

Abstract

This workshop begins with a review of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities (OEs). It then leads participants in a guided meditation, followed by a journaling/art exercise to reflect on the various ways overexcitabilities may manifest within themselves, and the ways these have influenced their development and sense of self, favorably or otherwise. There will be a facilitated discussion of the experience, which will end with a healing meditation.

Agenda



- Dabrowski's overexcitabilities
- Guided Meditation
- Journaling/art
- Discussion
- Guided Meditation

DABROWSKI'S OVEREXCITABILITIES



Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities (OEs)¹⁵



- Dabrowski: psychologist, psychiatrist, physician (1902–1980)
 - Theory of Positive Disintegration
 - Overexcitability: measure of individual's level of nervous response
- Inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli
- Expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity
- Represent a distinct difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience
- Psychomotor, Intellectual, Emotional, Sensual, Imaginational

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Psychomotor Overexcitability



- Heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system
- “Capacity for being active and energetic”²⁴
- Love of movement for its own sake,
 - Intense physical activity; drawn to movement / action
 - Rapid speech, enthusiasm, intense physical activity, need to act
- Might misbehave or physically act out tensions
 - Talk compulsively, act impulsively, nervous habits (fidget, twitch)
- Intense drive (workaholism / prolific)
- Compulsive organization
- Zealous enthusiasm; competitive at times
- Manage with vigorous exercise, doodling, knitting, etc
- High potential for misdiagnosis: ADD / ADHD, bipolar³⁵

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Intellectual Overexcitability



- Marked need to seek understanding and truth
 - Drive to gain knowledge; and to analyze and synthesize^{8,23,24}
 - Independence of thought¹⁵; incredibly active minds: intensely curious, often avid readers, usually keen observers
 - Prolonged focus & intellectual effort; tenacious problem solving
 - So excited about an idea that they interrupt inappropriately¹⁵
 - Relish elaborate planning; remarkably detailed visual recall
- Sometimes appear critical, impatient with others who cannot sustain their intellectual pace¹⁵
- Often love theory, thinking about thinking, moral thinking.
 - May translates into strong concerns about moral and ethical issues: fairness on playground; lack of respect for children; concern about “adult” issues such as homelessness, AIDS, war

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Intellectual Overexcitability



- Curiosity
 - Can be fatiguing for others
 - May lead to being more knowledgeable than others
- Ask probing questions: see beyond what others see
- Concentration
 - May be over-focused; under-focused (preoccupied)
- May lead to emotional flatness if extreme / overbalanced
 - Can be misdiagnosed as Psychosis, Asperger’s, personality disorders³⁵

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Emotional Overexcitability



- Often the first to be noticed by parents
 - Heightened, intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, strong affective expression⁵
- Physical responses²³
 - Stomachaches, blushing, concern with death and depression
- Remarkable capacity for deep relationships⁸
 - Strong emotional attachments to people, places, and things
 - Compassion, empathy, and sensitivity in relationships
 - Acutely aware of their own feelings; of how they are growing and changing; often carry on inner dialogs & practice self-judgment^{23,24}
- Can be idealistic
 - Cynical, angry when disillusioned

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Emotional Overexcitability



- Often accused of “overreacting” because of intensity¹⁵
 - Compassion and concern for others, focus on relationships, and intensity of feelings may interfere with everyday tasks
- Heightened concern for & reactions to environment
 - Ethical concerns
 - Social justice
 - Strong attachments to people, places, things
- Marked compassion for others, even strangers
- May appear extreme to others
 - Potential misdiagnosis as histrionic, hypomanic, psychosis³⁵

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Sensual Overexcitability



- Heightened experience of sensual pleasure / displeasure
 - Sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing,^{8,23} textures, tastes, lights, odors
 - Super-responsive to physical stimuli
 - Clothing tags, classroom noise, cafeteria smells so distracting that schoolwork becomes secondary^{8,23,24}
- Can lead to extreme reactions to situations
 - May overeat, go on buying sprees, or seek physical sensation of being the center of attraction^{8,23}
 - May withdraw from stimulation; or try to avoid or control some over-stimulations

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Sensual Overexcitability



- Can exhaust them & others¹⁵
- Easily misunderstood, 'finicky'¹⁵
- Intense pleasures can be quite stimulating¹⁵
 - Music, language, art, foods, sex
 - Intense delight from tastes, smells, textures, sounds, sights
 - Higher potential for dependence / addiction?
- May become so absorbed in a particular piece of art or music that the outside world ceases to exist¹⁵
- Far more expansive experience from their sensual input than the average person¹⁵
- Potential misdiagnosis as Impulse Control, OCD³⁵

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Imaginational Overexcitability



- Heightened play of the imagination^{8,23,24}
 - Frequent use of image and metaphor
 - Facility for invention and fantasy
 - Rich association of images and impressions
 - Elaborate dreams
 - Detailed visualization
 - Vividness leads some to interpret as psychotic
 - Day-dream
 - May manifest dramatically (e.g.: Robin Williams)
- Often confuse truth and fiction, or create private worlds¹⁵
 - ¾ have imaginary playmates in preschool, with imaginary pets on imaginary planets.....

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Imaginational Overexcitability



- Difficult to stay focused in a classroom where creativity and imagination are secondary to learning rigid academic curriculum¹⁵
 - May write stories or draw instead of following class instructions¹⁵
 - May have difficulty completing tasks when an idea sends them off on imaginative tangent¹⁵
- Potential misdiagnosis: Impulse Control, Bipolar, Anxiety, mania, hypomania, histrionics³⁵

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Overexcitabilities & Misdiagnosis³⁵



- Overlaps and similarities
- Coping tools can distract others, be seen as disrespect
 - Foot jiggling, fidgeting, doodling
 - Blurting out answers in class or work meetings
- Questions may appear irrelevant or off-topic
- Strong-willed behavior may be seen as defiance
 - Power struggles re: focus / areas of work
- Responses seem outsized for situation
- Some potential diagnoses for any OE
 - Learning Disabilities, Personality Disorders, Relationship Issues


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Self-Assessment




- Overexcitability Checklist
 - Geared toward children; can interpret as for self (present or past)
 - <http://rvsgifted.wikispaces.com/file/view/Overexcitabilities+Checklist.doc>
- Overexcitability Questionnaire
 - Geared toward children; can interpret as for self (present or past)
 - <http://pillowgt.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/3/9/14395378/understanding-overexcitabilities-questionnaire.pdf>
- Overexcitability Questionnaire II
 - More used for group research, not for individual assessment

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PERSONAL REFLECTIONS JOURNALING / ART

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OVEREXCITABILITIES AS STRENGTHS

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Leveraging strengths

- “Highly gifted people tend to have all 5 of these, but different people lead with different OE's. The engineer types lead with Intellectual, the poets with Emotional and Imaginational, etc. But variations in the levels of the individual OE's explain a great deal about the temperamental differences we see!”³² - *Stephanie S. Tolan*
- “Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm and harmony.”¹⁶ - Thomas Merton
- “For me, purity of movement wasn't enough. I needed expression, more intensity, more mind.”²¹ - Rudolf Nureyev

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General Strategies^{15,25}



- Discuss / reflect on concept of Overexcitability
 - Discuss / explore descriptions of OEs
 - See self with some of the characteristics?
 - Being OE is OK, understood, accepted; many sources validate
- Focus on the positives
 - Discuss positives when introducing concept
 - Continue to point out merits / benefits
 - Being energetic, enthusiastic, sensual, aesthetic, curious, loyal, tenacious, moral, metacognitive, integrative, creative, metaphorical, dramatic, poetic, compassionate, empathetic, self-aware
- Grow optimism: explore options with positive outlook¹⁷
 - May involve genetic disposition toward depression or optimism¹³

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General Strategies



- Medication or Counseling³⁴
 - Medication only when necessary, and when not for treating symptoms linked to Giftedness
 - Finding counselor familiar with OEs very important
- Establish patterns and routines¹⁷
 - What to expect, who is responsible for what, where to put things
 - Do not change without input from all family members
 - Setting boundaries can be an expression of love & caring³¹
 - Knowing what to expect allows children more time and freedom to pursue passion areas and find their own calmers and signs
- Build a support team¹⁷
 - Managing OEs (& teaching skills) can be challenging; tag-team

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General Strategies¹⁵

Cherish and celebrate diversity



- Pursuit of equity can dim pride in diversity, differences
 - Can fall prey to public, personal belief they are not accepted
- Vital: OEs just an aspect of who we are (tall, blond)²⁵
 - OEs are inborn traits, they cannot be unlearned!
 - Exceedingly important to accept our OE selves, children, friends
- Provide validation, help diminish “weirdness”, isolation
- Provide opportunities to pursue passions
 - Shows respect for abilities and intensities
 - Time to “wallow” in what’s loved & be validated for who they are
 - Removing passions as a consequence has negative effect
 - Message that passions (essence of identity) are not valued or worthy of respect

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General Strategies¹⁵

Use & teach clear communication skills



- All people need respect; to be heard; treated with grace
- OE people need more understanding and patience
 - To thrive, must share their intensity and feelings of differentness
- Learn good communication skills and teach them
 - Why? Improve odds to get what you want; nurture & facilitate others
 - Less stress; greater self-acceptance; greater understanding from and about others; less daily friction at home, school, work, public
- Verbal: listen; respond; ask; telephone; problem solving¹²
- Nonverbal: rhythm; time; distance and touch; gestures and postures; facial expressions; vocal tone; dress style(s)²⁰
- Skills to fit in when wish to, to change system if necessary, and to treat others with caring and respect

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General Strategies¹⁵

Teach stress management to toddlers+



- Increased stress reactions
 - Increased reception of and reaction to external input
- Many programs, books, options for stress reduction
 - Learn to identify stress symptoms for each family member¹⁹
 - Headache, backache, pencil tapping, pacing, etc.
 - Eustress: motivates, focuses energy, short-term, within our abilities
 - Distress: causes anxiety, short- or long-term, outside our abilities
 - Develop strategies for coping^{15,25}
 - Talk about feelings; do relaxation exercises; change diet; exercise; meditate; ask for help; organizational & time management skills
 - Develop strategies to prevent stress
 - Make time for fun; develop team of people to help, advise, humor you; practice tolerance of your own and others' imperfections
- Refine & develop over time

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MBSR

One option, many studies



- MBSR: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
 - Dr. Jon Kabatt Zinn, University of Massachusetts, late 1970s
 - Combines Mindfulness & Yoga, 8-week course
 - Available online (not included in study results)³⁶
 - Physiological impacts: increases in gray matter concentration³⁷
 - Left hippocampus; posterior cingulate cortex, temporo-parietal junction; cerebellum
 - Brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking
 - Studies show effectiveness with children (last 13 yrs)^{38,39,40}
 - Tool to help take away negative symptoms (stress, etc.)
 - Still quite place (between breaths)
 - Try for a few weeks; predict little to no immediate response
 - Decrease in anxiety, depression; increase in attention, self-worth

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General Strategies¹⁵

Create comforting environments



- Whenever possible
- Can be places for retreat or safety
 - Work / think in a quiet or calm non-distracting environment; listen to music; regard art; carry comforting item; move while working; wear clothing which does not scratch or cling
 - Creating them takes experimentation and support from others
 - Results in greater sense of well being and improved productivity

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General Strategies

Celebrate Success



- Document strategies tried, what works (in what context), and celebrate successes¹⁷
- Save evidence that documents success (articles, awards) in scrapbook, file, etc.¹⁷
- Encouragement for taking risk more effective than reminder to try harder next time³¹
- Email is an option; gives time to process questions and provide distance to encourage more objective thought³¹
 - Email can also be positive reinforcement & to celebrate success

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General Strategies

REST⁴¹



- Sleep, the obvious
- Random Episodic Silent Thought
 - Occurs when mind is stilled, between active thoughts
 - Association cortices wildly active
 - While brain is preoccupied with something else
 - Encourage via free association, word association
- Frequently occurs after periods of gestation, often unconscious
- Based in making connections & solving puzzles

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General Strategies¹⁵



- Persistently raise awareness of behaviors & their impact
 - Often insensitive / unaware of how their behaviors affect others
 - May assume others will understand why they interrupt, space out
 - Vital to teach responsibility for their behaviors
 - Become more aware of how their behaviors affect others
 - Understand their needs are not more important than those of others
 - Show how they are perceived & teach strategies to fit in
 - They must choose to change
- Self-care for caregivers¹⁷
- Remember the Joy in intensity
 - Great joy, astonishment, beauty, compassion, and creativity
 - Acknowledge and relish person's uniqueness

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Psychomotor OE



“Dancing is my gift and my life... God gave me this gift to bring delight to others. I am haunted by the need to dance. It is the purest expression of every emotion, earthly and spiritual. It is happiness.”²²

- Anna Pavlova



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Psychomotor strategies¹⁵



- These individuals love to “do” and need to “do”
 - Find favorite physical acts: dance, parkour, spinning in circles²⁹
 - Usually don’t favor organized sports or heavily structured (ballet)
- Allow time for physical or verbal activity, before, during, and after normal daily and school activities
- Build activity and movement into their lives
- Be sure physical or verbal activities are acceptable & not distracting to those around them
 - May take effort, but can be a fun project and beneficial to all
- Provide time for spontaneity and open-ended, freewheeling activities
-

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Intellectual OE

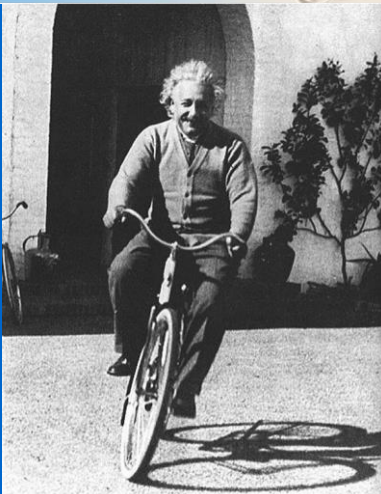


“You never fail until you stop trying.”⁹

“I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun.”¹⁰

“Great ideas originate in the muscles.”¹¹


- Albert Einstein



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Intellectual Strategies¹⁵





- Show how to find answers to questions
 - Respects passion to analyze, synthesize, & seek understanding
- For moral / ethical concerns, suggest ways to act
 - E.g.: Collecting blankets for homeless, writing to soldiers
 - Helping, in even a small way, to address important problems
- If critical or outspoken, teach they may be seen as cruel
 - E.g.: Saying “that is a stupid idea” may not be well received
- Cultivate mindfulness- awareness of present moment²⁸
 - Calmly note feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations
 - Sit silently 1 minute, focus on breath or heartbeat; empty mind; then silently ask “What is my most important thought / question?”
 - Builds ability to prioritize and be heard

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Emotional OE


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“My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!”¹⁸

— Edna St. Vincent Millay,
A Few Figs from Thistles

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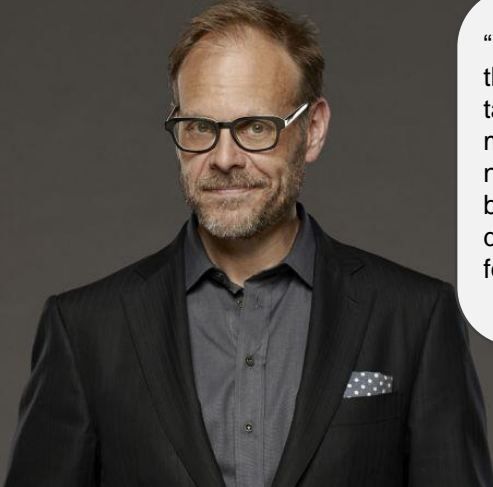
Emotional Strategies¹⁵



- Accept all feelings, regardless of intensity
 - Others may feel that one with Emotional OE is melodramatic
 - Accepting emotional intensity and working through any problems facilitates healthy growth & self-image
 - When triggered, take a moment, slow down, connect²⁶
 - Check in; ask about feelings; never minimize
 - May be too overcome to communicate in that moment
 - Reassure / demonstrate that you are there when they are ready
- Learn to anticipate & manage emotional responses
 - Often don't know reaction may grow to loss of control
 - Help identify warning signs of emotional stress: headache, sweaty palms, stomachache
 - By knowing warning signs and acting early, are better able to cope with charged situations and not lose control


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Sensual OE

“You need to pay attention to the food — feel the dough, taste the sauce — so you can make small corrections when necessary. It’s an observation-based process that you can’t do if you’re so completely focused on a recipe.”⁵


– Alton Brown



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Sensual Strategies¹⁵



- When possible, limit offensive stimuli & provide comfort³⁰
- Unexpected attention / opportunities to be in limelight
- Facilitate creative / dramatic productions with audience
 - Attention is something they feel, palpably
- Time to dwell in the delight of the sensual
- Time to create a soothing environment
- If gift for creative expression or intense passion, *feed it*³⁰
 - Use as link to get excited about other things
 - Loves rap? Write a rap about the Periodic Table
 - Tactile stimulation of creating? Projects to explore interests

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Sensual Strategies¹⁹

Calmers



- Visualization, music, aroma therapy, comfort foods (specific)
- Tactile strategies such as yoga, breathing, stretching
- Visualize a “happy place” to help calm them down.
- Encourage and model them
- Flow³¹
 - State of “optimal experience”
 - When intensity and skills are perfectly matched, and we are fully engaged in the challenge before us
 - Satisfaction = calming

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Imaginational OE



“If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”²

“I know that I'm not the easiest person to live with. The challenge I put on myself is so great that the person I live with feels himself challenged. I bring a lot to bear, and I don't know how not to.”³

- Maya Angelou



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Imaginational Strategies¹⁵



- Confuse reality & fiction; memories & new ideas blend
 - Reflect back what seems important; ask questions²⁷
 - “Is this what I would’ve seen or heard if I’d been there?” or “What would your dog or cat have seen if they had been there?”
 - Learning difference helps imagination be expression of creativity, rather than as a source of disconnection, pain, or fear²⁷
- Help to differentiate between imagination and real world
 - Have them place a stop sign in mental videotape
 - Write down or draw a factual account before they embellish it
- Help use imagination to function in real world
 - Promote learning and productivity (create tools & systems)
 - Use imagination to combat any fear-inducing entity²⁷
- REST: Random Episodic Silent Thought ⁴¹

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DISCUSSION

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REFERENCES & RESOURCES

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For More Information



- [National Association of Gifted Children](http://www.nagc.org) <http://www.nagc.org>
 - Pages on parenting, publications, special programs, etc.
 - Pages / programs by state
- [Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted](http://www.sengifted.org) <http://www.sengifted.org>
 - Pages addressing parenting, diagnosis, finding a qualified psychotherapist, gifted adults, and multicultural outreach
- [Hoagie's Gifted Pages](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/) <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/>
 - Education-focused
 - Articles: home schooling, advancement, enrichment programs, etc
 - Frequent updates
 - Scholarships available for the gifted
 - Links to many other web pages

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Footnotes



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