



## Resources:

- \* *Aging well* by George Vaillant (description of Erikson's life tasks).
- \* *Man's search for meaning* by Viktor Frankl.
- \* *Wisdom* by Andrew Zuckerman.
- \* *The antidote* by Oliver Burkeman (description of memento mori).
- \* *Any human heart* by William Boyd (a beautiful exploration of a human life).
- \* *Intelligent Virtue* by Julia Annas.

## SESSION 1: What might life hold in store?

### 1. My life story so far.

- \* **Wheel of life 1.** The first exercise enables students to take stock of where they are in life and what matters to them. The aim is to complete a double-sided sheet (use plain A4 or A3) with a wheel diagram on each side (example on the slides). On side 1, ask the students to think of the different elements of their life. They can divide the wheel up into as many segments as they like. Ask students to also rank the segments into the order that they matter most to them; they might rank some as equally important as others.
- \* **Wheel of life 2.** On the second side of the sheet, ask students to identify which virtues they think they most exemplify. Again, they can divide the wheel up into as many segments as they like, and can use whichever virtues they wish. Ask students to evaluate how well developed that virtue is in them; they might like to use something simple like a score out of 10, or something more complex like specific sentences or paragraphs. To help them evaluate, they might like to compare themselves with people who have developed each virtue to a high level.
- \* One way of doing wheel of life 2 is to characterise each virtue as a person in an imaginary team. For example, self-discipline might be characterised as 'Captain Sensible', and courage might be characterised as a superhero. Students could then think of their virtues as their team, with them at all times, who help them to live well.

### 2. Off into the future.

- \* The first part of the lesson gave students a chance to take stock of elements of their life now. The

second part of the lesson invites students to imagine what their life might hold for them. There are a couple of videos that could be used as prompts: there is the John Lewis advert from 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pf17BgtfWSw> [available 02/15]; alternatively, there is a sequence from the Pixar film *Up*, which whistlestops through Carl and Ellie's married life and picks up on the idea of ups and downs.

- \* Give students a blank sheet of paper. They are going to imagine a map of their future: the emphasis is very much on imagination rather than planning; where my life *could* go, rather than where my life *will* go. Students are going to envisage the journey their life might take by drawing a map. Obviously, in order to make sense of a map, we need to know where we are (part 1 of the lesson). They should imagine this as being the bottom left hand corner of their paper. Their destination (whatever they choose it to be) will be top right. Ask students to draw the journey between A and Z: they might draw a direct line, or a more meandering one. They might travel on a motorway, or through the mountains. They might have certain key destinations/milestones (marriage, own a house, make first million, cure first illness etc.). They might go it alone, they might travel with people, they might pick up and drop off as they go along (they might also use the image of their 'team' of virtues and the role they play). The aim is to be playful and imaginative and to use as many metaphors as they can come up with.
- \* Get students into pairs to describe their journeys to each other. The listener should listen without judging or criticising.



## SESSION 2: The life tasks.

### 1. Review

- \* Ask students to review the wheels of life and the map which they constructed in the previous lesson. In looking again, with the benefit of time between sessions, is there anything they would like to change?

### 2. Adults are developing too.

- \* The emphasis of this lesson is on the idea that we continue to grow, learn and go through stages of development as adults. Ask students to think about the adults that they know and the varying stages of adulthood that those people are at. Can students work out any stages of adult development from their own experiences?
- \* Shakespeare's poem, *The Seven Ages of Man*, was one attempt to encapsulate this (text included as a footnote). What do students think those seven ages are? Do they match up to their own speculations? Do the students agree with Shakespeare's assessment of adulthood?

### 3. The life tasks: Erik Erikson.

- \* Provide students with the information about Erik Erikson's model of adult development, which concerns mastering the life tasks (included as an endnote).
- \* Ask students to think of individuals they know who are either in the middle of one of the life tasks, or who they think have successfully completed a particular life task. Ask students, in small groups, to talk about those individuals and what reasons the students have for placing them in that life task.
- \* Ask students to look back at their life map. Ask them to try to plot the completion of the various life tasks against the journey that they sketched out in the previous lesson. They may find it difficult to imagine when certain tasks will happen: why do they think that is? What is it about a human life that makes it difficult to map the future in this way?

*THE SEVEN AGES OF MAN*  
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players,  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
Then, the whining schoolboy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice  
In fair round belly, with good capon lin'd,  
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws, and modern instances,  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide,  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.





### MASTERING THE LIFE TASKS.

You will not remain the same person for the rest of your life. Although many of your core personality traits and your temperament will probably remain the same, or similar, there are 6 key stages that you can expect to go through as you age. This is important for finding a sense of meaning and purpose in your life, because if you can work out which stage you are in, it can help you to work out what your priorities will be at that time of life and also, any pitfalls or problems to watch out for. Here are the 6 stages:

**1. Identity: working out who you are.** You are involved in this stage at the moment and it may last into your 20s. This stage is all about developing your own beliefs, your own values, your own friendships, your own passions: in short, your own self. To complete this stage successfully, you have to have a sense that everything about your identity is yours and not from your parents, your school or your culture. That doesn't mean you don't appreciate the role of parents, school, culture in your upbringing, but it means that you have successfully defined yourself as an individual, that you know where your parents' influence ends and your own individual self begins.

**2. Intimacy: forming a contented and committed relationship with another.** It is not until you have a clear sense of your own identity that you can form a healthy and successful long-term relationship with another person. It often takes several attempts to find a relationship that works and part of that process is 'expanding your sense of self' to make room for another person: in other words, getting over yourself and being able to meet another person's emotional needs. This, basically, is the ability to love another human being, and some researchers have suggested that love and good relationships with others may be the single most important source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being. It takes time, patience and the ability to learn from mistakes to develop healthy and fulfilling intimacy with another human.

**3. Career consolidation: finding a job you love.** Work forms such an important part of how we find meaning in life, that it makes sense to think of it as something that we develop and take time to get right. Work is about feeling that our life has purpose, that we are contributing in some way and also, it is about forming relationships with others. Many of our great friendships are formed with people with whom we work or study, which makes sense: if you are a

doctor, you are likely to meet people with similar values, skills, beliefs and attitudes through working in a hospital, and people we share things in common with make for better friends. George Vaillant suggests that we need 4 things to succeed in career consolidation: contentment (that we are happy), compensation (that we are rewarded for what we do), competence (that we feel able to achieve and succeed) and commitment (that we care about what we do).

**4. Generativity: helping the next generation.** The first three stages are about developing our own abilities and identity, but there comes a point when our life can become focused on the people who will follow us; the next generation. Generativity, which often begins in the 30s and 40s, although sometimes later, is about selflessly guiding the next generation: helping them find their own way and allowing them autonomy (freedom of choice). Generativity is not about control. Those who are successful at generativity are our community builders, mentors, guides and leaders.

**5. Keeper of the meaning: wisdom, justice and preserving human culture.** If generativity is about guiding the next generation, 'keeper of the meaning' is about noticing what is best about our human civilizations and doing the utmost to preserve those things. For example, Sir David Attenborough has dedicated his life to preserving the delicate relationship between mankind and the natural world through his documentaries and his books: he is a keeper of the meaning.

**6. Integrity: accepting your life for what it was.** The last of the 'life tasks' is integrity: the ability to accept that your life was the only life that you had, that it was something that had to be, and it is the ability to accept the life that you had, even if it involved suffering and sacrifice. Death is the one inevitability of our lives and integrity is achieved if we are able to accept old age, illness and our own extinction.

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It is important to bear in mind that no one stage is better than any of the others. According to Erik Erikson, these are the stages of adult development and they are there to help us to work out where we are, and where others are. These stages also contribute to our wholeness, from where the word health comes. Overall, these developmental stages are about moving beyond selfish concerns (which are normal in childhood) to concerning ourselves with others and with the world as a whole, rather like when the bud of a flower opens to reveal its full beauty.





## SESSION 3: Circumstances of a life and the living of a life.

The theory behind this lesson comes from *Intelligent Virtue* by Julia Annas. There is a key extract included as an endnote.

1. The circumstances of a life.

- \* Give students a case study of an individual life, which will enable them to tease out the importance of the circumstances of a life and the living of a life. One such example comes from the documentary series *7Up*, which has followed a number of people from the age of 7 to the age of 56 (in the most recent instalment). Neil Hughes has experienced varied and interesting circumstances of a life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcMWAwaXWhg> [available 02/15]
- \* Ask students to identify the circumstances of Neil's life. What bearing do the students think that circumstances of Neil's life had on the way Neil lived his life?

### 2. The living of a life.

- \* Ask students to identify **how** Neil has lived his life. Which virtues do they see enacted in the way that he chooses to live? Is there a change in his enacting of the virtues across the course of his life, from 7 to 56?

### 3. The good and practical reasoning.

- \* Ask students to identify what is good about Neil's life. In what ways is Neil living a life that brings about goodness for himself and for others? How has this changed over the course of his life?
- \* Ask students to speculate on how Neil identifies the good, and he lives according to it. Has it happened by chance, or was it somehow his fate? Was it the result of careful and deliberate choice? What are those choices? How does a person choose to live a good life? How much of an effect did the circumstances of Neil's life have upon the way that he lived it?

### 4. Back to your map.

- \* Ask students to look again at their life maps.
- \* How much of it is about the circumstances of life (i.e. what they already have and want to have) and **how** much of it is about how they want to live their life?
- \* How much of it could be said to be focused on the good? How much thought have they given to **how** they are going to accomplish the things they want to accomplish?

## SESSION 4: Finding meaning in the lives of others.

This lesson could be done as reminiscence work with senior citizens.

### 1. Wisdom: keepers of the meaning.

- \* The Faces song *Ooh La La*, portrays a young man reflecting on the things his grandfather says with a mixture of amusement and respect. The key lyric in the song, for the purposes of this lesson, is "I wish I knew all I knew now, when I was younger / I wish I knew all I know now, when I was stronger."
- \* As a stimulus for this part of the lesson, there is a clip from *The wisdom* film by Andrew Zuckerman on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/5702381> [available 02/15] where well-known people share the wisdom they themselves have accumulated. The book and feature length film are both marvellous.
- \* Ask students to gather stories from each other about what they can and have learned from older generations of their relatives. How many of them put into action the wisdom that is passed on to them? For those that don't, can they identify what





it is about youth that makes it harder to make use of the wisdom of our elders?

- \* Feedback and discuss as a class.

## 2. Memento mori.

- \* One technique that has been suggested to help us avoid wasting our lives and also, to give our lives more meaning, is the ancient Stoic reminder ‘Memento Mori’: remember that you must die. There are some quotes about this on the slides.
- \* Ask students to discuss in small groups what they think about this idea. Would regularly reminding ourselves of our own mortality have a positive

impact on the way that we live our lives? What problems might we encounter with ‘Memento Mori’? There are questions on the slides.

- \* Ask students to read the extract from *The Antidote* by Oliver Burkeman (included as an endnote). Ask them to discuss whether or not they agree with the arguments that he puts forward for finding more meaning in life. Do any of them know anyone who has confronted death through serious illness, an accident or daredevil activities, who has emerged with a more meaningful outlook on what matters in life, and who has also changed the way they live?

### INTELLIGENT VIRTUE: CIRCUMSTANCES OF A LIFE AND THE LIVING OF A LIFE.

FROM *INTELLIGENT VIRTUE*,  
BY JULIA ANNAS PP92 – 116.

‘The circumstances of your life are the factors whose existence in your life are not under your control. You are a particular age, with a particular genetic disposition, gender, height, etc.; you have a particular nationality, culture, and language, have received a particular upbringing and education, have a particular family, employment and so on. It’s not that you can’t do anything about these factors, but it’s not up to you that they are in your life. You can’t bring it about that you are a different age or were born in a different place. You can alter your appearance, weight, language, culture, and so on, but you can’t bring it about that you started with any but the original.

The living of your life is the way you deal with the circumstances of your life. You can’t bring it about that you have a different genetic disposition from the one you do, but it’s up to you how you respond to this, either refusing to think about it or working with it. You can’t do anything about having the parents you do, but it’s up to you how you deal with your relationship with them. You can’t do anything about having been brought up in a particular culture, but it’s up to you what you make of this, and what attitude you take to your culture and others. In the metaphor used in ancient philosophy, the

‘The circumstances of your life are the factors circumstances of your life are the material you have to work on and living your life is working on those materials to make a product. Living your life well is doing this skilfully (the metaphor is one that brings the skill analogy to the fore); a life well lived is like the result of a skilful and intelligent formation of materials into a whole...

...a virtuous life can be lived in very disparate circumstances. There is no one circumstantially specified good life in which the virtues have to be exercised. Many different specific kinds of life, in different kinds of circumstances, can be lived virtuously.

...The virtues are not just admirable but inspire us as an ideal, whether or not they are useful and agreeable. They are inspiring, not just useful and agreeable, because exercising virtue is a commitment on the part of a virtuous person to goodness because it is goodness: goodness is not just an outcome. The different virtues appear to be focused on different values, but the virtuous life consists in the living of a life, not its circumstances, and so the diversity of ways of life and the values they focus on is not a barrier to the unification of the virtues, and thus an aspiration to a good life overall.’





MEMENTO MORI: FROM 'THE ANTIDOTE'  
BY OLIVER BURKEMAN.

'Trying to embrace death as a good thing would seem to be asking far too much of yourself [because it is unpleasant]. It might not necessarily even be desirable, since it could cause you to place less value on being alive. But coming to understand death as something that there is no reason to fear, yet which is still bad because of what it brings to an end, might be the ideal middle path. The argument is a thoroughly down to earth, pragmatic and Stoic one: the more that you remain aware of life's finitude, the more you will cherish it, and the less likely you will be to fritter it away on distractions.

The psychotherapist Irvin Yalom, in his book *Staring at the Sun*, points out that many of us live with the dim fear that on our deathbeds we'll come to regret how we spent our lives. Remembering our mortality moves us closer to the deathbed mindset from which such a judgment might be made - thus enabling us to spend our lives in ways that we're much less likely to come to regret.

Truly to confront your own mortality, Yalom argues, is to undergo an awakening - a total shift in perspective that fundamentally transforms how it feels to be alive. And it is not necessarily remotely pleasant. This is the real

distinction between mortality awareness as a way of life, on the one hand, and those clichéd slogans about 'living each day as if it were your last' on the other. The slogans may be motivational - a reminder to get down to the important stuff before it's too late. But Yalom is talking about a transformation that redefines what constitutes 'the important stuff'.

When you really face mortality, the ultimate and unavoidable worst case scenario, everything changes. 'All external expectations, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.'

Start thinking this way, Yalom points out, and it becomes a virtuous circle. Living more meaningfully will reduce your anxiety about the possibility of future regret at not having lived meaningfully - which will, in turn, keep sapping death of its power to induce anxiety. Live a life suffused with the awareness of its own finitude, and you can hope to finish it in something like the fashion which Jean-Paul Sartre hoped to die: 'quietly...certain that the last burst of my heart would be inscribed on the last page of my work, and that death would be taking only a dead man.'

