

Criteria for Rating
the Intensity
of
Overexcitabilities

Second Edition

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CRITERIA FOR RATING THE INTENSITY OF OVEREXCITABILITIES

Nadpobudliwość is a Polish word that means to be superstimulated. This has been translated into English as overexcitability (OE). The term overexcitability was chosen to convey the idea of a special kind of excitability, one that is enhanced and distinguished by characteristic forms of expression. Only when the expressions of excitability are above and beyond what is considered common or average do they make a significant contribution to development. OE's are assumed to be innate tendencies which appear in five forms: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. As innate modes of experiencing, OEs may be thought of as original equipment. Overexcitabilities represent exceptional responsiveness to both the external world and the inner world of the individual. The difference in OE intensity and sensitivity is not only of greater than normal excitability, it is also in the very quality of experience.

¹**Psychomotor Overexcitability (P)** may be viewed as an organic excess of energy or heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system. It may manifest itself as a love of movement for its own sake, rapid speech, pursuit of intense physical activity, impulsiveness, pressure for action, drive, or the capacity for being otherwise active and energetic. Examples of psychomotor OE are illustrated in the responses below.

When I am around my friends, I usually come up with so much energy I don't know where it came from. Also when I am bored, I get sudden urges and lots of energy that can be dealt with by doing a physical sport or activity such as bike riding, jogging, walking, or playing basketball. Sometimes during class (it happens quite often) I get bored because I understand what is being taught, and get a lot of energy. This energy is used to goof off, even though I know I shouldn't. The energy seems to just swell up inside me, then just flows over. Honestly, some classes are boring and I wish those who understand could go ahead and work, then maybe I wouldn't use my energy so harmfully. (Female, age 13)

[I have the greatest urge to do something] mainly when I haven't been doing anything. Like when I've been doing a long homework assignment or sitting typing more of my book I suddenly get the urge to shoot some baskets or bike ride or something. Usually I just get up and walk around for a while if I'm really in need of finishing my homework. If not I usually go outside and let my dog chase me around for a while. (Male, age 15)

Sensual Overexcitability (S) denotes a sensory aliveness and heightened capacity for sensual enjoyment. It finds expression in heightened experiencing of pleasure through touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound, as well as in seeking sensual outlets for emotional tensions. Sensual overexcitability is also manifested as a desire for comfort, luxury or aesthetic delights; it includes the pleasure derived from being admired or being in the limelight. It may also manifest itself as intense sexuality. Sensual outlets of emotional tension include overeating, shopping sprees, and other forms of self-indulgence to soothe oneself. Sensual OE may also demonstrate itself as extreme sensitivity, and sometimes irritation, to sensory input. Examples include:

I love to have something that tastes good in my mouth. I just really enjoy good tasting things. If I taste something I like I can't stop eating it. (Male, age 14)

[What kind of physical activity (or inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?] If I said sex would you die laughing or just be shocked? (Female, age 16)

[Is tasting something very special to you?] Yes, it is. Maybe that's why I'm so "picky." Taste depends on flavor, texture, consistency, smell, color and appearance. Beans are so gross! They are just there, they don't do anything for you. Whipped potatoes in butter—they are fun! You can do anything with them! Not that food has to be fun—simply being good in flavor is all right, too! (I don't mean to sound like a jell-o commercial. Watch it shimmer!). (Female, age 16)

Intellectual Overexcitability (T) is an intensified activity of the mind. Its strongest expressions, such as persistence in asking probing questions, avidity for knowledge and analysis, preoccupation with logic and theoretical problems, have more to do with striving for understanding and truth than with academic learning and

¹ From: Piechowski, M. M. & Colangelo, N. (1984). Developmental potential of the gifted. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 28, 80-88.

achievement. Other expressions are: a sharp sense of observation, independence of thought (often expressed in criticism), symbolic thinking, development of new concepts, striving for synthesis of knowledge, and a desire to search for knowledge and truth. Examples include:

I can't resist math puzzles, or brain teasers of any kind, and I go to ridiculous lengths to figure them out. When I'm being sensible I know they're a waste of time, but I can't see one without working it out. I guess I'm conceited—I don't like to think that there is anything I can't figure out. My favorite puzzles are the logic puzzles in which they give a set of facts that must be combined in order to find the answer. (Female, age 16)

Yes. [I think about my own thinking,] sometimes I get a long line of thinking and I go back and trace from where I started, and usually it is from the most insignificant thing, or, I am appalled at how I have compared something. (Male, age 14)

I don't very often [catch myself seeing or imagining things that aren't really there]. Instead, I analyze things that are there in different ways. I read stories deeper, read into questions, find catchy puns or mistakes of words in people's writings, etc. If something has no meaning I try to give it some. If it means something I wonder why. I usually find when given a topic to write about, for example, I usually have a completely different approach to the same topic than does the rest of the class. (Male, age 16)

Imaginational Overexcitability (M) is the capacity for free play of the imagination and creative vision. It is recognized through rich association of images and impressions (real or imagined), inventiveness, vivid and often animated visualization, use of image and metaphor in speaking and writing, attraction to the unusual, and the like. Dreams are vivid and can be retold in detail. Daydreaming, distractibility, predilection for fairy tales, magical thinking, imaginary companions, love of fantasy, poetic creations, dramatizing to escape boredom, or a taste for the absurd and surreal, are also characteristic expressions of Imaginational OE. Examples include:

I like to think about things not too many people do. Like what will fire hydrants look like in the future. Sometimes I used to pretend I had a little brother or sister, or I would imagine myself in a rabbit hole watching thousands of wild horses galloping over me. (Female, age 13)

I also have one [fantasy] in which I can get inside people's heads to see what "makes them go" or can make everything and anyone freeze in their tracks (everyone except me) so I can go around and see what they are doing. (Male, age 15)

In a real event, if it does not particularly interest me, I only see a few highlights. If it is a real event that terrifically interests me I only see the main highlights and supporting detail. I do this a lot. I also take real events and change them around in my imagination to make them appeal more to me. (Male, age 15)

Emotional Overexcitability (E) is the heightened intensity of positive and negative feelings. It is recognized in the way emotional relationships are experienced; in strong attachments to persons, living things or places; in the great intensity of feelings and emotions; and in an awareness of the full range of emotions. Characteristic expressions are: inhibition (timidity and shyness); enthusiasm; emotionality; compassion and understanding of others; strong affective recall of past experiences; concern with death, fears, anxieties, and depression; and occasional feelings of unreality. Intense loneliness may be combined with an intense desire to offer love or a deep concern for others. Intrapersonal and interpersonal feeling achieves a high degree of differentiation. Examples of emotional OE are as follows:

When I kill a fly or an ant or any other insect, I suddenly get a feeling like, "Should I have done that? That's really just like going and killing a human being. I bet the animals have their own life, feelings, they must because they are really very intelligent." The next time a fly gets in the way, I usually just let it go, because I feel guilty. (Female, age 13)

I spend my time writing poetry once in a while. Every time I write a poem, it comes out as a poem about someone I love, something that won't always be around or something special to me. Sometime I write of sad things to take the hurt out of me. I can never write poetry unless it is something very special to me. (Male, age 13)

[If you ask yourself, "Who am I" what is the answer?] Usually the answer is: an insignificant human speck in the vast universe trying to make something out of itself but will probably not succeed. A biological imperfect being destined for certain death in the end and being forgotten even though it attempted to make something of itself. But sometimes I get

an irrational response: You are a perfect intelligence. You are destined to become a powerful person. This response sometimes scares me. (Male, age 15)

Expressions of overexcitability vary in the degree of intensity and the extent of elaboration. A guide to identifying OEs is presented in Table 1, Forms and Expressions of Psychic Overexcitability. Although this list is not exhaustive, it presents a set of criteria by which to identify expressions of overexcitability. It also provides a guide from which one can extrapolate. After identifying an OE, one then decides which level of intensity to assign.

OE Intensities

OE Intensity 1

- A mention of at least one of the listed criteria (within the appropriate context) listed in Table I.
- Possibility of an OE, but not enough information.
- Occasional occurrence of a listed criterion, but no evidence that this is characteristic of the person's behavior.
- No elaboration.
- No scope.
- No adjectives or adverbs indicating strength.

OE Intensity 2

- A clear example of one of the listed criteria (within the appropriate context) listed in Table I.
- OE appears to be characteristic of the person's behavior.
- Some strength evidenced by elaboration or scope or use of modifiers such as "very," "frequently," "deeply."
- Use of typographical forms for emphasis—such as underlining, exclamation mark, capitalization.

OE Intensity 3

- Close to a perfect example of an OE from Table I.
- Very elaborate or very intense response.
- Scope evidenced by the person indicating 2 or more areas in which the OE is manifested.
- Use of frequent or strong modifiers, e.g., "intensely," "extremely."
- Use of strong verbs or phrases, e.g., "agonized," "I longed for...," "an overpowering feeling."
- In the case of imaginational OE, unique picturesque language or use of uncommon metaphors.

Levels of Intensity of P

P1: "The best physical activity is climbing ropes at school" (female, age 9).

P2: "I feel active after lunch. I run around a lot right after lunch" (male, age 9).

P3: "I feel the most energy when I am about to go swimming, feel as I could go on forever and make higher limits" (female, age 11).

The P1 example reports an occasional energetic exercise; P2—a regularly arising surge of energy and impulse to discharge it physically; P3—an intense drive.

Levels of Intensity of S

S1: "I like to taste things, it's sort of fun" (male, age 11).

S2: "[Taste is special] when I taste my favorite food—lobster. It tastes luscious and juicy" (male, age 9).

S3: "[Taste is] an intensely pleasurable, full, and overpowering sensation—it's really impossible for me to say in what way—I can't seem to put it in words" (adult male).

In S1 the enjoyment of taste is merely present not elaborate or intense. In S2 the description is richer and more vivid. S3 is more elaborate, intense, and describes a pervasive characteristic.

Levels of Intensity of T

T1: "During tests I think about how and what's going on inside my head" (male, age 11).

T2: "I think about my thoughts being different from other people's thoughts and I wonder what they think and how they 'word' it" (male, age 13).

T3: "I think I'm about the only kid who loves to ask questions. I mean...that's my life! Questions, questions, and when I finally get all those questions answered, it's put together, and it's like a puzzle and all the pieces have been put together and it looks decent" (female, age 13).

T1 expresses curiosity about one's thinking in a very limited context. In T2 the scope of intellectual curiosity and awareness of one's thought processes is much greater. In T3 curiosity and pursuit of knowledge are expressed with great intensity.

Levels of Intensity of M

M1: "My daydream is to become an astronaut" (female, age 9).

M2: "I daydream about time machines and where I would go in them" (male, age 13).

M3: "I like to dream about different countries, places that I make up, even animals that I make up. Just anything that is unusual to me" (female, age 13).

In M1 the daydream occurs within the bounds of physical reality. In M2 these bounds are freely transcended. In M3 the examples are varied and an imaginary reality is created.

Levels of intensity of E

- E1: "I feel really high when I play football with my friends" (male, age 13).
- E2: "I often feel very happy. When I ride my bike I feel a special kind of pride. I have the same feeling when the Broncos win, or when the snow is falling outside" (male, age 13).
- E3: "When I feel really happy I feel like nothing can go wrong for the rest of my life...When I am really happy it is more so than other people I know. When I am quite happy I am so high it seems like nothing could ever get me into a bad mood" (male, age 13).

In E1 intensification of feeling is somewhat superficial. In E2 the feelings are deeper, quietly spontaneous and evoked by quite dissimilar occasions. In E3 the feelings are very intense and there is an awareness that this intensity of feeling makes him different from other people.

Coding Guidelines

1. All five OEs may be at times identified and coded in the response to one question.
2. Code the response to each question separately.
3. You must be able to point to a specific word or phrase in an answer and point to the specific form and expression in the coding manual. Point to the example, point to the code book.
4. Underline the word or phrase you are coding on the questionnaire. Place a note in the margin indicating the OE.
5. A specific word or phrase may be used only for one OE.
6. Code a word, phrase, or expression within the context of the single answer. Avoid using the question as the context unless it is absolutely necessary.
 - a. Avoid rating the context when it is a restatement of the question.
 - b. Do not rate the context higher than the word or phrase being rated.
7. Avoid using intuition or personal experience to interpret a response.
8. Avoid reading your own strong overexcitabilities into a response, that is, don't take your experiencing for granted and underrate the strength of the OE in the response.
9. Find the type of OE (P, S, M, T, or E) before rating the intensity.
10. Look for internal locus—don't score if behavior is conforming or commonplace.
11. If not certain, give it a 1.
 - 0 = no indication that OE is present—seems mundane or in no way indicative
 - 1 = may be at times identified and coded
 - 2 = sure it is characteristic of the person
 - 3 = wow, extreme example
12. For a short, unelaborate list of five or less items relating to one OE, give a 1 (i.e., "I play basketball, football and soccer." or "I like soccer. I play hockey. I swim once in a while.")
13. Remember a verb doesn't always mean what it says (i.e. "love" can mean "like")
14. Don't use a descriptor from Table 1 out of context—i.e. Not just a positive feeling, but an intensified positive feeling, or not just detailed planning, but detailed planning as part of intensified activity of the mind, or independence of reflective thought, not just stubbornness

Table 1
FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF OVEREXCITABILITY²

PSYCHOMOTOR

Surplus of energy

rapid speech, intense physical activity (fast games and sports),
pressure for action (organizing), competitiveness

Psychomotor expression of emotional tension

compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions,
nervous habits (tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out

SENSUAL

Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure

seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing; delight in beautiful
objects, sounds of words, music, form, color, balance

Sensual expression of emotional tension

overeating, shopping sprees, wanting to be in the limelight

INTELLECTUAL

Intensified activity of the mind

thirst for knowledge, curiosity, sustained concentration, avid reading,
keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning,
passion for precision

Penchant for probing questions and problem solving

search for truth and understanding, tenacity in problem solving

Reflective thought

thinking about thinking; love of theory, analysis, and logic;
moral thinking; independence of thought (sometimes very critical)

IMAGINATIONAL

Free play of the imagination

frequent use of image and metaphor, rich invention and fantasy,
detailed visualization, animistic and magical thinking

Capacity for living in a world of imagination

predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds,
imaginary companions; dramatization

Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension

² From: Piechowski, 2014, p. 28

catastrophizing, elaborate dreams, phantasms
Low tolerance of boredom
need for novelty

EMOTIONAL

Feelings and emotions intensified

extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings,
identification with others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of
feelings

Strong somatic expressions

tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart,
sweaty palms

Strong affective expressions

inhibition (shyness); enthusiasm, ecstasy, euphoria, pride; strong
affective memory; shame; feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties,
feelings of guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships

strong emotional ties and attachments to persons, living things, places;
attachments to animals; difficulty adjusting to new environments;
compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships;
loneliness

Well-differentiated feelings toward self

inner dialogue and self-judgment

Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) Items

(K. Lysy and M. Piechowski, 1983)

1. Do you ever feel really high, ecstatic, or incredibly happy? Describe your feelings.
2. What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure?
3. What is your special kind of daydreams and fantasies?
4. What kinds of things get your mind going?
5. When do you feel the most energy and what do you do with it?
6. In what manner do you observe and analyze others?
7. How do you act when you get excited?
8. How precisely can you visualize events, real or imaginary?
9. What do you like to concentrate on most?
10. What kind of physical activity (or inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?
11. Is tasting something very special to you? Describe in what way it is special.
12. Do you ever catch yourself seeing, hearing, or imagining things that aren't really there?
Give examples.
13. Do you ever think about your own thinking? Describe.
14. When do you feel the greatest urge to do something?
15. Does it ever appear to you that the things around you may have a life of their own, and that plants, animals and all things in nature have their own feelings? Give examples.
16. If you come across a difficult idea or concept, how does it become clear to you?
Describe what goes on in your head in this case.
17. Are you poetically inclined? If so, give an example of what comes to mind when you are in a poetic mood.
18. How often do you carry on arguments in your head? What sorts of subjects are these arguments about?
19. If you ask yourself "Who am I," what is the answer?
20. When you read a book, what attracts your attention the most?
21. Describe what you do when you are just fooling around?

Overexcitability Questionnaire—Short Form

1. Do you ever feel really high, ecstatic, and incredibly happy? Describe your feelings.
2. What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure?
3. What are your special kinds of daydreams and fantasies?
4. What kinds of things get your mind going?
5. When do you feel the most energy and what do you do with it?
6. How do you act when you get excited?
7. What kind of physical activity (or inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?
8. Is tasting something very special to you? Describe in what way it is special.
9. Do you ever catch yourself seeing, hearing, imagining things that aren't really there? Give examples.
10. When do you feel the greatest urge to do something?
11. If you come across a difficult idea or concept, how does it become clear to you? Describe what goes on in your head.
12. Describe what you do when you are just fooling around.

Adapted by Cheryl M. Ackerman & Nancy B. Miller, 1997

Coding Procedures

- Use ink
- Remember:
 - Your name
 - OEQ subject number (e.g., 18-800, GR-11)
 - Use this coding order: P S M T E
- Write on the OEQ questionnaire, then transfer information (i.e., P2, T3) to the coding sheets
- Call a colleague if you are stumped
- Return only the coding sheets to the researcher
- Retain OEQ with scores
- Deadlines are vital. If you know you cannot get it done, send them, uncoded, back to the researcher
- Save one blank coding sheet as your master

Calculating Consensus Score

Using the consensus scoring sheet, enter both coders' scores for each item and OE.

If coders are physically together, discuss and determine a consensus score.

If coders are physically separated, calculate the mean of the two scores as the consensus.

Calculate the total for each OE by adding the intensity scores.

Save one blank coding sheet as your master.

OEQ Coding Form

Coder: _____

< Coding Sequence: P S M T E >

| Subject Number | Subject Number | OEQ Question Number | Subject Number | Subject Number |
|----------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | | 1 | | |
| | | 2 | | |
| | | 3 | | |
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