

# Chapter 7

## *Psychological Adjustment of Gifted Students*

Psychologists have long tried to understand the relationship of intelligence to psychological adjustment. For many centuries madness and genius were considered to be inextricably linked. Our culture holds many stereotypes of gifted individuals, most of them negative. Images of gifted people in the media have ranged from the bumbling absent-minded professor to the hard-drinking writer or half-crazed artist.

Terman hoped to put these negative images of gifted individuals to rest with his research. However, in many ways, Terman's studies of gifted individuals raised as many questions as they answered. Although Terman found that the majority of the students identified by his procedures grew up to be welladjusted adults, among the group there were indeed people who had suffered psychological disorders (Terman & Oden, 1947). There were instances of depression, anxiety, and even suicides among the group. Apparently, too, at the highest IQ levels, there were more psychological disorders than would be expected in a normal group.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) also provided support for the idea that at the highest levels of ability gifted students may simply be too different from average students to ever lead normal lives. Her students with IQs above 180, although for the most part functioning well, had suffered a great deal from being treated as deviants in the classroom and in society.

In more recent years, research on the psychological adjustment of gifted individuals has become more sophisticated and has begun to explore more complex questions than simply "Are gifted students well adjusted?" It is common now for studies to examine a wide variety of characteristics associated with psychological adjustment such as self-concept, self-actualizing tendencies, depression, and social self-esteem. In addition, contemporary studies of gifted students examine the adjustment of boys and girls, of students of varying ages, of students of differing abilities, and of students in particular talent areas.

In this chapter, we will first explore differing subpopulations of gifted students, and second, we will examine some common adjustment disorders that may affect gifted students. Interventions will be suggested for some of these adjustment disorders.

### **Gender and Adjustment**

The majority of studies of gifted girls and boys show that gifted girls are better adjusted than gifted boys or average girls and boys. On personality measures, gifted girls show fewer traits associated with poor adjustment such as depression and anxiety. Also, gifted girls are referred for fewer behavior disorders than gifted boys or average girls and boys (Kerr, 1985). Only in the matter of self-concept some findings indicate that gifted girls may have a lower opinion of themselves than gifted boys. Most studies show that both gifted boys and girls have positive self-concepts (Kelly & Colangelo, 1990). However, when self-concept is considered in terms of academic and social self-concept, some complexities emerge. For instance, gifted girls may have a lower social self-concept as a result of being labeled gifted; many gifted girls feel that giftedness is actually a social handicap (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1987). Most studies find that gifted boys and girls have about the same academic self-concept, but some studies show that gifted girls have less confidence in their academic abilities than their actual achievement would warrant.

Hollinger and Fleming (1985) suggested that because social self-esteem in gifted girls seems to be the result of a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics, androgyny may be the best predictor of social adjustment for the gifted girl. Other studies have found that gifted girls who are less conforming to social norms than girls in general tend to be psychologically healthier. One study (Karnes & Wherry, 1983) found that gifted girls were more casual and careless than other girls, and other studies have found gifted girls to be more independent, curious, and assertive.

In short, gifted girls and boys are very similar in their personality characteristics because they tend to be superior to average students in their psychological adjustment. Differences occur in the areas of social self-concept or social self-esteem, and differences favoring boys tend to appear only during the adolescent years when girls may be particularly sensitive to the social impact of giftedness. Although many studies examine specific personality characteristics such as dominance, need for achievement, or depression, there are too many conflicting data to be able to make any statement about specific characteristics of gifted girls and boys. After reviewing the studies comparing boys' and girls' personality characteristics and psychological adjustment, it can be said that Terman's finding probably still holds true: Gifted girls and boys are more like each other psychologically than they are different, and both are well adjusted.

### **Age and Adjustment**

Although only a few longitudinal studies exist that trace the adjustment of gifted individuals over the course of long periods of time, most of these studies (Terman & Oden, 1947; Kaufmann, 1981) agree that gifted individuals in general are well adjusted throughout the life span. However, there may be critical periods for gifted students just as there are for average students when mistimed interventions or lack of intervention can lead to adjustment problems. Preschool and kindergarten can be a difficult time for many gifted children. As Stephanie Tolan pointed out in her case study in *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), gifted children may be sorely surprised upon finding that their preschool or kindergarten playmates cannot play the same games or read the same books they themselves can.

Many gifted children look forward to the beginning of preschool or kindergarten with great enthusiasm and anticipation. They are often disappointed, frustrated, and bored with the reality of school. As a result, gifted children may develop school-related problems such as fear or anxiety about going to school; quarrelling with playmates; or withdrawal into fantasy or daydreaming during the school day.

Gifted 4- to 7-year-olds may have a difficult time understanding why other children cannot keep up with them and why teachers fail to stimulate them to the degree that they need. This is a period of life that requires patient understanding and guidance from parents, teachers, and counselors.

Another critical period for many gifted students is the entry into junior high school (Buescher, 1987). Gifted students may begin to be especially sensitive about being labeled gifted in junior high, particularly girls. Both boys and girls may see their giftedness as a social disadvantage. In addition, new social and romantic interests may overwhelm the previously intellectually oriented child, bringing about what seems to be a marked change in personality.

Teachers frustrated by the sudden onset of silly or blindly conforming behavior may believe that there are adjustment problems above and beyond those caused by the onset of adolescence. However, in most cases, it is simply the contrast between the intense achievement orientation that was once directed toward academic work and that is now directed toward social accomplishments and popularity, which leads the gifted students, teachers, and parents to be alarmed by this change in behavior (Groth, 1969).

Another critical period is also a transitional period: the end of senior year and the beginning of college. Many gifted students at this point become afflicted with indecision and fears about the future. In chapter 5 on career counseling for the gifted and talented, it was noted that multipotentiality can be a source of great difficulty for gifted students; having too many options can be a curse rather than a blessing. This confusion, toward the end of the senior year, can sometimes lead to depression, anxiety, and the lowering of academic performance after years of success (Frederickson & Rothney, 1972).

The beginning of the freshman year of college brings with it, often for the first time, competition with students of equal and superior intellectual ability. This often leads to dismay and anger in the gifted student who is used to straight A's and little competition. Some students who have never experienced failure may be intensely negatively affected by every

grade less than an A. Occasionally, the fear of failure can lead students to deliberately underachieve, to withdraw from college completely, or to choose another college with much lower standards.

### **Talent Area and Adjustment**

There is good reason to believe that certain psychological characteristics may be linked to particular talent areas. John Holland's work established that vocational interest areas were strongly related to personality characteristics (Gottfredson & Holland, 1989). There has been a great deal of controversy about the ways in which ability and personality may be related. Interest in characteristics of individuals with specific talents has grown since Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, and Bloom's (1985) study of gifted adults in specific talent areas. In addition, evidence from programs such as the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth and the Study for Verbally Precocious Youth at Johns Hopkins as well as the many Governor's Institutes that select students in specific talent areas has shown that some fairly predictable psychological characteristics and adjustment problems are related to specific talent areas.

### **Verbally Gifted Students**

Verbally gifted students' advanced vocabulary and unusual fluency can actually make it difficult for them to relate to others (Webb et al., 1982). Whenever verbally gifted students find themselves in conversations with individuals of lower verbal ability, they may be constantly trimming their conversation to fit the group. Particularly tactful verbally gifted students may conscientiously avoid using long words and discussing topics about which their agemates are ignorant. However, years of attempting to relate to people of lesser verbal ability may transform the talkative and friendly gifted student into a sarcastic cynic.

Verbally gifted students are particularly challenging as clients. As counselors, we often assume that the ability to articulate one's problems is equal to the ability to solve one's problems. This is simply not true with these students. They may be able to label and describe their difficulties eloquently, and yet not have the slightest notion of how to go about resolving them. Verbally gifted students literally talk around their problems.

Studies at Johns Hopkins University have shown that verbally gifted students may experience more psychological difficulties than mathematically gifted students (Brody & Benbow, 1986). When verbally gifted students have problems that merit referral to counseling, they are more likely than students in other talent areas to be witty, rebellious, and argumentative. The counselor may find it necessary to use counseling techniques that are less verbal; it may be useless to attempt to beat the client at his or her own game. Gestalt techniques (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) and other techniques that emphasize experience and awareness rather than conversation may be more appropriate.

Finally, it may be that verbally gifted students suffer the most from lack of acceleration and opportunities for intellectual stimulation. Their lively minds and their desire to describe and discuss every aspect of their existence may be thwarted by the lack of opportunity to read challenging books, to engage in conversation with intellectual peers and superiors, and to argue and debate at a high level.

### **Mathematically Gifted Students**

Studies of mathematically gifted students have dispelled the myth that they are awkward and socially inept (Haier & Denham, 1976). There is little evidence that mathematically gifted students are withdrawn or alienated. Mathematicians and scientists do tend to be more introverted by nature, according to vocational interest studies (Gottfredson & Holland, 1989). However, mathematically gifted students' introversion is likely to be well within the normal range.

Nevertheless, there are those mathematically gifted students whose interests are so esoteric that they may indeed be rejected by other children who have little understanding of the mathematical concepts that the gifted student finds so fascinating. In addition, many mathematically gifted students

may actually choose the label of "brain" or "nerd" because paradoxically, the media have made it somewhat fashionable in the 1990s to be brilliant in an area such as math, chess, or computers. Movies such as "Stand and Deliver," "The Wizard," and "Back to the Future" provide models of young people who are fascinated by math and science activities. Therefore, counselors and teachers should not automatically assume that a student who is considered "weird" by his or her peers is necessarily unpopular or unliked.

More critical to the psychological adjustment of mathematically gifted students than social popularity may be the issue of acceleration and intellectual challenge. Because mathematical giftedness often appears at a very early age (Gardner, 1983), these students need guidance and education even in the elementary grades. Mathematical knowledge is logical and linear in its progression, and is well suited to acceleration. Mathematically gifted students often have an intense desire for further information about their interests as well as an intuitive sense that there is much more to know. The refusal of schools or parents to allow the mathematically gifted child to learn at his or her own pace may lead not only to frustration and anxiety but also to the eventual rejection of math interests. Mathematically talented students must be nurtured and encouraged in their interests. Attempts to make them well rounded by discouraging math interests and encouraging participation in intellectual and social activities that are less attractive to these students are probably doomed to failure.

Counseling with mathematically gifted students may require that the counselor become knowledgeable about some of the mathematical ideas that are fascinating to the students. This does not mean that the counselor needs to be mathematically gifted; merely that he or she be willing to show curiosity rather than ignorance in the face of the client's enthusiasm. Most counseling strategies that rely upon sound reasoning such as rationalemotive therapy (Ellis & Harper, 1975) may be particularly well suited to mathematically gifted students who are experiencing psychological difficulties.

### **Spatially-Visually Gifted Students**

The spatially-visually gifted student literally sees what others don't see, and this experience can be isolating. The spatially-visually gifted student may often think in images rather than in words (Gardner, 1983). These students' visual talents may be manifested most obviously in their dress and grooming. At the Nebraska Scholars' Institute, one instructor was heard to say of the Integrated Arts group of students, "You can see them coming a block away by the way they are dressed." Perhaps it's their tendency to think in images and to dress in unusual ways that leads to the stereotype of spatially-visually gifted students as nonconformists. However, the vast majority of spatially-visually gifted students are not nonconforming socially; they are, however, nonconforming in the way they perceive and think.

Critics and those who appreciate the arts are often frustrated by artists' inability to articulate the meaning or purpose of their works. This is because artists simply feel little need for verbal explanations. Images for the spatially-visually gifted students stand by themselves and have meaning in themselves. As a result, when spatially-visually gifted students do have psychological problems, they are most commonly related to problems in communicating their feelings or thoughts to other people in ways that others can understand.

Counselors need to think of creative ways of helping spatially-visually gifted students to express themselves. Psychodrama (Moreno, 194(r1969) and art therapy techniques may be particularly useful in counseling and therapy with spatially-visually gifted students.

In chapter 3 on underachievement, it was noted that one of the most common reasons for the diagnosis of underachievement is actually the result of a misunderstanding of the IQ or achievement test scores of spatially-visually gifted individuals. Spatially-visually gifted students often score quite remarkably on the WISC-R performance scale and other nonverbal measures of intellectual ability, but achieve only average or above-average scores on measures of verbal ability. These students are not true underachievers. It is simply the case that the curriculum of most schools offers little that taps

the abilities of the spatially-visually gifted student. Only in such areas as art, photography, geography, and geometry are spatially-visually gifted students likely to shine. Therefore counselors must be on the lookout for this misdiagnosis and must also be prepared to deal with the effects of a mistaken assessment. Students who are spatially-visually gifted but only average in verbal abilities may be misplaced in gifted education programs or incorrectly accelerated in verbal talent areas.

### **Musically Gifted Students**

The problems and psychological characteristics unique to musically gifted students are probably directly linked to the nature of the development of talented musicians. Musical talent, in order to flourish as musical accomplishment, requires rehearsal and training usually from a very early age (Bloom, 1985). Music is an area in which creativity and panache cannot substitute for hard work and long practice. Musically gifted students, like mathematically gifted students, may show their talent at an

extremely early age (Gardner, 1983). These students can be identified and given training while still very young. Whereas acceleration for verbally, mathematically, and spatially-visually gifted children is extremely rare, acceleration for musically gifted students, usually through private schooling, is common. Musically gifted students usually progress through the learning of music at the rate that is appropriate to the level of their talent. Occasionally, however, musically gifted students may feel pressured to work faster and with more complex pieces than they feel ready for. Performance anxiety and a dread of practice can result.

Students who seem obsessed and completely involved with music may have a love-hate relationship with their instrument or talent. They may feel consumed by the discipline that is necessary. They may feel as if their lives are being shaped by the inanimate object with which they must spend so much time if they are instrumental musicians. In addition, many musically gifted students must suffer through long periods in which their talent may not be recognized or rewarded. Although there is frequently a role as an accompanist for the child who plays the piano and an occasional performance for children playing other instruments, much of the musical giftedness of these children seems irrelevant in the regular school curriculum. Because musical talent does not always go along with academic talent, these students may feel as if their own gift has somehow been devalued.

When musically gifted students come for counseling or therapy, they may show the same kinds of inarticulateness that counselors sometimes experience in spatially-visually gifted students. Musically gifted students may think in musical terms sometimes. It may be easier for them to describe an emotion musically than verbally. One harpsicord player who came to the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented needing help with depression asked her counselor to meet with her in her practice room at the music building so that she could express to her in music the emotions she could not discuss. The counselor then was able to help her find words for her feelings. Music therapy techniques may be particularly helpful.

### **Interpersonally Gifted Students**

Interpersonally gifted students are likely to be well adjusted, almost by definition (Gardner, 1983). However, occasionally interpersonally gifted students can have problems related to their gifts of empathy, communication skills, and ability to influence others. As discussed in chapter 3 on underachievement, interpersonally gifted students sometimes receive high grades and excellent recommendations from teachers based mainly upon their outstanding communication skills. This may lead to problems when the student is confronted with objective tests of his or her verbal reasoning ability, mathematical skills, or other skills that are not as well developed as "people" skills.

Interpersonally gifted students may also have difficulty with career development. Because they are often very socially oriented, interpersonally gifted students may be drawn to a wide variety of socially oriented careers or professions. However, they may lack good career exploration skills or decision-making skills.

In counseling, the interpersonally gifted student may present a number of unique problems. Often, interpersonally gifted students have many of the same skills that counselors have, this can be a jarring experience. At the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented, we have often observed that interpersonally gifted students seem to "mirror" the counselor's behavior. These students tended to listen, to engage in empathic responding, and to repeat and rephrase what the counselor was saying. Sometimes these clients are extremely dominant or manipulative during the session. In counseling, a client who is able to draw out the counselor or to manipulate the counselor may not get his or her needs met. Therefore, the counselor needs to make a special effort to make the interpersonally gifted student the center of the counseling procedure and to insist that he or she stay on task during the process of decision making. Gestalt techniques, which frustrate clients' manipulations, are helpful.

### **Psychological Adjustment and Educational Placement**

One of the most common and widespread misconceptions about gifted education is that grouping and acceleration lead to problems in psychological adjustment. A common criticism of special grouping for the gifted is that grouping students according to ability leads to elitism. In addition, the claim is often made that grouping gifted students leads to overly high expectations, pressuring, and competitiveness. This notion persists despite the fact that there is little research evidence to support this idea. In fact, the vast majority of studies contradict the notion that grouping is related to psychological adjustment disorders (Lehman & Erdwins, 1981).

On the contrary, grouping seems to benefit bright students by increasing their intellectual stimulation and providing opportunities for friendships with intellectual peers. Directors of Talent Search programs and Governor's Institute programs frequently have observed that students who enter summer programs with a record of behavior or personality disorders often seem to improve spontaneously in their behavior in an environment that encourages academic challenge and relationships with other bright students.

The idea that grouping students leads to elitism among gifted students has also received no support from research. Studies of the Iowa Governor's Institute showed that students who participated in this institute tended to improve in the areas of self-esteem and social support, feeling more selfconfident and more comfortable in relationships with other students than before participating in the institute (Kerr, Hallowell, & Erb, 1989).

Gifted students need to learn to be comfortable and on friendly terms with people of much lesser ability. In order for gifted students to learn to be tolerant and even compassionate toward students of lesser ability, it is necessary for them to feel comfortable with their own abilities and to have empathy for the feelings of inferiority or failure that so many average and less-than-average students experience.

Paradoxically, it may be that retaining a gifted student in a regular classroom throughout the school years can lead to elitism and contemptuousness. A student who has always received the highest grades in the class and has found all tasks to be easy, and who has been prevented from understanding his or her giftedness, may assume that success is simply the result of hard work. For this student, it follows that the other students in the class are simply not working hard enough. It is much more likely that a student who perceives his or her peers as lazy or unmotivated will grow contemptuous rather than a student who perceives his or her peers to be of lesser ability.

On the other hand, a gifted student who has been placed in an appropriately challenging gifted program may learn for the first time what it means not to be as competent as other students. That student learns what it feels like to not be the best. Placement in a gifted program with one's intellectual peers can be a humbling experience, although in the long run a growth-producing one.

Acceleration has also received much condemnation as a source of pressure and psychological disorders. Again, however, the research on acceleration has shown the effect of this educational strategy to be precisely the opposite (Janos & Robinson, 1986; Kulik & Kulik, 1983). Most studies of accelerated students show them to be better adjusted than their nonaccelerated peers. Even among students who have been accelerated as much as by 5 or 6 years, such as the students in Talent Search programs and radical accelerants who are

admitted early to colleges and universities, these findings hold true. Acceleration may be harmful only to students who are misplaced because of inappropriate evaluation of their abilities or to students who have other behavior and personality disorders unrelated to their giftedness.

Because the findings that support grouping and acceleration of gifted students go against the intuitions and inclinations of so many policymakers, information about these research findings usually fall on deaf ears. Gifted educators and counselors who have read the research and who have observed gifted students in accelerated programs or programs for gifted students are often frustrated by their inability to communicate this information. Nevertheless, counselors have as great a responsibility to dispel misconceptions about gifted students and gifted programming as they have to dispel the many myths about minority and handicapped children that have prevented them from receiving appropriate educational opportunities.

### **Common Adjustment Disorders of Gifted Students**

In this section, the common adjustment disorders gifted students experience will be discussed. Stress-related problems, depression, perfectionism, and problems in relationships are probably the most frequently cited presenting problems of bright students.

#### **Stress and the Gifted Student**

Jessie is a 6-year-old girl who likes to read the newspaper. Soon after she reads several accounts of people who have been poisoned by medicines that have been tampered with, she begins to have nightmares about poisoning. Soon she insists that her mother check all of her food to be sure that it doesn't have poison in it.

Lynn has just been admitted to a special school for the gifted. She is happy and proud to be in the gifted school because she knows that her parents are happy about it. Soon after her admittance, however, she develops a number of nervous habits such as nail biting. Worst of all, she begins to lose her hair; the only diagnosis the family doctor gives is that she is nervous and anxious.

Jordan is a member of the high school swim team and is its high-point diver. He is also a straight-A student and the editor of the high school newspaper. One day Jordan doesn't show up for swim practice. He has no explanation or excuse when the coach stops him in the hall, but he refuses to swim again.

All three of these students are gifted children under stress. There are as many reasons for gifted students to experience stress as there are sources of stress. However, some aspects of giftedness seem to be particularly conducive to stress, particularly loneliness (Kaiser & Berndt, 1985) and academic stress (Yadusky-Holahan & Holahan, 1983). It is interesting how often people immediately assume that the gifted student under stress is being "pushed" by his or her parents. Many writers have castigated parents and teachers for having overly high expectations of gifted students and have attempted to show a relationship between these expectations and the students' experience of stress. There is indeed some truth to the notion that stress can be related to overly high expectations; however, this alone is not a satisfactory explanation. Some students with ambitious, hard-driving parents nevertheless are relaxed and easy-going. On the other hand, every teacher has seen a gifted student who seems tremendously anxious and success-oriented but who has casual, easy-going parents with only the most moderate expectations of their child. It is not likely that parental pressure alone is the cause of stress in the gifted child.

For some gifted children, however, meeting others' expectations has become a way of life (Kerr, 1982). The student who is expected, not only by parents but also by teachers, school administrators, and community to be achievement-oriented may indeed feel pressure. The small town "scholar-athlete"; the high school's star speech and debate student who has won a national contest; or the school's only national merit scholar all may feel pressure as a result of their unique status. Jim Delisle, in his book, *Gifted Children Speak Out* (1984), gave many examples of students' beliefs that others hold expectations of them that are too high. Many gifted students describe a cycle in which achievement is followed

by expectation of higher achievement, which is then followed by higher achievement in a never-ending spiral, so that the student believes that no matter how much he or she may try, no attainment will ever be enough.

How can the gifted student break out of this vicious cycle? How can counselors help the student out of the cycle? One of the only ways of helping gifted students to deal with the overly high expectations of others is to help them to move from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation, the dependence on others' approval, recognition, and rewards, can be a trap. When explicit approval or reward is not present, the student may become extremely anxious, looking around for a way of evaluating his or her performance. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is characterized by self-evaluation and an independence from the opinions of others. Students who have internalized their own set of standards can judge their own performance. Because they do not need to rely on the opinions of others for self-evaluation, they can be more autonomous and more confident about their performance. Counselors can help bright students to develop intrinsic motivation by challenging them to evaluate their own performance. For example, when reviewing a student's transcript, the counselor can point to each course and grade and say, "You received an A in French. Is this the grade that you expected? Is this the grade that you believe you deserved?" Or "Here is a B in pre-calculus. How would you have evaluated your performance? To what degree were you challenging yourself?" It is important for the counselor to help the student to decide upon the level of effort that he or she will consider satisfactory, rather than the actual outcome that the student will consider satisfactory.

What happens, however, when students set their own internal standards too high? This, too, is a serious source of stress. Many gifted students seem to "raise the stakes" on their own, even when parents and teachers assure them that their performance is excellent. These students never seem to be satisfied with any amount of recognition or reward. Each accomplishment merely sets the stage for the next effort. Some internal force presses these students toward achievement. It is not achievement orientation per se that is stressful. In fact, most eminent individuals drive themselves very hard and are extraordinarily persistent in their work. Many accomplished adults are extremely self-critical. Stress results when there is no area of the student's life that is not counted as a potential achievement and when the student is completely indiscriminating about accomplishments. Being focused on excellence in a major area of interest is seldom as stressful as a student's desire to be perfect in all activities. Another common source of stress in the lives of gifted adolescents is overcommitment to school activities. Many gifted boys and girls seem to be engaged in a fierce competition to see who can receive the most inches of fine print under their names in the yearbook. Multipotential students, with multiple interests and skills, often seem to find themselves involved in nearly every extracurricular activity available (Kerr, 1982). Too often, students have been encouraged by faculty advisors to participate in activities such as yearbook, plays, newspaper, athletics, pep squad, and departmental clubs without an awareness of the degree of their involvement in other activities. The bright young man who cannot say no to any after-school activity may suddenly find himself in a position of having multiple conflicting commitments. Teenagers who find themselves constantly having to be two or three places at once and need to seek excuses from classes in order to fulfill out-of-class obligations may begin to experience all their activities as stressful. Some gifted students begin to resemble middle-aged, overly harassed executives, rushing from one appointment to the next and suffering from stress-related symptoms. Headaches, stomach disturbances and ulcers, skin rashes, and respiratory disorders all have stress as a common denominator. The remedy for these stress symptoms is exactly the same as that recommended for the hard-driving executive: a change in life-style.

Bright students who have become overextended need help in learning how to manage their time more effectively and to set priorities on their activities. Counselors can help best by engaging them in time management exercises. Also, students can be helped to rank their activities in a variety of ways. First, they can rank their activities in order of preference; second, in terms of each activity's value in



applying to college; and third, in order of each activity's importance to the school. The counselor can help the student discuss these rankings and develop a final list.

In general, these students need to learn how to slow down. They need help finding time for rest, for proper eating, and for recreation. Many of these bright, hard-working students almost seem to have forgotten how to play. Counselors need to encourage them to let go of some of their structured activities and replace them with more unstructured, spontaneous activities.

Finally, an important source of stress in the lives of many gifted students is the necessity of making decisions that are simply beyond their capacity to make (Kerr, 1982). The third grader who is asked to make his own decision about whether to enter a gifted program: the seventh-grade girl who has to make a decision whether to stay home for the summer or to attend an institute for the gifted and talented far away; the high school freshman who is being pressured to make a decision about a college either by his parents or the colleges themselves may simply not have the maturity or the resources to come to an appropriate decision. If students are given choices beyond their capacity for decision making, they may react with avoidance, confusion, and anxiety. Often adults expect that gifted children can make difficult decisions simply because of their excellent reasoning abilities. But advanced reasoning abilities are of no help in weighing emotions. Counselors can help gifted students by giving them permission to ask others to make choices for them sometimes.

At times, however, parents and teachers are unwilling to make choices for students. In this case counselors can help by providing the gifted student with decision-making strategies that take into account both the situation as well as the student's feelings about the situation. A decision-making model such as force-counterforce analysis can be useful. In this exercise, the young person works on one decision at a time. A choice is written out as a yes or no question. For example, should I attend the Duke University summer program? Then all the forces in favor of the decision are recorded as well as all the forces against the decision. A numerical value from 1 to 10 is assigned to each force in order to indicate its strength. Therefore, the decision results not from having more reasons to support it but from the cumulative strength of forcefully held beliefs.

## **Depression**

Depression among gifted students is increasingly becoming a concern of parents and educators. Many of the same situations that lead to stress for the bright child can also become precursors of depression. Under conditions of prolonged stress a student may gradually lose motivation, energy, and the will to go on. In the previous section on stress and the gifted student, examples were given of students who were overextended and "burning the candle at both ends." Often the student who has not dealt with the stress of overcommitment eventually becomes depressed. Likewise students who have been forced into situations that overtax their emotional and intellectual capacity will often move from anxiety into depression. A student who converts his or her stresses and anxieties into physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches is still trying to succeed beyond his or her abilities; the depressed student has stopped trying. The depressed gifted student presents a challenge to the counselor precisely because intervention should have come much sooner. By the time a student is depressed because of overextension, time management and decision-making skills will not help. A 17-year-old young man came to counseling at the Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development because he felt "frozen." He said he felt paralyzed in his relationship and work, and seemed unable to feel any emotion. He had been an extremely competitive tennis, soccer, and baseball player and a straight-A student. Even his language was filled with the vocabulary of competitiveness: "She had the advantage of me when she said she liked me first" - and "I think I can win out over this depression if I work at it."

This kind of depression must be treated like any form of burnout. Students like this require a moratorium from activities, a slow process of engagement with rewarding activity, and at least short-term counseling or psychotherapy in which the student can discuss his or her feelings, or lack of feelings. Often family and friends need to be brought into the process in order to help the student create a new manageable and rewarding life-style.

Cognitive behavior therapy, which replaces unrealistic beliefs with realistic beliefs, may be particularly helpful to "burned-out" gifted students. Counselors often use the lists of irrational beliefs developed by Ellis and Harper (1975). In the case just described, the counselor helped the client to see that all of life could not be conceptualized as a competition. The client learned to rethink his beliefs, to use new words to describe his experiences, and finally, to change his behavior so that he had a more relaxed, open approach to relationships and his work.

Delisle (1990) developed a list of healthy beliefs specifically for gifted students. They are as follows:

*Seven Realities for Successful Transition From Adolescence to Young Adulthood*

Reality #1: Remember that the *real* basics go beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Reality #2: You can be good at something you don't enjoy doing.

Reality #3: You can be good at some things that are unpopular among your friends.

Reality #4: Life is not a race to see who can get to the end the fastest. Reality #5: You have the ability to ask questions which *should* have right answers, but don't.

Reality #6: It's never too late to be what you might have been.

Reality #7: A life's career is not a life sentence.

Another type of depression that seems to be almost unique to gifted students is a kind of premature existential depression (Webb et al., 1982). Existential depression occurs in gifted children and adolescents when their capacity for absorbing information about disturbing events is greater than their capacity to process and understand it. Second graders who are capable of reading news magazine accounts of war and pollution may understand the information but not be able to deal with their helplessness to do anything about it. As Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926) pointed out long ago, many gifted children feel trapped in a world created by adults that is somehow out of control,

Gifted children's existential depression can result not only from their advanced reading ability but also from their participation in activities that call for greater maturity. One bright girl was so effective in working with animals at an animal shelter that she was given increasing amounts of veterinary responsibilities. Her work changed from simply taking wounded pets from individuals who had brought them in to preparing them for treatment, and finally to helping with the euthanasia of dogs and cats too sick or hurt to be adopted. This 12-year-old volunteer was heard to say, "I've seen too much death." Similarly, gifted teenagers who do volunteer work in hospitals and crisis centers may, because of their intelligence and skill, be given adult responsibilities without appropriate support.

Some gifted students seem to experience existential depression as a result of having wrestled with concepts with which even the wisest of adults have struggled. The meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the beginning and end of the universe are all subjects that may lead to depression in the child or adolescent who is attempting to understand them. Perhaps the depression results from the incongruence between the child's developmental stage and intellectual abilities. A young person whose cognitive development is still "dualistic," that is, still perceiving the world in terms of absolutes such as right and wrong or good and bad, may be disturbed by reading about and thinking about questions for which there simply are no right or wrong answers. Unable to resolve the ambiguity, the student lapses into anger and despair. Perhaps one of the most helpful techniques for this kind of existential depression is bibliotherapy. Counselors can recommend books that are appropriate developmentally as well as intellectually. Stephen Schroeder-Davis (1990) developed a comprehensive, annotated list of books that are appropriate for bibliotherapy. He says that books used in bibliotherapy with the gifted should meet the following criteria:

1. They are good literature. That is, independent of their relevance to the gifted, the books are well written and fun to read. Many are by award-winning authors or have won awards themselves. <sup>y</sup>
2. Giftedness is important, but not necessarily central to the story. The book must be *concerned* with the gifted, but not "about" giftedness.
3. Readers should be able to identify with the characters, themes, and conflicts. Therefore, portrayals that are rich, varied, and realistic rather than stereotyped or derogatory should be chosen.

Schroeder-Davis's selected, annotated bibliotherapy list is included in its entirety in the Resources section at the end of the book.

The book *Guiding Gifted Readers* (Halstead, 1988) provides guidelines for selecting reading as well as excellent lists of books for helping gifted students to deal with unanswerable questions. The counselor should keep in the office books that have been particularly meaningful to him or her so that these can be shared with the bright student dealing with existential concerns. There is evidence that gifted students who have been guided toward self-actualization and meaning are less likely to be depressed (Berndt, Kaiser, & Van Aalst, 1982).

## **Suicide**

Although the statistics have been overblown and the newspaper accounts of gifted students who have committed suicide have been overly dramatized the fact remains that a high proportion of students who commit suicide are at least above-average students. There is not, and probably never has been epidemic of suicide among gifted students as the news suggests; however, there have been needless deaths.

## **Perfectionism**

Very few clients are likely to refer themselves to counselors for problems with perfectionism. Instead, friends and family often pressure them into counseling out of concern or frustration with their tendency to be hard on themselves and others. Perfectionism has been described as a problem of gifted individuals by most of those who have studied them at close hand. Hollingworth (1926) saw perfectionism as a common characteristic of the highly gifted; Whitmore (1980) related it to fear of failure and underachievement; and Roedell (1987) outlined its consequences. Perfectionism here is defined as a complex of characteristics and behaviors including compulsiveness with regard to work habits, overconcern for details, unrealistically high standards for self and others, indiscriminate acquiescence to external evaluation, and rigid routines.

### *Possible Causes*

*Inherent Tendencies.* Although the commonsense notion of the causes of perfectionism tends to lay the blame for the perfectionistic child squarely on "pushy," exacting parents, clinical experience shows this conclusion to be unwarranted. Many perfectionistic gifted children are the products of relaxed, easy-going parents with realistic expectations. Developmental psychologists have established that infants come into the world with tendencies to develop particular temperaments, differing among themselves on many variables such as activity level, sensitivity to change in the environment, reactivity, and mood. It seems possible that certain children are simply *born* with the combination of temperaments that create a need for an orderly environment, or conversely, an aversion to chaos. Children born with these temperaments who are also of high intelligence may be able to carry perfectionism further than average children, simply because they often have the ability to carry out tasks expected of their age level perfectly. In this way perfectionism becomes entrenched. The ability to perform perfectly combines with the need to perform perfectly (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989).

*Lack of Awareness of Giftedness.* Many gifted children are unaware of their abilities and many have never been labeled as gifted (Webb et al., 1982). Even those who have received a label have seldom been given specific information about their abilities: How gifted? In which areas? In what percentile? How many other children can be expected to

perform similarly? In the absence of specific information about how their intellectual abilities compare with those of others, gifted children and their parents usually underestimate the children's abilities or assume their intelligence to be "just average." When a child assumes that he or she is "just average," but consistently receives higher marks and consistently performs age-level tasks with ease, then that child begins to search for other explanations for his or her superiority. Children who believe their superiority is purely the result of hard work are in danger of becoming perfectionistic, just as they are in danger of becoming "elitist," as pointed out earlier.

If a gifted child assumes that his or her superiority is the result only of effort, rather than some combination of effort and ability, it is likely that the child will begin to see other children as not expending effort, and not living up to expectations. A child who holds other children in contempt for their lack of effort grows up to be an adult with impossibly high standards for others as well as a warped sense of his or her own capabilities.

On the other hand, a child whose gifts are identified early, and who has specific explanations of his or her abilities ("About 95 children out of 100 can't read as well as you do"; "Your math ability in 7th grade is about equal to the average 12th grader"), is likely to feel comfortable with those gifts. He or she is also more likely to have more realistic expectations of average peers, while having somewhat higher expectations of himself or herself in age-level tasks.

*Extrinsic Motivation.* Although they are more rare than believers in "the hurried child" syndrome would have it, there are parents and teachers who have made the mistake of setting up systems of rewards or punishments for every conceivable achievement or behavior. Gifted children whose abilities have been shaped by ever-increasing contingencies and who have been pressured into performing for points, grades, and awards soon lose a sense of ownership of their talents. An overemphasis on rewards can lead to less creative, more automatic behavior. A gifted child can develop perfectionistic behavior when he or she responds to all situations as an opportunity to gain "points." Although lacking in creativity, the work of the gifted perfectionist is always precise, correct, and full of detail in order to get the hoped-for reward. Gifted perfectionists generalize their perfectionism to relationships, hobbies, and even religion so that they seem to be trying to get an "A" in marriage, leisure, or spirituality.

## **Strategies for Change**

Miriam Adderholt-Elliott, in her book *Perfectionism: What's So Bad About Being Good* (1989), offered many helpful explanations for the origins of perfectionism in gifted children and ways of bringing about change. A program of behavior change for gifted perfectionists, dubbed by one of our clients "Slob for a Week," is one of my favorite techniques arising from the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented. By teaching perfectionists how to role play a "slob," the technique may help them to undo some of their more rigid behaviors; to empathize with the plight of nonperfectionists; and to learn indirectly the value of setting priorities on tasks. The Perfectionism Behavior Change Contract is included in the Resources section at the end of the book.

When guided with the right proportion of humor and seriousness, this technique can help the perfectionist to gain some new insights into his or her habits. In addition, many perfectionists learn that when they are able to give up their obsession with precision, details, and outside evaluation, they are better able to focus their energies on issues of real concern to them. One client who used the technique said, "When I gave up being perfect I rediscovered excellence in the thing I really care about-my creative writing."

Other approaches to perfectionism include rational-emotive therapy (RET) (Ellis & Harper, 1975) and Gestalt therapy (Perls et al., 1951). RET attacks the irrational belief that one must be perfect in all things at all times and replaces it with more logical beliefs. Gestalt therapy "loosens" rigid, compulsive behaviors through humorous frustrations of the client's attempts to be the "perfect client."

## Problems in Relationships

What kinds of problems in relationships are unique to gifted and talented individuals? Although gifted people experience the same societal expectations as other men and women, they do have special problems in friendships and intimate relationships that are related to their special talents. Terman and Oden (1935) found that the majority of gifted children and adolescents were well adjusted and popular with their classmates. Although the Terman subjects married later than average Americans, they tended to have very stable marriages and well-adjusted families. Hollingworth (1926) found that the great differences in intellect between highly gifted and average peers created difficulty in establishing friendships for this group. Kaufmann (1981), who also studied the highly gifted-the Presidential Scholars-found that they often received less recognition than their less gifted peers. She also found that Presidential Scholars married very late compared to the national average, and were virtually childless. Problems in relationships among the gifted may be related to several issues.

### *Peer Relationships.*

Webb et al. (1982) reviewed the major problems gifted and talented students have in peer relationships. Many difficulties gifted students have in peer relationships relate to their uneven development. Often, gifted young people's intellectual development outstrips that of their same-age peers to the point where they become "group deviants": they are simply too different intellectually to be accepted by their age-mates. Webb et al. suggested that gifted children need several different peer groups that fit their different physical, intellectual, and social levels of development. They also pointed out that what adults consider to be satisfactory peer relationships may be very different from what the gifted child considers to be satisfactory. Pressuring gifted children to "fit in" makes them feel as if they must hide their gifts and their true selves. Too often, adults assume that a gifted child lacks social skills when the actual case is that the child has social skills, but chooses not to use them.

*Intimate Relationships.* Some difficulties in intimate relationships for the gifted are simply the result of demographics. Availability of appropriate partners becomes more problematic the greater the intelligence level or the rarer the talent. In American society, men tend to marry their intellectual equals or their intellectual inferiors. As a result, there may be fewer gifted men available for gifted women. Another perspective is that if shared interests and values are an important basis of marriage, gifted men and women may have to search longer for partners who share their unusual or unique interests and possibly more intellectually oriented values.

Problems in intimate relationships for gifted people also have their roots in childhood socialization and expectations. Gifted girls, in particular, receive mixed messages about relationships. Until adolescence, they are generally rewarded primarily for achievement behaviors. As adolescence approaches, however, girls are rewarded more for their success in relationships and less for success in the classroom (Kerr, 1985). Therefore, many gifted young women become conflicted, unsure as to whether relationship goals or academic goals should be primary. Gifted young men also seem to respond to their socialization with unrealistic expectations; despite the overwhelming number of women entering and staying in the job market, a majority of gifted young men don't want their future wives to work (Fox, 1976)! Male-female stereotypes, which are harmful to people in general, may be very harmful to gifted young men and women, whose dreams for themselves and whose needs in relationships don't conform to social norms for men and women.

Finally, gifted people experience problems in relationships when they generalize achievement-oriented behavior to relationships. That is, when a gifted individual evaluates and selects partners in terms of which one will seem to others to be the greatest achievement, problems result. Individuals who generalize achievement-oriented behaviors need help in learnancy to separate accomplishment from intimacy.

Webb et al. (1982) and Kerr (1985) provided a number of suggestions for strategies for guiding gifted young people in the area of relationships. At the Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development, the Role-Stripping exercise was modified to help gifted students examine the roles and

relationships that hold the greatest significance for them. By setting priorities to their roles, and processing the results, gifted students are able to explore the meaning of their relationships and to receive counseling with regard to conflicts. Instructions for Role Stripping are included in the Resources section at the end of the book.

## Summary

This chapter dealt with the major adjustment concerns of gifted and talented students. It must be remembered, however, that gifted individuals encounter all the psychological disorders experienced by the general population. Whether the incidence of psychological adjustment problems is higher or lower among the gifted than among the general population is still a subject of much debate. Nevertheless, common problems such as depression and anxiety among gifted clients should never be considered

separately from giftedness. It is often said that a child is a child first, and then gifted; but this misses the mark in that intellectual giftedness and its attendant isolation and stresses are so often part of the problem.

Delisle (1986) showed the dangers of ignoring the stresses of giftedness in his essay on suicide and the gifted. Therefore, the counselor who wishes to help the gifted must first make a sincere effort to understand the special characteristics of that population. He or she must be willing to try creative strategies for intervening in the concerns of gifted young people. An understanding of the needs of the gifted and talented throughout the life span, together with a readiness to synthesize new approaches, makes it possible to help bright young people fulfill their promise.

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