



# PERFECTIONISM, anxiety & depression in gifted learners

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learning | **as unique** | as every student



Calgary Board  
of Education



What is **PERFECTIONISM**?

What is **anxiety**?

What is **depression**?

*How can we support  
our children?*

# The gruesome threesome



# PERFECTIONISM...what is it?

“...a rigid adherence to **impossibly high standards**, irrational importance on the **attainment of these standards**, **overgeneralization of failures**, and engagement in **all or none thinking**”

Fletcher and Speirs Neumeister (2012)

# The research... **PERFECTIONISM**



## ■ **healthy**

- mistakes = learning
- criticism = improvement
- doubts push action
- conscientious
- intrinsic motivation
- mastery performance

# The research... **PERFECTIONISM**



- **unhealthy**
  - mistakes = failure
  - criticism = crushing
  - doubts disabling
  - extrinsic motivation
  - performance adverse
  - risk avoidance

# The research...what



- higher intrinsic motivation in gifted
- high ability students external motivation
  - detrimental to school engagement, anxious, angry, bored, avoid school
- perfectionistic tendencies - please parents/teachers
  - may mask underlying negative feelings related to school, may become more pronounced over time
- success may come at a high price,
  - achievement to meet high standards
    - suffer self-doubt & fear of failure

# The research...what



- may enjoy comparison to others during K-12
  - in post-secondary at-risk for stress & anxiety
- “high achieving gifted have it all together”
  - ...praise high achievement
  - positive or negative perfectionism
    - ...masks anxiety, excessive concern over mistakes, fear of failure, self-worth contingent on achievement, depression



# The research...why



## **PERFECTIONISM** (personality characteristic associated with giftedness)

- is an abstract concept
  - takes an abstract mind to grasp its meaning; to cherish a vision that does not exist in the concrete world
- as a function of asynchrony/uneven development
  - set standards according to their mental age rather than chronological age
- having older playmates
  - tend to set standards appropriate for more mature friends

# The research...why



- successful in first attempt at mastery of a skill(s)
- crave challenge & stimulation
  - if work is too easy, will add to the task: to accomplish perfection
- occurs as a distortion of the drive for self-perfection
  - a positive evolutionary drive

**Experience**

**Behaviour**

**PERFECTIONISM**

**Culture**



# PERFECTIONISM as experienced

- expectation – self & others
- fear of failure
- lack of control
- overwhelmed
- pressure to perform
- can't let it go

# PERFECTIONISM **behaviour** observed

## Healthy

- excellence
- practice
- best effort
- perspective
- mistakes as opportunity



# PERFECTIONISM **behaviour** observed

- unrealistic expectations
  - perfection
  - effortless
- negative cycle
  - obsessive
  - avoidance
- low self esteem
- procrastination
- underachievement
- paralysis by analysis
- anxiety
- migraine

# PERFECTIONISM **behaviour** observed

- type A coronary-prone behaviour
- psychosomatic conditions
- obsessive-compulsive
- panic disorder
- anorexia nervosa/bulimia
- depression
- suicide

# PERFECTIONISM in culture

Roots:

- inappropriate challenge
- “you are so smart!”
- “good job!”
- performing as “gifted”



# Do you know a **PERFECTIONIST**?

- What do you notice about their behaviour?
- Is it healthy/unhealthy?
- What motivates their perfectionism?
- What strategies could be used to help manage their perfectionism?



# Strategies for health

- support **appropriate** challenges
- **separate** the failure from the person
- view **'missteaks'** as **learning**  
**'ooportunities'**
- provide opportunities to **practice**

# Strategies for health

- strive for **excellence** vs. perfection
- emphasize **process** not product
- focus on personal best; praise specific **effort**, not results
- help **“frame”** competition & compliments

# Strategies for health

- **model** healthy perfectionism
- demonstrate **goal setting** for **improvement**
- set **priorities** & maintain **perspective**
- provide clear **expectations**
- explain **limits** on effort in relation to the goal

# Strategies for health

- provide creative problem solving **opportunities**
- don't evaluate all work, love of **discovery**
- demonstrate a **growth** mindset VS. **fixed** mindset
- use **hUmOur, huMOuR, & huMoUr !!!!**

**“Perfectionism doesn’t  
determine success;  
talent, energy, and  
commitment do.”**

# Anxiety ...what is it?

...a more pervasive emotion that may drive **unreasonable or excessive reactions** to a perceived threat



# Anxiety ...what is it?

...diagnosed when the anxiety becomes severe enough to **prevent developmentally appropriate activities or behaviours**





# Anxiety...types



- specific phobia
- separation anxiety
- social anxiety
- obsessive compulsive disorder
- generalized anxiety disorder
- panic disorder
- PTSD

# The research... anxiety



- 3-5% of children and adolescents suffer (2005)
- significantly **lower levels of anxiety** than non-gifted; no difference between males gifted/non-gifted; gifted females, slightly higher levels than non-gifted females
- however...huge variation in gifted population, need to study specific **subgroups** e.g. 2e; visual-spatial, creative, profoundly gifted
- **2e gifted** highest risk for frustration & anxiety
- impacts **cognitive functioning**

# Experience

# Behaviour

## Anxiety

# Culture



# Anxiety as **experience**

- agitated
- overwhelmed
- fear/panic
- physiological response
  - breathing
  - heart rate
  - blood pressure
  - perspiration
  - fight or flight

# Anxiety **behaviour** observed

- distressed
  - physically
    - unsettled, unfocused
    - agitated
  - emotionally
    - distraught, withdrawn
    - argumentative, aggressive
- avoidance

# Anxiety in **culture**

- expectations
  - students/children
  - gender
  - giftedness
  - other exceptionality
- structure & organization
  - control & voice
    - daily routines
    - time management by others

# Strategies to reduce anxiety

## Breathe

- physiological response to stress
- calming breath & balancing breath

## Relax...don't tell me to relax!!!

- visualization and the 2 minute vacation
- progressive relaxation techniques

## Awareness

- 5 pt scale – strategies & triggers

Neihart (2006); Students First Project



# Strategies to reduce anxiety

## Confront fear

...avoidance increases anxiety

- awareness of breathing & relaxation
- baby steps to reduce anxiety
- safe practice
- other calming items/activities





# Anxiety



Think of your child's experience of anxiety...

- When is it most likely to occur?
- How does it feel for him/her?
- What might it look like to others?
- What can/do you do to help reduce it?

Don't believe  
every thing  
you think.

# Depression...what is it?

**...depressed or irritable mood** or markedly **diminished interest or pleasure** in almost all activities for **at least a 2-week period**, causing **significant impairment in academic, social, and other areas of functioning**

DSM IV-R



# Depression...type



“...highly sensitive, creative and gifted, high ability people can be particularly vulnerable to **existential depression**”

“...**existential depression** is a depression that arises when an individual confronts certain basic issues of existence...four such issues (or ‘ultimate concerns’) – death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness”

Webb (1996); Yalom (1980)

# The research... depression



- 20-30% of 15+ years
- gifted far less depressed than non-gifted
- triggers may be similar, but the experience/response may be different, e.g. death - sadness vs. meaning of life
- existential depression more common among gifted
- gifted introverted girls higher suicide ideation, but lower than the general population
- gifted learners are very effective at masking challenges



**Experience**

**Behaviour**

**Depression**

**Culture**



# Depression as **experienced**

- shame, weakness
  - mask feelings
- hopelessness
- helplessness
- disconnection
  - isolation
  - alienation
    - clash of values

# Depression **behaviour** observed

- Impacts well being
  - cognitive functioning
  - physical – energy, sleep, pain, eating
  - social – engagement and pleasure
  - emotional – engagement and response
- Slightly down cast



# Depression **behaviour** observed

- Unrelentingly bleak
  - Extreme behaviour
    - Withdrawal
    - Acting out
      - immature
      - anger
      - despair

# Depression in **culture**

- Value:
  - confidence
  - strength
  - compliance & conformity
- Expectations:
  - not to show weakness, doubt, fear
  - not to act differently than the majority, even with identified differences

# Strategies to support

- **unconditional** acceptance of feelings
- focus on what they can **control & do**
- **balance** between individual time & time with others
- support & encourage **difference**, it's "how we grow as a society"

# Strategies to support

- connect tasks to what is **important/meaningful**
- **breakdown** seemingly insurmountable tasks
- accept **key components** of a task vs. all components

# Proactive measures

What daily practices or ways of being could you take up to minimize the experience of **PERFECTIONISM, anxiety & depression** in your child?



# Desired Outcomes

## Experience

Purpose

Belonging

Achievement

## Behaviour

Participation

Collaboration

Independence

## Children

## Culture

Inclusive & diverse

Caring

Interconnected community



## A provocative thought...

“The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we can make happen. Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer’s muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue, yet these could have been the best moments of his life.”

*Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

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# Other resources?

- Is there an app for that?
- Community resource?



# Questions?

