

# POWERWOOD



*... happily unique ...*

**Intense?**

**Sensitive?**

**Over-anxious?**

**Easily overwhelmed?**

**Reacts out of proportion?**

**Puzzled or worried**

**about your child or teenager?**

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**PowerWood raises awareness about and supports families and individuals living with intensity, super-sensitivity and hyper-reactivity**

## EXPERIENCE LIFE DIFFERENTLY?

Do you know someone who seems to experience life differently from everyone else? Who seems hypersensitive, appears to overreact to everyday situations, and who generally seems to experience life more intensely than other people? There's a good chance you do, because one in five people have this combination of 'OE' personality traits.

Although 'OE' is a shortening of what psychologists refer to as 'overexcitability', at PowerWood we prefer to use 'OE' because these innate traits can be very different from what would normally be described as 'overexcitable'.

The leading twentieth century psychologist and psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski identified five types of OE: Emotional, Imaginational, Sensual, Intellectual and Psychomotor.

An individual may possess aspects of one or several of these. It is not about ticking all the boxes but about the extent and intensity of the experiences.

### Emotional OE

People with emotional OE experience complex emotions and intense feelings, both positive and negative. Being overwhelmed by intense emotions and not yet knowing how to be in charge of yourself and your extreme sensitivity can be quite daunting. However, emotional OE can be a real asset - people who have this trait will also have the drive to improve themselves and the world.

### Characteristics - Emotional OE

- Can develop deep emotional bonds with family, friends, animals, places and things
- Often feel what others feel, and are deeply affected by those feelings

*"Experiencing the world in this unique way carries with it great joys and sometimes great frustrations. The joys and positives of being OE need to be celebrated. Any frustrations or negatives can be positively dealt with and used to help facilitate the child's growth." (Lind, 2001)*



*One mother described how, as she was driving hurriedly, her daughter cried, "Stop! Slow down!" When the mother asked why, the daughter replied, "We're killing bugs on the windshield, and I've already seen too much death for my age!" (Webb et al, 2005).*

- Are usually compassionate, empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others. Tend to put others' feelings above their own needs
- May respond physically to emotions, such as anxiety-induced headaches or stomach aches
- Worry about their behaviour in relationships and the well-being of the important people in their life
- May idealistically want to help others or animals

### **Challenges - Emotional OE**

- Can seem to be overreacting with disproportionate tantrums, or may hide their sensitivity to protect themselves and become extremely withdrawn
- Might be very self-critical and can experience feelings of inadequacy and inferiority
- Have a strong need for depth and intensity in friendships and relationships, which can cause them to overstep others' boundaries. They can feel lonely and are prone to being excluded (bullied). They might mourn for months when a new friend at school doesn't want to play with them anymore
- Often have difficulty adjusting to new environments and with change generally
- Can overreact to losing at games
- If they feel a certain emotion they think that it will last forever
- Can be sad and deeply disappointed when they realise that not everybody feels so passionately
- Being overwhelmed by intense emotions and not yet knowing how to be in charge of yourself and your extreme sensitivity can be quite daunting
- Is sometimes mistaken for anxiety and depression related disorders.

*“When we bought our house I brought our daughter, nine at the time with me to the bank to discuss all the different mortgage models, which she understood and had profound talks about with the bank employee. When we finally found our house and decided this one we want, she threw a huge tantrum there and then, she didn't want us to buy the house. She was on the floor unable to stop herself shouting, hitting and kicking. It took me two days of talking to calm her down and get clear she was afraid we would die and she would be left with a huge debt.”*



*“When the goldfish died his grief about the dog resurfaced for weeks.”*

## **Imaginational OE**

People with imaginational OE are the creative source of all new inventions and future solutions for world problems. They can use their creativity to provide a safe space to soothe themselves.

### **Characteristics - Imaginational OE**

- Have a rich imaginative life which they often prefer to real life
- When introverted they can be completely content to focus on their own inside world
- When extroverted they might focus on engaging others in their imaginary dramatic ideas, telling them exactly how the created complex games have to be played
- Might mix truth and fiction
- Talk and share with their pets or trees, or may have an imaginary friend
- Love to daydream extensively, are magical thinkers

*“Elizabeth (8) saw her mother in her imagination, covered in blood, and was so scared she didn’t dare to go to sleep. I told her she was the boss of her imagination and that she could change the blood into anything she liked. The next time I saw her, she told me happily she had changed the blood into red balloons.”*



### **Challenges - Imaginational OE**

- May create bleak and scary imaginative worlds
- Are mostly visual-spatial learners. At a certain moment they just ‘get’ something and often can’t explain how they got there, which can make school and exams in particular a real challenge
- May worry excessively and experience high levels of anxiety
- Have a high need for stimulation so may be easily bored
- Might have trouble relaxing and/or falling asleep, and be prone to nightmares or night terrors
- When combined with emotional OE, children might become overwhelmed by worry about future events, such as what will happen when a parent dies or even how they will remember to do their homework correctly
- Getting the attention of children with Imaginational OE can be very difficult. This lack of attention can be seen as disrespectful in the class setting and might be viewed as poor behaviour, or in some cases as a characteristic of Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder or Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

*“At night just before falling asleep Nathan feels completely overwhelmed and he tries to postpone going to bed until he’s exhausted.”*

## **Sensual OE**

People with sensual OE are extremely sensitive to what they see, hear, smell, taste and/or touch. This sensitivity can be very challenging, but it can also make it possible to enjoy life to the fullest.

### **Characteristics - Sensual OE**

- May get extreme pleasure from or hate certain foods, sounds, textures, smells etc
- May dislike tags in their clothes or want to wear clothes inside out to prevent feeling the seams
- Can derive intense enjoyment from their ability to appreciate nature, art, music and food on a completely different level
- Can be overwhelmed by what they see, hear, smell, taste and touch
- May want to be the centre of attention
- Can be very responsive to touch

### **Challenges - Sensual OE**

- Children are often seen as overreacting when they try to avoid overstimulation and seek soothing experiences
- Might want to touch people at inappropriate moments
- Sometimes cannot cope with being touched themselves
- Can be overwhelmed by noise and want to avoid busy places
- May have difficulty concentrating when a lamp is flickering or when certain music is playing, or the opposite might be true - they may need a particular stimulus, such as music, to be able to concentrate
- May be inclined to develop eating disorders or addictions
- Sometimes mistaken for Autistic Spectrum Disorder or Sensory Processing Disorder.

*“My son hated shoes and always managed to sneakily leave them at petrol stations when we were on long journeys – he knew we wouldn’t discover they were missing until the next stop, and that we wouldn’t go back for them. He would then have a chance of being without shoes for a few days.”*



*“When my child feels tense she needs to chew on something to sooth herself.”*

*“My son refuses to go in other people’s cars as they smell and feel strange.”*

*“Sarah hates playing in the sandpit because of the feel of wet sand.”*

## Intellectual OE

People with intellectual OE have a deep need for the truth, a thirst for knowledge and a strong sense of fairness. Intellectual OE is the basis of all independent research and organisations that stand up for minorities.

### Characteristics - Intellectual OE

- Are curious, like new ideas, and can ponder over them for hours on their own
- Have a strong sense of justice and think a lot about related moral issues
- Enjoy solving problems and mental puzzles
- Need to get to the bottom of things and really understand why
- Often aim for perfection
- Rarely accept 'because I say so' as an answer
- Are able to concentrate and put effort into obtaining the information they want



### Challenges - Intellectual OE

- Sometimes cannot stop asking questions, even if it is against social convention
- Can be very argumentative and critical, and turn every conversation into a battlefield
- Their drive to understand is high and their mind never stops questioning, which others (eg teachers, peers) might find challenging
- Can be very focused on one specific subject for a long time, which can be seen mistakenly as a characteristic of Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- Enjoy detailed planning, eg for a game, and can be very disappointed when other children don't appreciate their ideas or want to follow their rules
- Can have difficulty with authority
- Is sometimes mistaken for Autistic Spectrum Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

*"A boy, 10 years old, looked at the women in the elevator. He tried to hold back, but blurted out just before the elevator reached the ground floor: "Madam, why do you have only one leg?"*

*"Joseph can never let go, he will have so many arguments that support his cause and never stops talking. I know I shouldn't, but sometimes when I'm knackered I just give in."*

*"When Reece was into castles, he built one, read many books about it, it was his favourite topic to talk about and wanted to visit one specific castle in York, miles away from us, and we ended up going."*

## **Psychomotor OE**

People with psychomotor OE have an enormous amount of energy. This energy is especially beneficial later in life as it can be directed towards achieving goals.

### **Characteristics Psychomotor OE**

- Need to engage in physical activities, liking to move, dance, run, climb, play-fight etc
- Have difficulty sitting still and concentrating when not interested
- Often express strong enthusiasm when engaged
- Might talk rapidly and excessively
- May fidget a lot
- Might enjoy engaging in adrenaline-stimulating activities

### **Challenges - Psychomotor OE**

- Might be restless and need to move in order to focus, which could be difficult in a classroom setting
- Might be compulsive talkers or organisers
- Might develop tics such as nail biting, hair pulling, skin scratching
- Can be very impulsive
- Can become extremely competitive
- If a child with psychomotor OE enters the room, the energy changes and their presence can be disturbing to the routine
- Sometimes seen as a characteristic of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or mistaken for Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder.



*“She has to move constantly, even when mum is reading her favourite book to her.”*

*“Oliver (7) can’t sit still. During dinner he runs between the table and the cupboard, the fridge and the toys in the other room; he hardly touches his chair, while talking all the time. The more intense his behaviour gets, the more his parents get stressed, the more Oliver moves and talks.”*

*“When Louise is nervous she starts babbling and talks so rapidly that it’s hard to understand what she is saying.”*

*“When she is anxious about her homework she is scratching her scalp until it bleeds.”*

## WHAT IS DIFFERENT?

The nervous systems of people with OE are both more sensitive, and more responsive, to stimuli. Having this increased sensitivity, awareness and intensity makes a real difference to how life is experienced. OE personality traits can bring above-average energy, pleasure, enjoyment, creativity, interests and empathy, as well as a deep sense of justice and an urge to make the world a better place for everyone. However, 2-4% of people experience OE in a way that brings challenges to ordinary family or personal life. People with OE often experience asynchronous development, high-ability, twice-exceptionality (high-ability combined with a learning difficulty eg dyslexia) and sometimes sensory processing and anxiety-related issues.

Unless it is recognised, appreciated and supported, OE can severely impact quality of life. Even at a young age, affected children and teenagers can become extremely unhappy, display symptoms commonly associated with depression and even express suicidal thoughts.

## PARENTING DIFFERENTLY

Parents of children and teenagers who have OE often feel isolated, and worry about their child's behaviour. They have usually tried many parenting techniques, which haven't worked, and may be at their wits' end. Often parents blame themselves, and unfortunately their social environment may also blame them for their child's behaviour. It is important for people to know that these children and teenagers need a different style of parenting, teaching and counselling.

*"I appreciated that you understood my situation and I definitely felt supported and in a trusting space where I could say whatever I wanted as I released my own pent up emotions. ... I felt much happier and lighter at the end of the session. I felt a sense of being empowered."*



*"I feel closer to my child today through a better understanding of his behaviour."*

*"I would like to say how hugely helpful and supportive Simone has been in moving me forward with strategies to help me and my daughter when situations become difficult. The service I received was warm, understanding and friendly."*

## UNDERSTANDING

The behaviour of children and teenagers with OE may be inappropriate or challenging, and they are often misunderstood and sometimes misdiagnosed. Sometimes parents and individuals worry about mental health issues. If their child has received a diagnosis, they may wonder if it covers what is actually going on.

Individuals with OE often feel different and may struggle to adapt to or rebel against the social environment. It is helpful for individuals to understand where their intensity stems from and to know how such intensity is shared by others. They need to learn how to deal constructively with the anxiety, frustration, self-doubt and maybe even self-loathing that can accompany their OE.

## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

PowerWood organises all kinds of activities to support children who have OE and their families.

PowerWood is a growing community which raises awareness about OE and offers information and validation, together with tools and strategies for living positively with OE.

We provide a variety of fun and educational events including workshops, individual family support, free informal meetings with a professional, celebrations and - the highlight of our year - the PowerWood Camp.

You can also get involved as a volunteer and contribute to the goals of PowerWood while being part of a supportive and understanding community.

*“We had tried all sorts of approaches and techniques to help our son manage his behaviour but nothing really worked for any length of time. It was easy to blame ourselves for his behaviour and we felt others did too. Simone really helped to ease that burden of guilt, showing us that children like our son need a different parenting style in order for them to be both happy and responsible members of society.”*



*“I found the session a huge relief, felt I had been carrying a burden and it was so good to talk to someone who understood that I wanted to change things for the better.”*

## EMPOWERING PARENTS

A key aim of PowerWood is to empower parents by acknowledging that it is not always easy to raise children with OE. We support parents to help their children understand and be in charge of their own emotions and behaviour. We provide strategies that make challenging situations more manageable, build greater communication and improve family dynamics.



## CONFIDENT AND POSITIVE

Research into the impact of PowerWood shows that parents feel more confident dealing positively with OE and challenging situations after attending PowerWood events. Children and teenagers involved with PowerWood develop an improved self-image and make social connections, sometimes for the first time in their lives. These positive effects empower individuals and make them part of a growing, understanding, and supportive community.

*“Attending the PowerWood workshop has been a transformation experience for our family. It gave us the opportunity to see that our son's intense and excitable behaviour wasn't a problem to be battled or controlled, but something to be nurtured. We appreciate his intensity and have learnt how to help him cope with his often intense and overwhelming feelings ... I couldn't recommend this workshop enough for anyone who feels they or members of their family might be have OE. Simone is amazingly supportive and generous with her knowledge and skills - and most importantly creates a space that is non-judgmental and kind.”*

*"I felt validated, heard and empowered."*



## ‘THE GIFT’

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) was a brilliantly creative and humane psychologist who conceived what is now credited to be the personality theory of the 21st century: The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD).

While studying music in the 1920s, Dabrowski was deeply affected by the suicide of his best friend, and resolved to devote his life to studying psychology and psychiatry. During his youth amidst World War I and later during his harsh experiences in World War II, Dabrowski was exposed to the lowest human depravity and also some of the most heroic acts imaginable.

Unable to find any theory of psychology that adequately explained these extreme differences in human behaviour, Dabrowski began to outline his developmental theory of ‘Positive Disintegration’. He observed that some individuals have an innate ability to react more strongly than others to sensory stimuli and used the term ‘overexcitability’ (OE) to describe this trait. Dabrowski believed that the stronger the OE, the more intense the pain, inner conflict and frustration a child or individual would experience due to the gap between their current self and their personality ideal. PowerWood sees this gap as a gift.



*I feel so empowered by your communication model, even though I still have a lot to learn. Already I am able to deal with some of my daughter's frustrations before it all blows up, and we are developing a language together, which we didn't have before. I feel happy and confident again, that we can create the mostly happy family life that we are dreaming of. In fact, it is already here! So a big big thank you!!!"*

*"The 'coming home' factor. Other people who understand what I'm talking about"*

The general accepted view on psychological struggle as negatively defining a person's mental health was reframed by Dabrowski towards seeing pain, inner conflict and frustration as the drive and the energy to take steps towards their own personality ideal or, in later development, towards changing the world for the better.

**PowerWood** Project C.I.C is the UK's leading not-for-profit, community driven, social venture committed to raising awareness and supporting and improving the emotional wellbeing of families and individuals living with intensity, hyper-sensitivity and super-reactivity. Psychologists refer to these combined traits as 'overexcitability' (OE). Having this increased sensitivity, awareness and intensity makes a real difference to how life is experienced. These innate personality traits can bring above-average energy, pleasure, enjoyment, creativity, interests and empathy. OE also often comes with the deep urge to make the world a better place for everyone.

PowerWood was founded and is led by Simone de Hoogh, supported by a board of directors, an advisory board, and a team of more than 30 enthusiastic and skilled volunteers.



Simone de Hoogh

**Simone de Hoogh** is an experienced Parenting Consultant, Family and Life Coach, and ECHA Specialist in Gifted Education specialising in OE and atypicality. Through family, individual and group support, workshops, PowerWood Camps and celebrations Simone aims to raise awareness, increase understanding, support parents, and improve communication in families living with atypical children.

In 2008 Simone de Hoogh received a European Advanced Diploma in Educating the Gifted from Radboud University (Netherlands) and approved by the European Council of High Ability (ECHA). Two years later she won an award from UnLtd to start the first PowerWood Camp. In 2012 the Lloyds Bank Social Entrepreneurs Programme offered her a fully-funded year of learning, including a grant to help grow PowerWood further.

Simone has been married to her partner Nic for more than twenty years and is the mother of two young adults.

# POWERWOOD

Find out if your children have OE as well with **FREE Online OE Questionnaire**



## **Workshops**

*Connecting Positively with your Child and/or Teenager and yourself.*  
*Guiding Confidently the energy associated with OE in your Child and/or Teenager and yourself*



## **PowerWood Camps**

*Time with inspiring workshops for the whole family in beautiful countryside in Devon.*



## **Family and Individual Support**

*Book a Free Introductory Talk to learn about OE and if you wish share your concerns.*

*By Phone, Skype or in person in Crediton, Devon*



## **Group Support**

*Meet and share with others facing similar challenges*

*By Video Conference*



## **Volunteering**

*Contributing while being part of an empowering, caring and supportive community.*



## **Further information**

*www.powerwood.org.uk  
phone or text 079263 66511*

*Email [info@powerwood.org.uk](mailto:info@powerwood.org.uk)*

*Tweet [@PowerWoodUK](https://twitter.com/PowerWoodUK)*

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Photograph front page: SaifAli at PowerWood Camp in the 'Arts and Crafts Area'