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Life Review

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“. . . They are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering.”—Aristotle

Life review involves remembering past experiences to promote self-awareness. It is a term coined by Robert Butler, director of the National Institute of Aging. Understanding oneself for greater meaning in the later years is also a concern of other prominent scholars.

Evelyn Duvall thinks building a set of beliefs one can live and die with in peace is an important final task of life that entails making sense of one's life.

Similarly, Erik Erikson sees the need to achieve “ego-integrity” or a unified sense of who one is, as the final stage of man. Achieving this self-integration involves reviewing one's life, accepting responsibility for it, and reconciling the past, present, and future into a harmonious perspective of life. If this is not accomplished, one may feel depressed and unhappy about life.

Constructive Remembering

Misconceptions often prevent both young and old from engaging in the life review process. John Mason, 78, has a tendency to look back over his life and talk about it, which is a natural and constructive act. This self reflection does not indicate a loss of recent memory or living in the past, but is a part of a life review process that is believed to occur universally. This is seen in other age groups as well but more intensively in older age. In later life, older adults often have a particularly vivid memory of the past and can recall early life events with sudden and remarkable clarity.

It's unfortunate that telling stories of the past is often seen as a sign of aimless wandering of the mind and preoccupation with self because the life review plays a crucial role in developing a final philosophy of life.

As people mature and realize their mortality, they begin to reassess and ask, “What has my life meant?” The elderly are not just taking stock of themselves as they reassess or review their lives; they are thinking through what they will do with the time they have left. They are assessing emotional and material legacies they may have to give to others.

Successful reviewing may result in the righting of old wrongs, the acceptance of mortality, making peace with enemies, a sense of serenity, pride in accomplishment and a feeling of having done one's best. Recent research has indicated people are never too old to change. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the story of Scrooge, is an example of a man forced into a life review who then changed dramatically. Current research on adults gives validity to that popular story.

With increased self-awareness, one may develop a lively capacity to live in the present enjoying the pleasures of nature, love, children, humor and friendship. A more comfortable acceptance of other

people, the life cycle, the universe and the generations may follow.

Aids For Life Review

Talking is a major way to engage in life review. In old age there is a renewed ability to free-associate and bring up memories from the unconscious. Talking helps to crystalize these past events and bring them into fuller view. Unresolved conflicts may be brought to light and looked at from a new and different perspective. When this is done, new insights may occur that affect attitudes and philosophy of life.

Listening. When a person reflects on life, it helps to have a participant listener-observer. The listener does not have to have an answer. Free flow of thought and sharing is the important thing. Some verbal feedback stimulates further sharing. . .for example, "That's interesting." Open ended questions leave a person free to think or talk about the things that mean the most to them, such as, "What is important in life?" or "What is it like to be old?" Listeners are sounding boards that help the speaker's ideas become more clear and meaningful to them. This may take the form of merely repeating to the person what was just shared.

The listener must be able to hear the themes of old age which may include regrets and losses as well as joys and accomplishments. Older people may talk about new starts and second chances, death or time left in life. This can enrich the life of the listener as it brings understanding of the aging process.

Activities. Life review can take other forms than simply talking and listening. Activities initiated by the older person, family or friends can evoke memories, responses and understanding of one's life. Tape recordings, written memoirs, family albums, scrapbooks and other memorabilia are useful tools to stimulate memories. Searching for genealogies brings continuity to the lives of younger generations as well. Trips to places of birth and childhood evoke conversation about early days of life.

Sometimes persons arrange "this is your life"

observances that bring to mind accomplishments, people and events of a lifetime. Television often features tributes to older actors and actresses as well as other famous people. A trend today in country music, as in folk music, is the writing of songs which draw upon memories of one's own life.

Films, books and plays often portray the life review. Ingman Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* shows an elderly physician whose dreams and visions concerned his past as he changed from remoteness and selfishness to closeness and love. Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is an example of this concept in literature.

People of all ages benefit by the life review of older adults. The personal accounts of unusual and gifted people are recognized for their historical value. For example, the *Oral History Collection* of Columbia University, New York, allows men and women of varied fields to reminisce in taped interviews and to pass on information that otherwise might be lost.

Such experiences help older persons know that life, for them, is more than the past. It can help them learn they can still be useful and contribute to future generations as they work through the life history process and come to better understand their own lives.

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