NEWS LESSON

# Finding Yourself Is Not Only a Teenage Task. The Evidence Suggests It Runs Well Into Adulthood



BEFORE YOU READ

## 1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What does it mean to hold a belief because you have chosen it, rather than because you inherited it?
2. Do you think societies expect people to settle on an identity too early? Why or why not?
3. How do you decide which parts of yourself are fixed and which are still changing?

## 2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **adolescence** | ☐ | A | a link between two things |
| 2 | **autonomy** | ☐ | B | the years when a child is becoming an adult |
| 3 | **connectedness** | ☐ | C | the feeling of being close to other people |
| 4 | **formation** | ☐ | D | proof that something is true |
| 5 | **association** | ☐ | E | small or limited in size or importance |
| 6 | **classic** | ☐ | F | the process of something being created or developed |
| 7 | **confirmation** | ☐ | G | typical, and well known as an example |
| 8 | **modest** | ☐ | H | the freedom to make your own choices |

## 3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

**A Finnish study tracking identity from 27 to 61 found continued positive development, mostly before 42, and a link with better mental wellbeing. What it cannot tell us is which causes which.**

1 Popular accounts often place the search for identity in adolescence. The teenager experiments, the adult settles, and by the time you are paying a mortgage the question of who you are is supposed to have been answered. One reason this picture has survived is that few studies have followed people through adult life, so there has been little evidence to challenge it.

2 A team at the University of Jyväskylä has drawn on one of the rare datasets that can. The Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Personality and Social Development has followed the same individuals for more than 50 years. It was led by Professor Lea Pulkkinen from 1968 to 2012 and by Katja Kokko since 2013, and it is primarily funded by the Research Council of Finland. In a paper in the Journal of Adult Development, Liinu Marin and colleagues examined identity at ages 27, 36, 42, 50 and 61, and mental wellbeing at 36, 42, 50 and 61.

3 Identity here is defined as a person's view of who they are and what they consider important in different areas of life, supplying a sense of continuity. The researchers assessed its development through two questions: how firmly people were committed to their views, and whether those views were reached through personal exploration or taken over from significant others or society at large. A well-developed identity is one with clear views a person has examined and chosen.

4 On average, identity developed positively from 27 to 61, with most of the movement between 27 and 42. Marin concludes that identity can continue to develop throughout adulthood. That is a modest but useful correction to the assumption that adulthood is mainly a time for living out an identity formed earlier.

5 The association with wellbeing is the more intriguing result. Wellbeing was measured broadly, covering psychological wellbeing such as autonomy and purpose in life, social wellbeing such as connectedness to communities, life satisfaction, and feelings of anxiety and depression. More positive identity development was associated with better mental wellbeing, in particular better psychological and social wellbeing and less anxiety.

6 The researchers are careful here, and readers should be too. The study did not examine causal direction, and Marin explicitly notes that mental wellbeing may support or challenge the formation of identity. This is a classic chicken and egg problem: a clearer sense of self may protect against anxiety, but a calmer mind may also make it easier to explore and commit to a sense of self. The accounts we have do not report the sample size, and results are averages, so they say nothing certain about any one person. The Phys.org article appears to repeat the university's own press announcement, so it is not independent confirmation.

7 The practical lesson should therefore be drawn with care. It would be going too far to claim that working on your identity will improve your mental health. But the findings do challenge the notion that being unsure of yourself in your thirties or forties is a sign of failure. It may simply mean that, like many people, you are still a work in progress.

Sources: Phys.org, Identity develops well into adulthood and is linked to better mental well-being; University of Jyväskylä, Identity develops well into adulthood and is linked to better mental well-being. Picture: AI illustration.

## 4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer thinks the findings show that working on your identity will improve your mental health. T F NG
2. The writer treats the Phys.org article as weaker support for the study than a separate investigation would be. T F NG
3. Identity was assessed at more ages than mental wellbeing was. T F NG
4. The sample included more people from cities than from rural areas. T F NG
5. The writer says the results tell us what will happen to any one person. T F NG

## 5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

| anecdotal | assumption | causal | examined | explicitly | longitudinal | rare | tentatively |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

1. The contract _____ forbids staff from sharing client data, so there is no room for doubt.
2. Ice-cream sales and drownings both rise in summer, but that is a correlation, not a _____ link.
3. A _____ study follows the same people over many years rather than taking a single snapshot.
4. The whole business plan rested on the _____ that interest rates would stay low.
5. Genuine cases of the disease are _____; most patients turn out to have something milder.
6. Each application is _____ by two independent reviewers before a decision is made.

## 6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The study's findings are _____ with earlier research on ageing. (CONSIST)
2. Critics argue that the survey's conclusions are _____ because of the way participants were chosen. (RELY)
3. There is no _____ evidence that the treatment works. (CONCLUDE)
4. The _____ of the original experiment by an independent team strengthened its credibility. (REPLICATE)
5. Her _____ to accept the figures at face value surprised her colleagues. (WILLING)

## 7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level the preposition is fixed to a whole phrase: tantamount to, contingent on, fraught with. Learn each phrase as one block.

| at | by | for | of | on | to | with |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

1. Claiming that identity work cures anxiety would be tantamount _____ overstating the evidence.
2. Any claim about causation is contingent _____ evidence that the researchers did not collect.
3. Studies that rely on self-reports are often fraught _____ bias.
4. Some adults, in defiance _____ social expectations, change careers at fifty.
5. A single study is a starting point, not a licence _____ drawing firm conclusions.

SPEAK

## 8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. When two things are linked, as identity and wellbeing are here, how should we think about which affects which?
2. What might be gained and lost when people treat adulthood as a time to live out a settled identity?
3. How might your own culture shape the way you think about finding yourself?

## 9 Role-play: a big change at forty

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

**Student A · the worried friend**

Your friend wants to leave a safe job and start something new at forty. You're worried about money and risk. Ask at least two questions before you give your opinion.

**Student B · the friend with a plan**

You want to change your life: a new job, a new city or a new hobby. Explain why it matters to you and how you'll manage the risks. Try to persuade your friend.

**Useful phrases**

I've been thinking about doing something different.

I'm not sure it's the right time.

What would you do about money?

I know it's a risk, but I'd regret not trying.

You're still working out what you want, aren't you?

Let's agree to try it for six months.

**Afterwards, tell the class: did the worried friend change their mind, and what helped?**

ANSWER KEY

**2 Key words**

1 B · 2 H · 3 C · 4 F · 5 A · 6 G · 7 D · 8 E

**4 True, false or not given**

1 F · 2 T · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

**5 Vocabulary**

1 explicitly · 2 causal · 3 longitudinal · 4 assumption · 5 rare · 6 examined

**6 Word forms**

1 consistent · 2 unreliable · 3 conclusive · 4 replication · 5 unwillingness

**7 Language focus**

1 to · 2 on · 3 with · 4 of · 5 for

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