

Developmental phases of life **By Cheryl Assauge**

Every period of life has its own point, its own purpose. To find it and accept it is one of the most vital problems in relating to life. (Erich Stern in Lievegoed, B. 1979)

There is widespread agreement that the journey of human life can be chartered as moving through several phases of personal growth. Despite our differences we may experience each milestone in a similar way and how we progress through each stage will be critical for our happiness and development. Much psychological suffering stems from being trapped in one phase or failing to have our needs met or validated at an earlier time. This brief outline of the phases may help you to understand the challenges you are facing now, encourage you to try something new or inspire you to make a creative plan for the future.

The seven phases of development: a summary

1. Phase 1 (0-7 years)

This is a period of rapid development of motor skills followed by the emergence of the self. At about two and a half years of age a child will gain an awareness of being separate from the world and refer to themselves as I or me, rather than by name. This change in behaviour often referred to as the “terrible twos” can appear as clingy, resistant or willful.

Mindful parenting techniques provide great insight into how to be fully present with your child as well as calm and accepting of their uniqueness.

(See the outline for mindful parenting on our resources page)

2. Phase 2 (7-12 years)

During this middle realm of childhood there is a sense of awareness about what is just and fair as well as an appreciation of beauty. Values developed at this stage provide guidance for decisions made across the life span. By age 9 there is strong sense of separateness or uniqueness which may also come

with the feeling that no one can really understand what it is like to be them. Children at this age benefit from reassurance and parents who are willing to do tasks together.

3. Phase 3 (teenage years)

Adolescence can be a time of intense internal conflict. Teenagers need to be involved in making decisions. Around 16 years of age psychological eroticism will emerge as a critical part of development of “the self”. The female will identify a key part of her ideal masculine self in a male and the male may recognise his ideal feminine self in a female. Teenagers who get to know each other “eye for eye or ego for ego” and hold back from premature sexuality are less likely to present with relationship problems in later phases.

Parents should avoid shutting down the relationship. Stay open, curious and available so that they can talk if they get into difficulty.

4. Phase 4 (the 20s)

The adolescent struggle with hereditary forces is shaken off and a personality comes into being. Questions centre on a place in the world. What is the world asking of me? Who am I and what do I ask of the world? Growth is stimulated by learning through relationships with friends, partners and work colleagues.

In the late 20s and early 30s high levels of confidence and energy will create the desire to have challenging experiences, get promoted and try new things. It is also a time when people may want to put down roots, get married or buy their first house. While people in their early 20s might just want a car, by the late 20s early thirties it's a good car they are after. This shift is also a metaphor for a change in approach to relationships and work. That is, people want to be in the right job and the right kind of relationship.

Developmental phases of life cont... By Cheryl Assauge

5. Phase 5 (early 30s)

During this time a period of restlessness is common. It is often described in a similar way to a death and may include experiences such as a marriage break up, being made redundant or moving cities. People come to terms with the fact that everything they want might not be possible or that some of things that they desire might mean giving up others.

However, some energy and optimism about the world remains

6. Phase 6 (30s to 40s)

Commonly known as a midlife crisis, thoughts such as "I thought I 'd be further along than this or that things would be different by now" may surface. You are faced with the ordinariness of life. It's heavy because we have the load of what we have created and all of what we haven't yet managed and it feels like a burden.

6. Phase Six (40s to mid 60s)

It is not until our mid forties that we discover what we bring to the world. The central question has changed to, "- what do I need to give up and what do I need to take up?" This can be a creative or spiritual time as we consider what the next phase of life is going to be about.

Men and women may experience their late 40s and early 50s differently. Male menopause can be experienced as increased libido and a desire to change their image. They may also develop anxiety, chest pain or fear of a heart attack. Feelings of being fragile, vulnerable or rejected can also happen. This is because there is a paradoxical convergence between physical decline and the desire to do things differently and creatively.

In the workplace this phase may present as a choice between becoming the "eminent leader" or the "frustrated tyrant". It is a time to decide whether to become a figure of wisdom and mentoring or regretful about missed opportunities and anxious about new talent.

In therapy, a client in this phase is often encouraged to see themselves as a mentor, to seek inspiration and to follow their intuition. Using the imagination to develop an inner life or spiritual dimension will be helpful for the next phase.

7. Phase seven (the 70s and beyond)

Stay fresh mentally by being positive and alert. It's not too late to take on something new. Take evening classes, learn to paint, travel. Take up social activities at your own pace.

Finally its important to know that recognising which stage you are in and want you need to move on isn't easy. Most of us need support as we are faced by changes in ourselves, workplace or families. Remember, if you feel lost or overwhelmed or someone you love appears stuck the chances are you'll benefit from coming in a talking about it.