

Coping Through Awareness

A transformational tool for coping with being highly gifted

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Coping for a highly gifted person requires knowing oneself and becoming more aware of what is truly involved with being highly gifted. Coping is also a process that should allow one to contend better with his giftedness throughout life. Yet coping poses many challenges and is not free of emotional strife or tension. The goal in coping must not rob one from his nature, but provide a means to explore and enhance the experience of being highly gifted. There are few models to make sense of the extreme nature and exceptional experience in life for this special population. So life for the highly gifted individual can be an arduous and seemingly impossible task. We already know that meeting the educational needs of our highly gifted is an extremely difficult task. So when we consider the social emotional needs, the task of meeting those needs could be exponentially even greater.

The Awareness Model described here is a transformational tool that can help the gifted individual make meaning of her experience and provide a process for coping and growth. The Awareness Model describes how a transformation to acceptance of the gifted self can occur naturally or with facilitation. It was developed by the late Dr. Vince Sweeney, a pioneer in the field of family therapy and transpersonal psychology. Although Dr. Sweeney was not involved in the gifted field, he was aware of the unique social emotional needs of highly gifted individuals and how their giftedness was a variable to be considered in the transformation process of growth. He developed the model to provide a framework to understand the human experience in a way that would neither minimize nor deny the depth or uniqueness of that experience; but would provide a direction to begin coping naturally with the existential nature of life.

The model is a process with four stages that have a circular flow. One stage leads directly into the next (see **Figure 1**). The model has been adapted here to the experience of being highly gifted and to the process of coping with that experience in it's fullest.

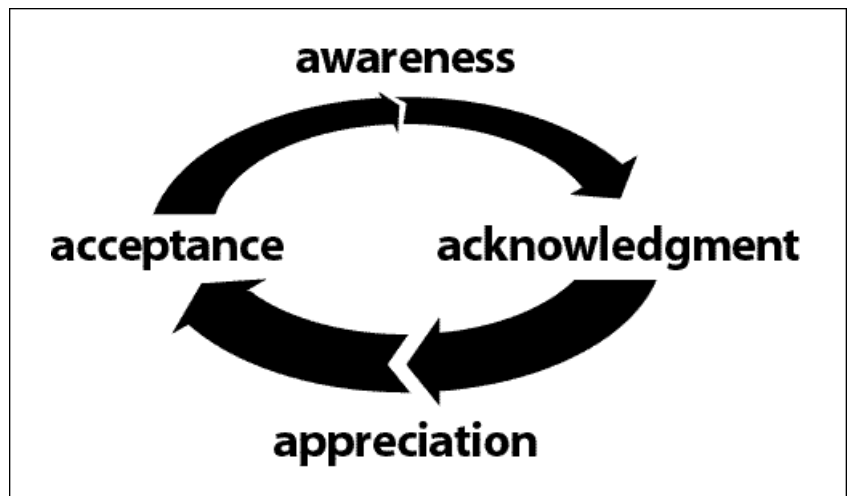


Figure 1

AWARENESS

Coping starts with awareness of being highly gifted. Here awareness

means more than a simple cognition. Awareness of being highly gifted entails a richness of experiencing “who I am as a gifted person and how my world is different and expressly me.” Gifted people experience awareness when they let down their defenses and feel their feelings in regards to the intensity of being highly gifted. The awareness of being gifted is not merely having the label of gifted bestowed on them. It is taking in the depth of feelings, intensities, behaviors and sensitivities of their experience, having to contend with all of their experience and uniqueness.

Many people want to step over awareness. They do not want to have what lies beneath their facades, their denial of who they truly are. This is particularly true when being “who I am” entails extreme difference from others and painful encounters with the self. Awareness brings a depth of feeling and a relatedness with the self. Without this awareness a gifted person can not fully cope with her giftedness because she is somehow denying it from within. Awareness will come through sharing the experience of being highly gifted with self, others and particularly others who are highly gifted. Awareness will come by letting feelings exist freely. Awareness will come through appropriately challenging one’s giftedness through inquiry, rigor and discipline, therefore allowing the self to be engaged in the process of growth. Awareness will not come through denial of the pain, removal of challenge, or sedating the self through work and addictions.

Others can help the highly gifted become aware by being open to the nuances that come with the experiences of being highly gifted, by educating themselves and others about the experience, and by not attempting to protect gifted individuals from their nature. “When I am aware, I am free of denial.” The experiences, feelings, behaviors and sensitivities associated with being highly gifted are present and not resisted. This openness can be difficult emotionally, but it frees individuals to face themselves for

who they truly are as gifted people. It is the experience that leads to understanding and acknowledgment of the uniqueness of being highly gifted. When people protect the highly gifted from experiencing their essence, either through rationalizing, pushing for conformity or just plain ignoring the pain that may come along with giftedness, the gifted individual slides farther from awareness and the ability to cope. We often think that being different and the pain associated with that difference should be taken away. Unfortunately the removal of that experience will deny the gifted person of the richness that awareness can bring. Coping through awareness requires honesty, feeling, experiencing and embracing the nature of being highly gifted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Once aware, acknowledgment is possible, bringing with it the experience of feeling valid. “I am highly gifted, and so are these very precious aspects of me.” Acknowledgment is the “why” of myself. It proclaims the meaning that allows me to make sense of my giftedness and to challenge the nature of the gift. This understanding can come only after a gifted person has awareness and has experienced the giftedness that is unique to herself. When a gifted person acknowledges that she has these feelings, aspects, uniqueness and often extreme parts of herself, then she can formulate methods to cope and grow in a manner that embraces her giftedness.

Acknowledgment provides purpose and context to life. This is where coping becomes a real possibility. “I have sufficiently embraced my giftedness through awareness when my denial has subsided and I can now place a context and meaning to my essence as it relates to being gifted.” This is not a place where pain or intensity is non-existent or where needs are all met; it is the place to set the foundation for growth and change. Acknowledgment comes when one stops fighting what awareness has revealed about the nature of being gifted. The meaning behind life’s experience then flows clear and with purpose.

APPRECIATION

To appreciate being highly gifted is to embrace all of “who I am” as a gifted person. Appreciation comes only after the earlier travels through developing awareness and acknowledging the experience of being highly gifted. What once was seen as a struggle or as unwanted characteristics, through appreciation becomes a valued asset. Once a gifted person cannot deny himself and his difference, he moves into a position of appreciating both the angst and the heightened sense of being that accompanies his gifts. By appreciating the gifts that are his, and all that the gifts entail, he is equipped to share those gifts with the world in an unselfish way, in a manner infused with “who I am.” Appreciation is transcendence. It is the pinnacle for

change and for the ability to contend with giftedness. Regarding coping, appreciation is a resting place. “When I reach a place of appreciation, I can revel in my existence and gain new energy to move further in my development – where coping becomes past tense. I have moved beyond coping to a level where mastery of the self becomes paramount and achievable.” When a gifted person is in appreciation, he no longer needs to deny or resist his essence.

ACCEPTANCE

Often the highly gifted are encouraged to accept their giftedness and what it entails without moving through awareness, acknowledgment, and appreciation. Acceptance comes only after the mastery of those three stages. Acceptance becomes the byproduct of the gifted person’s existence, a letting go of what was once foreign to her awareness and without meaning and value. “When I accept myself and the gifts that come along with me, I am free to be and experience all of who I am.” At this stage the gifted person has fully embraced the uniqueness of being highly gifted. “I feel it, I understand it, and I have a sense of meaning and appreciation behind who I am.” Each time the gifted person goes through this transformational process, she deepens her experience of self as gifted and copes with being highly gifted. Once she reaches a level of acceptance, she has opened the doorway to even greater awareness.

The process of moving from awareness through acceptance is a natural one. Although it can be enhanced through facilitation by teachers, parents, counselors or facilitation from oneself. The following story depicts Seth’s experience of being highly gifted and coping through awareness. Even though Seth had no conscious awareness of this transformational process, he experienced it naturally to cope and then eventually to contend with himself as a highly gifted individual.

Seth, now a young adult, spent much of his adolescence trying to fit in with his peers. When he was a young child he somehow figured out he was different and did not act or experience the world like other children his age. He felt lonely and strange. He then developed coping mechanisms to deny his uniqueness and the pain he associated with it. Actively pursuing a way out of his pain, he decided to fit in and get other children to like him by conforming. He refused to face his giftedness and the feelings that came with being gifted. He feared rejection if others experienced him as different. His energy was spent doing whatever he could to conform and not to appear different or strange. Seth’s denial of his nature went well into his adolescence.

As he grew through his adolescence he was not consciously aware that his behavior and attitude were affected by his denial of being gifted. Awareness on an unconscious level was his deepest fear, but consciously he knew something about how he faced the world was not right. As a young adult and after many years of not facing himself, he

felt empty and without purpose in his life. He was having more trouble coping with life. The people Seth once tried so hard to impress had now gone on to college and other pursuits. Seth was left feeling more alone than ever before. He started to question his loneliness and lack of purpose. The pain began to creep up on him and he started to feel the feelings of betraying himself throughout his youth.

Awareness for Seth began to emerge as he allowed himself to face some of his pain. He did not know why he had these feelings, just that they were there and that he had no place to hide from this existential awakening. One day he gave himself permission to not fight the feelings. So the feelings came, and for several days, even weeks, he felt them. As the feelings flowed freely into his awareness, he noticed this newfound awareness was evolving into understanding, an acknowledgment. He realized that somehow his denial of being gifted was involved with his deep feelings of betrayal. For the first time, Seth felt he was going to survive his pain, to cope with what it means to be a highly gifted young man. The more he acknowledged the feelings he had, the more insight and understanding emerged. He now felt answers to his questions of why things happened the way they did. Why he escaped the reality and pain of being with his giftedness early on in life. Why he tried so hard to fit in with his peers, betraying much of who he was during his adolescence, ignoring his deeper feelings and denying his abilities.

As Seth continued to feel and acknowledge his true self, his sense of purpose began to emerge. He started to appreciate his struggle. Going beyond just coping with these feelings, he started to have a desire to face his potential, perhaps to return to college or to create like he did prior to his adolescence. It was this sense of deep appreciation of who he truly was that led him to cope and grow with less fear and more knowledge. As he returned to challenge his giftedness, he then reached a level of acceptance. Accepting who he is and has always been involves accepting being highly gifted, and with this acceptance he no longer felt the need to betray or deny his self.

The acceptance of his giftedness has now opened Seth to a new level of awareness about himself as a highly gifted individual. Even though Seth discovered the awareness to cope and contend naturally, awareness of this transformational process model may be one way to precipitate coping for the highly gifted sooner in life and add a richness to the experience.

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