

**Positive Disintegration Podcast  
Episode 2: Overexcitability and Pseudoscience**

**Chris Wells & Emma Nicholson  
November 22, 2021**

**Emma:** Hi, everyone. Welcome back to Positive Disintegration Podcast, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm your host, Emma Nicholson. I'm a business analyst who uses business tools and techniques to explain Dąbrowski's theory on my YouTube channel, Adults with Overexcitabilities. And I write the Tragic Gift blog. I'm also the technical director of the Pottiversity podcast. Joining me again today is my co-host, and our resident expert on positive disintegration, Chris Wells, a Dąbrowski scholar, researcher, and therapist in private practice. Welcome back, Chris.

**Chris:** Thanks, Emma. It's great to be back.

**Emma:** Our topic today is overexcitability, something that I'm personally excited to discuss. And Chris, you recently presented at the National Association for Gifted Children. They had a conference. How was it?

**Chris:** It was great. It was wonderful to be back at a conference in person. It was kind of magical to be honest. It was the best conference experience I think I've ever had. And my presentation went well, which was, of course, the most important thing for me. I was blown away by how many people wanted to talk about Dąbrowski's theory—whether they came to my presentation, or they know me because of social media, or they heard a podcast interview, or they heard our first podcast episode. It was great.

**Emma:** That's really cool. I'm really pleased it went well for you. So what was the topic that you presented on?

**Chris:** Well, the title was Distinguishing Science from Pseudoscience: Overexcitability in the Gifted. And my session was a response to two [previous] sessions. Two years in a row at NAGC there was a Confronting Pseudoscience in Gifted Education panel. And both years, they made the claim that Dąbrowski's theory and overexcitability are pseudoscience. So, my session, the whole point of it was to respond to that, to say that it's not pseudoscience, but that there have been misapplications.

**Emma:** You really went out there to throw down the gauntlet, I guess, and also clear up some myths.

**Chris:** That's right. It did feel like I was throwing down the gauntlet, and I have to admit that I was a little disappointed that none of the critics came to my session to say anything.

**Emma:** Were you hoping for a bit of an argy-bargy?

**Chris:** A little bit, yeah. I was all psyched up for it.

**Emma:** Ready for a fight.

**Chris:** Ready. Absolutely.

**Emma:** Well, it's good to see you taking the boar by the horns, I guess, and flying the flag high, and for Dąbrowski.

**Chris:** Well, I believe in this. I study this full time for my work, and I know that the critics have only the most superficial understanding of these constructs. So, I felt well prepared.

**Emma:** You went in armed to the teeth, huh?

**Chris:** That's exactly right.

**Emma:** Cool. Well, that's awesome because today we're going to talk about a lot of the topics that you covered in that presentation, and fresh from your battle. I'm sure it's all fresh in your mind as well. So I'm really excited to get into this topic with you today.

**Chris:** Me, too.

**Emma:** So I guess the first question that might be on our listeners mind is what are overexcitabilities? So can you give us an explanation of what overexcitabilities are?

**Chris:** Yes. Overexcitability is a much older construct than most people think. It predates Dąbrowski's theory and Dąbrowski by many years. It comes from the condition known as

nervousness and nervousness goes back in the medical literature to the 1700s. And overexcitability, the first place I saw it was in William James's *Principles of Psychology* from 1890, in Volume 2, where he talks about psychic excitability, emotional excitability, hyperexcitability—just like Dąbrowski.

Then there are others who used it before he did, but Dąbrowski is the one who took overexcitability, differentiated it into five types, and built his theory of positive disintegration around it. The five types are psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. First, he wrote about it in 1929 with sensual and emotional, and then he added psychomotor and imaginal. And then he didn't actually add intellectual until 1958.

**Emma:** So that's a fair gap. He must have been working on this for a fair amount of time then?

**Chris:** Yes, that's right. He did. He put a lot of thought into this. Into all of this, and there's a book from 1935 called *Nervousness of Children and Youth*, and it's actually a Polish title, but my Polish pronunciation is rough. I'm not going to attempt it right now. But Michael Piechowski has been translating this book for the last year or so. And it's been very interesting because in this book he is talking about nervousness and overexcitability, and it ends with his germ of the theory. But instead of positive disintegration, he was calling it disaggregation, like of psychic structures.

You can see from his earliest work that overexcitability played a hugely important part in the development of the theory itself. But the theory didn't come until later. The first full outline of the theory was in 1949. And so that gives you a sense of the progression of these ideas.

**Emma:** It's quite a good timeline for us. What did Dąbrowski actually define overexcitability as?

**Chris:** Overexcitability is a lowered threshold to stimuli and this stimuli can occur in your inner environment. It can come from emotions or your imagination, or it can be external outside of you. So, really, it's an overreaction to stimuli. People who are overexcitable respond to things that other people don't even notice. They have more prolonged reactions to stimuli. It's in the nervous system.

**Emma:** I'm assuming that includes the bad stuff as well as the good stuff. So when you say you've got a heightened response to things and you notice things, you notice the good and the bad at the same time.

**Chris:** That's right. Yes, it can be wonderful. You're responding because you're ecstatic, or it can be negative that you are overresponding to maybe too much noise or light or, even imaginal

overresponse can be bad or can feel bad. One of the things that I've figured out from studying the Polish work, especially, is that there's tremendous overlap between Dąbrowski's construct of overexcitability and some modern diagnoses that we have such as ADHD or autism, sensory processing disorder—stuff like that.

Overexcitability is a very broad construct that includes the sensory, or the inattention, or the motor hyperactivity of any of these conditions. I am a neurodiversity-affirming practitioner. So, I don't look at these as problems or disorders so much as who we are if we have them.

**Emma:** That's interesting. So you're talking about a set of people who have overexcitability, who are most likely to have overexcitability. According to Dąbrowski's research and also what you've found in your own research.

**Chris:** It seems to me that the people who are most likely to experience overexcitability are people who are gifted, which is one group that we know about. And then within gifted, the twice-exceptional I think are especially likely, and especially the ones who have a diagnosis like ADHD or autism. But you don't have to be gifted. So, outside of that, I've certainly known people who aren't intellectually gifted, but have overexcitability. They may or may not relate to, or identify with, ADHD or autism.

A lot of people who consider themselves highly sensitive people also resonate with Dąbrowski's overexcitability, but not all. It's very interesting to me, the different groups that do feel that they are overexcitable.

**Emma:** And it's fair to say that not all gifted people have overexcitability, right?

**Chris:** That's right. They don't. It's impossible to say how many gifted people. People ask me often, “Well, what is the percentage of the gifted who are overexcitable?”

Well, it's hard to say because it depends on what definition we're using as gifted for one thing. I mean, if we're talking about gifted as achievement in the classroom, you're going to have a different percentage than if you are looking at gifted in terms of like IQ scores or the psychological aspect of giftedness or asynchronous development. There's no consensus in the field of gifted education around the definition of giftedness. So, that complicates things.

**Emma:** That's interesting that you bring it up because then I guess it would depend on whether or not the person identified with traits of overexcitability or not just whether or not they're gifted or fit in some other box.

**Chris:** Right. There are many manifestations of overexcitability, and the table of manifestations that we use most often is in Michael Piechowski's book, *Mellow Out*. It's in other places, and it's certainly not exhaustive. There are lots of manifestations of overexcitability that we have not captured in the literature yet at this point, I would say. But that speaks to the fact that there's a lot we still need to learn about overexcitability, which is something that I said in my presentation last weekend.

**Emma:** On that note, you were saying before that there are five areas. I think it'd be helpful to look at each of those five areas of overexcitability and some of the traits, because some of our listeners out there might identify with those as well. And it'd be good to have an explanation of them. I know, personally, when I read through some of the traits I went, oh, I think I've got all five areas of that, personally. But it's important to note, I think that not everyone has all five areas of overexcitability.

**Chris:** Everyone has their own combination of overexcitabilities. You can have a few, you can have all five. Dąbrowski considered that you have a stronger developmental potential if you have more. And that emotional has to be either the strongest or as strong as the others.

**Emma:** So, there are some people that could have one or more, or a few areas. There are some people that could have all five and, depending on the individual, those ones would all be at different strengths, which fits with Dąbrowski because he likes to talk about different dimensions of things and different levels. I guess it's like five different volume settings and each one could be sitting at a different level for each individual.

**Chris:** That's right. It's so highly individual.

**Emma:** Let's talk about the first one, which is psychomotor. What does psychomotor overexcitability look like and what are some of its features?

**Chris:** Well, the first thing I want to mention before we go into it is that each of the types has a pure expression of what it looks like, and also an expression of emotional tension. The only one that doesn't have an expression of emotional tension is the emotional type. In psychomotor overexcitability, you have a surplus of energy, the expression of it, which could look like rapid speech, intense physical activity, competitiveness, hyperactivity, but then you also have the psychomotor expression of emotional tension.

This is where you'll see nervous habits like nail biting or tics. This is where impulsivity is. Compulsive talking or chattering, workaholism, acting out. Those are the most common expressions of psychomotor.

**Emma:** For me, it translates as a surplus of energy, and it's more likely to increase when you're feeling emotionally tense or excited. I know personally, when I'm onto a good idea or if I'm feeling a bit stressed out, I pace a lot. And I used to chew things. So you talk about those nervous tics. I used to be a big chewer of things, which is really bad, and scratch—nervous scratching when I get real stressed out. And sleeplessness, I've found. So it's just like when your brain is ticking and your emotions are ticking, your body just doesn't want to shut down.

**Chris:** I'm also a pacer. So is my son, and then for me, I picked or bit my cuticles on my fingers for years, and I've managed to stop that habit, amazingly. But yeah, I hear you. I also have these psychomotor issues. And also like you said, it can become insomnia. I feel like insomnia is a mixture of also my intellectual overexcitability because my brain likes to wake me up in the middle of the night like, “Knock, knock, oh, you're awake? Let's think now.”

**Emma:** Time to get working. That may translate, if I'm working on something exciting, particularly if I'm not doing my day job, but I'm doing something creative on the side, like my sleep hours will drop down to like three or four a night. So, I'll be up all night working on something and thinking about it. It's like, “Think we're awake. We just want to get back to work. Just want to work on that thing that we're obsessed with.”

**Chris:** That's right. I get that.

**Emma:** Well, let's go to the sensual overexcitability.

**Chris:** Sensual also has the pure expression or the expression of emotional tension. So, it's really a heightened experience of sensual pleasure in this theory. It's interesting because Dąbrowski didn't talk about what we would consider sensory processing disorder issues, or in the theory he was talking about it from a positive point of view. So the enhanced sensory pleasure of like music or art, like delight in beautiful objects, seeing, smelling, just enjoying input from the senses. But we know that it can also be in these less pleasant ways too. It just hasn't been researched adequately in terms of the theory.

**Emma:** We're really talking about the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. And I know there is some unpleasant stuff that comes with it because I've heard a few podcasts where people start talking about being irritated by clothing tags. So that tactile sensitivity from touch, or not being able to get the seams in your socks right. Or even like light or sound sensitivity.

**Chris:** Or for me, it's smell. Actually I have super smell, which is not fun because most things don't smell good. I don't enjoy being somebody who is like a super smeller. But my son has super hearing. So, yeah, it's absolutely like any of these through the senses, it can be too much. It

can. It can be wonderful, or it can be like torture. And then there's also a sensual expression of emotional tension, like I mentioned, and this can look like overeating, buying sprees or wanting to be in the limelight, which is an interesting one. You see some fun examples of this in gifted kids, who enjoy being hams, or who enjoy being the center of attention. It can be hilarious.

**Emma:** But I guess that can also lead to some more problematic habits as well. Particularly if you're a pleasure seeker and you're trying to dull your senses that can easily lead down the addiction slippery slope.

**Chris:** That's right and that is absolutely what I want to investigate more. From the research perspective, I have had issues with addiction in the past. I've been addicted to drugs, and I've been addicted to gambling. So, for me, when I saw sensual overexcitability, I was like, "Oh, hello, addiction."

**Emma:** That's all right. I'm in the same boat, drugs and alcohol. And I have a checkered past together. I don't know whether or not it started as one of those, I want to experiment, those youthful stupidities. But certainly, particularly with alcohol. It's been a long path for me to operate without it. Because it's quite easy to go, "My senses are on fire. I just want to dull them down."

**Chris:** Right, yeah, I've learned to have less dangerous things in my life for this. I have a weighted blanket now. I enjoy the way that calms my nervous system.

**Emma:** Even for me. I must admit that touch is a big thing for me. I'm a big hugger. I don't like touching people that I don't like, but when I see friends and family, I'm always in for a hug. Just because I don't know—for me, it brings me so much joy.

**Chris:** Me too. I haven't always been [a hugger], but I am now as an adult and yes, at the conference last weekend, it was nice to hug people. It was very nice.

**Emma:** And also, I guess you got that being in the spotlight hit as well from doing your presentation. Having it so well received.

**Chris:** It was so nice. It's true. But yes, I don't love [the spotlight]. I actually was one of those kids that enjoyed being in the limelight when I was young, but then I went through a long period where ugh, I was super anxious and did not love it.

**Emma:** It's a bit of a double-edged sword.

**Chris:** Yeah. And these things can come and go. I think it's important when we're talking about overexcitability to remember that you don't just have it and it looks one way your whole life. Dąbrowski talked about overexcitability in terms of narrow and broad. The narrow kind is more problematic. It's not developmental. And the broad or global type takes over your whole psychic structure. That's how he would say it, and it is developmental. It's more positive in terms of the conditions for growth and the theory. But I guess I'm probably jumping ahead of things with that. But I wanted to mention that it's not a static thing where it's like, "Oh, you have overexcitability. It looks this way. It's going to look that same way 20 years from now."

It can change and evolve and transform. It can also become narrow. So, an example of this is when I was young, I had this traumatic experience when I was 20. That I talked about in my presentation actually. But the thing is, being traumatized caused my emotional overexcitability to become narrow. For the first time in my life, I was afraid to leave the house. I was agoraphobic. So, when you start to experience phobias, that is a narrowing of your overexcitability. It's not helpful to have phobias. Anxiety, though, or depression would be global kinds of emotional overexcitability. Here we are seeing that these things that most people think of as negative are actually positive in this theory.

**Emma:** What are some of the other aspects of emotional overexcitability while we're on that topic?

**Chris:** Emotional overexcitability is the type that has the most manifestations, and is the most important I would say, in the theory because it's the driver of development I think. Empathy in Dąbrowski's theory is hugely important.

Emotional [overexcitability]. It's hard to even tackle because it looks so many different ways. I'm going to stick with the table of manifestations that we've been using as I've been describing them. Feelings and emotions are intensified. So, you have extremes of emotion, you have complex emotions and feelings.

You can identify with other people's feelings or feel their feelings. You have awareness of a whole range of feelings. And then there are strong somatic expressions: a tense stomach, blushing, sweaty palms, your heart is racing, or you're flushing. There are strong affective expressions like shyness or timidity, inhibition, enthusiasm, ecstasy, pride, a strong affective memory, shame, feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, guilt, a concern with death and also depressive and suicidal moods.

Basically emotional overexcitability is a capacity for strong attachments in deep relationships, strong emotional ties, compassion, sensitivity in relationships.



**Emma:** I think that's important to call out because people are probably listening to this list of things and saying, "Oh, fear and guilt." And they might be thinking, "Well, everybody experiences those." But I guess the defining part of emotional overexcitability would be that it's stronger and probably more frequent than normal. So, you are reacting to things in a stronger way that other people might brush off.

**Chris:** Well, and let me tell you—I think it's very clear that not everybody experiences shame. I am thinking right now of people who should feel shame and don't, so it's certainly not a given, and I would say the same thing for guilt. I mean, a lot of people do feel guilt and shame, but not everybody. Of course, we're talking about Dąbrowski, so there are levels of overexcitability. There are levels of guilt and shame. Guilt and shame are dynamisms in this theory, but they're not always dynamisms—you can have guilt that's not a transformative type of guilt. You can feel bad about something without wanting to do anything about it.

So, all of this stuff is layered and complicated and nuanced, as is the Dąbrowski way. Particularly when we're talking about relationships, complications and too many layers of nuance aren't always helpful. One thing that I think is interesting is that in Michael's chapter that he wrote—that introduced overexcitability to gifted ed—he really makes it clear that it's emotional overexcitability when there's a relationship involved. And that if a relationship isn't involved, it's not overexcitability, and it's some lower form of excitability, or it's not developmental. But I think that's an interesting distinction. And it's important that for somebody with emotional overexcitability—this is somebody who has the capacity for deep, strong relationships. Relationships are a part of how it looks and how it manifests. It's contextualized that way.

**Emma:** Which might also manifest in pushing people away because of the fear of that strong attachment.

**Chris:** Or shutting it down. I know that personally, when I was young, I shut off my feelings because I didn't know how to deal with them. I went for years of my life without like being able to cry, or it was easier for me to not feel than to feel. And I think that this is unfortunately a common coping mechanism for people with overexcitability.

**Emma:** When my emotions are going, and they're too much, I tend to call it hurricane brain. Because it feels like you're feeling everything at once, really intensely, almost to the point where you can't even put your finger on how you feel about a situation, because everything seems to be happening at once. You're afraid, you are sad, you are angry.

You're excited and it's all just roaring at you at full volume at the same time. And it becomes really hard to pick out how you feel. And what you said about it becoming somatic resonates with me because at that point I'll often get massive headaches. My teeth will hurt. And it literally feels like my head's about to explode.

**Chris:** Yes. I know that feeling. It's not fun. I'm laughing, but I absolutely know that feeling of my head is going to explode or I'm going to shut down. We talk about meltdowns in people that are autistic or ADHD, and it's the same thing with overexcitability in the gifted, or it's just reaching a point where you just can't function anymore. It's overload.

**Emma:** Yeah, overload. For me, there's only two ways to shut it down. It's either try and get it into meditation and shut it down, or you're just going to burst into tears and it's going to come out that way and you're going to have a meltdown.

**Chris:** That's right. Yes. So, yeah, overexcitability is intense. That's how I learned about it. Doing searches for intensity.

**Emma:** I guess the opposite of emotional, or people might see it as opposite, would be intellectual. It's probably the one people would most associate with gifted people. So let's talk about what intellectual overexcitability looks like.

**Chris:** Intellectual is definitely the one that most strongly correlates with intellectual giftedness, and Dąbrowski thought it was the rarest overexcitability, which I think is noteworthy. It's intensified activity of the mind. The thirst for knowledge, curiosity, sustained concentration—AKA hyperfocus—avid reading, keen observation, a passion for precision.

I have to give credit—these words are directly from Michael Piechowski's table of manifestations of overexcitability, from his book, *Mellow Out*. I feel like I'm plagiarizing him, but the table—this is my cheat sheet for overexcitability when people ask what it looks like, so that's why I'm going to it.

Intellectual is also a penchant for probing questions, problem solving, the search for truth and understanding, and also reflective thought, metacognition, thinking about thinking, love of theory, analysis and logic, moral thinking, and independence of thought. All of this. I think that the negative can look like overthinking. Oh my gosh. Not being able to stop thinking. Totally. Like I said, at the conference last weekend, in the lead up to it, knowing that I had to present. Every night, my brain would activate between 3 and 4:00 am, and then I couldn't go back to sleep because it's like I had to rehearse. So, of course, I think that's a mix of intellectual and imagination, but my brain, it's always going.

**Emma:** Overthinking for me often manifests in reading too much into things. We're either reading too much into things that people say offhand, like, what do they think by that? Do they mean this? Where they said a straight sentence and you think there's like 500 layers between the lines. Or watching a movie or reading a book, and seeing all this meaning in it—for other people, it's just fiction, let it go. Yes, but you don't understand about this character, which is good for doing literary analysis and stuff. But when you're just trying to watch a movie with people and

you're seeing and reading all sorts of things into it, they're not picking up, you come across as a bit of a weirdo sometimes.

**Chris:** Yeah. I was just thinking while you were describing that, that people do not appreciate intellectual overexcitability in others. I think that it's one of the types that can be really annoying for other people who are not so intellectual.

**Emma:** Particularly if you're racing ahead. The one thing that makes me think of is Tony Stark. I actually did a piece on why I think Tony Stark has overexcitabilities, but one of his intellectual traits is he's always doing the reading. Didn't anyone else do the reading? And he's really impatient with other people who can't keep up. Particularly in the first Avengers, he connects immediately with Bruce Banner because Bruce is the only one who seems to speak his language and can keep up with his ideas. And he gets really impatient with Steve Rogers. He hates Captain America because Steve just doesn't think on his level, and can't keep up with his rapid thought. So, there's annoying traits that come out like that, having high expectations on other people, or getting impatient with them when they can't keep up with you.

**Chris:** I loved your piece on Tony Stark, I thought it was great.

**Emma:** Makes you a bit of an asshole, actually, because you get impatient with everybody who doesn't want to, even people who don't want to discuss things on your level because they're not interested in it. You become frustrated because no one wants to talk in depth about Marvel characters and stuff. I don't know.

**Chris:** It's a challenge. If you have intellectual overexcitability, it's not easy to find other people who can satisfy your need for mental stimulation, and being able to talk about your area of interest.

**Emma:** I was going to say, thankfully, now there are things like Facebook and social media where you can connect with people who've got interests in those sorts of things.

**Chris:** I think it's helped. Yeah. For me, I had to create my Positive Disintegration Study Group to have people to talk about the theory with. And then there's another study group about the theory that I'm in. So, it's been important for me to find other people who really care about the theory, and are willing to talk about it. Now, of course, here we are—we have this podcast. But it's important to find people you can really dig in with about your special interest.

**Emma:** Find your fellow nerds really is the message.

**Chris:** Yeah, I know you've done that with Harry Potter, too. So, there you go.

**Emma:** Yeah, I know. I like sticking my nose into intellectual and academic places where I don't necessarily belong, but we're also going to find people to talk about the many personality traits of Sirius Black. We've got to do it somewhere. Fiction is a good note, I think, to swap over to imaginal overexcitability. Well, that segue just presented itself, and off we go. So tell us about imaginal.

**Chris:** Imaginal is interesting actually because this one, for me—well, I have things to say about this. Imaginal can be the free play of the imagination, where you are having invention and fantasy or detailed visualization. The use of image and metaphor. And it also can be animistic and magical thinking. But it can be the capacity for living in a world of imagination. But that would also include having imaginary friends, being dramatic. Mixing truth and fiction. It's somewhat common, if you have imaginal overexcitability.

**Emma:** Which for kids is probably a little bit problematic. I know I was one hell of a daydreamer when I was a kid. I still am, unfortunately, but for me it was really difficult to focus in school sometimes, particularly if it got a bit boring. I'd race ahead and do my work and then just sit and we spin out the window off in fantasy land, somewhere and I suppose imaginary friends and not being able to figure out truth from reality, is probably a common thing, with a lot of kids I'd say.

**Chris:** Right. And, yeah, a low tolerance for boredom is a part of this, and the need for novelty.

**Emma:** What you're saying, too, about people who appreciate magical thinking or have rich visualization. The one thing that springs to mind for me are people who wax lyrical about talking. How well he builds his worlds, particularly like the Lord of the Rings. So, they take his little nuanced descriptions, and they can build this really vivid picture of what Rivendell looks like, or what Hobbiton looks like. And they can create that world in their mind. I know one of the things that I've read that people with imaginal OE tend to like is like fantasy and science fiction. And maybe that's why, because they're able to be able to build these worlds in their mind's eye.

**Chris:** Yes, I think so. It's interesting to me because I think that imaginal overexcitability can look like that. It can look a lot of different ways. It can be around this kind of worldplay, or it can be—the only part that we haven't talked about yet is the expression of emotional tension aspect. And here we would have catastrophizing, always imagining the worst thing that can

happen. This is where anxiety lives—this combination of imaginal and emotional can be really problematic.

**Emma:** I can tell you 15 ways today, the world will win. Don't you worry about that.

**Chris:** That's right. So yeah, that's a downside of it. In my research, I've found that psychomotor overexcitability strongly correlates with the hyperactivity-impulsivity dimension of ADHD, and imaginal overexcitability correlates with the inattentive dimension of ADHD. It's interesting. I hope that more people will do research to examine ADHD and overexcitability and put them together more rather than try and tease them apart, which is something that we are going to talk about a little later in this episode,

**Emma:** It'd be beneficial for particularly our listeners to understand how overexcitability fits into Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration because I think it's important to know that it's not just some standalone construct. It's actually got a place within positive disintegration.

**Chris:** True. Although, it can stand alone, too. We can absolutely understand overexcitability without bringing in the whole rest of the theory, but we do want to bring in the rest of the theory because this is positive disintegration podcast. So, we're not trying to—

Now that you've said this, it's opened up a can of worms for me. Because to my mind, one of the misunderstandings is that you can't study overexcitability without the rest of the theory. I don't think that that's technically true. Because overexcitability predated the theory of positive disintegration, we obviously can study it without bringing in other constructs from Dąbrowski. The question is, do we want to do that? And the answer to that is no. If we're going to talk about overexcitability, then we are going to keep it within the framework of Dąbrowski's theory.

It's important to understand that he saw overexcitability as creating challenges and conflicts for us, and that could lead to disintegration. There's one quote from Positive Disintegration that I always think about where he talks about how the child with imaginal overexcitability can't adapt to their environment. That's the problem. If you have overexcitability, well, the world isn't built for you. You are going to have a hard time fitting in. When you're a child, it's going to be tough to be in the classroom. When you're an adult, it's going to be tough to do your nine to five job. It's hard to adjust to everyday reality when you have overexcitability. And so that creates challenges. That's where the positive disintegration comes from. And so the unilevel or the multilevel disintegrations—the overexcitabilities are the raw material that produce the dynamisms in this theory.

**Emma:** It almost gives a beneficial quality from my understanding. It's like, otherwise you've got these overexcitabilities. What are they good for? Well, your answer is in the theory of positive disintegration, because this is the power of it. And if you can direct it and use it to

question your values, you've got that developmental potential, whereas otherwise you might just say it's another, almost neurodivergent thing that might be hindrance in your daily life. And once you get past that, well, how is it inhibiting me positive disintegration for me is the why behind it.

**Chris:** And you're making me think too, that like the overexcitabilities are the foundation for a multilevel experience of reality. If you have overexcitability, then you are taking in more. You're processing more—you have a different capacity for stimuli than somebody who doesn't have it. Dąbrowski saw that as the foundation for a multilevel reality.

**Emma:** So, Chris, you've been studying OE for a while. Tell us about your studies in OE, because I really want to get onto some of the topics about the myths and whether or not studying overexcitability is actually scientific.

**Chris:** I came to overexcitability because I was doing a personal research project, and I was trying to understand my history of being gifted and also ADHD. I saw myself as being mentally ill—it's a long story. But that's how I came to it. So, it took me a while to really start digging in. But once I decided I needed to study Dąbrowski's theory, I was becoming friends with Michael Piechowski. We were writing back and forth to each other. He helped me write a paper—in his capacity as an associate editor of a journal. And being in contact with him made me want to read all of his work. So, that's how I started. I read all of Michael's work, including his second dissertation. I really dug in. I read both editions of his book. Then I had to read everything Dąbrowski wrote, and I am still working on that because a lot of it is in Polish. So, I had to start learning Polish. It's almost five years now that I've been learning Polish and I'm getting there.

**Emma:** That's commitment, man. That is commitment.

**Chris:** It's commitment. I'm still learning, but I'm getting there. I can read children's books, and I actually am better at reading Dąbrowski than I am at reading children's books because I've memorized so much of his technical language. Then I had to study the overexcitability research, and then I started examining Dąbrowski's data and Michael's overexcitability data. It's been years of this at this point.

Along the way, I read the criticisms about overexcitability, I read these papers in gifted ed saying that overexcitability is really openness to experience, and that Dąbrowski's theory is no longer relevant, or that it can just be replaced by the five-factor model. And so when I saw that kind of thing, I was like, well, are they right? I had to figure out whether that was true. Or I would read, in the misdiagnosis literature in gifted ed, you'll read that, well, it's not really ADHD, it's overexcitability. Well, when I came to this theory, I saw myself as ADHD. I thought, wow, is it really overexcitability? Is it either/or? And what I've learned is that it's not either/or.

Overexcitability is a broad construct that encompasses ADHD. As I was studying the theory, I had to get to the bottom of these issues and resolve them. And often that meant going to the Polish literature from Dąbrowski, and seeing what he said in the 1930s, with the help of Michael. It's been really interesting for me because I got to a point in summer 2019 when I started really questioning him and saying, I think that there's not a meaningful difference between ADHD and overexcitability. I made the case for him, and we kept digging into the Polish literature. And yeah, we just had a chapter come out this summer together where he has his name on a chapter saying that this is true—that we can no longer try to say that it's either/or—it's a big deal.

**Emma:** It is a big deal. And I think particularly with some of the stuff that you are working on, you are really honing in on the scientific side of it. When you talk about gifted ed saying, “Oh, we don't need this theory anymore.” I think a lot of the reasoning behind that—I think the criticism would be that it's not particularly quantitative science. But you argued the case against that.

**Chris:** Here's how I see it. The critics in gifted ed, who are saying that this theory is pseudoscience—they have not approached making that claim in a scientific way. I see this as I have just spent the past six years of my life studying this theory, like every day almost. I've had to force myself over the last few years to take Christmas off. You know what I mean? In Christmas 2016, I spent hours that day coding overexcitability data in qualitative data analysis software. So, my approach to studying Dąbrowski's theory has absolutely been scientific. It hasn't necessarily been quantitative research. I'm a qualitative researcher, but that doesn't mean that I haven't also examined quantitative research as part of what I do. Essentially what I'm saying is that I don't want to be a jerk about this, but the people claiming pseudoscience have not actually studied this theory.

I would bet that none of them have ever even read one book by Dąbrowski, let alone several. Until they have a better grasp of Dąbrowski's theory, I think that they should stay in their lane, and stop saying this because it's simply not true. Science is cumulative and science is useful. We have decades and decades and decades of research and work on this theory. It's not all perfect.

Maybe it doesn't all meet their criteria of what science should look like, but the fact is, it is scientific and there's a ton of it. And then the useful criterion, well obviously when Dąbrowski's theory is no longer useful, it won't be serving a purpose anymore. But I can tell you that I have a never-ending stream of people contacting me because they want to study this theory. They're graduate students, or because they are using it in their practice and they want to know more about it, or they've just learned about it and they've recognized themselves in it, and it's meaningful to them. When those things stop happening, Dąbrowski's theory will no longer be relevant, but I can tell you that we're a long way from that happening right now,

**Emma:** As long as it's resonating with people so strongly, then there's a case to keep studying it.

**Chris:** That's right. And we have to study it. So, another thing is in order to prepare for my presentation, I did read quite a bit along with my colleague Frank Falk because we worked together on this session. I want to mention Frank because he was really helpful with me. He did a lot of the reading around what's the difference between science and pseudoscience. Really what we learned as we delved into the philosophy of science literature is that the problem of demarcation between science and pseudoscience is a legitimate problem. It's not always easy to tell the difference, but there are hallmarks.

Unfortunately, there have been misapplications and problems in the gifted ed literature, and in the gifted ed research when it comes to overexcitability. And so we have to acknowledge that there are some people who are unable to take evidence and data and change their minds. I have people in mind right now where I've said to them, "Look at this data, we can see that not all gifted people have overexcitability." And yet they can't seem to integrate this knowledge and change their beliefs. So that's the kind of person who is a pseudoscientist.

**Emma:** That's a big problem, too, for people that are new to the theory and coming at it. Maybe they've read about overexcitabilities, and it's resonated with them, and they're trying to figure out who to read and what to believe. And that could be really problematic when you don't know who's just talking out of their ass, I guess. And who's actually gone and done the research and looked at the data and the analysis behind it.

**Chris:** That's right. It can be problematic. And certainly, that's something that we're dealing with right now. Yes.

**Emma:** So, are there any big myths that you want to call out for people that are floating around there, any particularly large pieces of bullshit that you want to point your finger at?

**Chris:** Oh, my goodness. Some of them we've already talked about—the idea that ADHD is different than overexcitability. We have to stop saying this. Again, overexcitability is a broad construct, and it encompasses the hyperactivity and the inattention and the impulsivity that we see in ADHD. So yeah, that's a big one to my mind. It's very important to me as somebody who identifies as being ADHD. I want people with ADHD to investigate Dąbrowski, and to look into positive disintegration. I believe that they're going to recognize themselves just like gifted people do when they come to this theory.

The next one is that overexcitability can be used to identify giftedness. It makes sense because when you examine the history of overexcitability in gifted ed, this was a big area of research in the 90s. Especially there were many dissertations, and Cheryl Ackerman is one researcher who really investigated this.

The outcome was that overexcitability is not a reliable way to identify giftedness because it's not only for the gifted. Research—the whole point of it is to figure these things out. So, that was



figured out, but a paper just came out last year that suggests that we could use overexcitability to identify the highly and profoundly gifted. And that is just not true. There's no reason to think that we should be using overexcitability to identify the highly and profoundly gifted, especially when the only type of overexcitability that clearly correlates with that population is intellectual. The research that we've examined at the Gifted Development Center shows that there's only one type of overexcitability that clearly increases in strength with intelligence, and it's intellectual. The other four—there's not a meaningful difference there. You can have it at lower levels of IQ, too. This even gets into the issue of IQ and giftedness. It's a whole path that we don't want to go down in this episode.

**Emma:** It seems though that using a perfectly good tool for something it's not intended to do, and then complaining that the tool's no good. For some reason, I've got this mental image, you can't find your screwdriver. So, you grab a butter knife to try and undo a screw. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, and you bend your knife, and you go, "Well, the knife is useless, it doesn't work." It's like, yeah, you're supposed to use it to cut things, not to remove screws. And it's like, you're just complaining about—you've got a tool that's not meant for that purpose. And then bitching it doesn't do that purpose it's not built to do.

**Chris:** Yes. Absolutely. We want people to stop thinking of overexcitability as connected to gifted. Open your mind. Think of it more in terms of positive disintegration or even neurodivergence. We're going to write a paper following up on this presentation to try and catch this in the literature and say, hey. Because there's no place right now where this has been really made clear except in my own work that has come out this year. I'm glad that we're getting a chance to talk about it here, but it also needs to be a part of the gifted literature.

The next one that comes to mind for me, when it comes to myths and misunderstandings, is the idea that overexcitability can only be understood within the context of the theory. You can understand overexcitability and not know anything else about Dąbrowski theory. However, that's not recommended. Because Dąbrowski's theory is meant to be an alternative framework to mainstream psychiatry or psychology, then overexcitability is also an alternative. When we are identifying with overexcitability, we're choosing to be more positive in our view about these challenges. We're not trying to pathologize or look at it from a deficit perspective. And you can just see, just now, while I'm trying to talk about some of these myths and misunderstandings, it's complicated.

**Emma:** You've got a point that overexcitability is probably a gateway. I've seen it as, it's the thing that people can identify with. People who have got overexcitability, they're going to read a checklist or a table of traits, and in 15 minutes they'll either identify with it and probably be in tears because they've finally got an answer to who they are, or they won't. But that's the stepping stone for me, and that's certainly my journey with it—I understood and resonated with overexcitabilities first, and then was able to follow the path down to theory of positive disintegration.

People can understand the concept of the wheel without understanding how a car works. It's just more beneficial to know that there's a mode of transportation called a car because it will take you a lot further than just rolling along with a wheel. I think you're right, the two do go hand-in-hand, but I don't see why, if there's benefit in people being able to easily grasp overexcitability, why they shouldn't have access to that at first

**Chris:** That's right. I think that there's only really one other—I don't know, it's not really a myth, exactly. But there was a session at NAGC where they were, interestingly—it was from the people who claim that overexcitability and openness are really the same, and they referred to it as overexcitability theory in their description, which bugs me. Because there is no theory of overexcitabilities. It's the theory of positive disintegration. There is no overexcitability theory, and openness and overexcitability are not the same. They are not. And there will be more on this in the future. But I think that's a good start when it comes to the myths and misunderstandings—these are the big ones.

**Emma:** As our resident expert and someone who is researching actively into overexcitability, if we go back to our butter knife and the screw analogy, how would you recommend that people take the butter knife of overexcitability and actually use it properly?

**Chris:** That's a good question. Honestly, we have to really think about the appropriate application of overexcitability, and how we want to use it. And we need more study. That's very clear to me. I hope more graduate students especially are going to be interested in doing dissertations that explore the aspects of overexcitability that have been so far unexplored. I mean, there are a lot of things that Dąbrowski said about overexcitability that nobody's ever checked or investigated. There's plenty to work with, but when it comes to using it appropriately, I encourage people to use it as an alternative to the medical model. That's what I do.

That's how we live here in my house. My son and I both are ADHDers and gifted. We don't think of this difference that we have, in which we hyperfocus on our interest almost to the detriment of other things, or are inattentive and spacey or dreamy—we don't look at these as negatives. We look at these from a different perspective. We operate differently. The world is not built for us. We accept this as who we are, and we are learning ways around that, or ways to live with it. I think that this theory gives us a new framework for understanding these differences without seeing them as something that's wrong with us.

That's what Dąbrowski wanted. His major thesis was that psychoneurosis is not an illness. He was right. The fact that we're different, the fact that we do react too strongly. Yeah, it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with us. We're not broken.

**Emma:** Changing your perspective on yourself like that is a very powerful thing for individuals, and even how it changes the way you view and relate in your relationships with other people. I know for me, it's helped me get a bit of handle on who I am, but it's also helped me understand

the different ways in how I interact with other people, and how I could be abrasive, or I could be frustrating. It's helped me have smoother, better relationships with people because I'm more conscious of how I am. And rather than beat myself up for being an oddball or I did something wrong. I offended someone. Just understanding that not only helps you mitigate it in the first place, but helps you be more forgiving with yourself when things do go pear shaped.

**Chris:** That's right. Actually you just made me think of families. Many clinicians that I know use overexcitability in their practice as therapists. When they're working with a family, they say, "Okay, let's look at how the overexcitabilities in this family are different. Maybe dad is very intellectual with a kid who's very emotional." When you look at the overexcitability makeup of the different members of a family, especially a gifted family, you're going to have a better understanding of some of the conflicts that you have in certain relationships, or maybe why it's harder to connect between this parent and child or these siblings. It's very useful when it comes to understanding our makeup within a family.

**Emma:** I think that's probably one of the best reasons to continue to study it is if it makes people's life easier, and it makes it easier for people to have better relationships with their loved ones. What could be a more worthy goal?

**Chris:** That's right.

**Emma:** Thanks, Chris. I think that's a lovely note to end on.

**Chris:** I agree. Thank you, Emma. I think that this was an important topic for us to really delve into. So, I appreciate you.

**Emma:** Me, too. I feel the same. I appreciate you, and I appreciate all your expertise as well.

**Chris:** In the show notes, we're going to link to my chapter with Michael that I mentioned, "Reexamining Overexcitability: A Framework for Understanding Intense Experience." It was in the Cross & Cross *Handbook for Counselors Serving Students with Gifts & Talents*. And we're also going to link to my paper with Frank Falk called "The Origins and Conceptual Evolution of Overexcitability." We're also going to link to Emma's blog or Emma's website, Tragic Gift, is a resource for people who are interested in this. I also want to link to Michael's book, "*Mellow Out*" They Say. *If I Only Could. Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright*. That is where I got the table of manifestations that I shared during this episode.

Michael's book, *Mellow Out* is the best book to read when it comes to understanding overexcitability, in my opinion. I love it. I've read it many times. I can't recommend it highly

enough and it's cheaper from the publisher than anywhere else. So, that's worth noting. And then Michael was co-editor with Susan Daniels on *Living with Intensity*. That is another book that people find very useful in understanding themselves in overexcitability. So I think that those are the big resources.

**Emma:** Cool. So, that's an awesome list of resources, and we'll link those in the show notes. Thanks, Chris, once again for being on the podcast and giving our listeners such valuable information. That's all we have time for—we're at the end of our show. If you'd like to contact us, you can do so on social media, through Twitter and Instagram on Positive Disintegration Podcast, or at Gmail at [positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com](mailto:positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com). Until next time, thanks for listening, and keep walking the path of your authentic personality.