

Life Span Development: Intervention Implications for Concepts of Aging

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Abstract:

The life span theory of development is based on the notion that development occurs at all ages. A person's developmental history influences his or her behavior later in life. Following this assumption, the ability of an elderly person cope with health problems is related to past experience in coping with similar problems or life events.

The goal of intervention related to life span development serves two purposes: help individuals overlap positive health behaviors that will be sustained throughout life and to discuss the role and impact of life events on their ability to cope with later problems. The school health program provides an excellent vehicle for achieving these goals.

Article:

INTRODUCTION

The life span theory of human development is based on the notion that development occurs at all ages (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age) with specific incidents or critical tasks characteristic at each age. Baltes (1973) states that "developmental change not restricted to any specific stage of the life span and that, depending upon the function and the environmental context, behavior change can be pervasive and rapid to all ages." In essence, the life span view of human development suggests that the behavior of the aged individual is determined by the person's developmental history. Therefore, the ability of the aged to cope with health-related problems encountered later is dependent to a large extent on the types of coping skills they have developed throughout their life course.

The life span human development orientation provides a unique method which a teacher can integrate into the school curriculum. This model stresses the need to promote competence in dealing with life events throughout the life course rather than to remediate problems when they occur at a later date. This notion is similar to recent innovations in health education that emphasize the need to promote wellness concepts among school age and non-school age populations (i.e., positive health habits developed earlier can become life patterns). One only needs to look at the proliferation of health education literature that advocates prevention as opposed to remediation of health problems to conceptualize the relationship of life span human development and health education. Basically, life span human development views aging as an integrated, articulated series of developmental stages. How well we learn to adapt to various events early in our development can influence our positive adaptation at later stages.

As with some health education endeavors, the potential payoff of life span human development has been questioned. In particular is the recognition that behavioral changes are difficult to measure over time and that the influence of social and environmental changes may exert greater influences at any given time than for which our personal adaptability skills are designed to cope. But, the effectiveness of various preventive health education models must be examined if positive behavior changes and appropriate coping skills are to be developed and maintained through life.

LIFE EVENTS-THE FOCAL POINTS OF LIFE SPAN DEVELOPMENT

Life span human development incorporates the concept that growth and development of the individual is preceded by a crisis, stress encounter or state of imbalance (also referred to as a life event). Without these crises or life events, development cannot occur. The goal of life span development education or intervention is not to prevent crises, but to enhance the individual's ability to deal constructively with these life events; in other words, to use these life events as a means of helping the person grow and develop.

When discussing life events, we need to look at two types; stressful life events and life markers. Stressful life events have been thought to be antecedents to a wide range of physical and mental health problems. Holmes & Rahe's (1967) compilation of stressful life events has special implications for the aged. Although not developed specifically by the aged, Table 1 outlines the various stressful life events that are especially common in aged populations.

Table 1
Stress Associated with Change

Life Event	Scale of Impact	Relationship to Later Stages of the Life Course
Death of spouse	100	More likely to occur among the aged
Divorce	73	
Marital separation	65	To a degree, this may occur as a result of extended hospitalization, etc.
Jail term	63	
Death of close family member	63	More common among the aged
Personal illness or injury	53	Can occur anytime across the life course, more likely to occur among the aged.
Marriage	50	
Fired at work	47	May be analogous to forced retirement
Marriage reconciliation	45	
Retirement	45	This is a major life event. Especially, if the retiree has not prepared for the retirement years financially or socially.
Change of health of family member	44	Can occur at any time across the life course, more often among the aged.
Pregnancy	40	
Sex difficulty	39	May be a problem for the aged for a variety of physical and psychosocial reasons.
Gain of new family member	39	
Business adjustment	39	Has implications for those who partially retire

Change in financial stage	38	An obvious concern of retirement
Death of a close friend	37	Again, more likely to occur among the aged.
Change to a different line of work	36	A common concern of widows entering or re-entering the work force.
Change in number of argument with spouse	35	Often a concern of recently retired couples.
Mortgage over \$10,000	31	Health care costs could cause similar financial Burden
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	A problem for those on a fixed income
Change in responsibilities at work	29	Especially common among aging as certain physical skills may diminish
Son or daughter leaving home	29	Common phenomenon of aging.
Trouble with in-laws	29	
Outstanding personal achievement	28	
Wife begins or stops work	26	A potential life event for the aged.
Begin or end school	26	
Change in living conditions	25	Often related to retirement or living on a fixed income.
Revisions of personal habits	24	A possible result of the various physiological declines often associated with aging.
Trouble with boss	23	
Change in work hours or conditions	20	
Change in residence	20	A concern of the aged who are moving into or changing residences or nursing homes.
Change in schools	20	
Change in recreation	19	Also may be related to physiological decline associated with aging.
Change in church activities	19	

Change in social activity	18	A possible result of a change of employment Status or decline in physical health.
Mortgage or loan less than \$10,000	17	
Change in sleeping habits	16	A common problem for the aged.
Change in number of family get-togethers	15	
Change in eating habits	15	May result from physical or domestic change associated with aging.
Vacation	13	
Christmas	12	Special events with other family members absent could be more difficult for aging.
Minor violation of the law	11	

The effects of these life events, although difficult to measure, may be significant to the aged. The elderly are more likely to simultaneously encounter a variety of these stressful life events than other age groups. Again, it is important to enhance the individual's ability to cope with these problems throughout life rather than providing remedial coping strategies when they emerge in later years.

In most cultures there is a normative timetable for major life events, commonly referred to as life markers, which include informational norms concerning when men and women should marry, purchase a home, raise children and retire. These life markers may influence the mental health status of individuals who believe they are out of synchrony in experiencing this type of event- As mentioned previously, it is important that individuals be able to confront these life events whether they are normative or non-normative.

Thus, the life span approach suggests that students in an elementary school setting, for example, could discuss life events appropriate to their stage of development which have the characteristics of events to be faced in the future. Teaching strategies using simulation approaches or analogous life events can be used to examine feelings, attitudes and reactions of these events as they occur during the school years and provide an opportunity to make appropriate inferences about similar phenomena common to later life stages.

INTERVENTION ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

Danish and D'Augelli (1980) propose using life span intervention education to promote competence across the life course. The basic goal of life span intervention is to educate individuals to successfully deal with life events- Similarly, many health education programs strive to provide students with techniques and skills to deal effectively with health problems either prior to or concurrent with their onset. The goal of intervention is not the total prevention of crises, but rather to enhance the individual's ability to deal constructively with these events. Danish and D'Augelli suggest that experience in coping with stressful life events leads to effective coping ability in the future. Experience with similar life events increases one's competence and awareness to cope successfully with a wider range of environmental and social demands. The nature of a particular life event or problem may vary from stage to stage. Nonetheless, the skills, emotional capabilities and attitudes necessary to successfully deal with the event overlap considerably.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH EDUCATION

The school health education program provides an ideal setting for intervention education related to health

concerns of the aging- Intervention in the school health program serves two purposes. First, preventive intervention helps students develop positive health behaviors for a lifetime- Second, by discussing the role and impact of life events (either actual or simulated) the educator enhances the student's ability to cope with analogous problems later. For example, most health educators would agree that is preferable to help students develop positive life-styles early rather than attempt subsequent behavior change when negative habits evolve. Therefore, with respect to the first purpose of intervention in the school health program it is important that students be equipped with skills they can use throughout their lives. A health education program which offers the opportunities to utilize appropriate practice activities in decision-making and problem-solving will provide students with these skills.

Various life events throughout the school-age years could serve as a foundation for life events to be faced during the aging process. At the very least, these events could provide experiences analogous to those which may occur to the aged- For example, the loss of mobility due to illness or injury is an appropriate base from which to discuss similar losses that occur in old age. The death of a pet helps prepare a child for the subsequent death of friends or relatives. In addition, this could be an appropriate time to discuss common reactions to death. Old age simulation experiences developed in recent years provide excellent examples of how the school health educator can use a staged life event to help students become more aware of the physical and emotional problems associated with loss of function in old age.

The following table provides a brief outline of examples of common life events and suggests intervention strategies appropriate for discussion concepts related to aging.

Table 2
Selected Life Events
Related Intervention Education

Life Event	Possible intervention Education
1. Loss of Baby Teeth	1. This provides an opportunity to discuss the concepts of physiological change across the life span. The difficulty the child experiences in chewing provides an analogous aging related situation. In addition, it serves as an appropriate setting for the discussion of the need for development of proper dental care throughout the life span.
2. Loss of "Baby" Role Due to the Birth of a Younger Sibling	2. This provides a setting to discuss the changes in roles that occur throughout the life span. The role changes that grandpa or grandma have experienced in retirement are an analogous aging-related situation. It should be stressed that role changes are a normal occurrences in human development.
3. Loss of Mobility Through Illness or Injury	3. Decline in physiological functioning is a concern of the aging. Throughout the life span there are a variety of life events that help us pre, pare for the inevitable decline. A broken arm can provide as an excellent opportunity to intervene and discuss the psychological and physiological problems that result from a loss of mobility. In addition, this life event can help the student identify the loss of social roles that often occurs through prolonged illness or injury.
4. Death of a Pet	4. Life is full of a series of life events that help prepare the individual for death, such as the death of a pet. The child's emotional response can be discussed in the context of death occurring at various times throughout the life span, This provides an ideal time to discuss the biological life cycle.

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| 5. Loss of Childhood | 5. Again, this provides an opportunity to discuss the notion that physiological and psychological changes occur throughout the life span. With these changes there are often changes in personal expectations and social roles. |
| 6. First Visit to the Doctor or Dentist Office | 6. This can be traumatic for the young child. Yet, it provides an opportunity to discuss the role of the patient in the health care system. |
| 7. First Day of School or the First Day in a New Classroom | 7. The first day of school often creates a feeling of anxiety, fear and apprehension. In addition, the child must deal with a different social setting than he or she is accustomed. The freshman entering college or the aged entering a nursing home may also experience similar feelings. |
| 8. First Time a Student Has To Make a Health or Consumer Decision | 8. Appropriate practice in a variety of consumer areas or simulated decision-making may provide a foundation for the attainment of life-long consumer skills. |

Numerous other life events common in the school years could have been identified (feeling of loneliness, experiences with failure, loss of a friend via argument, etc.) which closely relate events experienced in the later stages of development. However, the purpose of this paper was to suggest the appropriateness of intervention strategies directed at various events occurring in early stages as one technique which enhances the quality of adjustment to similar events encountered at later stages.

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