

Life Review

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In traditional societies, storytelling was an art used to help understand the meaning of life. Storytellers typically included older adults who had experienced challenges in their lives and were aiming to help the young learn from them. This tradition of storytelling not only facilitated the transmission of valuable information between generations, but it also improved the elderly's social status. One of the many changes associated with modernized society has been placing a larger focus on youth, allowing the elderly to be marginalized within society. As a byproduct of the focus on youth in modern society, older adults have collectively experienced a loss of purpose, which leads to lower self-esteem. Life review serves as a mechanism through which older adults can maintain high levels of perceived purpose and self-esteem throughout old age.

Life review is typically constructed around one or more themes of an individual's life. Most often, family and occupational themes are used to construct a review. However, other themes such as turning points, historical events, role of health, education, or passions, and meaning and purpose are also used. Using these themes, individuals determine how their memories give meaning to their lives.

For more difficult memories, life review helps individuals to come to terms with how those memories shape the meaning of their lives. Life review is often employed for both educational and therapeutic purposes with both older adults and younger populations. Therapeutically, Life review is frequently used to help people find meaning in their losses, conflicts, and accomplishments. For educational purposes, life review can help to inform others,

passing along knowledge to younger generations, or it can serve to improve the understanding of one's own life.

Life reviews require minimal resources and little training. In fact, life reviews can be done by oneself, but it is often more effective if facilitated either through a partner or a group experience. Paired life reviews are typically shorter in duration, with a maximum of only six meetings, whereas group life reviews can last between one and eleven months. Although the duration of life reviews may seem extensive, in order for the life review to have a significant impact on an individual's mental health the review needs to involve an appropriate investment and review of each aspect of life. The benefit of paired life review is the short duration, and more intimate reviews, whereas the benefits of group life reviews include establishing new relationships with peers and adjusting to new settings such as assisted living homes. These life reviews often involve the use of sentimental items such as scrapbooks, letters, photographs, and other valued possessions. Music is also used in some life reviews as a way to enhance memories, especially those memories that an individual associates with a particular song (i.e., weddings or popular music from a particular era). Furthermore, some individuals choose to travel to significant places that may have shaped their lives and memories during a life review.

The benefit of life review is often thought of in terms of how it relates to Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development, particularly the final stage: ego integrity versus ego despair. Ego integrity is defined as an individual's acceptance that his or her life has been inevitable, meaningful, and appropriate. Conversely, ego despair is largely related to resentment, regret, and guilt in the final stage of life. As such, Erikson determined that life review was an integral part of achieving ego integrity. Erikson maintained that a life review helped individuals accept their only life with no regrets by helping individuals construct a pleasant view of how

they came to be who they are, where they are now, and where they will be in the future. Those individuals who are not able to integrate their life history into who they have become will experience ego despair.

The benefits of life review have also been thought of in terms of how it relates to other theories, but have received less attention in academic literature. Generally, most of these theories contend that the positive effects of life review are gained insofar as life reviews allow them to reconstruct their lives and maintain a positive sense of identity. The rapid modernization of society with each coming generation, as well as negative stereotypes toward aging, are constantly threatening the positive identities of older adults. Additionally, the emotional importance of negative memories may be minimized through life review through selective reminiscing about only positive memories. As such, the retrieval and validation of positive memories plays a large role in the abilities of older adult to maintain positive self-esteem.

Further Reading

- Butler, R. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26, 65-76.
- Hauber, D. (2006). Life review: Implementation, theory, research, and therapy. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 63(2), 153-171.