

Provisional Clinical Guidelines for Therapists Working With Gifted Clients

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Therapists recognize that intelligence is a valid dimension of individual difference and that high intelligence occurs in individuals from all social, racial, ethnic, and economic groups.

Therapists understand that high intelligence may have diverse and pervasive effects, not solely on cognition and academic achievement, but on every aspect of the lived experience of gifted individuals.

As with other dimensions of human difference and cultural experience, therapists do not require a claim of high intelligence to be proven before it can be considered as a valid part of the therapeutic dialogue.

Therapists strive to become culturally competent with the gifted population. They educate themselves about the cognitive, conative, affective, behavioral, social, familial, relational, academic, and occupational experiences commonly found in this population. They learn about how gender, ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, as well as concomitant learning disability or psychological disorder, can create additional risk for these individuals. They also educate themselves about the persistent mythology surrounding the educational and psychological needs of these individuals. They become aware of high intelligence as a source both of risk and of resilience.

Therapists understand that the various manifestations of high intelligence are not necessarily indicative of psychopathology. They also understand how high intelligence can serve to mask psychopathology.

Therapists learn about how social stigmatization can create psychological risks for this population. They also understand that the espousal of giftedness as part of an individual's social identity is not necessarily indicative of psychopathology, and may in fact reflect a positive step in social identity development. One role of therapy can be to support the continued process of development of the individual's identity as a gifted person.

Rather than assuming that these are "easy clients" with whom any therapist could be successful, therapists recognize that gifted clients bring a unique constellation of needs and challenges to the therapeutic relationship. They seek consultation or make referrals when appropriate.

Therapists maintain self-awareness regarding their personal attitudes about intelligence and gifted individuals, and consider how their feelings about their own and others' intelligence may affect their work with these clients. Therapists understand that countertransferential responses such as intimidation, admiration, competition, envy, or resentment, all pose potential risks to the relationship.

Therapists are encouraged to consider whether their own personal capacities are sufficient to provide accurate and mirroring empathy to a highly intelligent client, as well as to keep up with a potentially rapid, intense, and complex course of therapy.

Therapists recognize that gifted clients typically present with the same broad range of psychological diagnoses found in the general population. Clients may not identify their intelligence explicitly as related to their problems, either because they are concerned about the reaction of the therapist, or because they have not yet explored the connection themselves. However, therapists understand that giftedness is likely to be intertwined with the problems the clients struggle with, and provide an open forum within therapy for supportive dialogue around this issue.

Therapists recognize that the normative progression of the development of the self may have been affected by the often poor fit between gifted individuals and their ecological systems. They understand the potentially important role a therapist can serve in repairing these traumatic experiences, as well as the risk that a therapist could cause further harm through failures of empathy.

In their therapeutic work with gifted clients, therapists are encouraged to manifest an attitude of openness to learning. Being willing to work hard at understanding can both facilitate the therapeutic dialogue and serve as an important demonstration of cultural sensitivity.

In conducting therapy with gifted clients, even with children and adolescents, therapists avoid taking a "one-up," authoritarian, expert, or controlling stance. Rather, they remain aware of the possibility that the client will prefer a collaborative and egalitarian relationship, in which both partners can be valuable sources of information and ideas, in which each can question the others, and in which the client's self-determination can be supported.

Therapists understand the gifted clients may not only challenge themselves in therapy, but may also wish to be challenged still further. However, they also understand the risks that perfectionism may bring to the relationship.

In considering therapeutic techniques and interventions, therapists take into account the fact that gifted clients may manifest different levels of development from what is typical for their ages, as well as that a client who is highly advanced in one domain may be age-typical or even immature in another.

Therapists pay careful and empathic attention to the balance between intellect and affect in therapy with gifted clients, recognizing both overintellectualization and emotional flooding as potential risks. They help clients learn to value and use all aspects of the self.

Therapists recognize that high levels of cognitive development may lead gifted clients to become frustrated with what they perceive as simplistic techniques or easy answers; they pay attention to whether a client may prefer more complexity and nuance. Postconventional and philosophical reasoning, as well as empathic and imaginational strengths, may be particularly valuable topics and resources for therapeutic exploration.

Therapists consider whether psychoeducational reading, bibliotherapy, therapeutic writing, or other uses of written language may be useful adjuncts to therapy with highly intelligent clients.

Therapists develop familiarity with community resources which are available to provide educational, occupational, psychological, and social support for highly intelligent individuals at all stages of the lifespan.

Having themselves become knowledgeable about the complexities of working in therapy with gifted clients, therapists support the education of their professional colleagues on this topic through training, supervision, consultation, and continuing education.