Chapter 15 The Middle-Aged Person: Basic Assessment and Health Promotion

BOX 15-7  Assessment Criteria of Emotional Maturity

1. Ability to deal constructively with reality  
2. Capacity to adapt to change  
3. Relative freedom from symptoms that are produced by tensions and anxieties  
4. Capacity to find more satisfaction in giving than receiving  
5. Capacity to relate to other people in a consistent manner with mutual satisfaction and helpfulness  
6. Capacity to sublimate, to direct one’s instinctive hostile energy into creative and constructive outlets  
7. Capacity to love  
8. Ability to use intuition, a natural mental ability associated with experience, to comprehend life events and formulate answers.

Chapter 1. Yet each can reach his or her own ideal and peak of well-being, functioning relatively free of anxieties, cognitive distortions, and rigid habits and with a sense of the uniqueness of the self and others (128).

In adulthood there is no one set of appropriate personality characteristics. You will work with many personality types as you promote health. Explore generativity and maturity with middle-aged clients and others in the community. Relate to a definition of health. Utilize information in this section. Refer also to Box 15-7, Assessment of Criteria of Emotional Maturity.

Personality Development

Emotional or personality development has also been described by the stage theorists: Jung (76, 83), Sheehy (155–157), Gould (58–60), Levinson (99–101), and Vaillant (181, 182). Other authors have also described aspects of personality development (22, 32, 39, 69, 95, 111, 126, 136, 166).

Jung divided personality development to correspond to the first and second halves of the life cycle. In the first half, until the age of 35 or 40, the person is in a period of expansion. Maturational forces direct the growth of the ego (the conscious or awareness of self and the external world). Capacities unfold for dealing with the external world. The person learns to get along with others and tries to win as many of society’s rewards as possible. A career and family are established. To achieve, it is usually necessary for males to overdevelop their masculinity and for females to overemphasize their feminine traits and skills. The young person dedicates self to mastery of the outer world. Being preoccupied with self-doubt, fantasy, and the inner nature is not advantageous to the young adult, for the task is to meet the demands of society confidently and assertively (76, 83). In the second half, beginning in the late 40s, the personality begins to undergo a transformation. The person begins to become introspective, to turn inward, to examine the meaning of life. Earlier goals and ambitions have lost their meaning. The person may feel stagnant, incomplete, or depressed, as if something crucial is missing, even if the person has been quite successful, because success has often been achieved at the cost of personality development. Separating self from ordinary conformity to the goals and values of mass society and achieving a measure of psychic balance are accomplished through individuation—finding one’s individual way (76, 83).

Jung recognized that although middle-aged persons begin to turn inward, they still have much energy and resources for the generativity described by Erikson and for making personal changes. The person may begin new or long-forgotten projects and interests or even change careers. Males and females begin giving expression to their opposite sexual drives. Males become less aggressively ambitious and more concerned with interpersonal relationships. They begin to realize that achievement counts for less and friendship for more. Females tend to become more aggressive and independent. Such changes can create midlife marital problems. Although ongoing development may create tension and difficulties, Jung believed that the greatest failures come when adults cling to the goals and values of the first half of life, holding on to the glories and beauty of youth (76, 83).

Neugarten (126–128) found personality characteristics in middle age similar to those described by Jung (76).

Sheehy (155–157), Gould (58–60), Levinson (99–101), and Vaillant (181, 182) also describe midlife stages of development. See Table 15-5. Levinson’s Theory of Mid-Adulthood. These stage theorists confirm many of the characteristics already described and emphasize that this is a time of new stability and authenticity.

As you work with the middle-aged person, use the concept of generativity versus self-absorption in assessment of the client’s developmental level. Promote generative or altruistic behavior through your listening, support, encouragement of activities, teaching, counseling, and referral to organizations and causes that can use the person’s contribution of talents, time, and financial resources. The generative person or mentor needs to hear that what he or she is doing is indeed a worthwhile contribution. Your reinforcement of another’s strengths facilitates further emotional development and maturity. The self-absorbed person should be referred to a long-term counselor.

BODY IMAGE DEVELOPMENT

The gradually occurring physical changes described earlier confront the person and are mirrored in others. The climacteric causes realignment of attitudes about the self that cut into the personality and its definition. Other life stresses cause the person to view self and the body differently. The person not only realizes he or she looks older but subjectively may feel older as well. Work can bring a sense of stress if he or she feels less stamina and vigor to cope with the task at hand. Illness or death of loved ones creates a concern about personal health, sometimes to excess, and thoughts about one’s own death are more frequent. The person begins to realize that the previous self-image of the youthful, strong, and healthy body with boundless energy does not fit. Depression, irritability, and anxiety about femininity and masculinity may result. In the United States, more than in European or Asian cultures, youth and vigor are highly valued, a carryover from frontier days. The person’s previous personality largely influences the intensity of these feelings and the symptoms associated with body image changes. Difficulties are also caused by fear of the effects of the climacteric, folklore about sexuality, attitudes