

FINDING PEACE THROUGH PSYCHOTHERAPY

By Dr. Ann Weitzman-Swain

If you have had the good fortune to have lived past 50, you would probably be in agreement with Scott Peck, "Life is Difficult." Of course it is. In fact, in some ways the older we get, the more complex life can seem. Real difficulties with health, relationships, and finances can make even a well lived life difficult. The longer we live, the more life happens. The longer we live, the more we are challenged to accommodate the problems and difficulties in life. Most of us, however, would say that we find it to be worth it to be alive. How is that?

According to the ego psychologist Milton Erikson, we pass through a series of particular stages across the lifespan that are powerful determinants of how the experiences we have integrate together and help us weave meaning and purpose in our lives. According to Erikson's view, failure to successfully work through the conflicts in any particular stage along the way can result in a certain kind of stuckness. This stuckness may inhibit psychological progress and development, making it difficult to reach our fullest potential.

The developmental process of understanding the self in the world begins in infancy and progresses through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and finally, older age. This final stage Erikson identifies as Maturity. Maturity from an Eriksonian perspective, compels the individual to engage and resolve a conflict he describes as "integrity versus despair." This conflict becomes sharper as we approach our later years and are looking back, reflecting on our lives. We have raised our children, retired, have succeeded, failed, made choices, known and not known. We have asked do I have a sense of accomplishment? Did I meet most of my life goals? Can I live with the decisions I have made along the way? Have I contributed?

According to Erikson, if we can say yes to these questions then we will experience the virtue that he calls "Wisdom." We experience an inner sense of completeness, of stories with endings that make sense, work well done and, then, a conclusion that could be called peacefulness.

We get disappointed or hurt by people and circumstances. We feel we don't measure up. People we love get sick. People we love die. As human beings we have to make sense of all of these difficult challenges as they arise. Psychotherapy as a forum for self exploration, problem solving and meaning making emerged in the last century and has continued to expand its presence and availability. More often

now, individuals, couples and family will seek out a therapist to help manage problems. Thankfully so, in more recent years, there is less of a stigma attached engaging in psychotherapy as a means to help resolve the conflicts and sufferings that are an invariable aspect of life. Unfortunately, however, many older adults were raised in a culture of stoic individualism that stigmatized mental health care. Many elderly people today were raised in family systems that did not consider the psychological health of children as a priority. Children were seen and not heard and mental health issues were often viewed as a form of personal weakness. The focus of parenting was more on providing for the physical needs of children. Ironically, even today the psychological needs of the elderly are often bracketed in a similar manner. Consequently, many elderly people do not readily seek out the psychological support and care that they need. The good news is that the psychological well being of the elderly is moving more from the shadows and into the open. The benefits of psychotherapy for older adults is more readily acknowledged by medical doctors and family members. Greater numbers of the aged are being referred to psychotherapists and being offered the opportunity to resolve long standing concerns and manage daily struggles. They are, in many instances for the first time, being provided an opportunity to talk freely about the backlog of pain, sadness, and losses that have accumulated over the course of a long lived life. Most important also is an opportunity to share the joys, successes and happiness. One contribution psychotherapy continues to offer is the value of just talking and being listened to. In many instances, this is the best medicine. Psychologists working with the elderly teach, listen, foster a real relationship and help each individual to facilitate movement in their lives to that place Erikson described...a place of peace.



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