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Developmental Tasks of Older Adults

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Later life has its special challenges just as each stage of life does. For example, just as adjusting to new parenthood is an issue for young adults, adjusting to grandparenthood is a task for older adults.

Chronological age is a good indicator of the developmental level in early childhood, but in later life chronological age is not a good indicator of exact times one will face certain issues. This is because individual differences increase as people age. Some of the developmental tasks common to older people are listed below:

Finding Life Meaningful After Retirement

Continuing some central interests and purposes, and pursuing new interests.

Gaining status and recognition from some ongoing activities. Feeling needed and creative for what one is and does.

Adjusting to Income Level

Tapping resources built up in peak years of earning power.

Supplementing income with profitable activities.

Adjusting living standards to the realities of current income.

Making Satisfactory Living Arrangements With Spouse

Deciding where and how to live later years.

Fitting physical arrangements to health and economic situation.

Carrying out household routines without undue burden.

Keeping home safe and pleasant for lives as older people.

Keeping Well and Physically Fit

Adjusting comfortably to aging processes without undue rebellion or regret at lost youth.

Maintaining good health practices in diet, exercise, prescribed routines and regular health check-ups and care.

Keeping fit and attractive through good grooming and healthy pride in appearance.

Keeping Socially Active

Enjoying old friends and making new ones.

Carrying responsibilities for life outside oneself, such as clubs or group life.

Maintaining adequate roles as citizens, keeping posted and active in civil life.

Growing Emotionally

Growing close to spouse in new intimacy patterns appropriate to later years.

Maintaining close meaningful contacts with children and grandchildren.

Feeling needed in some significant ways, for what one is and does.

Facing Inevitability of Death As a Natural Part of Life

Preparing for the inevitability of a last illness and death of self and spouse.

Adjusting to life without spouse.

Developing a meaningful philosophy of life and death.

The psychologist Erik Erikson has outlined eight stages of life with a primary concern at each stage. The primary concern in adulthood has to do with “generativity” or concern for the survival and welfare of the coming generation in having children and raising them.

It is important for older people to follow their inclination to make order and meaning out of life as they have known it. According to Erikson, final concern in later years is to develop a sense of ego integrity, the outcome of a mentally healthy life. This means acceptance of life and the people who are significant to it. For example, one has new and different love of one’s parents and does not wish they would have been different. Integrity also means acceptance of life as your own responsibility. It brings a sense of comradeship with those of other times who have contributed to human dignity of their own life style. This broadened perspective of older people is in contrast to the young child’s egocentric or self centered way of looking at life. Older people are aware of other life styles but know life is but one segment of history and they must be true to the one style of integrity that is theirs.

Reminiscences of older people are an experience common to this stage and serves a constructive purpose. Life review is an attempt to integrate an overall perspective of life, to integrate an overall perspective of life, to integrate life as it has been lived in relation to how it might have been lived. The person reconciles the past, present, and future into a harmonious perspective. They would write a revised or corrected autobiography to be left with those who

survive. The ideal is a final perspective, or integrity.

A primary task of the older adult is to redefine and reevaluate self-worth. Whereas once people may have gained a sense of self worth from the work role, in later years they must find new satisfactions available since the idea of self worth cannot be built on a preoccupation of that earlier work role. Whereas once life happiness was gauged by physical beauty and attractiveness the older person must transcend these values and substitute feeling of self-worth based on the inner qualities.

When people rise above self-interest and concern for their immediate welfare and involve themselves with community interests or a concern for others they escape the trap of preoccupation with ego and have a better chance for a satisfying life during the later years.

Societal Help

How can society help to make it possible for older people to successfully attain the final quest for meaning and to meet the developmental tasks of aging? What opportunities are there for older people to have a helpful listener when reminiscing around the issue of "Who am I and what have I been?" Or what opportunities may be created that facilitate the sharing of reminiscences with others in groups? What situations are there for aged people to transmit personal experiences (and wisdom) to members of younger generations? Such efforts enhance a sense of continuity between generations as well as foster deep satisfaction and a sense of integrity of older people.

There are some needs that cut across all ages and stages and cultures such as to be safe, to feel loved and accepted, to feel competent. Special basic human needs of older people include some involvement in society, to serve some worthy purpose and to be valued, to preserve dignity and possessions, and to meet death honorably.

There is a task for older people themselves to learn to view old age as an opportunity for sheer enjoyment of the consummatory phase of life.

The attitudes and efforts of society significantly affect the attainments of these developmental tasks of this growing segment of society.

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