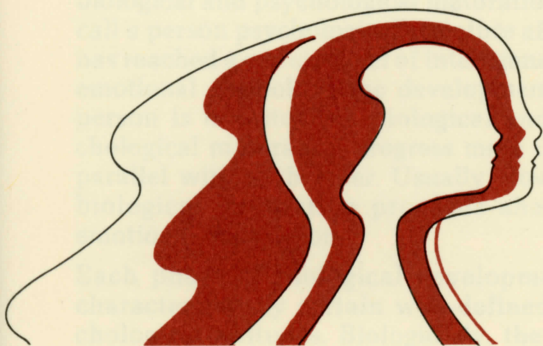


# Emotional Maturity



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# Emotional Maturity

by Franz Alexander, M.D.\*

The expression, "maturity," refers to a significant phase in the growth of a living organism. Maturity is achieved when individual growth is completed and the organism is ripe for propagation. The concept of maturity is used also in psychology and psychiatry. In this field it designates that phase of personality development which corresponds to biological and psychological maturation. We call a person psychologically mature after he has reached a certain level of intelligence and emotional outlook. If the development of a person is undisturbed, biological and psychological maturation progress more or less parallel with each other. Usually, however, biological maturation proceeds ahead of emotional maturation.

Each phase of biological development is characterized by certain well-defined psychological attitudes. Biologically, the newborn infant is completely dependent upon the mother and accordingly his emotional attitude is characterized by this dependence. He seeks gratification for his needs from his mother; his security is based on being cared for and loved by the mother. Gradually, the first signs of independence appear. The child learns to use his biological equipment, he learns to focus with his eyes, to masticate food, to coordinate the innervations of his skeletal muscles, he learns how to grab objects and to walk. He learns to exercise conscious control over his excremental functions and to communicate his needs by speech. All these functions at first are mastered separately. The eyes learn how to focus, the hands how to grab, the legs how to walk; but finally all these functions become coordinated with each other and the child is able to spot objects in environment, approach them and take hold of

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them. The greatest step towards independence is accomplished by the development of the functions of intelligence which allow a high degree of independent orientation in the surrounding world. The most important phase of development begins with the maturation of the sex glands during puberty. By now the growing organism has acquired all functions, to which finally the faculty of propagation is added. There follows a period called adolescence which in many respects is in sharp contrast with maturity although it introduces maturity. We speak of adolescent attitudes often when we want to emphasize that they are juvenile and immature. We refer to adolescent boastfulness, insecurity, awkwardness, instability, etc. Although biologically the adolescent organism reaches the end of its growth and is in possession of all its potential faculties, psychologically it can be sharply differentiated from maturity. In this age the parallelism between biological and psychological development does not prevail. Biological growth by now is a full phase ahead of psychological maturation.

## Adolescence

In order to define maturity, it is helpful to point out in detail the striking differences between adolescent and mature emotional attitudes. The mentality of the adolescent can best be understood if we consider this phasic difference between the faster biological and the slower psychological maturation. Adolescence is as if the biological functions of mature sexuality were foisted upon an organism which emotionally is not fully prepared for it.

The outstanding features of adolescence are insecurity and awkwardness which often makes a comical effect. Here is a young man or woman, biologically full-grown but in many respects emotionally still a child. One has the impression that they do not know what to do with themselves in their newly acquired status. Their insecurity manifests itself in self-consciousness, both about their body and

their personality. They do not know what to do with their hands and feet, there is a lack of spontaneity in their movements and speech and a constant effort to overcome their own feeling of awkwardness. A full-grown body is entrusted to an inexperienced mind.

Another conspicuous feature of adolescence is an excessive competitiveness. The adolescent feels as if he were constantly in a test situation. He must prove to himself that he is already a man or a woman. Noblesse oblige! Bodily they are full-grown men and women and this obliges them to behave as full-grown men and women. The only way to do this is by measuring up to others, both adults and contemporaries. Adolescent assertiveness, bragging, intensive competitiveness are the natural manifestation of this state of mind. The inexorable law of growth imposes upon them the obligation to perform according to their age and faculties. Lack of experience, the novelty of this new state, is what creates the feeling of inadequacy which the adolescent tries to overcome by competing with others.

## Psychological Maturity

The understanding of adolescence gives the clue to the essence of the mature state of mind. This consists in overcoming the insecurity and in being able to take one's self for granted. The period of competition during adolescence gives the person opportunity to prove himself to others and to one's own self. Moreover, this steady competition affords a continuous practice of one's full-grown capacities. During the period of adolescence the young person gradually grows emotionally into the advanced mature status which biologically he had already reached several years ago. The self-confident attitude of the mature person is based on taking himself and his capacities for granted. This is in sharp relief to the insecurity of the infant and of the adolescent. As a consequence of this inner security the mature adult's interests no longer center around the self. It can now be turned outwards towards the environment.

## Biological Maturity

Maturity can be best understood from the so-called concept of life. Life can be viewed as a relationship between three vectors: 1) the intake of energy in the form of the nutritive substances and oxygen; 2) their partial retention for use in growth; and 3) the expenditure of energy to maintain existence, its loss in waste, heat and in propagation. As long as the organism grows, intake and retention outweigh expenditure. Propagation may be understood as growth beyond the limits of the individual biological unit and follows the pattern of the propagation in monocellular organisms. The process of growth has a natural limit when the cell reaches maturity. Thereafter reproduction occurs through the division of the cell. When a biological unit reaches a certain size, addition of substance and energy becomes impossible because its capacity to organize living matter has reached its limit. Individual growth then stops and propagation serves as a means of releasing surplus energy.

## Maturity As Surplus Energy

All energy which is not needed to maintain life can be considered as surplus energy. This is the source of all sexual activity; it is also the source of all productive and creative work. This surplus of energy shows itself in the mature person in generosity, the result of the strength and overflow which the individual can no longer use for further growth and which therefore can be spent productively and creatively. The mature person is no longer primarily a receiver. He receives but also gives. His giving is not primarily subordinated to his expectation of return. It is giving for its own sake. Giving and producing are not felt by the mature person as an obligation and duty; he gives, produces and spends his energies with pleasure in the service of aims which lie outside of his own person. Just as for the growing child, receiving love and help are the main sources of pleasure, for the mature

person pleasure consists primarily in spending his energies productively for the sake of other persons and for outside aims. This generous outward directed attitude is what in ethics is called altruism. In the light of this view, altruism, the basis of Judeo-Christian morality, has a biological foundation; it is a natural, healthy expression of the state of surplus characteristic for maturity.

You may have the impression that we are speaking of something unreal, of a blueprint instead of reality. But we must realize that things in nature never correspond to abstract ideals. The platonic ideal of maturity in its pure and complete form is never found in nature and is only approached by human beings to a greater or lesser degree. Every adult carries in himself certain emotional remnants of childhood.

## Maturity As Giving

Whenever life becomes difficult, beyond the individual's capacity to deal with its pressing problems, there is a tendency to regress towards less mature attitudes, in which a person could still rely on the help of parents and teachers. In our heart, deep down, we all regret being expelled from the garden of Eden by eating from the tree of knowledge—which symbolizes maturity. In critical life situations, most persons become insecure and may seek help even before they have exhausted all their own resources. Many occupations require so much responsibility that a person's ability is taxed beyond his inner means. I could not use a better example than the occupation of the nurse. The nurse's function towards the patient in many respects resembles the maternal role because it is so one-sided in relation to giving and receiving. Like the child, the patient demands help and attention and gives little in return.

It must be realized that there is a proportion between receiving and giving which has limits for each individual and which cannot be transgressed without ill results. As soon as a person begins to feel that his work becomes a source of displeasure for him, this is the sign

that the balance between giving and receiving is disturbed. The load must be reduced to such an extent that the work again becomes a source of pleasure. It is therefore highly important that the occupational and the private life should be in a healthy compensatory relationship to each other. Many occupations in which a person assumes leadership and must take care of the dependent needs of others involve an unusual amount of responsibility. Even the most mature person has his own dependent needs, and requires occasional help and advice from others. In occupations which require a great deal of expenditure of emotional energy there is a danger of what might be called living beyond one's emotional means. Harmonious human relationships in marriage and friendships are most suitable to fill these emotional deficits and restore the balance between emotional receiving and giving. Vacations and recreational activities are of similar significance. And finally one cannot overemphasize the importance of nature's own great and universal device for restoring spent energy: sufficient amount of sleep.

## Maturity As Adaptability

This leads us to another important characteristic of emotional maturity, to the faculty of appraising realistically one's own limitations. The mature person is able to face not only the facts in the outside world but also the facts concerning his own self. He adjusts his work, his ambitions and efforts to these facts and seeks his gratification within the limits set by external conditions and by his own personality. This faculty to adjust one's needs to the existing and continuously changing external and internal conditions we call adaptability. It enables the person to meet in a flexible manner changes in the environment and changes in himself which are involved in the process of the growth and decline through aging. This is the function of the central governing portion of the personality, the ego. This flexible adaptive behavior stands in sharp contrast to automatic responses, for



example, blind obedience to existing standards. The child's ego is not capable of sizing up each single situation on its own merits. As we say, he has not yet acquired a sufficient amount of discriminatory judgment. Lacking those faculties on which flexible adaptation is based, experience and precise reasoning, the child's behavior is regulated by parental supervision and guidance. He cannot yet use his own mind and must by obeying them borrow from the experience and knowledge of the adults.

Mature behavior, however, is characterized by flexible adaptation to a given situation. The patterns learned in the past do not fit every new emergency. If the world and the individual were both stable, fixed automatic patterns would be sufficient to insure harmonious adaptation to given conditions. But periods of rapid social change bring other requirements. Not only do two subsequent generations live under different conditions, but an individual during his own lifetime has to readjust himself repeatedly to rapidly changing material and ideological conditions.

We have characterized the mature person as one who is able to use those energies not needed for survival in a productive, creative fashion by expending them for the sake of others. We have seen also that this generous productive state of mind requires security. Only that person who is not involved in his own internal conflicts, who is not handicapped by anxiety and confusion about his own problems, is able to turn his interest outwards. In order to obtain such internal peace of mind, the person must be able to adjust his internal needs in a flexible way to changing external and internal conditions. In order to have surplus energy which can be spent productively, the ego has to accomplish his adaptive functions in a smooth and economical way. Finally, we have seen that the complexities of modern life make the adaptive functions of the ego more and more difficult. The inevitable conclusion is that to reach emotional maturity in this present era became more difficult than it was in those periods in which life was simpler and regulated by well-tested traditions.

## Know Thyself

In its struggle for self-preservation humanity develops in each period of history the knowledge and skills it needs for survival. One of the crucial problems of a recent era has been to create sanitary living conditions for people in large cities. An understanding of contagious diseases became a question of life or death, and bacteriology and physical hygiene arose to meet the problem of congested areas. Dynamic psychiatry plays a similar role in respect to the psychological difficulties arising from rapid cultural change. The aim of psychoanalysis is to increase the effectiveness of the conscious ego by replacing automatic adaptations and repressions with conscious control and flexible adjustments to the changing conditions of modern life. It helps a person to approach more closely the ideal of a self-reliant mature state of mind. This requires facing facts not only outside but within ourselves. The Greek maxim, "Know yourself," may once have been a luxury; today it is a necessity. Man can adjust himself to his changing environment only by knowing himself, his desires, impulses, motives and needs. He must become wiser, more judicious and more self-reliant; in one word, more mature. Otherwise he will become confused and frightened and regress to the ways of dependent childhood and thus become the prey of power seekers who will induce him to believe that his security lies in doing what he is told.

