Mental Health as Maturity

Decline over time is the rule for the body but not necessarily for the mind. Most psychological disorders wane with age, and the elderly are certainly better able to moderate their emotions than are the young (Jones & Meredith, 2000). Accordingly, yet another perspective on mental health views it in terms of greater psychological maturity. The relevance to the present discussion is that maturity is not the sole province of the elderly. And conversely, advancing age need not bring psychological maturity, as one of my favorite bumper stickers reminds us: “You are only young once, but you can be immature forever.”

Much of what psychology has to say about maturity has been shaped by the theorizing of Erik Erikson (1963, 1968, 1982). He built upon and modified Freud’s stage theory of psychological development. Erikson proposed that throughout their lives, people pass through a series of stages in which a particular challenge is central. In each case, satisfactory resolution must be achieved if the individual is to progress through subsequent stages. Erikson called his approach a theory of psychosocial stages because each challenge revolves around a specific social milestone with far-reaching psychological implications:

- **Trust versus mistrust.** The newborn infant must first achieve a sense of safety, trusting that his environment (in the form of caretakers) will provide for his well-being. If a child’s needs for food, warmth, and physical contacts are met, then the child develops trust. If not, the child develops mistrust, which is shown as anxiety and insecurity.

- **Autonomy versus self-doubt.** At about 18 months, when the child’s physical development allows movement and exploration, she begins to confront the notion of her own self. She is somebody who can make things happen or prevent them from happening. Central to this task is the control of her own body, and here is the social significance of toilet training. Toilet training can be an area of conflict between children and their parents. Who will prevail? If the child successfully resolves this stage, she achieves a sense of autonomy. Otherwise, children doubt their own ability to make things happen.

- **Initiative versus guilt.** The next stage takes place from about ages 3 to 6, when the child starts to initiate his own activities, intellectual and physical. Erikson regarded this stage as critical in allowing the child to gain self-confidence. If thwarted by parents in these self-initiated activities, the child is likely to experience guilt and a lack of self-worth.

9. To be sure, the brain as the organ of the mind is hardly immune to the effects of aging or the damage due to illness, injury, or insult like alcohol abuse. But the brain is designed to be plastic in a way that kidneys, hearts, and skin are not, and barring injury or disease, the central nervous system can function extremely well across the entire lifespan (Vaillant, 2003).
**Competence versus inferiority.** From age 6 to the onset of puberty, the child begins to explore systematically her skills and abilities. School begins, and she starts to interact with peers. A number of possible skills can be developed: physical, intellectual, and social. Children take lessons in ballet or gymnastics, or throw themselves into art classes or swimming pools or the intense study of dinosaurs. Successful resolution of this stage produces feelings of competence. Children who experience failure in mastering skills during this stage may suffer feelings of inferiority.

**Identity versus role confusion.** For Erikson, the central issue of adolescence is the creation of an ideology: a set of personal values and goals by which to live. An ideology translates itself into an occupational identity, a gender identity, a sexual identity, a political identity, a religious identity, a social identity, and so on. These identities orient adolescents to the future, determining not just who they are but who they will be. An identity can only be chosen after one has the cognitive skills to do so, in particular, the ability to think in hypothetical terms.

**Intimacy versus isolation.** For those who leave adolescence with an identity, the next task is to merge this identity with that of another individual to achieve intimacy. By Erikson's view, people cannot find out who they are in a relationship. Just the contrary: Identity is a prerequisite for a relationship that is characterized by shared feelings and closeness. Those who fail to achieve an intimate relationship with another person feel isolated.

**Generativity versus stagnation.** When identity and intimacy are achieved, men and women enter Erikson's next psychosocial stage. Here the concern is with matters outside oneself, with the world and the next generation. Erikson termed this concern *generativity*. An obvious way to resolve this issue is by raising one's own children. There are other ways as well, through an occupation such as teaching, or through one's support for causes like environmentalism or the elimination of nuclear weapons. According to Erikson, those who do not achieve generativity will feel stagnant and self-absorbed.

**Ego integrity versus despair.** The final Eriksonian stage comes at the end of life, as a person looks back over the issues he faced. If they have been resolved successfully, the person feels content, having achieved the state of *ego integrity*. One leads but a single life, and integrity results from the conviction that one has led it well (Wong, 1989). If not, the person feels despair. Life has been too short, too unfair, too filled with failure. But if the person has achieved integrity, he has achieved mental health in the form of maturity.

More generally, maturity means doing the psychosocial tasks well that are appropriate to one's stage in life. We can speak of a mature 10-year-old, as well as a mature 50-year-old, but they are of course mature in different ways. Butterflies