

Ep. 41 Ages & Stages

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Welcome to the podcast today. We continue in our series where I'm giving you Dr. Erik Erikson's lifespan development. We started in episode 38, hearing about infancy through adolescence. Last week, we had a really interesting guest as we looked at self-awareness, internal self-awareness and external self-awareness, and the role it has in helping us answer the question, Who Am I? Of course, we do this initially in adolescence, but as all of us in our forties, fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties know, this question is one that we are always redefining as we age. I wonder when you heard me talk about infancy, play age, childhood or adolescence. Did you have any memories come back? Things you hadn't thought of for many years? Perhaps remember the teacher who said you were very talented in math or writing, and as you look back now, you realize, wow, that person was part of my process of answering the question, who am I? Maybe you like our guest last week took a personality profile and it also helped to deepen your own information about yourself. Perhaps you remembered a parent's alcoholism, the death of someone very significant in your life. And as we all know, these events also shape how we answer the question, Who Am I? Sometimes looking at our life story, isn't easy. But when we don't try to look at it with some sense of compassion, understanding and curiosity, our ability to answer the question Who Am I?, is severely compromised. So let's move forward this week and look at Erickson's next stages. Adolescence is the bridge from childhood to young adulthood. Thus we move into Erickson's six stage with a clear sense of ourself. And we begin to answer the next big question. Can I love? Erickson calls this stage, which starts in the late teen years and last until we're 40 young adulthood. In young adulthood, we are wrestling with the psychosocial crisis of intimacy versus isolation. The big question is, can I love? When first introduced to this stage, people often think of it as can I find my life partner? Interestingly, people seldom think of it as, can I become a wonderful life partner for another? Which really is Erickson's intent. Can I learn to love in such a way that I can do what is best for myself and others, which is the definition of love that I like to use. This means I'm working on my intimacy skills being able to communicate my opinions, emotions, and values. Of course, we've been working on these parts of ourselves for our entire life, but in young adulthood, when we are on track, we have stepped into owning these more and more for ourself and now work on loving and caring for others. Certainly lots of energy in this stage goes towards romantic relationships, which I'm all for! Yet, I want to expand the stage to include, can I love when it comes to developing friendships and community. If we don't clearly state this to young adults, they will often expect friendships and communities just to happen as they have for most of

their life. In this stage, many young adults move away from home, graduate from college and leave behind established friendships and communities that provided them with support, meaning, purpose, and fun. The clients I have worked with over the last few years are often surprised at how much effort it takes to find new friends and new communities. In fact, one wise woman said to me, I'm in the rebuilding phase. Perfectly said, and the main tool is intimacy. What is intimacy? I define it as the ability to share our opinions, emotions, and values in a mutual way. Many call this being authentic. I just like to be a bit more concrete. Authenticity is being honest with what your opinion really is, what you are really feeling, your emotional state. And really being clear on what your values are. Intimacy starts with knowing that about oneself and then we share it with another, in a very mutual way. Intimacy does not mean that another person agrees or shares all of our same opinions and values, but rather that our curiosity leads them and us to be able to articulate our point of view and be interested in others. We use the skill of intimacy, not only in dating relationships, but with family, friends and people we work with. We use it with the communities that we are part of in this stage, as well as later in life. Intimacy is a superpower. So we use it wisely and not with everyone. But without it, we will often feel alone. Devalued. And as Erikson has said, excluded as we move into the next stage adulthood. When people reach their forties, they leave young adulthood and they enter the time Erikson calls, adulthood, which extends to the mid-sixties. More about that in a minute. The psychosocial crisis, according to Erickson in adulthood is generativity versus stagnation. The burning question at this stage is, Can I make my life count? Generativity involves finding your life's work and contributing to the development of others through activities such as volunteering, mentoring, raising children and of course our occupations. Like in adolescence, one of the challenges of our modern world are the images that other people's lives make us feel less than. I often fear that our culture's is overemphasis on fame and money and power can make those of us living a good ordinary life feel as if we're not enough. The care that the dad or mom of three who worked their full-time jobs, help their children with their homework and shuttles them to practice, may not seem generative enough compared to the images we see on Instagram of the mom and dad who have their own startups and run marathons. I've had many clients in this life stage often feel a sense of being devalued and even rejected because what they are contributing to our world seems so normal. Raising good and loving children, doing one's job well, does not measure up to the stories of greatness that the media puts out daily. In my opinion, I am the number one fan of the ordinary. A life done well. Those who do not master this task may experience stagnation and feel as though they are not leaving a mark on the world. I really encourage all of us to not get swayed by media. We all know in our head that everything is blown up. We need to look

at our lives and value them. Take a minute. Thank that soccer coach. Instead of complaining to the teacher step back and look at wow!, That is a hard job. And thank her for doing the ordinary in an extra ordinary way. We are each other support system. And so often we lean into complaining instead of stepping back and giving credit. The more, we see the media just as a movie where most of it made up, the more we're going to feel generative in this stage. We're going to understand that each of us has something to contribute. And that is very important for mental wellness. Now let's move on from adulthood to a stage I'm going to sneak in. Erickson did not have in his original life stages, this stage called Adulthood II. This stage proposed by Mary Catherine Bateson acknowledges our longer lifespan. She proposes a stage called Adulthood II which begins somewhere in the early sixties and ends with the onset of old age. The psychosocial crisis in Adulthood II, as proposed by Bateson, is whether to continue to engage with the world or withdraw. This is the stage I am in and I can really see her wisdom. Because of the pandemic, many of us had a period of time where we did withdraw and there seems that we have to push ourselves to get out there and be contributors again. The reason, I think Adulthood II is so worthwhile is because there was so much that needs to be done and many people in this age and stage have great wisdom and great abilities to share in the world. So, I'm leaning into engaging, not withdrawing. Because I've been in practice for more than 36 years, I've seen the value of adding this stage as many of my clients in their sixties have so much more to give. What does the retired university professor do with the wisdom obtained after a lifetime of teaching? How about the ordained minister or the person who successfully raised three children? Do they find a way to actively continue to give back? Or do they become indifferent? The burning question in this stage is, Who Am I Now? Who am I, now that my children are raised my career, as I knew it has ended, changed or significantly diminished. Bateson acknowledges that the strength gained in this stage is active wisdom. Figuring out how to contribute when the old structures that were used are gone or significantly changed is harder than one might think. Especially when we consider that our culture really leans towards youth. Yet, the needs in our culture, are endless and Bateson wisely states that to let this pool of talent go untapped is foolish. In fact, Bateson and her friends formed a group in their sixties called Granny Voters to encourage the elderly to vote. I want to acknowledge the significant role that many grandparents in this day and age in helping support raising their grandchildren. Just the other day. I had a session with a client in her late sixties who moved in with her married adult child, and grandchild. All we're surprised at how well this was working as grandma cooked meals, picked the child up from school, helped with some of the household organization and knew when to retreat to her own space. While, this may not be a permanent arrangement, it acknowledges how helpful it is for young

families to get support from those in this life stage. Erickson's last stage, old age, starts in his mind from 65 to death. But I think most of us would take Bateson's idea of Adulthood II seriously and think that old age starts somewhere around 70, 75 or 80, depending on one's health and mental state. When exactly it starts maybe up for grabs, but the question is the same by Erickson's standards. Is it okay to have been me? People who are not successful at this stage may feel as if their life had been wasted. They focus on what would have, should have, and could have been. They face the end of their lives with feelings of bitterness, depression, and despair. Yet, at this stage is not all about sitting back and reflecting. There are still learning to be done. This is where the strength of humility comes in. Can I be wise enough to accept the limits that come with old age that often humble me? I only have to look at my parents for an example. My father was dying of cancer and his eyesight was compromised. It was clear that after a long, healthy life at 89, he needed to hang up those car keys. His pride would not allow him to do this. And the best we could do was barter for three weeks of no driving at a time. My mother at age 87, had a few small driving mishaps and said to me one day, I think it's time for me to no longer drive. That is receptive wisdom that Erikson says is a strength at this stage. This receptive wisdom leads to honest humility, the hallmark of this stage. After years of can-do, this stage asks us to accept what we cannot do. Which often means allowing others to help us. This can either be humiliating or it could be what I call an update to our stage in life. Often when we're able to update and live into what is truly being asked of us in life, we can form connections with the people who care about us in a new way. It is our opportunity. It is our choice. It is not easy, but it is my belief, having worked with a number of people in this stage, when they know the strength they need to cultivate and grow into is receptive wisdom which helps them grow into acceptance and humility instead of disdain, they will form connections with people that are deeper and more satisfying. They will form connections with themselves that accepts the reality of aging. Can I use my receptive wisdom, to live with integrity, which means accepting the limits of this stage instead of despairing that I no longer can do in the way I used to. Then often the big question, is it okay to have been me?, gets answered quite differently. I think one of the greatest opportunities we have is to answer the question, who am I?, Throughout our lifespan. For most of us. There's a real core of similarity in who we were as a teenager and who we might be in our sixties or eighties. Life is hard and it throws at us challenges that most of us would never choose. But often it's in these challenges that we find out who we are in a deeper, more authentic way. When I think of the genius of what I call the river of mental wellness, I love the words FACES. Life throws at us really hard things that completely turn upside down, how we answer, who am I? But if we're flexible and adaptive, we find coherence in how we answer the question, Who Am I?

And soon we feel more energized. And then we feel more stability. We cultivate mental wellness by knowing and understanding our life story and being committed to developing all parts of ourself. Our physical, emotional, social, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual. We become a whole human being and when we do that, we feel mentally much better. So, step into your life story. And look at these last stages and get curious about how your own development from adolescence on has shaped how you today answer the question, who am I? Here are my Inner Challenge insights, mostly from my view from the couch: Insight number one: From my view on the couch, it seems much harder to be a young adult today than when I was in that stage. If you have young adults in your life, try to really understand the challenges of this life stage. The cost of living is so much more expensive. They've come of age with technology that is unregulated and syncs up to their brains so perfectly that it's literally costing them thousands of hours a year in sleep and productivity time. They have been given almost no education in managing technology. And when I look at their elders, it seems like this struggle is universal. Many are now using weed, which is legalized in many states, but there hasn't been any education about healthy usage. Most young people I work with are surprised to learn that this substance, which we like to think of as having no long-term side effects actually does. Young adults need our support. They need families, educators and employers to be patient and connecting with them. And to be beacons of hope and encouragement. The best advice I got as a parent was from one of my friend's husbands who said that the most surprising thing about parenting his children was that they really did need support all the way through their twenties. Trust me, he was not coddling them, but being there when they needed him. Insight number two: What is the greatest challenge in adulthood? From my view on the couch, the number one challenge for working parents is childcare folks, it's an abysmal! Even for the people who make a lot of money. We must stop pretending that our families can figure this out one household at a time. We must also stop pretending that our current system is meeting the needs of young children. For many, it is not. If you are in that very small percentage of people where your childcare needs are working out, share with your peers, what you have found and be grateful. I really want to encourage employers to allow flex time and remote working. Grandparents to continue to step in. Many of you are the heroes of this often-unspoken crisis. Remember the volunteer work you were planning on doing once you retired. Who knew it would involve three cute children? Two who happened to have eyes just like yours. Insight number three: Adulthood II. I love it! As a therapist I have so enjoyed working with a number of clients, who've come to therapy after retirement a bit bored and depressed, only to see them create ways of using their talents and abilities that have been very fulfilling and helpful to others. If you are in your sixties or seventies,

enjoy your hobbies, but you don't have to leave your talent at the office. Or maybe you're a person who says I am so done with that skillset. I want to encourage you to consider working with one of the many civic groups, many who desperately need volunteers or even part-time workers. Our communities have many civic groups, that have successfully run for many years with lots of volunteer hours. But the truth is yesterday's volunteers are mostly at the office today. I love the idea of shifting this work to those of us in Adulthood II so the parents of today can be at home for dinner while the parents of yesterday, keep our many civic groups going. It is not either or, but rather both, and. Do your hobby, have fun and be a contributor. No matter what stage we're in, we can always get healthy. I want to give a shout out for episode 33. Where a 67 year old man, in Adulthood II, decides to lose more than 120 pounds, so he can really enjoy the later years of his life. This episode is not only inspiring, but reminds all of us that no matter how old we are, we really can continue to up our game when it comes to self-care. Insight number four: Old age. From my vantage point, it comes much faster than I had realized. Here are a few tips that I have learned from people I have seen age well. Tip number one. Admit, I will get old. Tip number two. Don't stop moving. Walking is the most underrated of all human activities. Tip number three. Don't be a pain to your children. Both of my parents aged very well. Though, I have worked with clients who had to figure out how to cope with parents who were abusive or in complete denial of the aging process. Both are heartbreaking. It seems to me that we need to mourn aging as it happens and it doesn't start once we hit 80. It starts when the first child leaves home. Or perhaps a young therapist in a book group looks at you and says, oh, MJ, you can't really understand it because you're old. Really? I didn't think I was old, but to her I'm old. We have to mourn, those periods when our children are so involved in their life, that they kind of forget about us, not really, but kind of. We have to mourn that we have crappy sleep sometimes when we age. Our lifelong friends moved to be by their children. There's a million lettings goes between 50 and death. Feel the ache. Ground your feet. Do notice on the inside? Hold the hurt. Honor it. What often follows is gratitude. If you want to hear from some experts, listen to episode 18 where beautiful 92 year old woman shares her life's wisdom on aging. Or episode 22, another terrific episode where my guest talks about making the transition to widowhood. Insight number five: There's a bit of luck in getting to be 40, 60 or 90. If one is lucky enough to do so, one of the most important skills is your relationship to change. We all know change happens at a rapid pace. Before, you know, it, you will be like one of those older people in your childhood, you know, the 50 somethings or 60 somethings, who you heard saying when I was young. We all say such things, but what we're really saying is change is hard. I encourage all of us to date change. To try to figure out how to develop a relationship with change, because it

makes us nervous and sometimes it makes us feel rejected and old. Each month, I challenged myself to learn one new thing when it comes to technology. One month it was Apple Pay, another it was voice text, nothing dramatic, but slow and steady. Watch a show or two, the young people love. At the end of the year, I always listened to the top10songs.I've done this for decades. I used to know all of them. Now I seldom no one. But it's one of the ways I try to stay connected to how our culture changes. Lastly, and most importantly, find a way to stay connected to young people. Maybe it's your grandkids or maybe you're a tutor to school? Nothing like a relationship keeps us young. And nothing like a relationship keeps us updated. Thanks for listening. And no matter what age and stage you're in, keep using yourself awareness to answer the question, Who Am I?