





the EXCITABLE ones

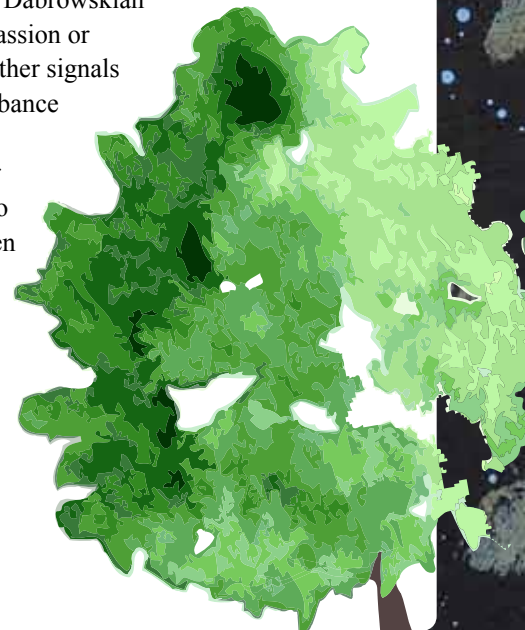
PERSONAL GROWTH CAN BE FOUND IN THE DISCOMFORT OF INTENSITY
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Intensity is a quality that is easier to recognize than to define. We know it when we experience or see it, such as with Marshall, 42, who is obsessed with ideas, words and routines. “Sporadic thoughts will pop into my head and I’ll have to go write something down,” he said. While always good at English, he repeated ninth grade before dropping out of high school, but that didn’t stop him from learning or creating at an extraordinary level. He describes himself as a “sponge.” A shy child who was frequently bullied, he has battled addiction and admits to coming out on the other side of recovery a changed man. His storytelling shows a relentless pursuit of authenticity as well as artistic growth and experimentation – vacillating between profound insight and childish humor – regardless of whether others always approve or understand. He says he thinks about words all the time: “I actually drive myself insane with it.”

For the unusually intense, life is a wild ride that is rarely smooth or easy. Intensity is the antithesis of cool, the enemy of blasé. But that same intensity can also be a catalyst for a life of meaning and personal growth. Beyond IQ scores or traditional measures of academic success, intensity is a key to understanding the difference felt by many highly intelligent and creative people.

Much of the current discussion about intensity (used here synonymously with excitability) as an aspect of giftedness stems from the work of Polish psychologist, psychiatrist and writer Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980), whose works include, among others, *The Theory of Positive Disintegration* (PD) and *Personality-shaping Through Positive Disintegration* (PS). Dabrowski’s terms “excitability” and “hyperexcitability” refer to “a strong, uncommon sensitivity to external and internal stimuli” (PD, p. 81). Often neglected is the fact that excitability is only one relatively small part of his larger theory of personality development.

Intensity in the Dabrowskian sense is more than passion or strong interest but rather signals a mismatch or disturbance between one’s inner experience and outer world, which leads to inner conflict between who we are and who we want to be. It is this mismatch, this disturbance, that brings both pain and extreme sensitivity to all aspects of the inner



Excitability AT ITS ESSENCE IS DISCORDANCE, A PERMANENT STATE OF "NOT FITTING IN."

and outer environment. Intense people notice more keenly, whether they want to or not, and this noticing often triggers internal disintegration. We fall apart over and over again, only to come back together with more integrity and wisdom.

What does Dabrowski's idea of intensity look and feel like? Five different areas of "excessive excitability" (often referred to as overexcitabilities or OEs) indicate an unusual potential for personal growth: emotional, imaginal, mental, sensual and psychomotor.

EXCITABILITY OF EMOTIONS results in "states of agitation and depression, sympathy for or dislike of oneself and the world, dissatisfaction with oneself and the environment, strangeness in relation to oneself and the environment, and feelings of inferiority and superiority" (PS, p. 61).

EXCITABILITY OF THE IMAGINATION produces daydreaming and creative, impulsive and intense dreams, both at night and for the future.

MENTAL EXCITABILITY is "an exaggerated search for explanations and a tendency to intellectualize problems in everyday life" that can also eventually help to direct personal growth (PD, p. 98).

EXCITABILITY OF THE SENSES is experienced as strong and keen sensual (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile) and aesthetic reactions that nonetheless are unsatisfactory or incomplete, leaving us wanting more. Sensual excitability can lead to difficulties in environments that are overstimulating or intolerant of sensual responses.

Finally, those with what Dabrowski terms "PSYCHOMOTOR EXCITABILITY" (psychomotor: physical action related to mental activity) have a "sharpness, speed, and an immediacy of reaction and capacity for action ... a 'permanent' psychomotor readiness" (PS, p. 81). In children, especially, psychomotor excitability causes responses "far beyond what is appropriate to the stimuli of his environment," leading to inner and outer conflict (PS, p. 98).

NOT FITTING IN

So far, excitability may seem more of a burden than a blessing, and it can often feel that way for both excitable adults and parents of excitable children. Excitability at its essence is discordance, a permanent state of "not fitting in." Intensity cannot be cured. Excitable children in particular require much understanding and guidance on the part of parents and other adults if they are to achieve self-acceptance and self-worth. That is not to imply that intensity necessarily becomes easier with age.

Consider Dabrowski's example of the excitabilities of Augustine of Hippo (Saint Augustine, 354-430), all of which many modern readers will recognize in themselves:

St. Augustine possessed all forms of excitability: sensual, affectional [emotional], psychomotor, imaginal and mental. Sensual hyperexcitability is the ground for perpetual sensual hunger, continual and excessing satiation and dissatisfactions. Affectional hyperexcitability constitutes the ground for compassion, pity, anxiety about others and about one's own thread of life in connection with recollection and on analysis of the past. Psychomotor hyperexcitability, in conjunction with other forms, is the main cause of violent

Shape your PERSONALITY through self-education

Psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski believed that self-education is the primary method for tapping into our excitabilities to develop our personality. The following suggestions are adapted from his book *Personality-shaping Through Positive Disintegration*.

- ★ Pay attention to ways in which you feel "inferior to yourself," ways in which your inner and outer life do not live up to your own ideals.
- ★ Build time in your life for books, theater, museums, music, conversation and other forms of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation.
- ★ Create space in your life for "isolation in peaceful conditions," whether through formal meditation or a walk in nature.
- ★ Seek out mentors and advisors who are further on the same path of growth you want to follow.
- ★ Follow the lead of your own interests, regardless of how useful or important they seem or whether you have any talent for them. Dabrowski calls such inherent interests "gifts of nature" that are an integral part of our personal growth.

reactions, motor unrest, and the need for action....

His variety of feelings and interests made Augustine sensitive to everything human and to all the complications of life. Strong instinct, increased excitability, a variety of seemingly contradictory interests, all these cause his fluctuations in life, his tension and depressions, his disquietude and enthusiasm (PS, p. 223).

BURDEN OR BLESSING

The good news is that, in Dabrowski's view, excitability is a positive trait. Sensitivity to life's nuances and incongruities, combined with self-reflection, allows us to direct our own life, to shape our personalities, and to work for change, both personal and social. A full discussion of positive disintegration is beyond the scope of this article; what is crucial is that inner disintegration is necessary for this personal growth, with the goal of directing and shaping out our own lives, according to our own principles.

While we may yearn for a life entirely free from self-doubt and inner conflict, Dabrowski argued that such a life precludes the more important lifelong journey toward meaning, which we also crave. To reframe high potential as excitability or intensity requires that we sometimes resist the urge to run from or hide our own intense feelings and personal demons and that we let go of the myth that gifted children are always ideal students or easy to parent.

The following lines from Dabrowski's poem "Be greeted psychoneurotics!" are an ode to intensity and a plea for a broader acceptance of excitability:

For you often feel others as you feel yourselves.

For you feel the anxiety of the world, and its bottomless narrowness and self-assurance.

For your phobia of washing your hands from the dirt of the world for your fear of being locked in the world's limitations and your fear of the absurdity of existence. (quoted in Mendaglio's Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Disintegration*)

The lines evoke hip-hop lyrics when read with a certain rhythm, which brings us back to Marshall from the beginning of this piece. His full name is Marshall Mathers, better known as the hip-hop artist Eminem, perhaps a more accessible and realistic example for the 21st century than St. Augustine. Irrespective of his controversial lyrics or suppositions about



Further RESOURCES and reads

- ★ Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Integration*, edited by Sal Mendaglio, Great Potential Press, 2010
- ★ *Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students: Helping Kids Cope with Explosive Feelings*, by Christine Fonseca, Prufrock Press, 2010
- ★ Hoagies Gifted Education Page: Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities and Theory of Positive Disintegration (hoagiesgifted.org/dabrowski.htm)
- ★ *Living with Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults*, edited by Susan Daniels and M. Plechowski, Great Potential Press, 2008
- ★ "Overexcitability and the Gifted," by Sharon Lind (Sengifted.org/archives/articles/overexcitability-and-the-gifted)
- ★ *The Theory of Positive Disintegration* (Positivedisintegration.com)

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his personal views, Mathers's intensity is palpable, his excitability a driving force of both his art and his ongoing private journey.

Intensity is not always easy to live with or comfortable to watch, but it is also never boring. In the words of developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky, "People with great passions, people who accomplish great deeds, people who possess strong feelings, even people with great minds and a strong personality, rarely come out of good little boys and girls" (*Educational Psychology*, p. 232).

Here's to the excitable ones.

First paragraph Marshall Mathers quotations are from "60 Minutes" interview by Anderson Cooper (October 7, 2010) and GQ interview by Will Welch (Music Issue, 2011). 