

Maintaining Vital Engagement in the Later Years

**A presentation at the Museum
of Jewish Heritage: A Living
Memorial to the Holocaust**

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We must take it with a smile...

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**“Your doctor can only do so much.
The rest is up to you. Stop getting older.”**

Continuity vs. Change

- We change so much throughout life, both in physical and psychological aspects, yet we experience ourselves as “the same” person. Both continuity and change in personality take place as we move from decade to decade.
- Most researchers observed that the basic personality traits remain stable throughout life
- One of the most stable examples for continuity in personality traits is the trait “activity”: How active or passive we are remains so in older age.
- Naturally, not in relation to ourselves in former times but in comparison to peers of similar age and in the absence of serious health problems. Most of you who Schleppe yourselves here today were probably also not the kind who was low-activity at earlier times in your lives.

Research Findings

- Shaei (1994); Schaei et al (1996) found that in a sample of 2,500 individuals aged 21-84. of 20 traits examined, 18 remained stable over 7 years.
- Woodroof (1988) Followed people in her study for a quarter of a century, from the time they were students. Personality tests administered early and later revealed that the two were quite similar, despite **the subjects' perception** that they had change much since their early years.

The Power of Self-Perception

- The perception of our self is one of the most important aspects of our personality. It is not necessarily the same as the objective reality of our actual self. Everyone knows someone not so talented who inflates their self assessment, and others who are very talented and suffer from the “imposter phenomenon”, feeling forever not competent or knowledgeable enough.
- A positive self perception is the most important aspect of resilience and coping with life’s transitions and with difficult situations.
- In fact, self-enhancing self perceptions, even if inflated, are correlated with some positive outcomes.
- People with higher self esteem report less anxiety and more satisfaction and sense of control over events in their lives than those with lower self-esteem.

Is Self-Esteem Consistent?

- Do older people, despite multiple changes in social, occupational and interpersonal roles and in physical aspects maintain their basic sense of self esteem?
- Surprisingly, the answer is YES.
- Relatively early in life we develop a style of coping which becomes a consistent and stable aspect of our personality.
- If we know how someone coped with previous important events we can predict how he or she will cope with other events in the future.

Personality and coping types

- 1. The mature** : feels competent and capable, flexible, open to new experiences and knowledge, good impulse control, accepts self and is content with life. Optimistic even in difficult situations. Sees the half glass full.
- 2. The defended**: high achiever, needs to control the environment and their own impulses, high activity level which defends against feelings of passivity and helplessness, always doing the next thing

- 3. The rocking chair type:** passive and has dependency needs, likes to be released from the need to take initiative and be responsible, enjoys 'doing nothing' in retirement, old age allows them to legitimately stop competing and slow down, let others take care of them.
- 4. The immature:** the opposite of the mature. Always angry, poor impulse control, unsatisfied, blames others or life for their failures, feels lack of control, tend toward depression. At every age, sees the glass half empty. [most of you are likely to be in these two categories]

Maturation: The Later Years

- The image of late life is shifting from the deficit-loss model to a more optimistic view.
- The focus on pathological aging is replaced by examination of mechanisms that might compensate for cognitive decline and enhance emotional well-being in old age.

Boomer Women Redefine Grandma Role

AARP Sept. 2014

Jane Seymour, 63-year old Emmy-winning actress, lovingly plays with one of her four grandchildren. — Kwaku Alston



Negative aspects of maturation

- Physical decline in the acuity of the senses and in other capabilities is often unavoidable.
- Microlevel cognitive changes include:
 - Compromised Processing speed, working memory and attention is part of normal aging.
 - Most pervasive in tasks of memory **speed**
 - Reduction in attention and especially **capacity to screen out** irrelevant stimuli and distractions.

Changes in Memory and Cognition

- Free recall declines with age
- Recognition recall remains intact for longer
- Emotionally salient information, especially of positive valence, is favored over neutral information.
- Learning involving abstract reasoning declines.
- Explanations using concrete examples that are emotionally meaningful to the individual, rather than conceptual ideas, are more useful.

Positive aspects of maturation

- **Cognitive complexity** increases. Cognitive and emotional complexity can enhance the ability to deal with the negative consequences of aging and with specific challenges.
- **Crystallized intelligence**, improves until 60's.
- Accumulation of experience and knowledge may foster **expert systems**, especially if used continuously.
- Wisdom, a fund of both **factual** and **procedural** knowledge , **life context**, **relativism** of values and priorities, the capacity to see seemingly **contradictory perspectives**, the so-called “post-formal stage”.

Personality Clusters

- Researchers attempted to identify through empirical studies which personality traits “go together”.
- Statistical analyses revealed that certain personality traits cluster together in different age groups and in different cultures.
- These clusters of personality traits have been named “the Big Five”.

“The Big Five”

- **Openness to experience**
- **Conscientiousness**
- **Extraversion**
- **Agreeableness**
- **Neuroticism**

Openness To Experience

- *(inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious)*.
Appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, curiosity and variety of experience. Openness reflects the degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity and a preference for novelty and variety a person has. It is also described as the extent to which a person is imaginative or independent, and depicts a personal preference for a variety of activities over a strict routine.

Conscientiousness

- (*efficient/organized vs. easy-going/careless*). A tendency to be organized and dependable, show self-discipline, act dutifully, aim for achievement, and prefer planned rather than spontaneous behavior.

Extraversion

- (*outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved*).
Energy, positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others, and talkativeness.

Agreeableness

- (*friendly/compassionate vs. analytical/detached*). A tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others. It is also a measure of one's trusting and helpful nature, and whether a person is generally well tempered or not.

Neuroticism

- (*sensitive/nervous vs. secure/confident*). The tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, and vulnerability. Neuroticism also refers to the degree of emotional stability and impulse control and its other pole is referred to as "emotional stability".

Changes in the Big Five with Aging

- Slow **decline** of neuroticism with age
- Extraversion and openness to experiences decline with age, (perhaps adaptively as mobility and energy levels decline.)
- Agreeableness increases and conscientiousness remains stable in adulthood.
- **Emotional development of adults is marked by a shift towards more positive emotions and better emotional regulation.**
- **A Motivational** shift: from controlling the environment to minimizing negative affect.

The benefits of Emotional complexity

- Greater emotions complexity: emotions are **less “pure”** (black and white) and less intense than in younger years.
- Cognitive and emotional complexity may help clients reconcile the co-existence of positive and negative due to a better capacity to contain **ambivalence** and through **reframing**.
- Greater complexity is associated with less neuroticism and psychological distress and with **greater resilience** (Ong and Bergman, 2004).

Age related specific challenges

- Older adults often encounter problems that can disrupt equilibrium at any age, but are more common in the later years.
- Chronic illness and disability, grief and bereavement, retirement, and care giving are some of these issues.
- History of prior extreme traumatization and loss might constitute a risk factor in older age.
- Normative processes of life-review and reminiscing, as well as current losses and frightening experiences of helplessness, might evoke earlier traumatic memories which have not been processed in the momentum of rebuilding one's life at earlier times.

Successful Aging

- “Adding life to years not just years to life”
- **Strength-based** approach: promoting positives rather than remedying the negative dimensions of life.
- **Healthy psychosocial development in the later part of life requires renewing balances around themes of care, love, commitment, autonomy and hope.**

The Lady of the Violetes:

Focus on possible solutions

- An old lady lived alone in her home, bound to a wheel chair. She rarely had contact with anybody but her gardener and her regular visits to church. However, she cut those short by coming late and leaving early to avoid any interaction. She had become depressed, and her nephew asked Milton Erikson to visit her in her home in Milwaukee. Once there, Erikson found a sickly woman, very limited in what she could do, living in a neglected house, very lonely and depressed. Erikson did notice, however, that there were several pots with African Violets on her window sills. He instructed her to begin to make cuttings and send them to the people in her congregation, based on the church announcement of births, weddings and funerals. Soon she became known as the 'lady of the violets' and well appreciated for her beautiful gift of the plants. When she died, there was a loving article in the local paper titled "African Violet Queen Dies, She Will Be Missed by Thousands" (from Michele Weiner-Davis, 1992 pp.75)
- There is always *SOMETHING* we might still be able to do that can fill our life with meaning and connections.

Maintaining Vital Involvement

- Goal: increased later life vitality is associated with **better quality of life**.
 - Achieved through consideration of **strengths alongside deficits**.
 - Strengths and obstacles need to be assessed both in terms of **intra-individual** assets and deficits as well as those in the **environment**.
 - Maintaining vital involvement despite declining abilities requires:
 - **intentional choice** of prioritized activities to maintain,
 - **maximizing** our investment in these to achieve optimal functioning
 - **compensating** for deficient skills and functions by using supportive others, smart technologies, other aids.
- (Nitza Eyal, 1997; Kivnick and Stoffel, 2005)

Arthur Rubinstein's concert

Arthur Rubinstein was said to have given one of his best concerts at a very late age.

When the pianist was asked how he did it, he replied, I played fewer pieces than in earlier concerts (**intentional choice**), I practiced more than I used to (**maximize** the investment), and when I knew a fast part was coming, I played the previous part more slowly, so to the listeners it would appear to be faster (**compensate**)!

(In:Nitza Eyal, 1997,pp.285)

How is this re-balancing achieved

- Each older individual accomplishes these thematic renewals through engaging in age-appropriate involvement with the people, creatures, materials, organizations, ideas and relationships *that constitute his world in the present*, as well as by reviewing the engagements of earlier life.
- Psychosocial health in older age is not achieved only through reflection and reminiscing but as in all life phases, ***by engaging fully with the environment.***

Your engagement with the museum

- For survivors of the Holocaust, and for the 'second generation', the commemoration of the Holocaust and educating the public about it are some of the most meaningful themes.
- You have chosen to make the connection with the museum, to educate yourselves as docents, and to engage with the public in order to be personally involved with this task which is so meaningful to you.

This is your vital engagement

- With an issue and a sense of duty that has been very meaningful in your life all along
- With the museum dedicated to it
- With the people, students and adults, whom you meet and instruct
- And last but not least, with one another, a community of people with a shared, terrible experiences that nobody but you can truly comprehend.

Grappling with the Holocaust

- In some ways, all those born “after” have to grapple with the aftermath of the Holocaust (George Steiner, “A Kind of Survivor”, 1969)
- For what is the meaning of the values of this culture if a man can read Rilke and Goethe in the evening, play Bach and Schubert, and then go to his day’s work in the morning at a concentration camp? (Milner, 2003)
- For survivors and the second generation, the meaning of the Holocaust has been even more personal than that, taking place in the home, in the atmosphere of the intimate relationships and within the matrix of attachments.

Silencing and Repression

- In the early years after the end of WWII and for a long time thereafter, silencing and repressing characterized the encounter of the survivors with their new post-war societies.
- Served as both a necessary defense for the survivors' own psychological survival and as an expression of the interests of society which was not ready to confront their suffering and offer compassionate listening.
- Survivors were part of the “others” vis-a-vis the new Israeli ‘Sabra’ identity and the ‘All American’ identity .

Collective Consciousness

- Over the recent decades there has been a tremendous change in the attitude towards the Holocaust. As Saul Friedlander (1987, Albany) stated (there, pp.9), there is a return of the topic to the collective consciousness in Israel and elsewhere.
- The idea that we, the second generation, were spared only by an arbitrary space of a few years and that had we been there, we would have been also hunted to be killed, is a very real, personal one (Milner, 2003, pp. 25-26).

The return of the survivors' voice

- In recent years there is a **return of the voice of the survivors and their children** which gives the Holocaust a status of a private, personal formative traumatic event, free of any imposed national –political narrative or ideology, and based on the biographical, personal family story.
- The arena is the family space, the physical and mental place in which the transformation occurs from silencing and repression to the exposure of the past from underneath archeological layers buried in the long years of silence and repression, sometimes until after the survivors themselves have passed away (Milner, 2003)

Changed attitudes and Zeitgeist

There is now more literature about the Holocaust in Israel than about any other event in Jewish history, evident in a proliferation of books, movies, documentaries, plays, museum projects, institutionalized school trips to Poland, school programs, university Holocaust study programs, video testimony projects and legal efforts to return confiscated Jewish property all over the world.

The Role of Personal Testimonies

- Without verbal, individual testimonies of the personal Holocaust the memory of the past will be incomplete. Its horrors can at best be depicted by the collection of private, personal testimonies
- The past was destroyed twice : when it was physically destroyed, and when its memory was repressed by society when the survivors re-entered life.
- The cost of it for some individual survivor is at times psychologically devastating (as portrayed in the movie “Everything is Illuminated” by Marc Turtletaub).
- Despite the importance of speaking about the Holocaust, not every survivor is capable of this work. For some, it is too physically demanding or psychologically de-stabilizing.

The World After the Holocaust

- Some claim that all those born “after”, not just the second generation descendants of the survivors, have to grapple with the collapse of fundamental assumptions about the view of mankind and of culture that occurred in the Holocaust, an event that shattered Western culture and its values.
- Thank you for allowing us all to listen to your personal testimony, to learn from your experience both about the terrible past, but also to be inspired by your resilience.
- These days more than ever, with the difficult events both in Israel and in the world, your strength, wisdom and coping allow us to believe in our own resilience and ability to cope and survive.

Thank you very much!