



Living with Intensity

Susan Daniels , Michael M. Piechowski (Editor) , Ellen D. Fiedler (Contributor) , Linda Kreger Silverman (Contributor) , Stephanie S. Tolan (Contributor) , Patricia Gatto-Walden (Contributor) , Annemarie Roeper (Contributor) , Elizabeth A. Meckstroth (Contributor) , more... Michele Kane (Contributor) , R. Frank Falk (Contributor) , Edward R. Amend (Contributor) , Sal Mendaglio (Foreword) , P. Susan Jackson (Contributor) ...less

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Gifted children and adults are often misunderstood. Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their imagination as not paying attention, their passion as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional. This resource describes these overexcitabilities and strategies for dealing with children and adults who are experiencing them, and provides essential information about Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration. Learn practical methods for nurturing sensitivity, intensity, perfectionism, and much more.

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From Reader Review Living with Intensity for online ebook

Emily Evans says

Excellent if sometimes emotionally difficult book on the psychological needs and experiences of the gifted with a focus on Kazimierz Dabrowski's theories of overexcitabilities and positive disintegration. While it's primarily written about gifted children, there are a few articles on adults as well. It should be required reading for parents of gifted children, and I'd highly recommend it for gifted adults as well.

Susan says

As a mom with three kids in the "gifted" program at school (quotes because I use the term loosely; I'm under no illusion that I'm raising the world's next Einsteins), I'm always on the lookout for books exploring various traits exhibited by such kids.

"Living With Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and the Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults" was great! It's really a compilation of articles by various authors, and especially highlights works inspired by the late psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, who I regret is no longer with us. He posited that gifted individuals have various "overexcitabilities" to a much greater degree than the general population. The overexcitabilities he noted were psychomotor (a surplus of energy), sensual (enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasures), intellectual (intensified activity of the mind), imaginative (free play of the imagination), and emotional (intensified feelings and emotions).

As I read through the book, it felt like I was reading a family history, because each member of our family has "overexcitabilities" in at least one of these areas. And while intensity/passion/whatever you want to call it can be a true gift, it's also exhausting to live with on a daily basis.

One thing I liked about Dabrowski's writings is that he viewed these "overexcitabilities" as positive features, not as pathological or negative features - as many teachers, sadly, do.

"Parenting a gifted child is like living in a theme park full of thrill rides. Sometimes you smile. Sometimes you gasp. Sometimes you scream. Sometimes you laugh. Sometimes you gaze in wonder and astonishment. Sometimes you're frozen in your seat. Sometimes you're proud. And sometimes, the ride is so nerve-wracking, you can't do anything but cry."

In this book, you'll learn more about the noted overexcitabilities and how they express themselves in gifted children, as well as in adults. You'll also learn parenting and teaching tips to use with the more-intense child. There are even sections on overexcitabilities throughout life and how individuals with these traits may change throughout the years.

The book is packed with great quotes: "Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their passion as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional. They stand out from the norm. But then again, what is normal?"

Although scholarly in tone, the book is still fairly easy to read. Recommended for all those who are - or who know - someone experiencing life "in a higher key."

Shelley says

This is a mixed bag: some good essays, some meh, some painful. Useful if you need an overview of Dabrowski and wanted more than Wikipedia had to offer. It reinforced what I knew about myself as a child (and see in my own child), and that's either very nice or an example of cognitive bias.

(I don't know how much credence I give to personality theories in general, and as far as this goes, the research is incestuous. I'd like to see how well this weathers extensive academic scrutiny.)

Shannon says

I appreciated the parts of the book about overexcitabilities, but I was expecting more practical information about how to live with OE or how to live with a child with OE. All the material about Dabrowski's theory of the levels of development assumes a belief in a humanistic transcendental experience of self-actualization as the ultimate goal of human experience.

"Level V is the perfection of the personality. It is life without inner conflict. It is a life directed by the highest guiding principles. At this amazing level of human development, the individual becomes a wise teacher, guide, and exemplar for others. Here, one achieves autonomy from the lower layer of reality fraught with confusion and violence. Life is lived in service to all of humanity, not in service of the ego. The motto for this highest level could be, 'All is love.' This is the transcendent potential for humanity--the greatest gift of Dabrowski's theory."

"Each has developed a means to 'enter the light' and reach up to Spirit, Divine Order, or God in times of joy and gratitude, as well as during times of need. They are moving toward embracing themselves, others, and "All That Is" and uniting with an order greater than their intellectual and emotional grasp. Spiritually, as well as in everyday mundane life, the 'I' begets the 'We,' which begets the 'All'--the cycle is a continuous flow--'I,' 'We,' 'All' are One. These individuals are each committed to knowing and living this truth."

Shannon says

Amazing. This explained my life. It explained my students. It explained my friends. I was particularly interested in the section discussing the misdiagnosis of many gifted kids as ADHD because of their overexcitabilities. The information and research about gifted adults was particularly refreshing, as I haven't read ANYTHING else like this.

I'd recommend reading this book after reading *The Drama of the Gifted Child*.

Sophia says

This book really helped me understand other people. Weird huh? As a gifted adolescent you'd think that in the constant search for myself this would help illuminate all of my quirks and problems, in addition, perhaps, to solutions. Not quiet. Growing up i knew that i was "different" and i attributed this to many things. I knew that i was empathetic, intelligent, creative et al... albeit i never tied these things together or looked at them holistically. All of these things were just personality traits that had nothing to do with anything. The problem was i've never paid much attention to norms. While i've never put myself at the center of things assuming that im normal and everyone else is not... neither have i understood how most people think or live. Growing up read biographies of people like Einstein and Jung and associated with unusual people if any. Its like a person born into a rich family, living in a mansion visits my one bedroom apartment where we have no wifi and no food in the pantry- i dont really consider myself poor until bills start coming in. Anyway, my point is people who have been rich their entire lives cant possibly understand what its like to not have money much in the way that i cant possibly understand what its like to live your life in a negative stage of consciousness not even attempting to improve your spiritual or moral or personal growth. Its like when i was taking psychology and the teacher was lecturing about Kholberg's moral development and told us that not a single person in this room was in the later stages because it just wasn't possible. And of course i gave her this "you have to be kidding" look because one: i didnt believe her and found her presumptuousness annoying and two: the thought astounds me and is difficult to accept... i cant even imagine defending a law for no other reason than the government said so anymore than i can understand the mentality of a serial killer. Not to say that i don't try... its just not something that i had thought much about until now. Not in an egocentric way but in an innocent and well-meaning way.

I do have that constant need to be doing things, i hate sleeping, i have so much energy and want to accomplish so much... now taht i realize not everyone can do that i'm going to take their needs into consideration more instead of assuming taht everyone can keep up with my Haruhi like pace... Im not going to stop doing things or take more breaks, but maybe spend more quality time doing useful things while other people rest. Like when other people go to sleep and i stay up to read books then wake up early to cook everyone breakfast... or maybe meditating because i've been neglecting that. See this is a healthy learning experience. Also i saw a book last night i wanted to read so much. Cant wait to buy it!

Natalie says

This book is awesome. So far it's like reading a book written about my daughter :-)

I've read enough of it to know that I want to own it. I imagine I'll reference it off an on forever.

4/2010

I did buy this and I just re-read the part on young kids again to recharge me :-) Intensity takes a lot of energy and I've been burning out trying to deal with her. She deserves better than that :-(

Laura says

This is a hard book to review because I have mixed feelings about it. The most salient point is that this is

not a practical book. I bought it under the impression that it would have strategies for day-to-day life, but it's a very theoretical book, containing essays about Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and how it can be used to understand the behaviour of gifted people throughout the lifecycle. As the chapters are contributed by different authors, they have very different tones, styles, and quality.

Some of the chapters are both interesting and well-written. I particularly liked chapter 9, about perfectionism. Unfortunately, other chapters take interesting ideas and bury them in turgid, magniloquent prose:

"If there is inadequate responsiveness or lack of proximity with a sufficiently reciprocal and synergistic environment, this profound transmutation between the inner and outer world can feel hopeless and devastating. However, a therapeutic encounter with an understanding clinician of sufficient capacity can help enliven and heal an individual and can help a client to discover his or her own resources to create connectivity with the external world."

Translation: feeling out of place usually makes you feel bad. Therapy can help.

Others chapters drip with self-importance:

"[Gifted teens] experience an overwhelming need to affiliate -- to find a place with others in a vital, life giving, and meaningful human context. Arising, too, is a not-to-be-ignored yearning to find meaning in existence -- both for ultimate knowledge and for engagement in a wider and deeper sphere of contact, influence, and experience...This intense, often turbulent period of life is characterized by vital thrusts of discovery, newness, feelings of urgency, and questioning."

Finally, chapter 12 is new-age woo that has no place in any kind of academic work. The author seriously argues that some people are "spiritually gifted" and have the ability to connect with the Divine (capitalization hers). An excerpt:

"One four-year-old girl saw angels at bedtime on a regular basis. Her parents feared that she was hallucinating and that something was seriously wrong with her...I was able to assure her parents that her experiences were real."

Another client who was distressed by a tree being cut down could supposedly "receive the intrinsic essence of the tree and its distressed vibration in reaction to being cut down." This was because the client "communicated with nature spirits". I cannot overemphasize that this is an exact quote. I don't care what the author personally believes, but the other essays in the book are academic in nature and cite peer-reviewed literature. This one and its "nature spirits" are sorely out of place.

One hallmark of a good book, for me, is how much time I spend thinking about it as I read and after I finish. This book was very thought-provoking and the concept of positive disintegration gave me a new way of approaching difficult situations. I'm glad I read it; however, the chapters are very hit-or-miss, so I'll give it three stars overall.

Allison Corbett says

Wonderful book for anyone who has ever felt or been told that they were "too much" or perceived that

perhaps they just felt more than other people. As I read the beginning of this book I found myself crying because of how much it helped me understand myself. It offers a comprehensive view of "giftedness," what they term "Intensity," including 5 areas of OE or overexcitability. These authors view the emotional conflicts, intensity, and differentness of OE, intense, gifted individuals as potential for higher emotional development. Using Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration as a model, they explain the ways that what might sometimes be pathologized by untrained teachers, clinicians, and parents, can really be steps towards emotional development. That when we "disintegrate", we are then able to, potentially, re-integrate ourselves with a better understanding of ourselves and our world.

The book chronicles the common ways that OE manifests itself in children, how best to deal with OE children in a clinical setting, how parents can deal with an OE child, about OE parents, OE teenagers, and the ways that OE persists throughout a lifetime. Very specific topic, but an engaging book and fairly easy to read.

Danielle says

This book's greatest value to me was in helping me to understand my husband and my relationship with him. He is gifted, and that makes him both interesting and wonderful but also difficult to live with at times. It helps to understand that his differences are not unique to him, though they are uncommon. He is the kind of person who can talk passionately and at length on almost any subject. It's great, until I am exhausted. And he has certain sensitivities that I never realized were connected to his giftedness.

Another gift from this book was recognizing that both of my children are gifted, not just my younger one as I had previously thought. I didn't learn any new strategies for living with them, but I did get more insight into their world and I think that I am on the right track with them. I also got an idea of what the future may bring, and what I need to look for in educational opportunities for them.

Antoinette Perez says

This title was recommended by Amazon, and I must have seen the high average rating and clicked Buy. They could benefit from including the subtitle on the cover, or changing the cover to somehow acknowledge that this is a collection of pieces from academics and mental health practitioners. The book is not what I expected, which is to say that it was helpful in an entirely different way than I anticipated. I was hoping for "techniques for better parenting of an intense child," but what I got was a collection of essays or mini-academic papers on emotional intensity as related to a specific theory of personal disintegration I had never before heard of.

One of the best things to come from reading this is the idea that the emotional ups and downs my child is going through can be seen through a positive lens -- a necessary step for self-actualization (which many of us struggle through in our 30's and 40's, not when we are 8). The real challenge is in guiding this growth when the grower has a limited range of emotional experiences, having lived on earth for less than a decade. That was a good paradigm shift for me. I also got to reconsider the entire family dynamic in this new context. Still working that out in my head.

The how-to's are oversimplified in my opinion, and don't really address the challenge of how to advocate for

your child within a dominant educational system that doesn't have your child's best interests at heart. In that sense, the book hasn't provided practical information for the challenge at hand, and I'm back to square one: it's my problem to figure out.

The writing style is often dry, with some chapters reading like they came straight from an academic journal. If you don't buy into that theory of positive disintegration at all, this book may not be helpful at all. But I guess I was ready for a bit of a brain twist.

Elizabeth Andrew says

Revolutionary, at least in my little world. This book is essential for understanding giftedness, perfectionism, intensity, and human development. I most appreciate how Dobrowski's theory parses apart varieties of "overexcitabilities" (a clumsy, unhelpful term), to help me understand and be more compassionate toward intense people (myself included). I'm buying this one so I'll have it on hand to read again in a few years.

Laura says

There were some really good insights in this book and they were laid out in an understandable and logical way. The concept of OE was extremely helpful in seeing my child in a clearer light and understanding some of the challenges gifted children face. However, it was about 100 pages too long. All the garbage on research methodology and personal stories about people in the field of "giftedness" we're more than I ever wanted to know and not important to learning the material.

sologdin says

Popular psychology approach to education & parenting, employing Dabrowskian theory. Includes sections regarding adults, but the center of gravity is juveniles.

I'm finding Dabrowski's concepts very useful: overexcitability, multilevel development, asynchrony, personality disintegration, positive maladjustment, and so on.

Basis is that there are five levels of personality development, not related to age. Level I, primary integration, is animalistic, marked by concern for money & power. That describes the world, incidentally. Levels II-III involve inner conflict, a distinction between what is and what should be, vis-a-vis the internal and the external. Level V is hypothetical, and it is suggested that Christ might've achieved it; it dovetails with Maslow's self-actualization theory to some extent.

All that is great, but the whole thing fits well within a hegelian-marxist dialectics, wherein the internal conflict pushes to the point of crisis, at which time one might achieve "secondary integration," ultimately leading to "service to all humanity." It's slick.

Some facile presentation here, nonetheless, with the insistence on authenticity and a given internal real self seeking expression, as against impositions of the world. I'd suggest that the internal generally is inscribed by the external (what is this--innate ideas?), but with that amendment, am liking.

Volume refers to much academic research and clinical study, so it fulfills its promise as a popularizing volume. Essays are all high quality, some more rigorous than others.

Dabrowski himself has the distinction of surviving imprisonment in both the third reich and the Soviet Union.

Catherine Gillespie says

Living With Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and the Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults takes a much more academic approach, which was fine with me but might be dry if you aren't really fascinated with the topic. I found that there were several chapters I only skimmed, while others I took time to read slowly and carefully, because some dealt with things I'm not dealing with currently, or were better laid out in other books (like the Misdiagnosis book reviewed above).

I thought the particular strengths of this volume were the chapters on specific strategies for different excitabilities (if you've read much of the literature of giftedness you've probably run into this idea of different types of intensity/excitability) and the sections on being a gifted adult. I took LOTS of notes on the practical strategies, because my kids do have different excitability types and frankly, I should probably use some of these ideas on myself!

The chapters in Living With Intensity on adult giftedness really helped me. This book goes into several studies on how gifted adults progress through life stages, and it helped me to look at my stage in life and realize that I am not alone in some of my feelings and fears. It also helped me to think through strategies of dealing with things as part of a bigger picture—this is the very thing I try to help my kids with, but I don't always do it for myself.

Living With Intensity might be a good book to check out of the library so you can read sections of particular interest to you, but if you don't have time to read widely on these topics you really can skim lots of it.

{Read more from my round up of books about dealing with intensity and giftedness on [A Spirited Mind](#)}
