

The Art of Letting Go

The longer I live, the more I recognize that life is a series of transitions that push me to change and accept what I cannot control.

I am particularly aware of this "letting go" process as I visit with parents about the range of emotions they experience when their child leaves home. I am reminded of my emotional response to my son walking into his first classroom with his books and backpack. I was not prepared for the tears that welled up in my eyes. Perhaps, that experience was a foreshadowing to help me deal with the overwhelming emotion I felt when he left home for college. I felt an emptiness that seemed to linger for years.

The concept of the "empty nest syndrome" has been used to identify what many parents experience when their child reaches early adulthood and is ready to leave home to begin to accomplish his or her goals. Although this can be a sad time as parent realize that the stage of "active parenting" has ended, it can also be a happy time as parents recognize their child is exactly where he/she needs to be to follow their own dreams. This transition allows for the opportunity to create a new relationship with their child in which the interaction is more peer like. Parents can enjoy acting more as a mentor and offering advice rather than being demanding and seen as the "authority" figure.

After reviewing the literature, it occurred to me that this stage is just one of the eight states through which a healthy developing human should pass. In each stage the person learns important life lessons that prepare him/her for the next stage. The primary theme in all the stages after Infancy is learning the art of "letting go".

The following is a brief summary of Eric Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and the challenges to be mastered before successfully moving on to the next stage of growth.

- "Infancy - Birth to 18 months"
 - Developing trust is the foundation of building a healthy personality.
 - By successfully internalizing a certainty of receiving care, we can then be hopeful that we can trust ourselves to overcome struggles and limitations that will occur in our life journey.

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- **“Toddler - 18 months to 3 years”**
After mastering the ability to trust, we then begin to build confidence to establish independence and autonomy. The toddler begins to discover he/she is not longer attached to the primary caregiver but is a separate individual.
- **“Preschool - 3 years to 6 years”**
After developing a sense of independence, we can then begin to focus on our first identity to include our sexuality, belief about ourself and using our power of imagination to envision how we want to live our life. This is the time we learn to take initiative and prepare ourself toward roles of leadership and goal achievement.
- **“School Age - 6 years to puberty”**
After achieving a sense of unique identity, we begin to focus on our competence to solve problems and make decisions. This is a time where we can learn from, rather than feel defeated by our mistakes.
- **“Adolescence - 13 years to 17 years”**
After successfully developing the lessons learned from childhood, we can now embark on creating a reformed identity which integrates our strengths and skills cultivated earlier. Beginning the adolescent journey is a combination of grieving the loss of childhood and celebrating empowerment and greater freedom.
- **“Young Adulthood - 18 years to 40 years”**
This stage is another "rite of passage" as we are preparing to leave home, begin a career and develop committed relationships. Although we are still interested in blending our identity with friends, we are more prepared for being alone and separating from others. The lessons to be mastered include establishing a balance between intimacy and isolation, and, effectively dealing with pain, rejections and disappointments.

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- “Middle Adulthood - 40 years to 65 years”

This stage involves a series of life transitions, to include children leaving home, aging parents, an aging or ill body, retirement, etc. We are challenged with accepting changes in our life that involves loss of control. The important lesson in this stage of generativity is to reflect on what we can pass on to the next generation.

- “Late Adulthood - from 65 years”

The success of living the final stage of development is to have learned and accomplished the previous life lessons.

- Hopefully, we can reflect on the good and bad times with self respect.
- We are now capable of accepting our mistakes and regrets and find a new sense of integrity and a readiness for whatever life or death may bring.
- The completion of this stage is achieved when we gain a sense of fulfillment about life and peace with ourself and others.

Each developmental stage is an opportunity for us to embrace transitions and changes in our life. As painful as it has been for me to accept that my son is an adult, it has also given me one more valuable lesson in "letting go" of what I cannot change.

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The following is an excerpt from the poem, *Letting Go Takes Love* --- Author Unknown.

Letting Go Takes Love

*To let go does not mean to stop caring,
it means I can't do it for someone else.*

*To let go is not to cut myself off,
it's the realization I can't control another.*

...

*To let go is not to try to change or blame another,
it's to make the most of myself.*

...

*To let go is not to fix,
but to be supportive.*

To let go is not to judge,

but to allow another to be a human being.

*To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes,
but to allow others to affect their destinies.*

...

*To let go is not to deny,
but to accept.*

*To let go is not to nag, scold or argue,
but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.*

*To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires,
but to take each day as it comes and cherish myself in it.*

*To let go is not to criticize or regulate anybody,
but to try to become what I dream I can be.*

*To let go is not to regret the past,
but to grow and live for the future.*

To let go is to fear less and love more.

Remember: The Time to Love is Short.