9.17: Erikson - Integrity vs. Despair

How do people cope with old age? According to Erikson, the last psychosocial stage is **Integrity vs. Despair**. This stage includes, "a retrospective accounting of one's life to date; how much one embraces life as having been well lived, as opposed to regretting missed opportunities," (Erikson, 1982, p. 112). Those in late adulthood need to achieve both the acceptance of their life and the inevitability of their death (Barker, 2016). This stage includes finding meaning in one's life and accepting one's accomplishments, but also acknowledging what in life has not gone as hoped. It is also feeling a sense of contentment and accepting others' deficiencies, including those of their parents. This acceptance will lead to integrity, but if elders are unable to achieve this acceptance, they may experience despair. Bitterness and resentments in relationships and life events can lead one to despair at the end of life. According to Erikson (1982), successful completion of this stage leads to wisdom in late life.

Erikson's theory was the first to propose a lifespan approach to development, and it has encouraged the belief that older adults still have developmental needs. Prior to Erikson's theory, older adulthood was seen as a time of social and leisure restrictions and a focus primarily on physical needs (Barker, 2016). The current focus on aging well by keeping healthy and active, helps to promote integrity. There are many avenues for those in late adulthood to remain vital members of society, and they will be explored next.
Staying Active: Many older adults want to remain active and work toward replacing opportunities lost with new ones. Those who prefer to keep themselves busy demonstrate the Activity Theory, which states that greater satisfaction with one’s life occurs with those who remain active (Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1972). Not surprisingly, more positive views on aging and greater health are noted with those who keep active than those who isolate themselves and disengage with others. Community, faith-based, and volunteer organizations can all provide those in late adulthood with opportunities to remain active and maintain social networks. Erikson’s concept of generativity applies to many older adults, just as it did in midlife.