What Happened to All the Gifted Girls?

What happens to intellectually gifted girls when they grow up? Do they go on to have brilliant careers? Do they become bored and confined? Or do their gifts disappear? Much of the literature about gifted individuals focuses on children and adolescents. Yet these students grow up. What then?

Intellectually gifted girls can start to fall behind when they enter middle school. There may be more social pressure to conform, to be like everybody else. Girls and women are often socialized to accommodate to others – to fit in. This runs counter to the gifted individual’s drive to create, innovate, and look beyond the ordinary. These girls and young women may have been encouraged to hide their talents to avoid provoking envy. Or they may be so bored in school they withdraw into themselves. One might expect that this would not be the case now that women have more choices in career and lifestyle. However, adolescent girls and young women are still conflicted about whether it is acceptable to stand out from the crowd.

Loosing her childhood gift? A woman may say that she “used to be gifted” when she was in school. Now she is like everybody else. She may have put her aspirations on hold to support a husband’s career plans. She may feel she is “different” because she has not had contact with similarly gifted women. She may have lacked a close relationship with a mentor in her professional field. Until recently there were few prominent role models for bright innovative young women. She may have trouble understanding how to translate academic or artistic skills into practical adult career choices.

Gift or Problem? Some gifted individuals are almost painfully perceptive and sensitive. At its best, this quality this may lead to startling insights and increased empathy. It can also leave a woman overly sensitive to criticism. A gifted woman may be bored by or impatient with things that interest her friends; she may feel she doesn’t fit in. She may wonder if the answer lies in therapy or medication. To make her content without expressing her brilliance; to make her ‘like everybody else’.

A gifted woman might have boundless energy. Because she is multi-talented, she may move from passionate involvement in one project to the next. Does she have ADHD?

A talented artist or writer may need to seclude herself to spend long hours on her single-minded pursuit of a concept. This intense focus may not make sense to other people. Is she showing unhealthy obsession?

Another woman has been feeling increasing frustration with the disparity between her intellectual potential and her monotonous job. She begins to have frequent spells of weeping, and is not sleeping well at night. Is she suffering from major depression? Or is her depression a natural reaction to her frustration?
Whose problem? There is no simple answer to these questions. We need to tread carefully. The therapist should be familiar with the characteristics of gifted individuals. When evaluating a highly gifted woman, one should compare her to her gifted peers. The therapist should help the woman determine if the symptoms represent conflict within herself or with an intellectually “average” world. Because of her compensatory abilities, a woman may hide her very real depression or attention deficit from herself and from the world. If it is not accurately diagnosed and treated she may not be able to fully express her gifts.

Gifted women may have areas of relative weakness. But they often have an amazing ability to use their strengths to compensate for weaknesses. They may not understand their uneven performance or the strain of working around problems. This can lead to self-doubts, “Am I brilliant or stupid? If I don’t understand something, am I lazy or do I have a real problem with attention?”

Coping with giftedness - One gifted woman might only feel happy in a challenging occupation. Another may find challenge and fulfillment in raising children, volunteering in the community or working with her hands. People may unfairly criticize the professional for neglecting her family or the homemaker for not “using her intellectual gifts”.

Therapy, mentoring and self-examination help a gifted woman reassess her strengths and weaknesses. Instead of feeling isolated, she can feel unique. If she does indeed have some emotional difficulties, therapy can help her overcome barriers. She can identify her areas of passion and pursue her dreams and ambition.