
Psychology, Meaning and the Challenges of Longevity

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ABSTRACT

Humankind has begun to reap one of the most valued harvests of its scientific and technological pursuits: a significant increase in human longevity. We now live longer than ever before, due in large part to advances in medicine and health care that provide those who have the opportunity to afford them a lifespan that for many approaches the 100-year mark. It is now within the realm of possibility that people will live 125 years or more within the next century. However, our ability to increase physical longevity may have outstripped our ability to deal individually and socially with these new lives, these new existences that go well beyond what has traditionally been considered a “working life”. How well-prepared are we psychologically to cope with the meaning of a life that extends to as much as 150 years or more? In this new “age of longevity”, what are the challenges for psychology as a resource for humanity in its quest to give definition to the experience of being alive, as well as for managing the affairs of everyday life? Traditional developmental theories in psychology tend to articulate early stages of life in detail, but are generally mute on the matter of later life. Cognitive psychology has been inclined to view longevity as leading to a deterioration of mental faculties due to “aging”. This paper examines the psychological implications of increased lifespans from an optimistic perspective by reviewing current developments in research on cognition, emotion and aging. The review identifies trends in psychology that, if emphasized and strengthened, may lead to improved theoretical frameworks that cast longevity in a positive light, and that identify how people can find meaning and fulfillment throughout their whole lifespan.

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