

2001

## Opportunity Knocks Only Once? Challenging Common Beliefs About Adulthood

Marilyn Montgomery

Camille DeBell

Patricia R. McCarthy

Gerald Parr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gsc>



Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS ONLY ONCE? USING PROVERBS TO CHALLENGE 'CROOKED THINKING' ABOUT ADULTHOOD

**Montgomery, Marilyn, DeBell, Camille, McCarthy, Patricia R., Parr, Gerald**

Growth-oriented groups for adults are designed to help individuals learn about themselves for the purpose of making constructive life changes. While the success of such groups always depends to some extent on individual characteristics (e.g., motivation, openness to experience), group success can also be affected by members' beliefs or stereotypes about appropriate age-related behaviour. In this article, proverbs such as Don't change horses mid-stream or Opportunity knocks only once are targeted for discussion by group participants as a means of identifying irrational beliefs, confronting stereotypes, promoting flexible thinking, and examining acceptable adult behaviour.

## **Abstract**

Does it really take two to tango? Is life a bowl of cherries? Should you, indeed, never buy a pig in a poke? Our language is full of proverbs, truisms that represent the distillation of wisdom from generations of experience. We rely on these types of statements when we want to offer a quick, knowing explanation or an irrefutable but succinct analysis of human behaviour (Rogers, 1990). In their economy of expression and common-sense appeal, platitudes have intuitive truth-value that is difficult to deny. Who hasn't wished they had taken the proverbial stitch in time that would have saved nine, or admonished a friend not to be penny wise, but pound foolish? Proverbs are deeply ingrained in our language and thinking and shape our ideas about how adult life should be lived (Kohn, 1988).

Truisms, however, are, not necessarily true. While some proverbs offer interesting insights into human nature, many can be refuted by logic or psychological research. For example, Sigelman (1981) correlated intelligence and life satisfaction and concluded that ignorance is not bliss. Zajonc (1968) challenged the adage that familiarity breeds contempt by demonstrating that increased exposure to a stimulus resulted in its higher, not lower, favourability ratings. Bateson (1983) demonstrated that in human mate selection, it is not necessarily true that opposites attract; rather, a high degree of perceived similarity increases attraction. Evidently proverbs are not always reliable guides to life.

In addition, the extreme black or white positions that proverbs generally depict encourage dichotomous thinking—thinking that may create obstacles to adult growth and development (Perry, 1970). In fact, cognitive theorists warn that they encourage crooked thinking because they are not always true or applicable but claim to be (Ellis, 1973). Because proverbs are so embedded within the linguistic cultures in which we live and from which we make sense of our lives, we have all inherited their “wisdom” about how life should be lived. When accepted

without reflection, however, the beliefs that they foster can create problems in adult life. These beliefs also create special challenges for counsellors because dichotomous or irrational thinking restricts clients' willingness to risk constructive changes (Ellis, 1988; 1995).

## **Examining Proverbs as a Cognitive Intervention for Adult Groups**

Groups have long been recognized as an effective modality for cognitive restructuring (Rose, 1989). In this article, we offer a cognitive intervention strategy for use in groups. The strategy involves critical consideration of eight common proverbs for introducing the idea of replacing crooked thinking about adulthood with rational, facilitative thinking. We developed this intervention through our work with support groups in adult residential living communities and have found the critical examination of common proverbs to be an exercise in which group members become readily involved.

As is true for all cognitively based therapies, this intervention is most suitable for individuals with the appropriate intellectual capacity (little or no dementia, no thought disorders) and verbal fluency required to reflect on and analyze information. We find it especially helpful for ageing populations, including day-patient or outpatient mental health groups, where counsellor support can help maintain the mental health of individuals experiencing various stressors. We have also found this intervention to be helpful for members of personal growth groups, communication skills groups, coping skills groups, health promotion groups, and recovery groups.

The intervention is used in the early working stage of group therapy to highlight, challenge, and restructure dichotomized or irrational beliefs about adult life. Specifically, critical discussion of proverbs about proper behaviour in adulthood provides members with practice in determining distorted cognitions (as each proverb is held to the light) and ascertaining each client's own distortions (as clients determine whether the beliefs embodied in each proverb are ones to which they ascribe). Group discussion results in members collectively identifying more functional cognitions. For example, one group modified a traditional proverb by adding an addendum: Don't rock the boat—unless you'd like to go for a swim!

We suggest that the counsellor first offer a proverb for the group's consideration, asking for a verdict: Is it true or false? Then, together, counsellor and clients can tease out the foundational beliefs upon which the proverb is based and hold these up for scrutiny. (See Table 1 for examples of this step and the ones that follow for each of the eight proverbs.) In the next step, clients look for evidence of how they might retain a version of the proverb as a conscious or unconscious belief that unnecessarily limits their perceptions. Next, using disputation exercises, clients explore the limits of the proverb and the beliefs that it implies. A countering proverb can be offered for clients' consideration; considering both proverbs simultaneously will illustrate the concept of dichotomized thinking and may nudge clients toward more relativistic thinking, which

is thought to better facilitate constructive change in adulthood (Kegan, 1982; Perry, 1970). Finally, the group leader challenges the group to amend the proverb in a way that makes it more rational and more facilitative or to abandon a proverb that constitutes crooked thinking in favour of personal truisms that better fit clients' belief systems.

Through this exercise, clients are able to practice a rational assessment of popular wisdom and its possible effects on their thinking before they take the greater risk of examining very personal—and possibly irrational—beliefs held by members of the group. The goal is for clients to become aware of limiting beliefs about adult life, critically evaluate them, and choose more functional beliefs as a basis for their own behaviour. In the following section, we offer eight proverbs, along with related points for adult developmental theory, for purposes of discussion. Table 1 provides a structured outline of group exercises.

## **Folk Proverbs for Group Consideration**

### **Proverb 1: Opportunity knocks only once**

Applied to the life span, this proverb suggests that once people have passed their “peak,” no more major developmental changes can occur and life becomes anticlimactic. Young adults may believe the opportunities they don't seize during early adulthood (for professional advancement, educational training, parenthood, or intimate relationships) will never be available to them again in later life. Older adults may have resigned themselves to the fate of the missed opportunities of their younger days. Beck (1967) would describe this proverb as an example of absolutist (i.e., black-and-white) thinking.

The myth suggested by this proverb (that early opportunities will never arise again) is propagated by the youth focus and ageism of mainstream Western culture (Côté, 1994; 2000). Many North American rituals celebrate significant developmental events for younger people (e.g., graduation, obtaining a driver's license, first job, engagements and weddings, celebrating births), but few mark other significant transitions in adulthood (exceptions include the late-life transitions of retirement and golden wedding anniversary). This difference implies that little of significance occurs between the transition to young adulthood and later life.

However, many studies indicate that middle or later adulthood, rather than early adulthood, can be the time of greatest life satisfaction. Marital happiness and satisfaction usually increase during the second honeymoon stage, after children have left home (Rice, 1992). Adults who remarry in mid-life feel that they have learned to communicate better, handle relationship problems more maturely (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984), and are more highly motivated to make them work (Goldberg, 1982). Many single adults have highly satisfying independent lifestyles and are grateful not to face the worries of divorce or widowhood that plague their married counterparts (Rice, 1992).

Examining people's life experiences may lead others to challenge proverbs and make significant life changes. For example, opera star Beverly Sills gave up her active singing career at age 50 to take a second career as general director for the New York City Opera. “I may be considered

old as an opera star," she commented, "but I'm thought of as a young manager. That's one of the corporate perks of this job" (Heymont, 1980, p. 64). Using this story with an adult group, the group leader might begin challenging the belief that opportunity knocks only once by suggesting the counter-proverb, The best is yet to be.

### **Proverb 2: And they lived happily ever after**

This proverb suggests that when people develop normally, they reach a time in adulthood when they have "arrived," they "have it together," they are completely competent and in control—again, absolutist thinking. The crises of youth now resolved, adults are expected to achieve an ultimate end in all aspects of their development. Certainly by mid-life, adults will have resolved their most important problems and overcome the barriers to a good and complete life.

Not just a common ending to fairy tales and romance novels, living happily ever after is a common expectation evidenced in the statements of clients who expect themselves to "have their act together" because they are adults. This belief can inhibit risk-taking and increase anxiety because clients feel they should be more competent. Since they don't have it all together (but believe everyone else does), they may feel embarrassed or ashamed and resist disclosing perceived personal weaknesses. Some adults have personalized this fable into a belief that "I always thought I would live happily ever after" and express disappointment about a long list of specific life events or circumstances that have compromised that happiness.

This picture of adulthood is not as helpful as seeing development as a life-long process. Development can be seen as having a wide range of possible trajectories, influenced by individuals' past and present choices as well as biological and social influences (Schaffer, 2000). Additionally, people do not develop at even rates in all areas of life at the same time. A person can simultaneously experience progression and decline; for example, short-term memory may decline somewhat in late life, but gains in wisdom may also occur (Rice, 1992). Different types of development may take precedence at various times in a person's life; for example, a young adult may spend years building academic or professional skills at the expense of developing good interpersonal skills and relationships but may then return to these in later life. Some adults experience a disruptive unexpected life event that prompts them to reconsider the direction they have taken, the fate of their youthful dreams, and their opportunities for creating a better life in the future (Levinson, 1996; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Building and re-building a life structure that is suited to one's deepest values and dreams takes courage and time. Group participants might be asked to consider the counter-proverb, Rome wasn't built in a day.

### **Proverb 3: Don't change horses in mid-stream.**

This proverb implies that decisions are forever; once people set out on a course, they should not change. The rigid thinking implied in this proverb is similar to the thinking of clients who are reluctant to revise their plans once they have made a decision, even in the face of strong evidence that to do so would be in their best interest. These clients are likely to believe that to

change a course of action is too hard, too risky, or that it means that the effort put in thus far will be wasted if a different tack is taken (evidence of catastrophizing, as described by Ellis, 1995). For example, one client felt after being in a particular professional school for one year that it was the wrong choice, but he resisted re-entering a new field more to his liking because he believed that “we should finish what we’ve started.” Later, however, he contacted the counsellor and expressed regret at not having changed direction when he first became aware of his dissatisfaction.

It is often difficult for clients to realize that a direction chosen in the past was likely based on the values, goals, and beliefs that they had at the time, but that these guides for action often shift during adulthood, turning a previous good choice into a poor fit in later life. The counsellor can work to help clients understand that fluidity and malleability preserve a sense of youthfulness. When both stability and change are valued, future growth can build on past growth, and flexibility in direction can prevent the rigidity often attributed to old age.

#### **Proverb 4: It takes two to tango**

This saying means that the most significant actions in life are those that take two people (an over-generalization) and implies that a person can’t accomplish much in life alone. Worse still is the belief that a person without a partner is dreadfully in the way (e.g., “it’s awful being the third wheel,” an example of “awfulizing”). Indeed, many of the cultural rituals that mark development celebrate relationships with other people; for example, weddings, christenings, and anniversaries. Little in the culture acknowledges the importance of the individual’s psychological growth through adulthood or the milestones that can be achieved in personal development.

The importance of internal processes is stressed by counselling theorists such as Danish and D’Augelli (1983), who describe four major roadblocks to personal development: lack of knowledge, lack of skills, fear of risk-taking, and lack of social support. Cognitive theorists would add distorted thinking to the list. (Ellis, 1973; Beck, 1967). Four of these are individual factors, implying that we can be our own greatest roadblocks to growth. But we can also be our own greatest catalysts for development as we gain knowledge and skills and change our distorted thinking, including our beliefs about risk. It may take two to tango, but other dances work best as a solo act.

#### **Proverb 5: Doctor knows best.**

In attempting to navigate life’s decision points, many individuals turn to experts for answers, falling into the cognitive distortions of magnifying the power of authorities and minimizing their own power to discern what is best (Beck & Weishaar, 1995). For example, some clients request tests to tell them what career they should pursue, or they seek out a counsellor to diagnose and solve marital problems. However, many counselling theories would hold that it is a mistake for clients to believe that outsiders—even outside “authorities”—know what they should do (Teyber, 1997). This belief usually accompanies the assumption that for every situation there is a right answer, and since the client doesn’t have the right answer to the problem, the proper expert must be found who will know the right answer (absolutist thinking).

Group members might be asked to discuss how, for much of life, there are no right or wrong answers. Development is a highly unique, individual experience. While experts can be catalysts, they can't resolve a developmental task for anyone; individuals must resolve major life crises by integrating individual needs and traits with contextual constraints and opportunities (Erikson, 1980). The counter-proverb "Beware of false prophets" might be a springboard for such discussion.

### **Proverb 6: Act your age**

This edict contains the distortion of an implied "should" (Ellis, 1988). Inherent is the belief that people experience developmental events at the same predictable times, and therefore should behave in certain age-related ways. Our language has many expressions suggesting age-related norms (or violations of these) such as "child prodigy," "late-bloomer," "mid-life crisis," and "the empty nest syndrome." These expressions presume greater developmental consistency than may actually exist and encourage individuals to feel abnormal when they do things "out of order." An example is the returning student who feels embarrassed about being older than other students. Clients are being influenced by restrictive age-related norms when they say things such as, "I'm too old to date," "I'm too young to be a vice-president of the company," "I'm old enough to know better," and "Imagine! At my age!"

While some developmental experiences are strongly age-related, especially those early in life when genetics play a strong role (e. g., learning to walk and talk), many others are not. There is great variability between people, especially after early childhood when non-normative life events and enormously varied social contexts make "sameness" increasingly unlikely (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). We should beware of letting statistical averages (such as the average age for the birth of a first child or the average age of retirement) determine how our lives should be. Averages obscure the enormous variability of human behaviour. The counter-proverb in Table 1—You're as young (or as old) as you feel—provides a useful argument to refute the myths in this proverb.

### **Proverb 7: Birds of a Feather Flock Together**

This proverb suggests that external characteristics are better predictors of successful affiliation than any other factor. It emphasizes the functional importance of similarity and implies that there is something unnatural about choosing to associate with those who differ in social class, ethnic background, education level, religious faith, and so forth. Certainly, people feel affirmed and validated through interaction with people they perceive to be similar to themselves in valued ways. However, risks arise in avoiding those who appear different from us. Clients might want to discuss how those who are different from us have things to teach us—after all, they are meeting life's challenges in ways that might not have occurred to us. Choosing affiliations based on external characteristics can lead us to assume similarity where little exists or to overlook similarity that isn't immediately apparent, thus missing out on potentially satisfying exchanges.

### **Proverb 8: Don't Rock the Boat**

Clients often believe that crisis and conflict are bad and should be avoided at all costs (another example of catastrophizing). Clients dislike crises because they are painful, can have negative consequences, and can interfere with goal attainment. Clients also often think crises are signs of poor mental health and could be avoided with better planning. They might also avoid taking risks as a way of averting crisis. With such beliefs, clients become anxious and may retreat at the first sign of a possible setback.

Rather than being perceived as setbacks, life crises are natural and universal and can be recognized as opportunities for growth (Danish & D'Augelli, 1983). The term “crisis” means turning point or choice point. While the rule “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line” applies to mathematics, it does not generalize to human development. Development is discontinuous—marked by progression, regression, plateaus, and unpredictability (Baltes et al., 1980). Although many life events are initially experienced as being difficult or undesirable, mental health is ultimately marked by the ability to adapt, transform, and eventually reach a resolution. For example, a young adult might struggle over moving away from the family of origin, but the resulting increase in autonomy and strengthened personal identity provide a solid foundation for the formation of new intimate bonds (Erikson, 1980). Often, as life progresses, we realize that behind every cloud is a silver lining.

In addition to crises, clients often wish to avoid conflict at all costs. Yet avoiding conflict—not rocking the boat—can exact heavy personal and interpersonal costs. With support, clients can learn that “conflicted relationships are not the scourges of our lives but the price of admission we pay for living with other people.... There is no better way for us to get closer to ourselves and become more intimate with others” (Kottler, 1994, p. 230). Assertiveness is required to take responsibility for making change. Learning to manage conflict constructively rather than avoiding it can help clients become clearer about their goals, more efficacious in their behaviour, and more successful in their interpersonal relationships.

## Summary and Implications

The eight proverbs discussed above share some themes. At their core is the idea that age or external factors are the strongest determinants of a person's opportunities; that life proceeds along a predictable course for “normal” people; and that adulthood is characterized by permanence or inflexibility. While proverbs may hold some truth, they can foster cognitive distortions when subscribed to uncritically.

From a more realistic perspective, people reach turning points throughout the life span. Dealing with choices and opportunities is highly personal—no two people face issues in the same way. While development may be a subtle process, individuals also choose experiences to facilitate change.



Examining proverbs and their implied beliefs about adulthood may promote more realistic perspective among clients. Group discussion and exercises may be particularly effective because members can provide pertinent personal examples. Discussion and critical reflection of proverbs encourage six new norms for the group:

1. identifying and accepting individual differences in adult development
2. reducing the pressure to conform to unrealistic “norms”
3. legitimizing risk-taking
4. testing stereotypes and absolutist thinking
5. learning to recognize and challenge irrational beliefs
6. reducing the belief that there are right and wrong answers, especially as provided by “experts,” including the group leader

Through exercises with proverbs, participants practice identifying distorted cognitions, detecting their own distortions, and producing more functional cognitions to replace distorted ones. Additionally, participants gain self-awareness and awareness of contextual influences on beliefs and behaviours. Finally, developing flexible attitudes and beliefs helps clients increase adaptability and model successful adult development.

Table 1

### **Structured Outline for Group Exercises**

Legend for Chart:

A - Target Proverb (Counter Proverb)

B - Implication of Target

C - Clients' Mistaken Beliefs

D - Illustrative Exercise

A

B

C

D

Opportunity only knocks once.

(The best is yet to be.)

(Life begins at 40.)

Major chances in life only come up once. If you pass them by, they are gone forever.

I'll never have the chance again.  
I should have -----.

Think of someone you know or someone famous who had  
major accomplishments after age 40.

...And they lived happily ever after.  
(Rome wasn't built in a day.)

Healthy people overcome their major obstacles by  
early adulthood.

I should have my act together by now!  
My life hasn't turned out as it should have.

Name one thing someone you admire doesn't  
"have together." What does this say  
about the person?

Don't change horses mid-stream.  
(A rolling stone gathers no moss.)

You should know what you want, decide on a course of  
action, and follow through no matter what. Change is  
ill advised and potentially dangerous.

It's too risky/too hard) to -----.  
I should finish what I start. It's awful to appear  
wishy-washy.  
I should know what I want by now.

What mattered most to you when you were 10? 20? How  
about now? Have your decisions had permanent,  
irreversible effects on your present/future?

It takes two to tango.  
(It takes one[self] to know one[self].)

The most important events in life involve two  
people.

It is awful to be alone.  
I need a ----- (partner of some sort) to -----.

Think of your proudest accomplishments and whether they involved others. Discuss the importance of private time and the advantages of time alone. What does this show about you?

Doctor knows best.  
(Beware of false prophets.)

Experts know what is best for you.  
----- (expert) will have the answer.  
I can't do this on my own.  
I need someone to tell me what to do, say, think, etc.  
There is a right answer; I just need to find it.

Describe an experience where an "expert" was wrong about you. When might an expert be preferred to one's self as the authority?

Act your age.  
(You are as young/old as you feel.)

Proper behaviour is determined by age, and it is important to conform to these norms.

I'm too old/young for -----.  
I'm old enough to know better.

Name a positive way in which you differ from others your age, or describe an experience that others your age haven't had. What are you too old/young to do? How this makes you feel? How valid are these "rules?"

Birds of a feather flock together.  
(Don't judge a book by its cover.)

Stick with people who are like you (age, social class, educational level, ethnicity, gender, etc.)

I should stay with my own kind.  
They don't understand people like me.

Discuss group members' similarities and differences.

Which differences are attributable to age, gender, etc.? To individual uniqueness? Would the group be better without differences?

Don't rock the boat.

(Every cloud has a silver lining.)

(Nothing ventured, nothing gained.)

It is best to avoid crisis and conflict in life.

This ----- is awful! Nothing good can come from it.

It is too risky to -----.

I can't handle change.

Describe a crisis or conflict you experienced, how it affected you, how it turned out, and what you learned from it. The group leader discusses famous people who encountered adversity. Consider to what extent their "bad experiences" were necessary for later success.

### References

Baltes, P.B., Reese, H.W., & Lipsitt, L.P. (1980). *Life-span developmental psychology*. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 32, 65—110.

Bateson, P.P.G. (1983). *Mate choice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beck, A.T. (1967). *Depression: Clinical, experimental, & theoretical aspects*. New York: Hoeber. (Republished as *Depression: Causes and treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

Beck, A.T., & Weishaar, M. (1995). *Cognitive therapy*. In R.J. Corsini & D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current psychotherapies* (5th ed.) (pp. 229–261). Itasca, IL: Peacock.

Côté, J.E., & Allahaar, A. (1994). *Generation on hold: Coming of age in the late twentieth century*. Toronto: Stoddart.

Côté, J.E. (2000). *The brave new adult: The changing nature of identity and maturity in the late-modern world*. New York: New York University Press.

Danish, S.J., & D'Augelli A.R. (1983). *Helping skills II: Life-developmental intervention*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Ellis, A. (1995). *Rational emotive behaviour therapy*. In R.J. Corsini and D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current psychotherapies* (5th ed.) (pp. 162–196). Itasca, IL: Peacock.

- Ellis, A. (1973). *Humanistic psychotherapy: The rational-emotive approach*. NY: Julian Press.
- Ellis, A. (1988). *How to stubbornly refuse to make yourself miserable about anything—yes, anything!* Sacaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart.
- Erikson, E.H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: Norton.
- Furstenberg, F.F., & Spanier, G. (1984). *Recycling the family: Remarriage after divorce*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Goldberg, M. (1982). *Current thinking on remarriages: Commentary*. *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality*, 16, 151–158.
- Heymont, G. (1980). *A star is reborn*. *Dynamic Years*, 15 (July/August), 61–64.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Kohn, A. (1988). *You know what they say. ...* *Psychology Today*, 22, 36–41.
- Kottler, J.A. (1994). *Beyond blame: A new way of resolving conflicts in relationships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Levinson, D.J., (1996). *The seasons of a woman's life*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Levinson, D.J., Darrow, C.N., Klein, E.B., Levinson, M.H., & McKee, B. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine.
- Perry, W., Jr. (1970). *Intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Rice, F.P. (1992). *Human development: A lifespan approach*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company.
- Rogers, T. (1990). *Proverbs and psychological theories: Or is it the other way around?* *Canadian Psychology*, 31, 195–208.
- Rose, S.D. (1989). *Working with adults in groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schaffer, D.R. (2000). *Social and personality development (4th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Sigelman, L. (1981). *Is ignorance bliss? A reconsideration of the folk wisdom*. *Human Relations*, 34, 965–974.
- Teyber, E. (2000). *Interpersonal process in psychotherapy: A relational approach*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Zajonc, R.B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Monograph Supplement*, 9, 1–17.