

Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Gifted Adults

A Guide to Personality, Diagnostics, and the Therapeutic Relationship

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Introduction

Summary

Giftedness is far more common in clients than they and their therapists realize, because it is often difficult to distinguish from personality traits. Screening for the fact that the client is (or may be) gifted provides a different, often surprising, view of his or her functioning (including past functioning).

Through psychoeducation about the ten general characteristics of giftedness, the therapist can create awareness of the client's personal balance of advantages and disadvantages.

This book provides practical tools for understanding and improving self-image, hypersensitivity, and interactional problems.

Differential diagnoses, such as narcissistic personality disorder, are also provided.

Further diagnostics of symptoms and personality give the client a broader view of their own person (case conceptualization).

Rather than eliciting neutral or accepting reactions, gifted people often evoke resistance and/or admiration. Mental-health therapists also struggle with feelings of ambivalence toward their gifted clients. They are interesting, creative, and critical clients, but they also often cause the therapist to feel insecure, irritated, discouraged, or strongly involved.

The therapist should be aware of this through self-analysis and through a functional analysis of the therapeutic relationship.

Introduction

'Don't raise your head above the ground' is an old Dutch saying. Being excellent is considered a positive quality, but the word *excellent* comes from the Latin word *egregarius*, which means 'to stand out from the herd', which, from an evolutionary point of view is surely a dangerous aberration.

Giftedness is far more common in clients than they and their therapists realize, partly because it is often difficult to distinguish from personality traits and is therefore often overlooked due to a lack of knowledge. Rather than eliciting neutral or accepting responses, gifted people often evoke resistance and/or admiration. Mental-health therapists also struggle with feelings of ambivalence towards their gifted clients. They are interesting, creative, and critical clients, but they also often cause the therapist to feel uncertain or irritated or, on the other hand, strong feelings of involvement.

Is giftedness not just an elitist problem? Is it a narcissistic explanation of social failure and as such a desirable diagnosis? Giftedness is not even included in the DSM-5. What is clinically and scientifically known about adult giftedness? It is certainly a subject that is rarely taught in university.

In diagnostics and cognitive behavior therapy, giftedness in adults is not considered to be a mental disorder, but rather a distinct form of information processing which is unique, fast, and complex. It is, however, much more than just a high IQ and includes a cluster of interrelated personality traits.

The interplay between personality traits and giftedness in adults is both complex and interesting. Personality traits influence giftedness and giftedness influences the development of the personality. For both therapist and client the combination of giftedness and personality makes both diagnostics and cognitive behavior therapy especially complicated. There is a lot of progress to be made here!

The gifted person is more likely than others to end up in an isolated position, which more often than not negatively affects how they view themselves and others. There is also a greater chance of abnormal or unbalanced development, interaction problems, and creative stagnation. In addition, the personality trait of high sensitivity is present in over 80% of cases of giftedness, as well as an intense inner world of experience and overexcitability. In mental health care, the gifted client often presents with complaints of anxiety, trauma, depression, burnout, ADHD, ASS, etc. This leads to an above average number of requests for assessment and cognitive behavior therapy within the mental-health system. Clients are then treated after being diagnosed also with a specific symptom disorder or personality disorder.

How to use cognitive behavior therapy with gifted adults

Screening for the fact that the client is (or may be) gifted provides a different, often surprising, view of his functioning (including past functioning) and leads often to greater self-acceptance and well-being.

Psychoeducation about the general characteristics of giftedness and awareness of the client's personal advantages and disadvantages gives the client more insight and hope for therapeutic change.

Further diagnostics of symptoms and personality give the client a broader overview of the totality of his own case (case conceptualization) and possible and desired entry points for therapy.

The central role that personality traits play in the individual coloring of giftedness makes cognitive behavior therapy particularly appropriate for changing core cognitions, such as view of self, view of others, and core behaviors (learned in the gifted person's individual learning history).

This practical guide integrates dimensional personality assessment with the functional analysis and cognitive behavior therapy for giftedness combined with specific personality traits. The case conceptualization provides the link between diagnosis and cognitive behavior therapy. Systematic steps are presented for the practical screening for giftedness and the diagnosis of specific personality traits. The book also offers practical tools for understanding and improving complaints such as view of self, high sensitivity, creative stagnation, and interactional problems. It also explains how to create a case conceptualization, a functional analysis, and a treatment plan as well as how to adapt goals and techniques. Attention is given to analyzing and managing the pitfalls and dysfunctions in the therapeutic relationship. Differential diagnosis is also discussed in detail: when are narcissism, perfectionism, avoidance of emotion, autonomy, etc. healthy and when are they pathological? Practical case studies provide illustrations throughout the book.

The structure of the book is as follows.

Chapter 1 begins with a broad and multidimensional definition of personality traits in giftedness. This provides the basis for screening and a clear conceptualization of giftedness.

Chapter 2 presents a practical definition that enables clear screening of giftedness. The misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis of symptom-based disorders and personality traits or disorders are discussed. The theories of Millon, Beck, Young, and Cloninger, interaction-based diagnosis, the alternative DSM-5 dimensional personality model, and the five-factor model are reviewed and applied to giftedness combined with personality. When is narcissism or perfectionism or autonomy in giftedness pathological and when is it healthy? This can be determined using the Mental Health Index. A separate section is also devoted to the usually co-occurring personality trait of high sensitivity or overexcitability.

Chapter 3 explores the therapeutic process and presents a guide to creating a case conceptualization for giftedness which provides the core behavior of giftedness with its own place along with the core behavior of the specific personality. It also discusses a functional analysis of core behaviors, core cognitions, and core emotions for giftedness.

Chapter 4 addresses the implementation and evaluation of the treatment of giftedness through cognitive behavioral techniques. This cognitive behavior therapy is based on a concrete treatment plan which includes goals and appropriate cognitive behavioral techniques. The treatment plan is derived from the case conceptualization and includes the functional analyses of symptom behaviors and core behaviors of giftedness and of specific personality traits.

Chapter 5 deals with the functional analysis of the therapeutic relationship and the therapist's self-analysis of his or her own cognitions, feelings, and pitfalls, having first made an interactional diagnosis of both the general core behavior of giftedness and specific personality traits. Specific interactions and interactional dysfunctions per group of personality traits are manifested in the therapeutic relationship. The therapist can analyze and correct his or her own inappropriate responses and particular behaviors that influence the client's symptom-related behaviors, dual core behaviors of giftedness (general and specific), and practice behaviors (their typical approach to practicing new behaviors). The interaction of these factors is represented in a pentagon.

This book would not be complete without a survey of the diagnosis, the treatment, and the therapeutic relationship of narcissistic personality traits or personality disorder in Chapter 6.

Giftedness and narcissistic traits overlap in their view of self as being superior and unique. Therefore, the risk of a misdiagnosis is considerable. Too many gifted clients are misdiagnosed as having narcissistic personality disorders. The counter-transference makes this problem even more complex. The therapist reacts in an insecure or irritated manner when the narcissistic client seems to devalue him. Moreover, there is the problem of distinguishing between pathological and healthy narcissism.

Much attention is also given to the disturbances and pitfalls in the therapeutic relationship and how to concretely self-analyze and deal with them.

NOTE: The names of the clients in the cases are fictitious. Specific names that seem to be identities of actual persons are purely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Common personality traits in giftedness

Summary

Chapter 1 begins by presenting the general and multidimensional definitions of personality traits in giftedness. This is the foundation for the screening and for a clear conceptualization of giftedness. We then explore the prevalence of giftedness and high sensitivity in the general population. Of those who are gifted, the vast majority (87%) are also highly sensitive (Van Hoof, 2016). It is estimated that between 10% and 12% of the clients undergoing assessment or treatment in the mental-health system in the Netherlands are gifted, almost three times as many as in the general population (4%).

Chapter 2

Diagnostics for giftedness in relation to personality and symptoms

Summary

The aim of Chapter 2 is to provide practical guidance in screening in order to improve diagnosis and in particular to provide clarification in dual diagnosis of giftedness in relation to the individual's symptoms and personality. To this end, several theories are used, including those of Millon, Beck, Young, and Cloninger, as well as interaction-focused diagnostics.

A separate section focuses on the personality trait of high sensitivity, which commonly co-occurs with giftedness. The new dimensional model of personality disorders for pathological traits in the DSM-5 and the Five-Factor Model for general, 'normal' traits are both discussed in detail.

The Mental Health Index (i.e., limitations in personality functioning – APA, 2013) is also discussed as a tool to determine the functionality of the personality in four domains: identity, self-direction, empathy, and intimacy.

Chapter 3

Case conceptualization and functional analysis of dual core behavior in giftedness and personality

Summary

This chapter examines both the process of cognitive behavioral therapy and the practice of developing a *case conceptualization* of giftedness in seven stages. The case conceptualization provides the link between the diagnosis of symptoms, giftedness, and personality on the one hand and therapy on the other. This provides an overview as well as focuses on how the general core behavior of giftedness relates to the core behavior of specific personality traits. In addition, the *functional analysis* of both of these (general and specific) core behaviors in giftedness is used as a prelude to the treatment plan.

Chapter 4

Cognitive behavioral therapy for giftedness and personality

Treatment plan, techniques, and process

Summary

Chapter 4 addresses the implementation and evaluation of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for giftedness. We examine the process of problem selection for clients with giftedness and also with specific personality traits. The therapy is based on a concrete treatment plan that includes specific goals as well as techniques adapted for giftedness. The treatment plan builds on the case conceptualization, which includes functional analyses of the symptom behaviors and core behaviors of giftedness and specific personality traits. Many well-known psychotherapeutic techniques can be adapted to giftedness and high sensitivity.

Chapter 5

The therapeutic relationship in giftedness combined with specific personality traits

Self-analysis and functional analysis

Summary

Chapter 5 starts by examining the interaction diagnosis of both the general core behaviors of giftedness and specific personality traits before looking at the functional analysis of the complex therapeutic relationship and the therapist's self-analysis of his or her own cognitions, feelings, and behaviors. In the therapeutic relationship, certain interactions and interaction disorders are manifested specific to the group of personality traits. The therapist can analyze and correct his or her own inappropriate responses, cognitions, and behavior, thereby influencing the client's symptom behavior, dual core behavior, and practice behavior.

Chapter 6

The narcissistic personality disorder

Summary

This book would not be complete without a survey of the diagnosis, treatment, and therapeutic relationship of narcissistic personality traits or personality disorder.

Giftedness and narcissistic traits overlap in their view of self as being superior and unique. Therefore, the risk of a misdiagnosis is considerable. Too many gifted clients are misdiagnosed as having narcissistic personality disorders. The counter-transference makes this problem even more complex. The therapist reacts in an insecure or irritated manner when the narcissistic client is going to devalue him or her. Moreover there is the problem of distinguishing between pathological and healthy narcissism, especially with giftedness.

Much attention is also given to the disturbances and pitfalls in the therapeutic relationship and how to concretely self-analyze and deal with them. Concrete examples of case histories, test results, and self-analyses are presented, as well as figures from the functional analysis, treatment plan, and functional analysis of the therapeutic relationship. Clear frameworks summarize the clinical and scientific knowledge about narcissistic personality disorder.

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