


Adaptation & Well-Being

Meeting the Challenges of Life



KNUD S. LARSEN

“According to Leo Tolstoy’s famous statement, ‘all happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’. Knud Larsen in his book on human happiness proves the opposite. Summarizing the classical and recent research in successful human adaptation, adjustment and well-being of the soul and body, he shows the many faces of individual human happiness. Moreover, the book opens the perspective into the directions of social, cultural and biological evolution. What I like most in the book is its usefulness. Knud has many practical pieces of advices suggesting that we can improve our well-being if we try. I wish Anna Karenina could have read this well-conceived, well-written text.”

**Gyorgy Csepeli, Professor of Social Psychology,
Chair of the Interdisciplinary Social Research Program of the
Doctoral School of the Faculty of Social Science at ELTE,
Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of
Advanced Studies at Koszeg (iASK)**

“This unique, reader-friendly volume covers psychological aspects of successful living with such diversity and depth that I have not encountered hitherto. It is essential reading for psychology undergraduates as well as more seasoned academics and practitioners.”

**Howie Giles, Distinguished Professor of Communication,
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA and Honorary
Professor of Psychology, University of Queensland, Australia**

“This book by Professor Larsen is very enjoyable reading and covers the many challenges humans face across the lifespan. The focus is on positive psychology as supportive solutions are offered for the many challenges of living. This is also a relatively rare book that evaluates adaptation from a socio-cultural perspective, since most books today emphasize cognitive aspects of coping and development. I especially appreciated how Professor Larsen weaved his salient knowledge of cross-cultural psychology into this important work on human adaptation. In the book the author discusses the issue of adaptation in its varying aspects of human life and through the prism of cultural influence on personality and behavior.”

**Askar Jumageldinov, PhD, Assistant Professor at Catholic
University in Lyon**

This book uniquely ties together the author’s personal experiences with in-depth research on human adaptation. What strikes the reader is the very personal narrative that illustrates the many points of struggling with the challenges of being human. The book combines the best of classical literature along with very current and meaningful research. The whole human journey is evaluated from identity and finding meaning, through optimizing health in midlife to facing the final existential questions related to both death and longevity. A very thoughtful book.”

Sven Morch, PhD, Professor, University of Copenhagen

“An enlightened and enlightening story of the challenges we meet through our life course. Although the general reader may find useful information for the journey of life, it is also a volume packed with research-based information from the psychological and social sciences, with implications for how we can grow as human beings and live satisfying lives together.”

Reidar Ommundsen, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo

“I have found the work of Knud Larsen to dovetail with my own work on behalf of indigenous and third-world peoples since I first became acquainted with him in the context of supporting the People of Cuba. Dr. Larsen, as is manifest in this career-capping work, has the ability – rare among non-ethnologist academics – to be engaged in the inner cognitive world of people inside other cultures while viewing their society in his own unique perspective. This broad and deep treatment will deepen and broaden my own view of the peoples that I have engaged with on the cognitive level. It also broadens my view of the challenges of my own life and how to live a happy life.”

John Allison, Cognitive Ethnologist and Author

Adaptation and Well-Being

Knowing how to live a long, happy and healthy life is a universal desire of humankind. *Adaptation and Well-Being* is a narrative of the human journey, from the formation of identity to the end of life, which explores several key issues related to well-being and the challenges we face. Combining positive psychology and a social psychological evolutionary perspective with colourful, anecdotal evidence from his full and varied experiences, the author interprets research from various stages of human development in order to meet the challenges of life and achieve optimal health and well-being.

The book examines how an integrated identity and a healthy self-concept are key to successful adaptation and living. The author also discusses how emotional intelligence and communication are essentially linked to issues of culture and gender. The importance of understanding gender differences is a central theme that runs through chapters on sexuality, gender and intimacy. The book also looks at the relationship of stress to well-being, the challenges of midlife and the end of life, as well as the search for meaning and purpose.

Integrating classical and recent research and including cross-cultural perspectives, *Adaptation and Well-Being* will provide valuable reading for students in lifespan courses in counselling and therapy, developmental psychology and social gerontology. Those in tertiary courses, such as social work, welfare and nursing, will also find this useful, along with practitioners in these fields.

Knud S. Larsen is Professor Emeritus at Oregon State University and academician of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Arts. He taught widely at universities across the world and is the recipient of senior Fulbright awards in both Vietnam and Bulgaria. The author received the St. Kliment Blue Ribbon Medal for contributions to social science at Sofia. On Research Gate, the author is ranked higher than 90% of scholars listed.

Adaptation and Well-Being

Meeting the challenges of life

Knud S. Larsen

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To my daughter Debbie:

**For your cheer, for the bonding of our work
and warm memories.**

**In memory of the unforgettable courage of
the White Rose Society:**

**Lighting the candle and proclaiming, "long live freedom"
in the darkest night.**

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To live life to the end is no child's play.

Pasternak

Introduction

This book is a narrative of the human journey from the initial chapter on the formation of identity and developing a healthy self-concept to end of life issues of death and dying and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The author utilizes a social psychological evolutionary perspective as a valuable tool in interpreting research from various stages of human development and adaptation. The focus of the book is on how to meet the challenges of life and achieve optimal health and well-being.

Adaptation refers to changes in behavior required by environmental demands with outcomes that enhance fitness to survive and be successful. From an evolutionary perspective, all organisms face the same adaptive challenges. However, humans have complex adaptations transmitted socially and culturally that, in turn, enhance well-being. Genetic adaptations occur through natural selection and are retained because the alterations are linked to evolutionary success. Other adaptations occur during childhood through learning as taught by parents and the cultural environment. Traumatic experiences can lead to a breakdown in adaptation reflected in serious illness or fringe living. Of great importance to successful living are cultural adaptations in response to the unique physical and social environmental demands.

An integrated identity and a healthy self-concept are keys to adaptation and successful living as discussed in Chapter 1. Living life to the fullest also requires emotional maturity and a utilization of the more recently developed psychological concept of emotional intelligence that is discussed in Chapter 2. An emotionally mature person who has developed higher levels of emotional intelligence is better able to adapt to varying demands with a broader understanding that life is not just about the self. Enhanced decision making is an outcome of reading emotional signals correctly, and therefore being a better partner in communication. An understanding of what goes on in communication is necessary for successful adaptation. In Chapter 3, communication is discussed as an essential cultural trait and an adaptation central to individual as well as cultural understandings.

Normal heterosexual relationships are based on a biological platform of complementary differences. Understanding gender differences as related to human happiness is a central theme in several chapters. Sexuality, gender and

intimacy are the basic human adaptations that ensure both individual and social survival. In Chapter 4, sexuality is evaluated as the center of human life and as the point of interaction of all psychological and physiological dimensions. Recent years have seen a sea change in sexual norms in the West, which today leaves few or no limitations on the expression of sexuality. The chapter also discusses varying sexual understandings including transgender identity and related topics. Homosexual orientation is evaluated with recent research informing on physiological evidence, causes and ideological factors. Sexual motivation is based on both cognitive and socio-cultural factors. Concomitant with the sexual revolution, the world has also observed the rise in sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. The chapter concludes with an examination of hostility toward women as expressed in sexual harassment, pornography and rape.

The relationship of gender to human happiness is discussed in Chapter 5. The meaning of gender refers to the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of being raised as a boy or girl. Gender roles are ubiquitous and probably emerged in human culture since they contributed to human survival. Different requirements of men and women in reproduction, different physiological platforms, hormonal distribution and communication styles all contributed to gendered aspects of human life. Gender-related happiness is partly the outcome of secure attachment styles learned as children and overcoming the misunderstandings derived from different gender-based communication styles.

Chapter 6 evaluates the search for deeper intimacy as found in friendships, becoming lovers and seeking a permanent partner in marriage. The most important factor as a basis of attraction and interpersonal comfort is similarity of background characteristics. Physical attraction is thought to be related to the perception of fertility and is perhaps hardwired. Both genders, however, value emotional maturity and dependability. Cohabitation has accompanied the sexual revolution to the point where 30% of all children are born into these unions. However, many of these trial marriages fail for the same reasons that legal marriages fail. An important contributor to marital success is the perspective of each gender toward egalitarian or traditional gender roles.

The relationship of stress to well-being is ubiquitous. Chapter 7, however, demonstrates that it is not the stressor that creates the actual strain in life, but the appraisal of the situation. Furthermore, Chapter 8 includes a discussion on post-traumatic stress disorder. Acute or chronic trauma can lead to a breakdown in adaptations with negative consequences for health and well-being. Recent years have seen more information and research on post-traumatic disorders, supporting the conclusion that they occur more frequently than formerly thought.

A key adaptation involves the successful search for meaning and purpose in life, which is discussed in Chapter 9. Research shows that stable mental health and the desire to meet challenges are essential in successful adulthood. Good or excellent decision-making skills optimize the chances for a happy life. Aging is a normal and inevitable process, and like most things in life, has both negative and positive outcomes. For example, some cognitive skills improve in midlife

along with a decrease in perceptual speed. Life satisfaction is related to a conscious value system to guide important decisions. In midlife, mortality becomes more salient and raises the issue of the meaning of life for many people. The positive solution to the terror of mortality is generativity or, in other words, leaving something behind that is lasting and meaningful.

All stages of human development require adaptation and that is also true for midlife, which is evaluated in Chapter 10. This is a time in life where challenges increase along with an enhanced awareness of the temporality of existence. Life is change and living life to the fullest requires that we face up to all the changes and trials of being an adult. In the chapter on midlife, the author rejects the concept of crisis, but focuses on the need to find balance in life and meet common challenges.

The end of life forms special challenges that most people do not wish to face or at least would like to delay into the distant future. However, Chapter 11 suggests that it is possible to find a good death when we face the reality of the end with courage. A perspective on death and dying is presented in detail with suggestions on how to die successfully. Many people live with death denial and obfuscation throughout their lives. However, acceptance of what is real in biological death brings on a more serene end.

The book ends on an optimistic note in Chapter 12, where health and the possibilities of a long life are discussed. The final chapter emphasizes the optimism bias that marks the book. How to live a long, happy and healthy life is the universal desire of humankind and the final chapter shows that such outcomes are modified by socio-economic status and personality. In all the chapters, the major issues of human adaptation are related to well-being. Solving the challenges of adulthood and the common developmental tasks that involve relationships are essential keys to longevity and living life to the fullest.

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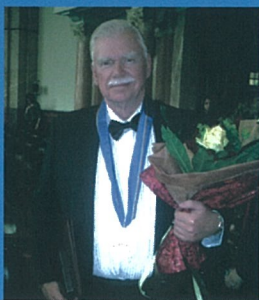
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