

## **Identity of Capability**

### **The Emotional Aspects of Complex Learning Disorders<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Introduction**

People with learning disabilities and adjustment disorders, which are often accompanied by lower intelligence than the norm, live in an existential reality that is far from straightforward. Alongside a broad spectrum of learning difficulties relating to skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic, many also deal with reduced abilities in the fields of social understanding and self-management. When the learning disability is accompanied by ADHD, the person experiences additional difficulties with attention, concentration and sensory- and self-regulation, and sometimes also exhibits hyperactivity. These difficulties may provoke reactions and criticism from family, from educational and social environments, and, in adulthood, from the workplace. During the educational path of the student with complex learning disabilities, great attention is paid to the acquisition of learning strategies that will lead to an improvement in academic achievements.

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However, very little attention is paid to the student's heart – to his emotional world, and the implications of his problems on his emotional world.

The interrelationship between the child and the various environments with which she comes into contact has emotional implications. These may be extremely meaningful in adulthood, when she is expected to form a distinct and separate identity for herself, of a competent person who is ready and prepared for the life challenges of an adult person. As adults, many find it difficult to complete processes of independence and separation from parents, finding a vocation and occupation, creating a stable relationship with a partner, and forming an identity – four measures that Sheinfeld (1981) sees as necessary for a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The existential experience of an adult with a learning, adjustment and functioning disability can be described as “continuous adolescence,” as he experiences a continuous journey of identity formation, finding an existential calling, and assuming full responsibility for self-management of his life (Hozmi, 2009). Many of these adults describe their existential experience as “falling through the cracks,” and they struggle with the issue of social belonging: Are they a “tail to lions” or a “head to foxes”? Even in the family environment, many adults with learning, adjustment and functioning disabilities experience frustration in the face of expectations of family members, which often do not match their abilities. The success of some siblings in various areas of life often provokes a sense of being different or flawed, as well as feelings of jealousy and frustration, for the person with complex learning disabilities, especially if they are the eldest sibling. Biller (1985) found that adults with learning disabilities display low levels of maturity, self-esteem, information-gathering ability, planning ability, desire for a career, and self-direction, and they tend to have an external locus of control. All of these have implications for the self-image and internal language of the adult with learning, adjustment and functioning disabilities – a language that is often based

on cognitive distortions and negative, inhibitive thought patterns (Chesner, 2005). A negative internal dialogue may lead to the development of a confused identity, and, in the absence of support, intervention and direction, will make it hard for the adolescent or adult with a complex learning disability to achieve and integrate in society as a full member and participant.

We can conclude by stating that complex learning disabilities that are accompanied by adjustment problems have implications for the intellectual, emotional and functional dimensions of the individual's life. For this reason, in 2002 Beit Issie Shapiro established the Inclusive University Program. The program has three central goals:

- To enable adults with complex learning disabilities to have an experience of personal empowerment and to **establish an identity of capability**, by way of a structured program, centered around the course “The Art of Living – An Introduction to Practical Psychology.”
- To invite students for a reparative learning experience via the development of working methods for **cognitively accessible teaching**.
- To facilitate **integration and equal opportunity** for students to study diploma courses at universities and colleges in a track adapted to their abilities.

In the course “The Art of Living – An Introduction to Practical Psychology,” which is a two-year learning and development process, the students study selected approaches in psychology as a tool for self-reflection, for processing past experiences and for creating a vision for the future that is based on the individual's objective capabilities. The course is based on the professional approach of psychologist Erich Fromm, who wrote in *The Art of Loving* that the way to love another is by loving oneself.

The course comprises three modules, which constitute steps for establishing an identity of capability. The first step consists of theories and approaches, and is directed at increasing self-love and focusing on strengths. The second step is focused on the student acquiring a toolbox of interpersonal skills, through familiarization with theories in social psychology, Gestalt theory – which attributes importance to the processing of past experiences and the development of the ability to forgive and forget – and theories that deal with effective communication, assertive behavior and conflict resolution. The professional assumption is that after a person recognizes his own value and has well-developed interpersonal skills, he is ready to progress to the third step towards establishing an identity of capability. The third step focuses on understanding human happiness and the positive psychology approach, with reference to two crucial components of human happiness: love and work. Naturally, the program ends with a focus on quality of life and models for decision-making.

This course is delivered using the **Pentagon of Empowering Teaching** approach, which was developed as part of this program. This approach sees the role of the teacher/instructor as composed of five meaningful components: imparting knowledge in an accessible and tailored way, instilling values, teaching skills that foster freedom, establishing an identity that is focused on the student's strengths, and facilitating social integration and creating a safe and inclusive social and class environment.

Over the course of two decades of constant dialogue with thousands of adults with complex learning disabilities who participated in the “Art of Living – An Introduction to Practical Psychology” course, working methods were formulated for establishing an identity of capability, the main elements of which will be presented in this article.

## **Identity**

Identity is the manner in which an individual perceives his past, his body, his abilities, his desires, his qualities, his values, the extent to which he belongs to various social structures, and even his preferences. Identity is the conscious and consistent way in which the individual gathers these components into a whole. Once the identity has been established, a person can conceptualize these characteristics and evaluate whether or not he has abilities in relation to each component, and assess himself as a whole as having or lacking value (Hozmi, 2022).

Identity is the basic key to existence, action and integration within social being. In traditional society, many components of a person's identity – his sexual, cultural, religious and professional identities – are dictated by his tribe or community. Birindelli (2014) noted that in modern and post-modern society great importance is ascribed to the personal narrative that a person formulates as the basis for his identity. The personal story, which is based on the individual's subjective biography, helps them conduct their intra- and interpersonal dialogue as a "social actor" with themselves and in the public sphere. British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) noted that identity is not an individual's visible characteristics. Identity is the way in which the individual reflects his life story to himself, understands it as an ongoing biography, and communicates it with his environment. The life stories of many adults with complex learning disabilities are composed of descriptions of a life on the seam between the mainstream of society and a world of difference and disability. Some experience otherness – mostly invisible – which begins in childhood when they are referred for professional assessment and diagnosis. At the end of the diagnostic process the child "earns" a diagnosis that may be perceived by the child as a label that has been imposed on him. Many of these children continue to identify themselves with their diagnosis even into adulthood, which then, unintentionally, becomes an important, if not central, part of their personal

identity. In many cases, the “diagnosis” is vague and incomprehensible to them. They are not familiar with the content of the diagnosis and from here the path to anxiety and shame is short. Many students that I have met are uncertain about what peer group they belong to, and report a feeling of “falling through the cracks.” The experience is that in comparison with children and adults in the mainstream, they are a “tail to lions,” while among people with cognitive impairments they are a “head to foxes.” The obvious conclusion is that for every adult with a complex learning disability, a tailor-made support plan should be built that is suited to her abilities and challenges, which will enable her to feel that she belongs, to experience empowering successes, to contribute, to benefit and to build a personal narrative for herself, in which she sees herself as worthy of both giving and receiving. The issue of identity for people with learning disabilities is highly complex, and the process of its formation is long and winding. In the 1950s, Erikson (1983) developed the psycho-social theory of development, in which he described eight stages of development. Erikson proposed that the engagement with the “self” and its formation should be done from a social-dynamic standpoint, as a person exists within social contexts, and both nourishes and is nourished by them. According to Erikson, in order for a person to be able to build an identity for himself, a process of development must be made available to him, in which he experiences belief from those around him in his infancy, autonomy to experiment and learn about the world as a toddler, encouragement to take initiative and be brave during early childhood, and creativity as a schoolchild. These are the foundations on which a positive identity is built during adolescence.

### **Identity of Capability**

An identity of capability is a “positive identity of a person who is aware of his or her ability to exhibit self-management, make decisions, and perform tasks and social roles, while at the same

time perceiving themselves as worthy of others giving to them and doing for them” (Hozmi, 2022, p.38). I identify ten key components that constitute the foundations of an identity of capability:

- a) **Awareness of limitations and disabilities, and acceptance of reality** – An individual’s disabilities are not a matter of choice; they are a reality that is imposed upon him. However, many people feel uncomfortable with their disabilities; they feel the need to hide them and sometimes even apologize for their existence. It is difficult for people to conduct their lives when they choose to hide an integral part of their existential being, or when they fear dealing with them or sharing that they exist. Gerber (2014) emphasized how important it is for adults with learning disabilities to redefine the way they relate to their disability, and to view it as an element of themselves that will encourage growth, fulfillment, and development of abilities that they would not possess under other circumstances. A person with an identity of capability is a person who can confidently look their disability straight in the eye, understand its causes, and not feel responsible for its existence. They know how to talk about it to people who are unfamiliar with it, according to their level of interest, desire, and need. They also learn to look at unique strong points that they can identify as byproducts of living with their disability, and do not view it as a barrier to fulfillment.
- b) **Focusing on strengths** – People with an identity of capability are aware of their difficulties, disabilities, and limitations, and view them as a given fact, but they prefer to focus on their unique personal resources and the values that motivate them in their lives, and they see these elements as the basis of their essence and being. They know that when one function is impaired, another unique ability emerges. They recognize this uniqueness and are experts on all components of their lives. They view support as a legitimate component in their lives that enables their natural talents to be realized. They view their abilities – not the support they

receive – as the source of their success, much as a person who has trouble reading and wears glasses does not credit their glasses as being the source of their ability to read. Focusing on strengths implies recognizing a person’s natural assets that he or she can use to negotiate with others, to build partnerships, to give and contribute, and, at times, to need and receive help.

- c) **A positive self-image** – It is not sufficient merely to be aware of a disability or to recognize one’s strengths. It is also important for people to establish the basis for a positive self-image that will serve as “protective armor” against internal and external forces that attempt to undermine their abilities and achievements, humiliate them, or undervalue them. Rogers (1951) views self-image as an integration of a person’s characteristics, abilities, property, social connections, and the manner in which they perceive their body, family and morality. Self-image results from the interaction between individuals and their environment – their family and wider society. People with an identity of capability have assimilated and affixed a positive internal representation of the self. They perceive their identity as a collection of abilities and successes, and are aware of their weak points and accept them as legitimate. They form a positive personal narrative based on all these things. Without a positive self-image, navigating through interpersonal space will be fraught with anxiety, and the individual will be unable to promote personal goals that are truly important to them. They will tend to proceed according to others’ expectations and not according to their own wishes. A person with an identity of capability will realize that there are challenges that they are capable of accomplishing, and others that are not compatible with their abilities. Despite this, they will not give up these areas of interest but rather will attempt to fulfill them according to their level of ability. A positive, realistic self-awareness and self-image are important for building an identity of capability and for charting a personal vision that is attainable.



- d) **Differentiation** – Differentiation is a person’s ability to see himself as a separate whole person, distinct from his family of origin, with his own personality, capabilities, and independent desires. According to Bowen (1978), a differentiated person will have a clear identity, will know how to identify his own objectives, and will be less occupied with trying to please others. He will be willing to endure the effort and suffering that are required to achieve personal goals; he will know how to tolerate frustration and how to calm himself in stressful situations. He will be aware of the values that guide his life and will be able to stand firm on his opinions. This sense of differentiation is missing from many adults with learning disabilities, with many still not viewing themselves as distinct entities. Due to their dependence on external figures, such as parents and counsellors, they exhibit a great deal of anxiety about losing these people, who, in extreme cases, act as an umbilical cord to their personalities. Despite the complexity of developing a sense of differentiation, it is important that these supportive figures enable a gradual process aimed at reducing dependency and over-protection, and acquiring skills, and, as a result, establishing differentiation.
- e) **Autonomy** – During the process of socialization, parents equip their offspring with knowledge, skills, and values so that they will eventually be able to fly the nest and begin an independent life for themselves. This is expressed in the law, which states that parents’ natural guardianship of their children ends at age 18. For adults with learning disabilities, being dispatched from the family nest often constitutes a move from parental authority to a rehabilitative authority. Due to the partial autonomy that they experience, some move to a supportive living facility. Belonging to such a framework is generally perceived as beneficial. However, many have a feeling of ambivalence towards it, as, despite the support that it provides, their wishes are not always compatible with the framework’s policies, and they are not fully free to do as they

please. The transition from the family home to a residential facility is presented to them as a transition to “independent living,” but many report that, despite their satisfaction with the extensive benefits that these frameworks provide, their freedom is limited. In order for adults with complex learning disabilities to establish an identity of capability, it is necessary to increase autonomy in their lives – particularly in areas in which they are capable. They should be educated, trained and guided in those areas in which they lack skills, and they should be provided with support in areas that they report a need for it. It is clear that knowledge and training in the area of financial management will enrich the person’s understanding and will enable him to be a partner in decisions related to financial matters.

- f) **Responsibility** – A person with an identity of capability feels that she is leading her own life, rather than being led. She is the one who decides her fate, who makes choices in her life and who bears the results of these choices – for better or for worse. Psychologist Julian Rotter coined the term “locus of control” to define the individual’s subjective experience regarding the source of power and control in his or her life. People with an “internal locus of control” relate success to their own desire, investment, and efforts, while those with an “external locus of control” attribute their success to external factors such as chance or fate. People with an identity of capability attribute their success to themselves. They do not fear failure because they believe that changing their methods or choices will result in success the next time. They sense that they control their thoughts, emotions, and behavior and are not controlled by them. Developing a sense of responsibility and an internal locus of control depend largely on experiencing autonomy. Growth environments that enable people to experiment, to experience both success and failure, and to grow and learn from one’s mistakes will serve as the basis for an identity that includes an internal locus of control, and the ability to assume personal

responsibility when a person reaches adulthood. New experiences, enriching knowledge, and acquiring skills can enhance people's feelings and awareness that they are capable of assuming significant responsibility for their lives and, consequently, establishing an identity of capability.

- g) **A goal-focused proactive approach** – People are motivated by goals that they set for themselves. Victor Frankel claimed that people experience existential anxiety from the knowledge that life is finite, and this knowledge urges them to set goals in their lives and to achieve them. People who do not set goals are similar to nomads lost in the desert – wandering about without an objective or destination and letting the road lead them. On the other hand, travelers equipped with a map and a compass will reach their destination even if the surroundings are unmarked and repetitive. People with an identity of capability know where they are going. They are motivated by establishing a personal vision, goals and achieving objectives. They feel capable of charting a course for themselves and using it to motivate themselves and to follow it on their path to fulfillment. For them, every ending is a new beginning. They are in a state of continuous action that increases their chances of success. This creates a positive cycle in which the identity of capability spurs a person on to succeed, while success strengthens and establishes a person's self-esteem, and the idea that "I am capable." People with complex learning disabilities often set realistic existential goals, but many have difficulty achieving them. Others are significantly challenged by executive functions. These are areas that enable a person to proceed according to their objectives and to initiate, plan, absorb, process, draw conclusions, regulate, adapt, and change (Aron, et al, 2003). In addition, they are often required to obtain approval for the goals they have set for themselves from those who support and guide them. Sometimes their "supportive" environment is less supportive for

fear that if they try, they will fail. There is a saying that “If you don’t try, you won’t fail. If you don’t fail, you won’t learn.” If we conducted our lives in the shadow of fear of failure, we would never step foot out of our comfort zone. It is important to offer tools and skills to adults with complex learning and executive function disabilities, instead of discouraging them and declaring that their personal vision that they have set for themselves is unattainable.

- h) **Assertive behavior** – Communication is the main tool with which people connect with others and let them know their feelings, desires and needs, as well as learning about those of others. Skills in transmitting messages clearly and receiving messages from others are essential for creating a web of give-and-take connections, and a network of belonging. Some people demonstrate a pattern of aggressive communication that is guided by the philosophy of “life is war,” in which others are perceived as opponents who must be defeated. Others adopt passive patterns of communication. Their guiding philosophy is: “I’ve got something to lose and therefore I shouldn’t get involved.” There are those that convey only implicit messages without assuming full responsibility for the messages they do or do not transmit. Their perception of life is: “I mustn’t get involved, but I also mustn’t stay away.” Their patterns of communication are primarily based on “acting out.” Assertive patterns of communication are common among people whose existential philosophy is that of “live and let live.” People who are assertive are sure of themselves and integrated in their identity, and are therefore comfortable saying what they want because their intentions are sincere. They want others to benefit, but at the same time they want to benefit themselves. People who exhibit assertive behavior and communication are less anxious, they have more diverse interactions, and they achieve more goals and objectives in their lives. Assertiveness is an important component of an identity of capability. People with complex learning disabilities have a lower self-image as compared with

people without diagnosed disabilities, due to numerous reasons. A positive, stable self-image is an important factor for developing assertiveness. It is an essential skill for all people to learn – particularly people with learning disabilities. People with an identity of capability know how to use this tool wisely to take credit for their successes, to forgive themselves for their mistakes, to assert their rights, to share opinions and feelings, to offer help, and to widen their circle of colleagues and friends.

- i) **Experiencing social integration** –Social integration is the individual’s self–perception of being a person equipped with the interpersonal skills required to exist within social space, as an equal by right and not out of pity. The experience of social integration is important in building an identity of capability, as self-worth is also built on the basis of the environment’s endorsement of the individual’s abilities and capabilities, as well as the social status they gain as a result. Traumatic social incidents, experiences of exclusion, rejection, or isolation by the environment are liable to lead to feelings of helplessness in mild cases. More severe cases can result in mental injury and may lead to the development of mental illness, which might be expressed as general anxiety, social anxiety, depression or personality disorders, and sometimes even as somatic expressions. People with an identity of capability feel accepted and wanted. They carry out an essential and varied set of roles in their families and in society, and enjoy extensive formal and informal systems of support. Social skills, a satisfying social life, awareness and fulfillment of social obligations and rights, and the experience of inclusion are all important and essential components in building an identity of capability.
- j) **An optimistic approach** – A positive attitude to life is a basic condition for establishing an identity of capability. Even when the self is positive and a person establishes goals for herself in life, there is no guarantee that life will be a bed of roses. The road is liable to be long and

filled with obstacles, but despite this, people who are determined do not surrender when things are difficult. They fall and get up, again and again. Hope is the power that motivates people in their lives. Ben-Shachar (2008) is convinced that the path to human happiness is the road itself: “There is no road to happiness – happiness is the road.” People who possess an identity of capability are highly motivated to achieve their goals, but they also know how to enjoy the challenge of the journey. They believe that change is possible. Lack of success at one point or another on the road to fulfillment will urge them to mobilize all their hidden creativity, and at times recruit others to help them overcome the obstacle and find alternative ways to advance their objectives. Despair is stagnating and draining. An optimistic outlook, through which a person sees the good in themselves, in others and in their achievements, helps the person muster the strength to face the challenges of life.

These ten components are critical foundations for building an identity of capability. Parents, teachers and support systems that assist children and adults with complex learning disabilities should pay attention to their emotional world – to their hearts and to the emotional burden that they experience on a personal, educational and social level, due to their learning disabilities and the existential challenges that arise as a result. Individuals who provide assistance and support strive to help those in difficulty to achieve success despite their issues. However, it is important to remember that first and foremost they must help children and adults with complex learning disabilities to experience successes, to know themselves and their strengths, to make peace with the past, to grow from it, to form an identity of capability and, only then, to help them build a personal vision that is tailored to these capabilities. An identity of capability is not a goal. It is a necessary means to a full life of meaning, love, social inclusion and action.

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