

Discovering Psychology: Updated Edition

18 Maturing and Aging

- 1 01:29:43:22 >> Our elders are fair game, it would seem, for an aberrant faction of our society.
- 2 01:29:48:03 >> ZIMBARDO: Why would this young reporter bind her hands and feet and wander city streets as an 80-year-old?
- 3 01:29:55:13 What does it mean to age in our society?
- 4 01:29:59:29 Do we all go through the same physical and mental stages as we grow older?
- 5 01:30:06:10 "Maturing and Aging" this time on *Discovering Psychology* .
- 6 01:30:45:27 >> ZIMBARDO: From birth to death, we all pass through many stages.
- 7 01:30:50:25 But until fairly recently, most important theorists who influenced the study of psychological development focused primarily on early life.
- 8 01:31:00:10 They believed that after adolescence the psyche was basically set, with only a few important changes left to come.
- 9 01:31:08:07 It wasn't until the 1950s that research on aging really began, with research on the various stages of adulthood starting shortly after.
- 10 01:31:18:06 Since then, a great many myths about growing older and maturing have been overturned.
- 11 01:31:25:00 One of the most valuable concepts emerging from psychological research is that of life-span development, the idea that many aspects of human nature continue to develop throughout the entire life cycle.
- 12 01:31:41:10 In this context, development isn't the same as growth.
- 13 01:31:45:07 It includes both growing up and winding down.
- 14 01:31:50:28 As we come to the end of our life, for example, there's what we call biological senescing, growing older physically, but also the possibility of psychological adolescence, growing up and developing psychologically to our full potential.

- 15 01:32:08:00 Erik Erikson of Harvard University helped redirect developmental psychology toward the entire life cycle.
- 16 01:32:15:18 His insights into the crises of identity came out of his own experiences as a newcomer to the United States.
- 17 01:32:22:25 >> Because as an immigrant, I faced one of those very important redefinitions that a man has to make who lost his language, all the references on the basis of which his language, his concepts, and so on, his sensory and sensual impressions were based.
- 18 01:32:46:00 >> ZIMBARDO: Erikson identified eight stages of psychosocial development, from birth to late adulthood, in which the individual is challenged by specific crises or conflicts.
- 19 01:32:57:14 Each stage is defined by a developmental task.
- 20 01:33:00:24 The individual must come to terms with two opposite demands, balancing or integrating them.
- 21 01:33:07:28 For the young adult, the conflict is between isolation and intimacy, the ability to make a full commitment to another person.
- 22 01:33:15:27 This requires accepting responsibilities and giving up some privacy and independence.
- 23 01:33:22:21 Failure to resolve this developmental crisis can lead to isolation, to a lack of meaningful psychological connections with other people.
- 24 01:33:32:26 Research indicates that anything which isolates us from sources of social support can leave us at risk for a number of physical and mental problems.
- 25 01:33:45:24 The next crisis and opportunity for growth comes during the 30s and 40s.
- 26 01:33:53:09 During midlife, people usually move beyond the focus on self to wider commitments to family, work, and society.
- 27 01:34:03:07 But for those who haven't resolved the earlier crises of identity and intimacy, there may loom ahead what's known as the midlife crisis.
- 28 01:34:13:06 People in a midlife crisis are self-indulgent.

- 29 01:34:16:04 They want to give up their commitments for one last fling, opting for freedom -- or its illusion -- at the expense of security and responsibility to others.
- 30 01:34:32:13 Erikson's eighth and final crisis comes at the end of the life course.
- 31 01:34:37:10 If an individual has resolved the crises of earlier stages, he or she can look back without regrets to enjoy a sense of wholeness.
- 32 01:34:47:13 But when there are too many crises unresolved, too many aspirations unfulfilled, the end is shadowed by futility, despair, and anger.
- 33 01:34:58:26 At Yale University, Daniel Levinson has also been studying the life course as a sequence of developmental periods.
- 34 01:35:06:20 >> I have proposed the following idea of the life cycle.
- 35 01:35:11:16 I believe that it is divided into a series of eras, each lasting about 20 or 25 years.
- 36 01:35:24:08 The first era is childhood.
- 37 01:35:27:04 It goes until around 20.
- 38 01:35:31:17 It includes what is ordinarily called childhood and adolescence.
- 39 01:35:36:21 The second era I call early adulthood, which goes from around 20 to the early 40s.
- 40 01:35:45:18 This is the time in which we are working to establish a place for ourselves as adults in society, forming a work for ourselves, forming a family, raising our children, advancing toward youthful goals.
- 41 01:36:03:02 The third era I call middle adulthood, which goes from roughly the early 40s to the early 60s.
- 42 01:36:11:17 This is a time in which we become more senior members of the adult world.
- 43 01:36:19:18 The fourth era I call late adulthood, which goes from roughly the early 60s to the early 80s.
- 44 01:36:29:10 Somewhere in our 60s we begin moving out of the center

- stage of society.
- 45 01:36:35:28 We're no longer having major responsibilities.
- 46 01:36:40:16 We feel less obligated to do the kind of work we did earlier.
- 47 01:36:45:29 We have the possibility of enjoying life more, being more playful.
- 48 01:36:51:25 We also have the hazard of becoming irrelevant.
- 49 01:36:58:07 So as I see it, the study of life-structure development and a sense of developmental periods provides a context within which we can look at more specific problems, such as work and family and leisure and religion and politics and so on.
- 50 01:37:20:01 It doesn't fully explain any one of these, but it helps us to see their meaning more clearly and also helps us to interrelate them.
- 51 01:37:30:17 >> ZIMBARDO: At the end of the life cycle, we come, of course, to old age.
- 52 01:37:34:15 But most of us have little understanding of what it's really like to be old.
- 53 01:37:38:22 How do the elderly experience the changes they go through and how are they treated by the rest of the society?
- 54 01:37:46:25 The average person's life span has increased by 30 years over the last century.
- 55 01:37:52:22 Consequently, there is growing attention to the quality of life as one gets older and to what the elderly have to teach us about aging.
- 56 01:38:02:07 >> How do you evaluate it?
- 57 01:38:04:12 How do you describe it?
- 58 01:38:05:16 >> ZIMBARDO: The research of psychologist Laura Carstensen looks at how emotions are experienced and processed in our later years.
- 59 01:38:12:25 >> I feel that things are very... are very much more in one piece.
- 60 01:38:20:11 >> In recent years, in part while scientists were searching for some of the problems associated with aging, they

- discovered some surprises.
- 61 01:38:30:23 College-age students are more likely to be lonely than the elderly.
- 62 01:38:37:04 Specifically, older people experience less negative emotion, fewer negative emotions than younger people do.
- 63 01:38:46:16 >> ZIMBARDO: Emotional problem solving and the ability to process complex emotions often improve with age.
- 64 01:38:54:17 Carstensen has also found that cognitive agility in normal elderly adults does not necessarily decline.
- 65 01:39:02:09 >> I'm going to have you look here at the computer screen and you're just going to see a series of pictures.
- 66 01:39:07:28 >> ZIMBARDO: Carstensen is studying how emotional stimuli can influence the cognitive processes in older adults, particularly in relation to memory.
- 67 01:39:17:17 >> We're working on a project which we're examining older and younger people's memory for emotional material.
- 68 01:39:26:18 We have been examining people's relative memory for emotionally charged visual imagery, as compared to neutral pictorial stimuli.
- 69 01:39:36:28 >> Okay.
- 70 01:39:38:01 And this time, if a picture comes on the screen that you saw in that first group, I'd like you to push "yes."
- 71 01:39:44:12 And if a picture comes on the screen that you didn't see, I'd like you to push "no."
- 72 01:39:48:11 >> Older people show the standard kind of age-related decline in their memory for neutral information, neutral stimuli, but not for the emotionally charged visual stimuli.
- 73 01:40:04:29 In this case, older people's memory is just as good as younger people's memory.
- 74 01:40:11:16 We have searched for age differences and where we see them we assume that there must be age decrements.
- 75 01:40:18:12 That is, if older people differ in some way from younger people, we say there's something wrong.

- 76 01:40:31:29 I think in the area of emotional development, we see much evidence for growth and improvement well into the later years of life.
- 77 01:40:42:15 >> ZIMBARDO: Despite promising evidence that challenges the belief that getting older reduces the quality of life, fears of aging still persist.
- 78 01:40:51:18 Perhaps the idea of aging threatens our illusion of eternal youth.
- 79 01:40:56:01 You would think that the inevitable process of aging would elicit compassion and help from society instead of indifference and hostility.
- 80 01:41:06:25 This videotape documents some of the experiences of Pat Moore, a young reporter who transformed herself into an 85-year-old woman and wandered the streets of over 100 cities.
- 81 01:41:18:18 She bound her legs to make walking difficult, taped her fingers to simulate arthritis, clouded her vision with contact lenses, and diminished her hearing with earplugs.
- 82 01:41:28:28 She found it difficult to function in a world designed for the young and the fit.
- 83 01:41:33:17 At one point, Moore was even attacked by adolescents.
- 84 01:41:40:06 >> Our elders are fair game, it would seem, for an aberrant faction of our society that believes they can take what they want.
- 85 01:41:48:14 And someone who is encumbered with a slow pace or loss of dexterity, low vision, loss of strength, and might have some money in their pocketbook is a very easy mark.
- 86 01:41:57:11 So to say that I learned something that I didn't expect would be difficult.
- 87 01:42:03:09 But to say that I was surprised by the extent of ageism in our society would certainly be a very accurate statement.
- 88 01:42:10:26 What is developing in our society with the controlling force of the baby-boom cohort is an attitude of "we can cure aging."
- 89 01:42:19:09 It's this Retin-A generation of saying, "I'm sure I'll be able to buy something that'll fix it."

- 90 01:42:24:01 I will never be like my grandmother."
- 91 01:42:27:14 >> ZIMBARDO: The processes of biological aging that are genetically programmed are inevitable.
- 92 01:42:32:28 But diet and exercise can retard the physical aspects of aging, and the psychological aspects can be greatly influenced by a variety of factors, including one's own expectations, one's sense of self-esteem and sense of personal control, as well as the ability to live independently or in a supportive communal setting.
- 93 01:42:53:11 It may even be possible to modify some effects of aging with mental strategies designed to increase an individual's sense of optimism and self-worth.
- 94 01:43:03:29 Research has shown that the elderly are not a psychologically fragile group as a whole.
- 95 01:43:10:09 They are surprisingly hardy given their physical changes, sources of stress, and society's negative stereotypes of aging.
- 96 01:43:18:15 Older people as a group have also developed a more narrow focus on what it takes to be satisfied and happy with life.
- 97 01:43:26:29 It's what we call selective optimization -- making the most of what you have -- for example, exercising carefully to avoid accidents and falls and limiting social contacts to those most important to you.
- 98 01:43:43:21 Irreversible psychological deterioration is the exception and not the rule of old age, especially when there's no severe physical illness.
- 99 01:43:55:15 For instance, there is a decrease in emotional outbursts with age and a decrease in psychosomatic symptoms.
- 100 01:44:05:27 And older adults seem to be better at getting the gist of a problem.
- 101 01:44:10:01 Traditionally this has come to be seen as the growth of wisdom with age.
- 102 01:44:16:04 Even the most noticeable cognitive change in the aged, loss of memory, can be ameliorated with behavioral techniques.
- 103 01:44:24:01 Though not as quick as their younger counterparts, the

- elderly do as well or better on vocabulary and general-information memory tests.
- 104 01:44:33:05 Sherry Willis of Pennsylvania State University has been developing new educational training methods which help the elderly function more effectively.
- 105 01:44:43:00 >> Many elder adults are afraid of losing their mental abilities.
- 106 01:44:46:05 They see a lot of publicity about senile dementia.
- 107 01:44:50:05 They know that they're not in the kinds of job that demand the kind of mental exercise that they had before they retired.
- 108 01:44:57:04 >> Ruth, number six.
- 109 01:44:58:18 >> We see some decline in their cognitive abilities or skills simply as a function of disuse -- the "use it or lose it" kind of phenomenon.
- 110 01:45:07:12 We're familiar with that phenomenon in terms of physical well-being and exercise, but it seems to hold true for mental abilities too.
- 111 01:45:15:11 >> If you want to turn it around and take a look and see if you were...
- 112 01:45:19:00 >> One of the abilities we've been studying is what's called spatial ability, the ability to mentally visualize in one's mind, for example, in using a road map, whether one should turn left or right, go up a street or down a street.
- 113 01:45:34:19 We developed a series of exercises that key in on that particular skill or ability.
- 114 01:45:40:13 We found that with very short educational training the performance of older adults on a variety of tasks related to their daily life can be significantly improved.
- 115 01:45:52:25 >> ZIMBARDO: Some disabilities are beyond help, however.
- 116 01:45:55:18 The severe deterioration in mental abilities due to brain injury or disease is known as dementia.
- 117 01:46:02:11 Senile dementia is a late-life condition in which a gradual reduction in mental efficiency occurs due to biochemical and neuronal changes in the brain.

- 118 01:46:13:09 Dementia can have devastating consequences, including the loss of memory, learning, language abilities, orientation, and self-care.
- 119 01:46:24:11 >> Of course I do, doctor.
- 120 01:46:26:13 >> Can you repeat them?
- 121 01:46:28:09 >> ZIMBARDO: It can lead to wandering and purposeless activity, inappropriate sexual behavior, apathy, and aggression.
- 122 01:46:37:04 >> Who are you?
- 123 01:46:38:04 Who are you?
- 124 01:46:39:23 What are you doing in my house?
- 125 01:46:41:26 Get out of my house!
- 126 01:46:43:07 >> Nurse!
- 127 01:46:44:09 >> Mrs. Gallagher, you must stay in bed.
- 128 01:46:48:01 You're in a hospital, remember?
- 129 01:46:49:27 >> Hospital?
- 130 01:46:51:11 >> ZIMBARDO: But only five percent of people over 65 and only 20 percent of those over 80 suffer from it.
- 131 01:47:00:02 Contrary to popular belief, the rates of depression and anxiety among the elderly are not higher in later life either.
- 132 01:47:07:09 Although there is an increase in paranoid disorders, it is usually traceable to losses in hearing or vision.
- 133 01:47:14:13 Given all the stresses associated with aging, from forced retirement and decreasing financial resources, to declining health and the death of a spouse, it's surprising that the elderly do not show a corresponding increase in stress-related disorders.
- 134 01:47:30:19 They suffer no more and sometimes less than middle-aged people do.
- 135 01:47:35:04 Perhaps the elderly have an increased tolerance of stress as a natural part of life.

- 136 01:47:41:13 There's also good news for the elderly about sexuality.
- 137 01:47:44:21 Research has shown no loss in the ability to derive sexual pleasure as one ages, assuming one remains healthy.
- 138 01:47:52:28 The bad news, however, is that many mistaken beliefs about aging and sexuality cause unnecessary anxiety over small changes in sexual functioning.
- 139 01:48:02:28 Also, the elderly often worry that there's something wrong about still having sexual thoughts and fantasies.
- 140 01:48:09:19 Those worries, in turn, may make them give up on sex entirely, yet there's absolutely no reason why they shouldn't have the same feelings they had when they were younger and still be able to enjoy their sexuality.
- 141 01:48:23:10 Research on aging seems to question the attitudes of the rest of us.
- 142 01:48:28:01 Why do we think there's far more deterioration and despair among the elderly than actually exists?
- 143 01:48:35:06 The culprit may be our old friend, the availability heuristic.
- 144 01:48:39:00 Personally experienced or vivid cases in the media are overrepresented in our memory, giving us a falsely exaggerated picture.
- 145 01:48:47:21 We also downplay equally dramatic instances of outstanding accomplishment among the elderly, people who are far more vital and creative than the majority of their younger colleagues.
- 146 01:49:01:03 At Pennsylvania State University, a long-term study on the effects of aging is being conducted by psychologist Werner Schaie.
- 147 01:49:10:13 >> Well, we've been studying adults from the 20s to the 80s over the last 30 years, following the same people over time, as well comparing people the same ages at different historical periods.
- 148 01:49:26:06 Now, what we've found is that first of all, age changes occur much slower than most people think.
- 149 01:49:32:27 People tend to peak in midlife.

- 150 01:49:36:19 40s, 50s are the ages at which we're in full command of our physical function and also we've had enough experience so that we have something to use our brain for.
- 151 01:49:49:08 From then on it's a matter of maintaining it.
- 152 01:49:52:08 A lot of people progressively move out of things.
- 153 01:49:56:27 Especially retirement can be a real threat in the sense that you may no longer be challenged as much as you were when you were working.
- 154 01:50:04:05 People who do well as they get older are, first of all, people who take care of themselves, who lead basically a healthy life and an active life.
- 155 01:50:14:08 Secondly, they are people who have flexible attitudes, who don't have to have everything in its place, who don't have to do things always the same way, but who can roll with the punches, who can enjoy new experiences, and who can take the changes that occur as you get older as challenges rather than as threats and defeats.
- 156 01:50:35:25 >> ZIMBARDO: We've seen a lot about the aging process.
- 157 01:50:38:03 But what about the social process of aging?
- 158 01:50:41:10 History tells us of societies where the old were left to die when they could no longer contribute.
- 159 01:50:46:22 In the United States, however, we now have more humane ways of abandoning the old.
- 160 01:50:52:01 We put them in nursing homes where the care, both physical and psychological, is often inadequate.
- 161 01:50:59:20 Currently about five percent of those 65 and older and 23 percent of those 85 and older live in nursing homes.
- 162 01:51:08:17 But this figure will rise dramatically as the population ages.
- 163 01:51:13:04 What's wrong with living in a nursing home?
- 164 01:51:15:16 Almost everything.
- 165 01:51:17:01 You lose privacy, individuality, and self-management.
- 166 01:51:20:20 You lose connections with your past, your friends and neighbors.

- 167 01:51:24:26 You live in an alien environment with strangers, a world of excessive bed rest and medication.
- 168 01:51:32:01 Sexuality is discouraged implicitly and explicitly.
- 169 01:51:36:01 Family contacts may sometimes diminish because the environment is usually unpleasant and because of the guilt involved in visiting.
- 170 01:51:45:23 And despite even the best medical care, the staff, which is rarely trained in psychology, often behaves in ways that treat the elderly like children, not wise senior citizens.
- 171 01:51:58:01 The more they're perceived this way, the more dependent and childlike they actually become.
- 172 01:52:05:02 >> ZIMBARDO: New research also points to several factors that predict rapid deterioration and early death among those who have been relocated to nursing homes.
- 173 01:52:14:15 Ironically, being cheerful, cooperative, and outward reaching is worse than being suspicious and aggressive.
- 174 01:52:21:19 In other words, the good die younger.
- 175 01:52:24:18 And those with the most hope when they experience relocation suffer the most when the reality of the change sets in.
- 176 01:52:33:13 Fortunately, many of the problems of old age can be ameliorated by education, training, and changes in the environment.
- 177 01:52:41:01 Also, promoting a sense of personal control and responsibility in the elderly has major psychological and medical benefits.
- 178 01:52:49:15 Primary prevention involves education of the elderly and the rest of society about the truths of aging, to dispel myths and change negative stereotypes.
- 179 01:53:00:23 Secondary prevention can then help the elderly redesign their environment to minimize and accommodate natural changes due to aging.
- 180 01:53:11:21 Public transportation can be made more accessible.
- 181 01:53:16:09 Vision and hearing tests can be given as early as possible to

- overcome physical problems before they affect mental outlook.
- 182 01:53:24:27 More home visits by medical personnel and counselors can be made to help the elderly function longer in familiar surroundings.
- 183 01:53:33:17 And more psychological training for caregivers can prevent problems of overdependence and depression.
- 184 01:53:42:04 The third level of prevention is early intervention by therapists to help those who may face problems associated with aging to minimize progressive decline.
- 185 01:53:56:05 Florida Congressman Claude Pepper, here addressing the American Association of Retired Persons, is representative of the increasingly vocal and politically powerful elderly.
- 186 01:54:08:08 The AARP is now one of the most influential political action committees in Washington, D.C.
- 187 01:54:15:08 In 1870, only three percent of the American population was over 65.
- 188 01:54:21:04 By the year 2040, that number will reach 20 percent.
- 189 01:54:25:23 They call it the graying of America and sooner or later you're going to be part of it.
- 190 01:54:34:02 In our next program, however, we'll explore a side of psychology that goes beyond the changes in behavior due to aging.
- 191 01:54:40:21 We'll see how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by other people, no matter how old we are.
- 192 01:54:47:06 We'll look at some social situations that are more powerful than you ever imagined -- situations that can bring out the best and the worst in human nature.
- 193 01:54:55:10 The world of social psychology next time.
- 194 01:54:58:07 I'm Philip Zimbardo.
- 195 01:55:01:29 [Captioned by The Caption Center WGBH Educational Foundation]
- 196 01:55:37:07 >> *Funding for this program is provided by Annenberg/CPB*

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