

Existential Crisis Stages Handout

An existential crisis is a period of deep reflection and questioning about one's own life, often triggered by major life events such as a serious illness or the loss of a loved one. During this time, individuals may confront profound existential concerns, including the search for meaning, purpose in life, and the value of their existence.

Sophomore crisis

An existential crisis, often called the sophomore crisis, typically begins in the late teenage years or early 20s. During this time, young adults face significant identity challenges, including choosing a career path, forming relationships, and understanding life's direction. This crisis often arises from fears about future security and can be triggered by major life transitions or the loss of a loved one. High achievers who once received praise may struggle with anxiety about not fulfilling their potential. This crisis can cause emotional distress and withdrawal but can also motivate individuals to define their goals. Resolving the sophomore crisis is crucial for reducing anxiety and gaining confidence about the future.

Adult existential crisis

In their mid to late 20s, individuals often face the adult existential crisis, which can persist into later adulthood if unresolved. This crisis involves deeper identity questions beyond those of the sophomore crisis, including career choices, relationships, and broader life issues. Unlike earlier crises, the adult existential crisis also addresses complex personal questions such as religious beliefs, sexuality, and the nature of independence versus interdependence.

Later existential crisis

In late adulthood, even with established careers and relationships, individuals may face a later existential crisis. This crisis focuses on themes of mortality, legacy, and achievements, rather than immediate issues like illness or death. People grapple with reflecting on past actions, seeking to make amends, and ensuring they have made a positive impact on their career, family, or the world. Unresolved issues from earlier existential crises can make this stage more challenging, leading to anxiety or depression as individuals confront missed opportunities and strive to leave a meaningful legacy before it's too late.

Reference

Andrews, M. (2016). The existential crisis. *Behavioral Development Bulletin*, 21(1), 104–109.
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