

PERFECTIONISM, anxiety & depression in gifted learners

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learning | as unique | as every student





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"

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 selfperfection
 - 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"



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

- strive for excellence vs. perfection
- emphasize **process** not product
- focus on personal best; praise <u>specific</u> **effort**, not results
- help "frame" competition & compliments

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

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

Greenspon (2010)

"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

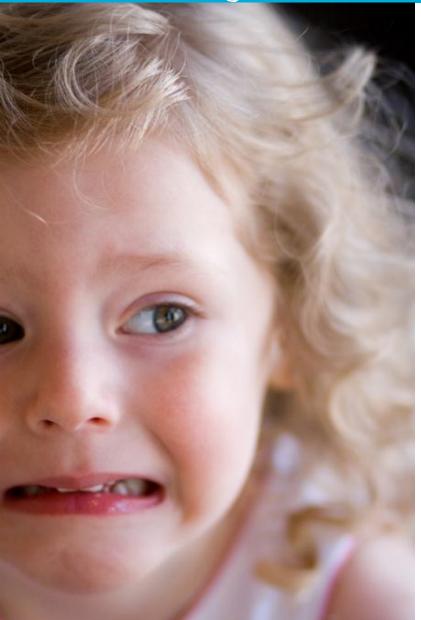


Anxiety ...what is it?

...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
- PSTD

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



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.

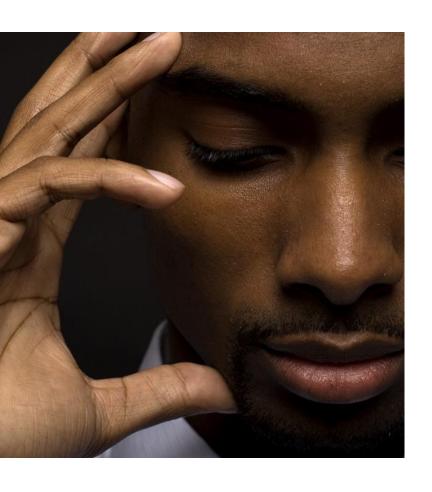


Depression...what is it?



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

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"

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



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?

