Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

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Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development has eight distinct stages, taking in five stages up to the age of 18 years and three further stages beyond, well into adulthood.

Like Freud and many others, Erik Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order, and builds upon each previous stage. This is called the epigenetic principle.

During each stage, the person experiences a psychosocial crisis which could have a positive or negative outcome for personality development. For Erikson (1963), these crises are of a psychosocial nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e. social).

According to the theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises.

Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. These stages, however, can be resolved successfully at a later time.

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	Basic Virtue	Age
1.	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	0 - 1½
2.	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will	1½ - 3
3.	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	3 - 5
4.	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competency	5 - 12
5.	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity	12 - 18
6.	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	18 - 40
7.	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	40 - 65
8.	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	65+

1. Trust vs. Mistrust

Is the world a safe place or is it full of unpredictable events and accidents waiting to happen? Erikson's first psychosocial crisis occurs during the first year or so of life (like Freud's oral stage of psychosexual development). The crisis is one of trust vs. mistrust.

During this stage, the infant is uncertain about the world in which they live. To resolve these feelings of uncertainty, the infant looks towards their primary caregiver for stability and consistency of care.

If the care the infant receives is consistent, predictable and reliable, they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened.



Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **hope**. By developing a sense of trust, the infant can have hope that as new crises arise, there is a real possibility that other people will be there as a source of support. Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear.

For example, if the care has been harsh or inconsistent, unpredictable and unreliable, then the infant will develop a sense of mistrust and will not have confidence in the world around them or in their abilities to influence events.

This infant will carry the basic sense of mistrust with them to other relationships. It may result in anxiety, heightened insecurities, and an over feeling of mistrust in the world around them.

Consistent with Erikson's views on the importance of trust, research by Bowlby and Ainsworth has outlined how the quality of the early experience of attachment can affect relationships with others in later life.

2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

> Autonomy versus shame and doubt is the second stage of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately 3 years.

The child is developing physically and becoming more mobile, and discovering that he or she has many skills and abilities, such as putting on clothes and shoes, playing with toys, etc. Such skills illustrate the child's growing sense of independence and autonomy.

For example, during this stage children begin to assert their independence, by walking away from their mother, picking which toy to play with, and making choices about what they like to wear, to eat, etc.



Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure.

For example, rather than put on a child's clothes a supportive parent should have the patience to allow the child to try until they succeed or ask for assistance. So, the parents need to encourage the child to become more independent while at the same time protecting the child so that constant failure is avoided.

A delicate balance is required from the parent. They must try not to do everything for the child, but if the child fails at a particular task they must not criticize the child for failures and accidents (particularly when toilet training). The aim has to be “self control without a loss of self-esteem” (Gross, 1992). Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **will**.

If children in this stage are encouraged and supported in their increased independence, they become more confident and secure in their own ability to survive in the world.

If children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves, they begin to feel inadequate in their ability to survive, and may then become overly dependent upon others, lack self-esteem, and feel a sense of shame or doubt in their abilities.

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3. Initiative vs. Guilt

> Initiative versus guilt is the third stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. During the initiative versus guilt stage, children assert themselves more frequently.

These are particularly lively, rapid-developing years in a child's life. According to Bee (1992), it is a "time of vigor of action and of behaviors that the parents may see as aggressive."

During this period the primary feature involves the child regularly interacting with other children at school. Central to this stage is play, as it provides children with the opportunity to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities.

Children begin to plan activities, make up games, and initiate activities with others. If given this opportunity, children develop a sense of initiative and feel secure in their ability to lead others and make decisions.



Conversely, if this tendency is squelched, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt. They may feel like a nuisance to others and will, therefore, remain followers, lacking in self-initiative.

The child takes initiatives which the parents will often try to stop in order to protect the child. The child will often overstep the mark in his forcefulness, and the danger is that the parents will tend to punish the child and restrict his initiatives too much.

It is at this stage that the child will begin to ask many questions as his thirst for knowledge grows. If the parents treat the child's questions as trivial, a nuisance or embarrassing or other aspects of their behavior as threatening then the child may have feelings of guilt for "being a nuisance".

Too much guilt can make the child slow to interact with others and may inhibit their creativity. Some guilt is, of course, necessary; otherwise the child would not know how to exercise self-control or have a conscience.

A healthy balance between initiative and guilt is important. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **purpose**.

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4. Industry vs. Inferiority

> Erikson's fourth psychosocial crisis, involving industry vs. inferiority occurs during childhood between the ages of five and twelve.

Children are at the stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums, to do things on their own. Teachers begin to take an important role in the child's life as they teach the child specific skills.

It is at this stage that the child's peer group will gain greater significance and will become a major source of the child's self-esteem. The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies that are valued by society and begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they begin to feel industrious (competent) and feel confident in their ability to achieve goals. If this initiative is not encouraged, if it is restricted by parents or teacher, then the child begins to feel inferior, doubting his own abilities and therefore may not reach his or her potential.

If the child cannot develop the specific skill they feel society is demanding (e.g., being athletic) then they may develop a sense of inferiority.

Some failure may be necessary so that the child can develop some modesty. Again, a balance between competence and modesty is necessary. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **competence**.

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5. Identity vs. Role Confusion

> During adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is most important. Children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families, housing, etc. The individual wants to belong to a society and fit in.

The fifth stage is identity vs. role confusion, and it occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years. During this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals.

The adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult (Erikson, 1963, p. 245)

This is a major stage of development where the child has to learn theroles he will occupy as an adult. It is during this stage that the adolescent will re-examine his identity and try to find out exactly who he or she is. Erikson suggests that two identities are involved: the sexual and the occupational.

According to Bee (1992), what should happen at the end of this stage is “a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of one’s appropriate sex role”. During this stage the body image of the adolescent changes.



Erikson claims that the adolescent may feel uncomfortable about their body for a while until they can adapt and “grow into” the changes. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **fidelity**.

Fidelity involves being able to commit one's self to others on the basis of accepting others, even when there may be ideological differences.

During this period, they explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. Failure to establish a sense of identity within society ("I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up") can lead to role confusion. Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society.

In response to role confusion or **identity crisis**, an adolescent may begin to experiment with different lifestyles (e.g., work, education or political activities).

Also pressuring someone into an identity can result in rebellion in the form of establishing a negative identity, and in addition to this feeling of unhappiness.

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6. Intimacy vs. Isolation

> Intimacy versus isolation is the sixth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during young adulthood between the ages of approximately 18 to 40 yrs.

During this period, the major conflict centers on forming intimate, loving relationships with

other people.

During this period, we begin to share ourselves more intimately with others. We explore relationships leading toward longer-term commitments with someone other than a family member.

Successful completion of this stage can result in happy relationships and a sense of commitment, safety, and care within a relationship.

Avoiding intimacy, fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **love**.

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7. Generativity vs. Stagnation

> Generativity versus stagnation is the seventh of eight stages of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during during middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 yrs).

Generativity refers to "making your mark" on the world through creating or nurturing things that will outlast an individual.

People experience a need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often having mentees or creating positive changes that will benefit other people.

We give back to society through raising our children, being productive at work, and becoming involved in community activities and organizations. Through generativity we develop a sense of being a part of the bigger picture.

Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.

By failing to find a way to contribute, we become stagnant and feel unproductive. These individuals may feel disconnected or uninvolved with their community and with society as a whole. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **care**.

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8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair

> Ego integrity versus despair is the eighth and final stage of Erik Erikson’s stage theory of psychosocial development. This stage begins at approximately age 65 and ends at death.

As we grow older (65+ yrs) and become senior citizens, we tend to slow down our productivity and explore life as a retired person.

It is during this time that we contemplate our accomplishments and can develop integrity if we see ourselves as leading a successful life.

Erikson described ego integrity as “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be” (1950, p. 268) and later as “a sense of coherence and wholeness” (1982, p. 65).

Erik Erikson believed if we see our lives as unproductive, feel guilt about our past, or feel that we did not accomplish our life goals, we become dissatisfied with life and develop despair, often leading to depression and hopelessness.

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **wisdom**. Wisdom enables a person to look back on their life with a sense of closure and completeness, and also accept death without fear.

Wise people are not characterized by a continuous state of ego integrity, but they experience both ego integrity and despair. Thus, late life is characterized by both integrity and despair as alternating states that need to be balanced.

Critical Evaluation

By extending the notion of personality development across the lifespan, Erikson outlines a more realistic perspective of personality development (McAdams, 2001).

Based on Erikson's ideas, psychology has reconceptualized the way the later periods of life are viewed. Middle and late adulthood are no longer viewed as irrelevant, because of Erikson, they are now considered active and significant times of personal growth.

Erikson's theory has good face validity. Many people find that they can relate to his theories about various stages of the life cycle through their own experiences.

However, Erikson is rather vague about the causes of development. What kinds of experiences must people have to successfully resolve various psychosocial conflicts and move from one stage to another? The theory does not have a universal mechanism for crisis resolution.

Indeed, Erikson (1964) acknowledges his theory is more a descriptive overview of human social and emotional development that does not adequately explain how or why this development occurs. For example, Erikson does not explicitly explain how the outcome of one psychosocial stage influences personality at a later stage.

However, Erikson stressed his work was a 'tool to think with rather than a factual analysis.' Its purpose then is to provide a framework within which development can be considered rather than testable theory.

One of the strengths of Erikson's theory is its ability to tie together important psychosocial development across the entire lifespan.

Although support for Erikson's stages of personality development exists (McAdams, 1999), critics of his theory provide evidence suggesting a lack of discrete stages of personality development (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

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Maslow vs Erikson

Maslow	Erikson
Proposed a series of motivational stages, each building on the previous one (i.e., cannot progress without satisfying the previous stage).	Proposed a series of predetermined stages related to personality development. The stages are time related.
Progression through the stages is based on life circumstances and achievement (i.e., it is flexible).	Progression through the stages is based a person's age (i.e., rigid). During each stage an individual attains personality traits, either beneficial or pathological.
There is only one goal of achievement, although not everyone achieves it.	The goal of achievement vary from stage to stage and involve overcoming a psychosocial crisis.
Individuals move up the motivational stages / pyramid in order to reach self-actualisation. The first four stages are like stepping stones.	Successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths used to resolve subsequent crises.

Psychosocial Stages Summary

Trust vs. Mistrust

This stage begins at birth and lasts through one year of age.
The infant develops a sense of trust when interactions provide reliability, care, and affection.

A lack of this will lead to mistrust.

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately age two to three years.
The infant develops a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.

Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure.

Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.

Initiative vs. Guilt

This stage occurs during the preschool years, between the ages of three and five.
The child begins to assert control and power over their environment by planning activities, accomplishing tasks and facing challenges. Success at this stage leads to a sense of purpose.

If initiative is dismissed or discourages, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt.

Industry vs. Inferiority

This stage occurs during childhood between the ages of five and twelve.
It is at this stage that the child's peer group will gain greater significance and will become a major source of the child's self-esteem. The child is coping with new learning and social demands.

Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.

Identity vs. Role Confusion

The fifth stage occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years.
Teenagers explore who they are as individuals, and seek to establish a sense of self, and may experiment with different roles, activities, and behaviors.

According to Erikson, this is important to the process of forming a strong identity and developing a sense of direction in life.

Intimacy vs. Isolation

This stage takes place during young adulthood between the ages of approximately 19 and 40.
During this period, the major conflict centers on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.

Generativity vs. Stagnation

This stage takes place during middle adulthood between the ages of approximately 40 and 65.
People experience a need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often having mentees or creating positive changes that will benefit other people.

Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.

Ego Integrity vs. Despair

This stage takes place after age 65 and involves reflecting on one's life and either moving into feeling satisfied and happy with one's life or feeling a deep sense of regret.
Success at this stages leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.