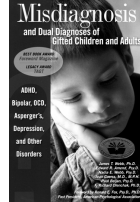
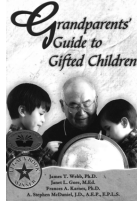


Stress, Perfectionism, Depression, and Resiliency

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Defining Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression

- > **STRESS**...We feel pressure and strong doubts of our ability to cope or manage ourselves or the situations at hand, which typically results in feelings of anxiety and discomfort. We are particularly stressed when we can see no alternatives; persons who commit suicide see no other alternatives.
- > **PERFECTIONISM**...We feel we must hold ourselves to an extraordinarily high standard of performance, and that it is "awful" if we do not meet those standards. Thus, we only feel valued if we continuously set—and reach—extremely high standards. We feel valued (and can value ourselves) only for our products, not for ourselves as persons.
- > **DEPRESSION**...On the surface, we feel sad and discouraged; our interests and energies narrow and we become preoccupied with our lapses and failings. Underneath, we feel angry at ourselves, anger that we feel we cannot or should not express, or anger that we feel is ineffective and hopeless.

Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression Can Come from Temperament, Idealism, or Lack of Resiliency

Children prone to stress, perfectionism, and depression are those who:

- > By inborn temperament, are pessimistic, unhappy, and unsociable.
- > Have not learned to be resilient and have a poor self-concept.
- > Are intense and quite sensitive ("overexcitabilities") in their feelings and reactions.
- > Are idealists, and whose idealism can actually increase the likelihood of depression.
 - Often frustrated in their idealism and vision of how things should be.
 - Their ideals for how things "should" be is not necessarily shared by those around them.

Gifted Children Have Some Characteristics that Make Them More Prone to Stress and Depression

- > Curiosity and wide range of interests lead to feelings of being scattered.
- > Intensity and sensitivity of gifted children make it difficult to receive criticism, modulate their behaviors, and promote over-commitment.
- > High ideals result in feeling of obligation (pressure) to make contributions to the world.
- > Strive to be "on top" in grades; desire to please parents and teachers.
- > Their high potential leads others to expect more of them.
- > Perfectionism. Low tolerance of gap between their ideals and their own abilities to perform.
- > Sense of space limitations (want to be everywhere at once to do more things).
- > Sense of time pressures/limitations (can't fit in everything they want to do).
- > Feel they don't fit with environment (school, peers).
- > To belong and be accepted, they may camouflage their abilities, but have a sense of being untrue to themselves.
- > Their accelerated thought processes, high expectations, and intensity lead to impatience with others.
- > They question/challenge traditions, causing others to reject them.
- > If they are "nerdy," they may feel isolated.
- > Their judgment lags behind their intellect.



A CHILD OR ADULT IS PARTICULARLY PRONE TO STRESS, PERFECTIONISM AND DEPRESSION FROM ALL OF THESE WHEN THAT PERSON HAS LOW SELF-ESTEEM, POOR SELF-CONCEPT, AND STRONG SELF-DOUBT.

Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression Have a Common Underlying Basis

- > **Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression have a common basis—"self-talk" combined with "irrational beliefs"**
 - Self-talk with a lot of "shoulds"
 - Idealism with an excess of "shoulds"
 - Thoughts and actions that assume that irrational beliefs are reasonable
 - Self-talk that incorporates many irrational beliefs
 - Self-talk errors ("bad bookkeeping" and "proportionality")

How Can We Help Children Manage Stress, Perfectionism, and Depression?

- Teach them that "self-talk" exists; then teach them how to use it to work for them, rather than against them.
- Point out common errors regarding self-talk
 - "Proportionality" error
 - "Bad bookkeeping" error
- Highlight the irrational beliefs that people base their lives upon
- Help them understand that "blaming others" leaves one helpless because it implies that any solution lies with others.

Some Irrational Beliefs

(from Ellis & Harper)

- You must do perfectly in all respects
- A person who acts badly is a bad person
- You must be liked, loved, and approved of by everyone
- Behaviors that worked for someone else, or which once worked for you, are what must be followed.
- It is terrible, horrible, awful, and absolutely catastrophic when things aren't going the way you want them to.
- People and things should be different from what they are, and it is terrible and catastrophic if perfect solutions cannot be immediately found.
- Your individual happiness is caused by other people or events, rather than by how you think or talk to yourself.
- If something is unpleasant, you should be preoccupied and continually upset about it for long periods of time.
- Things that happened in the past are all-important, need to be continually worried about, and limit your possibilities for the future

Managing Stress

- Help them understand and accept their idealism, intensity, and sensitivity.
- Model your own self-talk, and how you manage it. (Establish partnerships to help manage self-talk).
- Sarcasm and ridicule do not help; they only make matters worse. The child not only feels belittled, but also may adopt sarcasm and ridicule as ways of interacting with others.
- Establish problem-solving strategies to:
 - help them feel a sense of control over themselves and their life
 - teach goal setting and prioritizing
 - prompt them to action (rather than just thoughts)
 - teach them to use successive successes with themselves
 - teach them to decide on actions using "cost-benefit analyses"

Managing Stress - continued

- **Attempt to achieve some agreed-upon perspective and goals concerning what "needs to be changed", and then establish a "helping alliance."**
- **Construct a sense of perspective.**
 - point out the "catastrophizing"
 - question "Whose problem is it?" (Are they buying into others' expectations)
 - use humor (note the relationship between tragedy and comedy)
 - have them write a daily journal
 - compare their situation with other events (to promote priorities)
 - view mistakes as stepping stones for success, rather than as defeats
 - use role-playing; role-reversals to separate sense of self as distinct from one's roles
 - use guided readings/bibliotherapy to see patterns in others

Managing Stress - continued

- **Teach compartmentalized thinking (problems in one area need not spill over to all areas), and active ignoring.**
- **Use immediate calming techniques before trying to produce insight. (Don't teach navigation skills in the middle of a hurricane).**
 - H.A.L.T. (Hungry, angry, lonely, tired)
 - Meditation (undercuts self-talk; can distract you from worry)
 - Exercise and Relaxation (you can consciously control this)
 - Breathing (you can control this; helps prevent CO2 imbalance)
 - Massage; bath
 - Music
 - Sleep

Managing Stress - continued

- **Change the environment to "get the child out of his/her head."**
 - Go camping
 - Ropes courses
 - Outward Bound programs

Perfectionism

- Restate "shoulds" as "I am choosing to..." Explain the non-realism of media role models (particularly for girls).
- Use bibliotherapy; read about others with high ideals and/or perfectionism
- Model self-talk and your own imperfections. Daydream, relax, "goof off;" model how you learn from your mistakes.
- Give paradoxical instructions (e.g., "You cannot be perfectly human unless you are able to be imperfect; so be as perfectly messy as you can" or "Make a mistake, but in a way that I am the least likely to discover it").
- Gently refuse to talk about the child's excessive self-criticism; focus on how people don't always need to compare, evaluate, or examine for inferiority.
- Spend "special time" with undivided attention doing what the youngster wants to do except it cannot be a competitive activity. This prompts cooperative activities, sharing, admiring, or just being with the person—not for what they do, but for who they are.

Teach Resilience

- Model your own resilience.
- Teach them to challenge their self-talk by looking for evidence.
- Avoid catastrophizing by considering:
 - What is the worst possible outcome?
 - What is the best possible outcome?
 - What is the most likely outcome?

Teach Resilience

- Nurture the Seven Components of Resilience (Seligman)
 - Emotion regulation—the ability to stay calm under pressure
 - Impulse control—the ability to delay gratification
 - Empathy and the ability to read nonverbal cues of others
 - Optimism, though not false optimism
 - Causal analysis of adversities that are causing me stress
 - Personal: "me—not me"
 - Permanent: "always—not always"
 - Pervasive: "everything—not everything"
 - Self-efficacy—our belief that we can successfully solve problems we are likely to experience
 - Reaching out—taking risks to solve problems or have relationships

How Widespread is Depression?

- > **Depression Is Increasing**
 - 2.5 percent of children and 8 percent of adolescents in the United States suffer from depression.
 - The incidence of depression has increased in each generation over the last ten decades—not just in the United States, but worldwide.
- > **Who's Who Among American High School Students**, in its five most recent annual surveys, found:
 - 4% of these high achievers attempted suicide
 - 25% considered suicide
 - 19% knew someone their age who committed suicide
 - 43% knew someone their age who attempted suicide
- > These surveys also showed that children seldom shared their thoughts about suicide with their parents.
- > **Suicide**
 - From 1952 to 1992, suicides among adolescents and young adults increased nearly 300%.
 - From 1980 to 1992, the rate of suicide among adolescents ages 15 to 19 years increased by 28%, while suicide among children ages 10 to 14 years increased by 120%.
 - Suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15-24 year olds and the fourth leading cause among 10-14 year olds

Depression and Suicide in Gifted Children

- > Gifted children—in general—appear no more likely than others to commit suicide.
- > There may be specific types of gifted children more at risk for depression and suicide, however.
- > Some professionals have observed that highly gifted children, however, may be more at risk; more research is needed.
- > Some controversy exists whether gifted children are more frequently depressed than children in general.
- > Depression is not, however, always a bad thing; it reflects dissatisfaction, and can lead to personal growth and commitment toward change.
- > On the other hand, depression can lead to cynicism and despair.

Sources of Depression

- > **Genetics and environment**
 - Evidence for genetic predisposition to pessimism and depression
 - Toxic family, toxic classroom, or toxic peers
 - Toxic because of sarcasm, ridicule, guilt-inducing behaviors, feeling of being trapped and unimportant, etc.
- > **Idealism, perfectionism, and disappointment**
- > **Feeling alienated from others**
- > **Existential concerns** (particularly for highly gifted) about the absurdity of life, values; search for human meaning
- > **Learned helplessness**
- > **Underlying all of these is anger** ("It should not be this way!") either at oneself or at a situation that seems unchangeable.
- > "Where there is anger, there is hurt underneath!"
- > **Note:** In young children, we see depressive equivalents (truancy, bullying, temper outbursts, poor school performance, vague illness, withdrawal into daydreaming)

Sources of Depression - continued

- > Consider physical causes; hereditary predispositions; possible interpersonal precipitants. Was there a particular event that set off the depressive episode, or did it seem to come all on its own.
- > Most depressions are relatively short-lived (typically less than six months) whether or not intervention is done. However, this is not sufficient reason to just "wait it out."
- > Three patterns of depression (other than physically based depression) are:
 - Overly high, self-imposed standards of morality, responsibility or achievement
 - Feeling alienated from others who do not seem to understand or value them
 - "Existential depression" about the absurdity of life, values; search for human meaning

Depression - continued

WHAT NOT TO DO!

- > Don't ignore, belittle, ridicule, or tell the child that he/she has no right to feel depressed.
- > You cannot "argue" or reason someone out of depression.

WHAT TO DO.

- > Re-label the child's depression as anger—either at themselves (self-punishment such as in the "hair shirt" phenomenon), or angry at "fate." (In both cases they feel they "should" be able to do something about it.)
- > Re-state their self-talk away from "shoulds"
- > Provide emotional support; continue communication and empower them because they feel:
 - some sense of loss
 - a sense of alienation and aloneness
 - powerless to influence "fate," society, or to have a meaningful life

Helping Children Who Are Depressed

- > Teach resilience. "By emphasizing how a child feels, at the expense of what he does—mastery, persistence, overcoming frustration and boredom, and meeting challenge—parents and teachers are making children more vulnerable to depression." (Seligman, 1996)
- > Very often, gifted children feel that they are the only ones who have ever felt this particular way, and they need to be assured that someone understands them.
- > Accept their feelings, but state your own different view of them ("I'm sorry you see yourself as being so worthless, because I see you as being very worthwhile in many ways").
- > Foster physical closeness; touch them.
- > In existential depressions, suggest specific readings. [See, Judith Halsted (2009) *Some of My Best Friends are Books*].

Depression - continued

- Accept their feelings, but state your own different view of them ("I'm sorry you see yourself as being so worthless, because I see you as being very worthwhile in many ways").
- Consider "prescribing" anger; insist that they increase their activity level.

Children at Risk for Suicide

- Particular danger signs:
 - Withdrawal from others
 - Sudden decline in achievement
 - Narrowing or lessening of interests
 - Recent loss of friends or family
 - Changes in eating, sleeping, or social habits
 - Depressed mood
 - Giving away possessions
 - Drug or alcohol abuse
- Evaluate lethality. Does the child have a specific plan and the means?
- Strategies:
 - Ask, "Are you thinking of suicide?" This does not implant the idea in a young person's mind; if you are concerned enough to ask, it is likely that the thought has at least crossed the child's mind.
 - Virtually always, the child takes it as a sign that you care enough to ask.
 - If the child denies thinking about suicide, but looks as if he might not be completely honest, you might ask, "Would you tell me if you were thinking about it?"
 - Refer to a mental health practitioner if needed.
 - Make a "contract" with the child to stay alive at least until then.

The ABCDE Model

(adapted from Reivich, & Shatté, 2002)

- Adversity (the failure or stressful situation)
- Beliefs (your thoughts and beliefs that generated your reactions)
- Consequences (your emotional and behavioral reactions)
- Disputing (the arguments you make to counter your beliefs)
 - Gather evidence
 - Generate alternative ways of viewing the situation
 - Examine the "what ifs" of the adversity in order to decatastrophize
 - What is the worst possible outcome?
 - What is the one thing you can do to help stop the worst thing from happening?
 - What is the best possible thing that could happen?
 - What is the one thing you can do to help best thing happen?
 - What is the most likely thing that will actually be?
 - What can you do to handle the most likely thing if it happens?
 - Develop a plan of action
- Energization (Act on your new way of looking at the situation)

Suggested Readings

- > Adderholdt, M., & Goldberg, J. (1999). *Perfectionism: What's Bad about Being Too Good?* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.
- > Daniels, S. & Piechowski, M.M. (Eds.) (2009). *Living with Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
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- > Mendaglio, S. (Ed.) (2008). *Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- > Reivich, R., & Shatté, A. (2002). *The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles.* New York: Broadway Books.
- > Webb, J.T., Amend, E.R., Webb, N.E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F.R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other Disorders.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
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