

Box 21.1 The Life Review

The tendency of older persons toward self-reflection and reminiscence used to be thought of as indicating a loss of recent memory and therefore a sign of aging. However, in 1961 Robert N. Butler postulated that reminiscence in the aged was part of a normal *life-review* process brought about by realization of approaching dissolution and death. It is characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences and particularly the resurgence of unresolved conflicts that can be looked at again and reintegrated. If the reintegration is successful, it can give new significance and meaning to one's life and prepare one for death, by mitigating fear and anxiety.

This is a process that is believed to occur universally in all persons in the final years of their lives. . . . It is spontaneous, unselective, and seen in other age groups as well; but the intensity and emphasis on putting one's life in order are most striking in old age. In late life, people have a particularly vivid imagination and memory for the past and can recall with sudden and remarkable clarity early life events. There is renewed ability to free-associate and bring up material from the unconscious. Individuals realize that their own personal myth of invulnerability and immortality can no longer be maintained. All of this results in a reassessment of life, which brings depression, acceptance, or satisfaction. . . .

As part of the life review, one may experience a sense of regret that is increasingly painful. In severe forms it can yield anxiety, guilt, despair, and depression. . . . The most tragic life review is that in which a person decides life was a total waste.

Some of the positive results of reviewing one's life can be a righting of old wrongs, making up with enemies, coming to acceptance of mortal life, a sense of serenity, pride in accomplishment, and a feeling of having done one's best. . . .

One of the greatest difficulties for younger persons is to listen thoughtfully to the reminiscences of older people. We have been taught that this nostalgia represents living in the past and a preoccupation with self and that it is generally boring, meaningless, and time-consuming. Yet as a natural healing process it represents one of the underlying human capacities on which all psychotherapy depends. The life review as a necessary and healthy process should be recognized in daily life as well as used in the mental health care of older people.

Source: Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Lewis, *Aging and Mental Health*. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby, 1982.