The Depressed Underachiever

Although an episode of existential depression may be precipitated in anyone by a major loss or the threat of a loss which highlights the transient nature of life, persons of higher intellectual ability are more prone to experience existential depression. Because gifted children are able to consider the possibilities of how things might be, they tend to be idealists. However, they are simultaneously able to see that the world is falling short of how it might be. Because they are intense, gifted children feel keenly the disappointment and frustration which occurs when ideals are not reached. *Existential Depression in Gifted Individuals* by James T. Webb, Ph.D.

General Characteristics

- feel keenly the disappointment and frustration which occurs when ideals are not reached
- spot the inconsistencies, arbitrariness and absurdities in society and in the behaviors of those around them
- Question or challenge traditions
- feel isolated from their peers and perhaps from their families
- become particularly frustrated with the existential limitations of space and time

General Recommendations

- The isolation is helped to a degree by simply communicating to the youngster that someone else understands the issues that he/she is grappling with.
- A particular way of breaking through the sense of isolation is through touch. A hug, a touch on the arm, playful jostling, or even a "high five" can be very important to such a youngster, because it establishes at least some physical connection.
- Gifted children who feel overwhelmed by the myriad choices of an unstructured world can find a great deal of comfort in studying and exploring alternate ways in which other people have structured their lives. Through reading about people who have chosen specific paths to greatness and fulfillment, these youngsters can begin to use bibliotherapy as a method of understanding that choices are merely forks in the road of life, each of which can lead them to their own sense of fulfillment and accomplishment (Halsted, 1994).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATION (Self-Efficacy)</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>SEVERITY OF PROBLEM</th>
<th>INTERVENTIONS</th>
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</table>
| Perception of Ability (Self-Efficacy) | • Low grades  
• Low self-esteem  
• Effort doesn’t equal achievement | Denial | • Build a relationship.  
• Point out incongruities in thoughts and actions  
• Request social work or psych eval  
• Investigate opportunities for mentoring  
• Look at opportunities in independent study or leadership |
| Contemplation | • Remind them of past successes.  
• Support feelings.  
• Offer hope.  
• Use journaling and other self-reflection activities | |
| Acknowledgement | • How can we help you?  
• Offer information on resources.  
• Teach positive self-talk.  
• Modeling  
• Family Genograms  
• Research through peer interviews | |
| Acceptance | • List things they can and want to do.  
• Do self-awareness inventories.  
• Bibliotherapy | |
| Maintenance  | • Celebrate even small successes.  
|             | • Continue positive self-talk  
|             | • Reframing  
|             | • Adaptation  
<p>|             | • Cognitive Restructuring |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental Support (Expectation to Succeed)</th>
<th>• Little to no family support</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>• Challenge reality of their perceptions.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>• Give them specific points of hope.</td>
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</table>
|  |  | Acknowledgement | • Help them get involved with volunteer activity.  
|  |  |  | • Map out career path and how to get there (education, training, etc.). |
|  |  | Acceptance | • Continue to support the student’s success |
|  |  | Maintenance | • Be aware of their successes and help them celebrate. |
| Motivation/Interest (Meaningfulness) | • Thoughts of worthlessness | Denial | • Challenge reality of their perceptions. |
|  |  | Contemplation | • Give them specific points of hope. |
|  |  | Acknowledgement | • Help them get involved with volunteer activity.  
<p>|  |  |  | • Map out career path and how to get there (education, training, etc.). |
|  |  | Acceptance | • Continue to support the student’s success |
|  |  | Maintenance | • Be aware of their successes and help them celebrate. |</p>
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<th>Influence of Parents, Peers, Teachers</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| • Perceive that others don’t care, don’t help, etc. | • Point out those you know who do care.  
• What does it do for you to think that? | • Get them to recognize and gravitate to others.  
• Build a supportive, caring relationship with the student. | • Encourage relationship building through extracurricular activities, clubs, etc. | • Share the progress with parents so they can help. | • Validate the progress the student has made. |
| Realistic Expectations (Self Regulation) | Denial | Contemplation | Acknowledgement | Acceptance | Maintenance |
| • Thinks that grades, etc. can be raised in a small amount of time | • Question possibility of success | • Share the experiences of others in the same situation and the outcome.  
• Help the student set small, obtainable goals.  
• Break it up into small achievements. | • Help student set realistic goals | • Monitor progress toward goal | • Support the student’s expectations for success |