

Coming out Gifted

By
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The caller says they went to my website and started to cry. I have heard this reaction before. It isn't because they read the page on addictions or the one on depression. There is only one page that evokes this response. The caller has read about giftedness on my website. The information is new to them. Some people have always known they are gifted; this article is about those who have not.

The tears come from the shock of recognition, the personal "aha", the sense of relief, and the prospect of a new path. Who isn't drawn to a way of understanding themselves that seems to explain the sense of differentness, the longing for something more, and the sometimes painful comparisons with others? It is the awakening of something long forgotten or never named. It is the beginning of a redefinition of identity.

Understanding yourself as a gifted person can be compared to the coming out process for gays. The analogy is not perfect: after all, gifted people don't need to worry about personal safety, job security, discrimination and homophobia, or abandonment by family or friends because of their giftedness. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people do.

But there are useful parallels. Both gays and gifted people are invisible minorities. Both gays and gifted people may come to this awareness at different points in life, and may have been unable to previously articulate the nature of their difference. Both gays and gifted people are born and not made. Both gayness and giftedness are fixed traits that last a lifetime. And the claiming of one's gayness or giftedness, be it publicly or privately, contributes to one's identity and capacity to function more fully in the world.

Has the caller been told at some point that they are too intense, too sensitive, too focused or not focused enough? Has their giftedness been pathologized? Or is it more complicated? After all, gifted people can have mental health diagnoses, too. Is the caller, starting a "coming out" process or something else?

Coming out for gays refers to the process of developing a positive gay identity. It is often described in stages—before coming out, coming out, exploration, relationships and integration. The before coming out phase for gifted people may be characterized by a feeling of isolation and loneliness, a sense of being different in some way or not fitting in. They may not know why they feel this way. The gifted person may compare themselves to others, questioning whether they are as smart as this person or that. Or they may be ostracized for not fitting in, for their persistence, or for their frustrations with the slower pace of others. They may feel the pain of mistreatment and life's injustices more acutely than their age-related peers. Their sensitivities and predisposition toward introversion serve to make it harder to find friends. All of these can contribute to a feeling of alienation from others and the belief that something is wrong—with them.

The coming out phase starts when a person begins to acknowledge their giftedness. The person may discover the concept of overexcitabilities and how it applies to them. This information may be eye-opening as they realize that there are some neurological differences that explain why they are the way they are. They can acquire an understanding of the benefits and liabilities associated with their unique set of gifted qualities, and begin to think about how they want to manage the downside while benefiting from the upside of their intensity. At this stage it is also useful to tell someone else what they have discovered. How the confidant responds will be important. After all, identity is not created in a vacuum. We identify ourselves through relationships with others.

The next phase is “exploration”. Now the gifted person may experiment with giving full expression to their passions, collections and interests. If they used to believe that they had a hard time sticking with a task or topic, they may now understand it as an expression of their eclectic interests. What before might have seemed flighty can now be understood as sampling what life has to offer. Their curiosity, drive, and persistence are to be valued as an expression of entelechy.

The next phase reflects the fact that we are social beings. Our relationships may be changed as a result of “coming out gifted”. Or we may seek new ones. We may come to understand the contribution giftedness made, if any, to previous relationship failures. There is evidence that too great a disparity in intelligence (one measure of giftedness) between intimate partners can have a destabilizing effect on the relationship. We may get a greater understanding of how our gifted attributes have made us a bit of a “tough customer” in relationships.

The last phase in the coming out process is an on-going one of integration. The gifted person incorporates their giftedness into their identity. They are accepting of who they are and can fully embrace the way their own unique set of gifted qualities has shaped their relationship with self, other and community. In the integration stage the gifted person moderates frustrating environments with beneficial ones, thereby making life more enjoyable. This phase of life is characterized by greater pleasure and expression of giftedness in an environment that is more custom built.

I return the call. We talk, and like any other experienced psychotherapist, I know that we are about to embark on a journey. All the usual truths apply; I don't know where the journey will take us nor how long it will take. What I do know is that witnessing and guiding the coming out process is deeply meaningful and rewarding.