or one's life can easily spread into "all or none" or "always" or "never" thinking that results in stress spilling over into all areas of a person's life—for example, "I'm never going to feel happiness again!" or "I always feel alone. I'm never going to find anyone I can relate to, and that's catastrophic!" The extent to which individuals are miserable depends heavily on their self-talk and whether they can learn to compartmentalize or section off the stress and, at least temporarily, quarantine that area. Some people have found it helpful to visualize putting the stress inside a box or "Worry Jar," then shutting the lid and placing it on a shelf until they are ready to look at those worries again (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). They simply plan to deal with the issue at a later time, or they set aside a designated "worry time" just for that issue. Just because people are upset in one area of their life does not mean that they should be miserable about everything. Too much compartmentalization, however, can also result in problems. Sometimes people wall off their feelings so thoroughly that they have difficulty being "present" in the here and now, or they may intellectualize the problem into a compartment but never actually deal with the issue or the self-talk that created it in the first place. Some individuals develop such tight compartments that they cannot see how their behaviors and beliefs are actually contradictory—for example, environmental concerns juxtaposed against admiration for a gas-guzzling vehicle.
- **Letting go.** People who are intense often try to impose their will on the world around them in virtually all areas yet find themselves unsatisfied or unhappy with the outcome. Some years ago, there was a popular movie, *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), which featured two friends sharing their life experiences over an evening meal at a restaurant. In the film, Gregory, a theater director from New York and the more talkative of the two, relates to Shawn his stories of dropping out of school, traveling around the world, and experiencing the variety of ways in which people live, including a monk who could balance his entire weight on his fingertips. Shawn, who has lived his life frantically meeting deadlines and achieving, listens avidly but questions the value of Gregory's seeming abandonment of the pragmatic aspects of life. There is no resolution, but the film raises the question of how much one needs to try to control life versus whether it is better to just let go and flow with life.
- **Living in the present moment.** Living in the present (Dasein) is to be aware of what is happening to you, what you are doing, and what you are feeling and thinking. You look at situations as they are, without coloring them with previous experiences. You are not influenced by fears, anger, desires, or attachments. Living in such a way makes it easier to deal with whatever you are doing at the present moment. People in disintegrative states

often focus heavily on the past or on the future, which looks so bleak to them, rather than living in the present.

- **Learning optimism and resiliency.** Optimism significantly affects how people respond to adversity and difficulty. Although there is a genetic predisposition toward optimism or pessimism, and even toward depression, depression is greatly influenced by how an individual has learned to react to what happens in his or her life. Though people can do little about their genetics, their reaction to situations, including their self-talk, will determine their optimism and resiliency.
- **Focusing on the continuity of generations.** For some, focusing on the continuity of generations—children and grandchildren—is comforting; for others, it is disturbing because they see the world as being so full of difficulties that they worry over what their children will face. Nevertheless, age does bring perspective such that one no longer “sweats the small stuff.” And most people, as they get older, find that they have wisdom that they can share with younger people, which helps them feel connected with at least some of humanity. Some have even written an ethical will to pass their values, ideals, and life philosophy on to their children and grandchildren (Webb, Gore, DeVries, & McDaniel, 2004). Most people, as they enter their later life, find ways to resolve existential issues, including the thought of dying, and come to reach some sense of peace and contentment.
- **Being aware of “rippling.”** Recently, I sat with a friend who was dying of lung cancer, and we talked about rippling—how the influence of his life had rippled out widely to affect the lives of people, many of whom he did not even know. I recalled Yalom's (2008) statement that, “Of all the ideas that have emerged from my years of practice to counter a person's death anxiety and distress at the transience of life, I have found the idea of rippling singularly powerful” (p. 83). “Each of us creates—often without our conscious intent or knowledge—concentric circles of influence that may affect others for years, even for generations” (p. 83).

A Personal Coat of Arms

In the Middle Ages, families often had a coat of arms, depicted by a shield containing symbols to represent and highlight different aspects of that family's tradition and heritage. A picture of a sheaf of grain might symbolize that the family owned land; a sword could depict family members who fought valiantly. Below is an exercise to help individuals depict what is important to them—what they would want their coat of arms to look like if we used such things today.

“Your Personal Coat of Arms” is an exercise shared with me many years ago by a colleague that helps people think about the key values they use to guide their life and the decisions they make. This exercise can also help them decide which areas are core values for them and which are simply a veneer of convenience or tradition.

Personal Coat of Arms

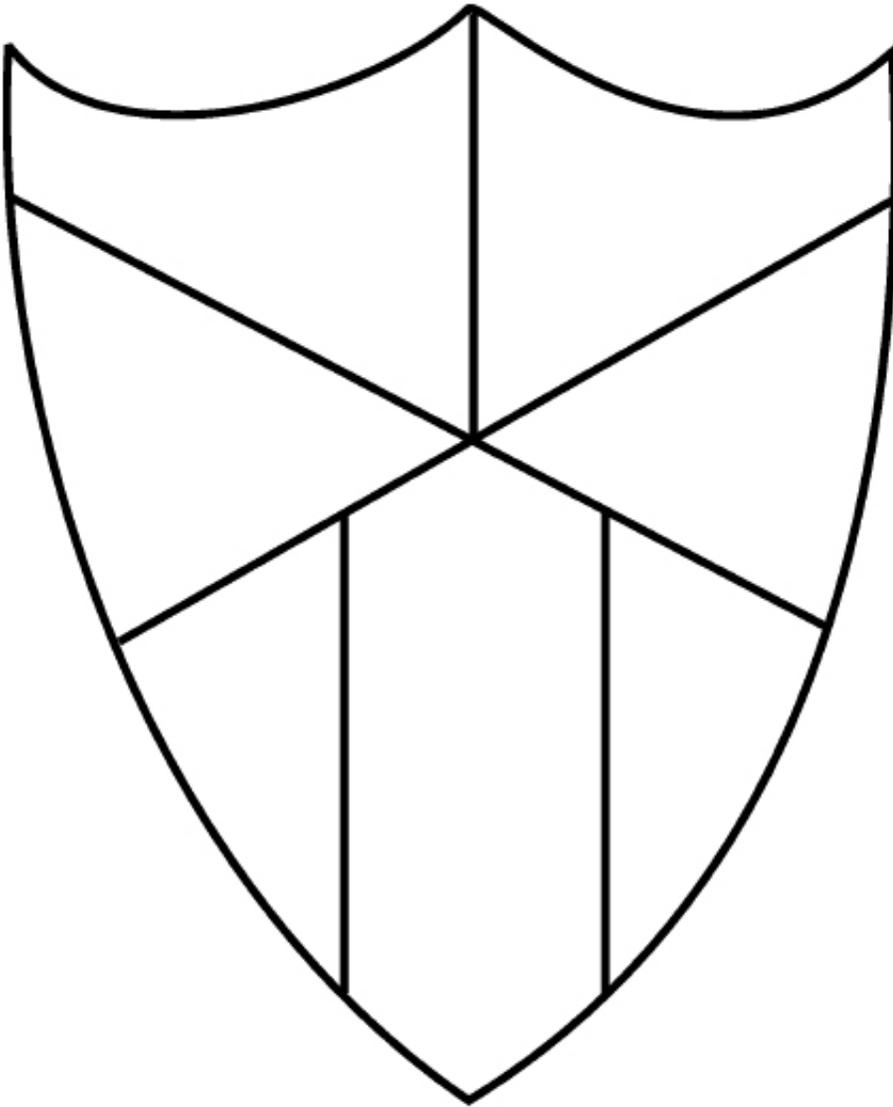


Figure 1. Personal Coat of Arms

Figure 1 shows an escutcheon that is subdivided. Here are the instructions for filling out your Personal Coat of Arms:

- First, title your shield by putting your name on the top.
- In each section of your shield, put the following:
 - Choose one word that describes you, and draw a picture that represents that word in one panel of the shield.
 - Draw a symbol to represent the social or political cause that you have done the most for in your lifetime.
 - List two things that you have been struggling to become better at, and write them in one panel of the shield.
 - Draw a picture or note a major fantasy of what you yearn to do or would do if you had no restrictions.

- Select three words that you would like people to use to describe you, and write or symbolize them in one panel of the shield.
- Draw something to represent what caused the greatest change in your way of living.
- Draw or symbolize the most important person in your life.

Now consider how central this coat of arms is in your daily life. Do you use your coat of arms only to protect you, or does it also represent something that you aspire to?

Roles and Role Stripping

You probably noticed that much of what you wrote on your Personal Coat of Arms had to do with your roles in life—perhaps as parent, student, musician, friend, spouse, helper, entrepreneur, adventurer—and roles certainly provide structure to our lives. But this raises some important questions. How much of your identity and self-worth come from the roles that you play? Do you define your roles, or do they define you? Are the roles simply irrelevant traditions and confining rituals, or do they give your life meaningful substance? Are these roles how you want to live your life?

A solid sense of self cannot be built on roles. To do so increases the likelihood of disintegration, because at some point, all of our roles will be stripped from us. There will come a day when we will no longer be a teacher or a business owner or musician or a husband or a wife. We will no longer be someone's child; our parents will die, leaving us as orphans. I can substitute new roles for the ones I have lost, but those may become lost, too. As I lose the roles that organize my existence, I will find myself having to confront provocative questions. What would I be like without my roles? What value would I have? As I substitute new roles, are they truly ones that I want to select?

Some years ago, a colleague in psychology introduced me to a role-stripping exercise as a way of focusing thought on these issues. It goes as follows:

- Identify the five most central roles in your life (mother, son, teacher, civic leader, etc.), and write them on a piece of paper.
- Rank these roles, with "1" being the most central to your life's activities.
- Take role "5" and consider how it structures and fits into your life. Now throw it away. You no longer have it in your life.
- Take role "4" and contemplate how it structures and fits into your life. Now throw it away. You no longer have it in your life either.
- Continue discarding roles, one at a time with due consideration, until only one role is left. This is your central role, the one around which most of your life is focused.
- Now discard that role. What of you is left? Who are you without your roles? What value do you have?

After the role-stripping exercise, consider once again how much your roles define you versus how much you define your roles. You may wish to contemplate what others would be like without their roles. What value would they have? Perhaps you might ask family members and co-workers how they perceive your major roles. Their ideas might be different! You may then decide to temporarily take "time out" from each of your roles so that you can enrich or enhance other roles. Or you may resolve to develop a new role or invent a new tradition for yourself or your family.

Interpersonal Relationships

Over the course of our lives, each of us develops a persona—a façade that we put up for the world to protect ourselves from others until we know that we can trust them well enough to lower that façade. Behind this façade is where we cope with our own internal existential issues, but it is also our façade that keeps others at a distance and fosters our existential aloneness because it hinders them from truly knowing us. This façade usually represents our lifestyle, and behind the mask are our values; however, both lifestyle and values are matters that we can choose to adopt or to discard. There are three underlying existential facts. They are: (1) we are basically alone, (2) we will die, and (3) we need others. Interpersonal relationships are basic to human existence, yet we spend so much of our lives in superficialities that we often give too little focus to meaningful relationships. Here are some questions to consider:

- Do you have at least one person with whom you can be accepted without your roles?
- Are your relationships with others primarily authentic, or are they mostly roles?
- Do you need to be in control of others as much as you are, or can you release some of that control?
- Does your logic and analytical ability interfere with your ability to give and receive affection?

Existential isolation is eased to a degree if people simply feel that someone else understands the issues that they are grappling with. For example, even though your experience is not exactly the same as mine, I feel far less alone if I know that your experiences have been somewhat similar.

Many people have written about how important it is that a person not be allowed to die alone, and hospice centers across the country make sure that someone is present at the moment of death. Anxiety about death is not a disease; it is simply a byproduct of life. It seems that death—the final moment in our life as we know it—is a topic that people avoid except in the abstract. However, we need to think and talk about death if we are to live our lives well.

In our aloneness, particularly as we contemplate no longer being in this world and no longer existing, we do need others. We never outgrow our need for connectedness. Establishing relationships with others typically goes through a sequence of three successive steps: (1) inclusion/exclusion—"Am I a member of this group, or am I on the outside?" (2) control—"Where do I fit in determining what we are going to do? Am I the leader, the follower, the worker, etc.?" and (3) mutual caring—"Do others really care about my concerns, and do I care about theirs?" (Schutz, 1958). However, these three steps can actually interfere with close relationships with others.

Here are some exercises you may find helpful for improving your relationships with others:

- Set aside five to 15 minutes of special time each day to let someone else be in control.
- As an exercise, convey and receive affection nonverbally.
- Touch other people more often, and regularly.
- Identify the "imperfections" in each of your relationships. How would your relationships change if you stopped trying to change these imperfections?
- Increase your self-disclosure, because self-disclosure promotes reciprocal self-disclosure in others.
- Offer others empathy, even when you are frightened or angry.
- Express gratitude to someone to whom you have never before expressed it.

These exercises should open the door to improved relationships with others. They help people connect in new ways and become more aware of their behaviors in relationships, including some that may be hampering the relationship.

Self-Management

I have already noted the importance of accepting oneself as valuable apart from one's roles and separate from others' evaluations. But learning to do this requires that people learn to manage themselves. This involves them becoming more aware of themselves—their roles, their coat of arms, their relationships—and then learning to manage their self-talk about all of this. If they allow themselves to explore as they do this, they may be able to discover parts of themselves that do not fit with their roles.

Here are some things to try that will facilitate your learning more about yourself, as well as learning new self-management skills:

- Meditate for five to 15 minutes per day.
- Become aware of your self-talk. Then, measure the amount of your negative self-talk as compared with the amount of your positive self-talk.
- Minimize your self-control in selected situations.
- Be aware of "HALT" and its relationship to depression and cynicism. HALT stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired—all of which are conditions that predispose people to feeling overwhelmed. Nietzsche said, "When we are tired, we are attacked by ideas we conquered long ago."

Life Meaning

Part of the human condition seems to be to search for meaning. Throughout history, countless great works of literature have focused on this theme. Victor Frankl, in his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*, showed us that even in dire circumstances, such as a concentration camp like Auschwitz, there is a great human need to find meaning. Frankl himself, imprisoned and in desperate circumstances in Auschwitz, searched for and found meaning in his relationships with others and with loved ones, even though they were separated.

Unfortunately, the people who need meaning the most are usually so busy achieving that they have little or no time to search for it. Without meaning as an anchor, people are particularly at risk for disintegration and existential depression. Frantic efforts at achievement and control end up collapsing because they are hollow underneath. Are you just playing roles, or are your relationships real? Can you conclude that your life has purpose and meaning? Have you developed values and beliefs that go beyond your roles? What if you could start over? What would you do differently? Can you trust that there is some unity or harmony in life and that your life can fit in somehow? These are important questions to resolve if one's life is to have meaning.

Meaning develops first from a deep, conscious, accurate, and authentic understanding of oneself. Second, meaning then arises from understanding oneself in relation to the world at large—that is, the sense of how one's life fits in relationship with the universe. And third, meaning grows from authentic relations with others, which allow expression for the first and a context for the second. It is through our personal relations that we can express ourselves as the unique individuals we are and how we can understand our practical grounding within the universe.

Since, ultimately, you will be the one who has to give your life meaning, what meaning do you give your life? Here are some suggestions that might help you begin the process:

- If you were to write a "last lecture"—a speech that you would give if you knew you would die tomorrow—what would you say? Carnegie Mellon professor Randy Pausch (2008), dying at age 47, did just that.
- What have you learned thus far about the meaning of life that you could share with others?
- Recall and locate five works of art—stories, poems, music, paintings, and/or other forms of art that have had meaning for you. Share these with a friend or a family member. In what ways have they helped you find meaning?
- Describe what you see as your greatest accomplishment. Does it relate to the goals you set for yourself? To your purpose in life?
- Remember that great ideas and accomplishments, including yours, may not be valued or recognized until long after your life has ended.
- "What can you do now in your life so that one year or five years from now, you won't look back and have... dismay about the new regrets you've accumulated? In other words, can you find a way to live without continuing to accumulate regrets?" (Yalom, 2008, p. 101).

Conclusion

A conclusion about existential issues and existential depression is impossible because they are like a Möbius strip that continues seamlessly and endlessly. Yet we do need to help ourselves and our bright youngsters cope with these difficult existential questions. We cannot do anything about death; our existence is finite. However, we can learn to accept those aspects of existence that we cannot change. We can also feel understood and not so alone, and we can discover ways to manage freedom and our sense of isolation so that they will give our lives purpose. We can keep creating and developing ourselves, we can keep working for positive and healthy relationships, and we can keep trying to make a difference in the world, thereby creating meaning for ourselves. Although we cannot eradicate the basic underlying bricks of the existential wall, we can learn from Dabrowski that growth through the discovery of authenticity within ourselves and the expression of our authentic selves through authentic relationships may serve as a salve to soothe these realities of our existence.

In coping with existential depression, we must realize that existential concerns are not issues that can be dealt with only once, but will probably need frequent revisiting and reconsideration. We can support others and help them understand that disintegration is a necessary step toward new growth and meaning—it can eventually be positive. And finally, we can encourage these individuals to give meaning to their own lives in whatever ways they can by adopting the message of hope as expressed by the African-American poet Langston Hughes in his poem *Dreams*.

Dreams

*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.*

About the Author

James T. Webb, Ph.D., ABPP-CL, has been recognized as one of the 25 most influential psychologists nationally on gifted education, and he consults with schools, programs and individuals about social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children. In 1981, Dr. Webb established SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children, Inc.), a national nonprofit organization that provides information, training, conferences, and workshops, and he remains as Chair of SENG's Professional Advisory

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Dr. Webb was President of the Ohio Psychological Association and a member of its Board of Trustees for seven years. He has been in private practice as well as in various consulting positions with clinics and hospitals. Dr. Webb was one of the founders of the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, where he was a Professor and Associate Dean. Earlier in his career, Dr. Webb was a member of the graduate faculty in psychology at Ohio University, and subsequently directed the Department of Psychology at the Children's Medical Center in Dayton, Ohio where he also was Associate Clinical Professor in the Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry at the Wright State University School of Medicine.

Dr. Webb is the lead author of five books and several DVDs about gifted children. Four of his books have won "Best Book" awards.

- Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers
- Grandparents' Guide to Gifted Children
- Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bi polar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders
- Gifted Parent Groups: The SENG Model, 2nd Edition
- A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children

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Comments

Other on 11/18/2016

Great article. Have shared this to my sister as she has a gifted son that, according to her, has existential depression.

Other on 9/22/2016

This article connected with me on a profound level, especially the self-care and coping mechanisms. Thank you so much.

Educator on 4/27/2016

I spent a good ten years in that state of disintegration, if I'm self-analyzing correctly, and the only way up and out for me was to learn to be okay with people sucking, with life having no reliability except that of statistical likelihoods, and there being no real purpose to existence other than to, well, exist. We don't really need a reason; we're blobs of cells processing sensory input, and that's really all there is to it. Everything else we create, all the meaning we assign, the relationships we build between ourselves, each other, the world, the past, and the future - that's all us. We're doing that. And when you stop looking at that as a bad thing, that "oh balls, we're on our own, and boy are we fucked," and start thinking of it as an amazing thing, as a sign of just how much potential humanity has, and how much we're doing with it (even though, when I first looked around and saw all those inconsistencies in peoples' behavior and belief, I never would have thought so)... it starts to be kind of incredible and fantastic, and you start to get back some of that sense of wonder and awe. Or at least, I did.

Student on 3/10/2016

Woah, I just read the article that might save my life. I'm actually being understood right now. Like this is my life. No one understands me when I talk about this. I'm so glad I googled. I don't feel alone anymore. I get so existential I stop talking. Daily. I go through periods of just curling up in a ball and not just hating life, but hating that I can't find the answers to everything. On another note I have a question: I get really caught up in psychology and dissecting emotions and things, getting depressed when I can't solve every issue I face through psychology--is there another form of depression caused by the study of psychology? Like does that have a name? I can't find anything anywhere--maybe this and Existential depression tie into one another? sorry if that doesn't make sense, it probably doesn't.

Student on 1/21/2016

And there it is! My recent life's turmoil described in eloquent & heartfelt words. This was VERY informative and a bit moving to read. I too have tried to discuss these things with loved ones but they didn't get it. Dealing with family dysfunction and subsequent separation from family, homelessness, financial challenges and career pitfalls have all made me question everything that I once thought that I could trust in this life. As a result, I have been forced to re-examine all that I ONCE knew in favor of new lessons & new discoveries about myself and others. Reading this made me sad (that an end comes for us all regardless of where we are in the journey), contemplative, frustrated and more at peace simultaneously. Still on a quest for my own meaning & truth. Thank you for writing this.

Other on 12/26/2015

Thank you for this. I realize that others experience this, but rarely do people talk about it, at least not in my circle. I've struggled with this for nearly 40 years now, doing what Camus refers to as evading, in order to get through. I set up tasks that I know are meaningless, plans that absorb my energy and thought. But eventually I come back round to this. There is no solution, but knowing that I'm not some insane person because I think this way and struggle with the despair, helps.

Student on 8/30/2015

I have read this article numerous times, and sometimes, I find myself getting emotional. I am truly grateful that I have encountered this article (thanks for my friend). Every time I read this article from start to end, feels like someone has understood me. I have tried to express myself about my sentiments in life and the universal questions I have pondered on for years to other people, yet almost everyone doesn't have any idea how to react to it, or even to do something that could make me feel better. Thank you again for the wonderful information you have shared. It feels better when you are not completely alone, especially dealing with existential depression.

Other on 4/25/2015

This has helped a lot. Thank you very much. While I don't consider myself particularly gifted, I am glad I got to this page and read this. I feel more at ease and it was comforting. I think I am currently disintegrating, but now I'm not so frightened anymore. Thanks again.

Student on 1/31/2015

This is a very informative and well-written article on a topic that few people seem to know about. I am extremely glad to have found it while researching for an essay on the necessity of comprehensive programs for gifted students in order to address issues similar to those mentioned in the article.

Other on 1/14/2015

While reading this, I felt the notion for an argument against free will. For three years, I have suffered greatly through the 'existential crisis'. It was something that felt so personal, but to have psychology put a label on it as a mid-life crisis for our highest intelligent beings, takes away the 'uniqueness' that you thought you were experiencing.

Other on 11/5/2014

Relating to essentially everything in this article solidifies a personal conclusion. Intelligence is perhaps the greatest of human attributes, yet can be a lifelong curse. I've felt alone my entire life; perpetually pondering my existence. At least I can take solace other individuals feel similar.

Student on 9/21/2014

Struggling with existential depression and not being understood is one of the hardest things to go through. Often times, most counselors don't even understand what is going on. This feeling is multiplied because the sufferer is even confused about his state of being. This article is a godsend. For those that have undergone serious bouts of existential depression and feel despair when nothing resolves it, this article sheds some light on this condition. Now I don't feel alone. Now I have words to explain what is going on. Everything is still up in the air, but, at the very least, there is hope because there are people who know and can help people with this form of depression.

Other on 9/18/2014

This article IS SO GOOD! I found Dabrowski in the midst of a quarter-life existential crisis and I'm gradually reintegrating positively. I think I would have dissolved into hysterics and/or killed myself if it weren't for discovering his theory. I'm a writer and I've experienced a huge surge of creativity; most of my work is now focused on overarching themes of humanity and the caveats of modern society. I was a gifted student. They put me in the "smart/creative" group of kids who got to take fun and novel classes at night. It was okay, but didn't really facilitate my development in a holistic manner.

Educator on 6/25/2014

I appreciate your article, although I'm wondering what the research basis is for your claims. I don't disagree that gifted youth are more susceptible to existential crisis, but I am looking for more research on the topic.

Other on 12/3/2013

Dr. Webb, Thank you for this very comprehensive overview of an important issue faced by many gifted/highly gifted individuals of all ages. I would like to add to the list of adaptive skills, that of emotion management and emotional regulation skills. Whatever the cause of depression, anxiety and other difficult affective states; skills are needed for coping and managing life even while depressed or anxious. In my experience as a therapist working closely with gifted and profoundly gifted folks and their families; there is often difficulty in managing overwhelming emotions or feeling overwhelmed by normal or intense emotional states. As such; in order to be

able to learn optimism and resilience as you suggest in your article; it is helpful for the individual to feel more competent in recognizing and managing challenging affective states. I do this with an integration of motivational interviewing, DBT and CBT within a relational context. I have developed The Emotion Management Life Course; in this workshop; the clinician serves as a teacher, role model, mentor and facilitator of emotion regulation coping and motivational skills. This seems to work well in assisting individuals with depression and anxiety.

Other on 10/25/2013

Thank for producing this; I no longer feel I'm on some kind of ego boosting trip of narcissism and reassurance when looking at this subject. The table and the coping strategies are particularly helpful; also I think I may be able to help one or two others I know as a result of your explanation regarding existential depression. There are times where I feel I've left things years and years too late to really get to grips with "career", but now I realize that I don't value what most career paths appeared to mean to me-politics, conformity, material gain. The ones I know, I still don't. I just wanted leverage to create ripple effects, good ones and I'm not sure I minded particularly if it was all that known; just as long as it happened. So thank you.

Student on 2/20/2013

It was amazing to read this just to know that I'm not the only person who feels this way. Before I always felt like I didn't even belong in this world. We are all different. The Coat of Arms exercise did nothing for me. However the Self Management skills section was hugely helpful, especially "Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired" - as soon as I began to manage those better (instead of ignoring them) my life became so much better. I also remind myself, "You know what? I don't need to think about the meaning of life right now." Big help.

Other on 2/12/2013

Very good article. Thorough. I liked the "coat of arms" exercise. It's helpful to visualize it. It's also good to see that disintegration is a normal part of the process, and how "gifted" people are more likely to be affected. The "zone of tolerance" and Table 1 characteristics hit home with me particularly.

Other on 1/30/2013

Amazing article. This is the first thing I've read that has really captured my experience and gives me hope that there may be light at the end of the tunnel. It's helpful to know that reintegration is possible and that based on this article I seem to be heading in the right direction.

Parent on 1/25/2013

This article is one of the most helpful things I've read. Thank you for the wonderful information.

Other on 1/18/2013

Thank you for the gift of this article. I thought I was having a traditional mid-life crisis in finding myself dissatisfied with a job I have previously loved even though I have changed direction several times already. Now I have some context that resonates with me for that and feel much calmer and positive about it. I also feel I will be able to support my daughter more effectively too in time.

Student on 12/23/2012

Really just a fantastic article, although unfortunately one that you would only really understand if you have been through it!

Student on 12/18/2012

I enjoyed the breadth of illustrative and theoretical literary references very much. Excellent exposition of a philosophical issue.

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