Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behavior. One area within psychology is lifespan development, which examines the ways human beings change as we age and move through each life stage (e.g., infancy, adolescence, middle adulthood, and so on) in similar yet unique ways. Lifespan psychologists consider the full human life cycle, beginning with conception and ending with death. At any given moment in the life cycle, we are a product of the timing of our birth in history, the years we have lived, and our present-day experiences.

Here I draw attention to the complexity of human development to illustrate how the COVID-19 outbreak, or any significant event, impacts people and elicits different responses, depending on age; creates a “coming-of-age” story for some cohorts; and alters the path of everyone’s life. Below are six principles that serve as a framework for assessing these dynamics. While not exhaustive, taken together they give us reason to show understanding, empathy, and compassion for ourselves and for those in other stages of the lifespan.

No Matter Our Place in the Lifespan, We Are Always Responding to Change

Everyone experiences age-related changes that are both maturational (e.g., puberty) and social in nature (e.g., expected age to retire). These experiences are further complicated by their gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, and other social statuses and identifiers. People are constantly responding to change, although the impetus behind the change is not usually as dramatic and widespread as what we have seen with this virus. Regardless of age, COVID-19 has changed the course of everyone’s life, albeit in different ways.

Our experiences with, and our responses to, the pandemic are shaped by our physical status and our capabilities for understanding the world. Clearly, how we respond to the challenges the pandemic brings depends on where we are in the lifespan. People who have been in the workforce for 20 years...
and lost their job as a result of COVID-19 may be preoccupied with how to pay household bills. A 16-year-old who lost a first job may brush it off as no big deal. A young adult may struggle with finding love during lockdown. All these concerns are developmentally typical. 3, 4

**People Are Capable of Change, Even in a Crisis**

Humans are capable of adapting in times of change, even if it becomes more challenging as we age. Adapting draws on effort, time, money, and energy. Where we are in the lifespan affects the types of resources we have at our disposal which in turn affects how we respond. COVID-19 has altered everyone’s routines. 5 School, work, leisure, and other areas of life have changed drastically. Such disruptions have created cascading concerns about well-being, the future, and whether things will return to normal.

The ability to pivot in times of crisis and harness one’s resources underlies the psychological concept of resiliency, a person’s capacity to recover from difficulties. That capacity is bolstered by previous experiences with challenging circumstances from which they recovered and grew. The capacity to be resilient is compromised when experiences leave a person feeling defeated and unable to recover. Resiliency can be learned, and a key lesson is that there are multiple pathways to personal fulfillment. For example, people working in the performing arts who lose their jobs during the pandemic exhibit resiliency when they can identify future opportunities, such as offering private lessons through Zoom, returning to school, looking into a backup career, or using time to work on a craft (songwriting, recording, painting).

**Human Development Is Multidimensional**

The way people grow and change across the lifespan has many interrelated dimensions—biological (or physical), cognitive, and social—each of which has subcomponents. For example, the cognitive dimension involves, among other things, thinking, remembering, and perceiving. But what we think and remember is intertwined with our brain maturation and social experiences. Whether or not we contract COVID-19 depends on interacting factors. For example, the strength of our immune system (biological), how we perceive the virus (cognitive), and who we live with (social) all combine to increase or decrease our chance of becoming infected.

Regarding the biological dimension, as children are developing, they are building their immune system function; as people move toward old age, the immune system function declines, making older adults more susceptible to infection with and complications of COVID-19. Cognitively, a
5-year-old may perceive the virus as a monster, and an 80-year-old may perceive the virus as something they cannot fight off like when they were younger. Regarding the social aspect, children tend to live in households with parents or guardians and other siblings. Adults in old age are more likely to live alone, with one other person, or be at higher risk in congregate settings.

Change Involves Losses but Also Gains

When we assess any change to our lives, we must consider not only what we have lost but also what we have gained. If loss is the focus, we are unaware of the possible good that can come out of change. If our graduation ceremony was cancelled, that is a loss. But we gained from the love and care of people who arranged new kinds of celebrations. When we lost our routines to COVID-19, many of us found ourselves with more time on our hands. But perhaps we finally took the time to learn a technology that once seemed too complicated. Or maybe we chose to spend more time appreciating nature. The ability to recognize that hope can be found in dark times is the antidote to being overwhelmed by loss and opens opportunities for growth and connection to others. We must look for positives, no matter how small.

Human Development Is Contextual

Your experience is unique to the particular place and time you were born. So, your 80-year-old neighbor is experiencing this pandemic differently than a 25-year-old college student. People in Kentucky are experiencing COVID-19 differently than people in Florida. People in large cities do not have the same experience as those in rural areas. “Experiencing differently” also encompasses a multitude of settings—home, local neighborhood, school or work, healthcare, place of worship—and spans multiple layers of influence—physical, psychological, relational, financial, spiritual, and so on. We cannot fathom the magnitude of ways in which people are experiencing COVID-19. Your experiences cannot be the same as mine, but whatever they are, they are shaping our development.

We also need a nod here to the historical context. COVID-19 occurred in a time of history when digital technologies dominate. So, we have to sort through a 24-hour news cycle, the countless news sources, and instant sharing of information. That did not exist in the influenza pandemic of 1918 when information spread slowly and from few sources. Peoples’ pandemic experiences in 1918 were very different from today. That, however, does not mean we can’t find similarities. At both times, people wrestled with what
information to believe. They also had to find ways to avoid contracting the virus while still connecting with others.

**Coming-of-Age Events Define a Generation**

Large-scale historical events, such as the Great Depression and September 11, affect everyone who is alive at the time. But we also think of these events as defining the generation that happens to be “coming of age” then. Baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1963) came of age after World War II, a prosperous time for the United States, and were strongly impacted by the Cold War’s nuclear arms race. They were also shaped by the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy. As a result, their fears are grounded in a clearly defined entity (e.g., a nuclear arms race and the Soviet Union challenging U.S. lives and values). Further, these coming-of-age events have influenced the perceptions of every other event that baby boomers have experienced since.

Generation Z (those born between 1996 and 2015) grew up in the aftermath of 9/11 and live in a world where gun violence and terrorism are defined as the threats. In other words, their fears are centered around individuals or small numbers of people infiltrating public spaces (church, school, airplane, mall), intent on carrying out violence, mayhem, and death that reverberates across the country and the world. The fears of Generation Z may be more amorphous than those of the baby boomers, because ostensibly any person could carry out an irrational, violent act at any time.

Coming-of-age experiences are the lens through which people will process subsequent events, including the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, responses to the pandemic might be strikingly different across generations, as occurs between the baby boomers and Generation Z. Because baby boomers have been alive longer and their brains have absorbed and processed a greater number of experiences, they will likely evaluate risks differently because of their age, prioritizing caution over risk. Generation Z, by contrast, has not lived as long and their brains have not absorbed and processed as many experiences, around 50 years’ fewer than baby boomers. Therefore, the Generation Z cohort responds with a willingness to take on more risk, which is developmentally typical.

So, armed with these six principles, what can you do to manage in this time of COVID-19? Imagine how lives are affected across ages and generations. Reflect on how your coming-of-age experiences have influenced your own response. Trust that you can adapt. Convey understanding of what people in other stages of the lifespan are going through. Use this experience to inform your next crisis experience. Seek to gain something, in spite of the losses. We are all capable of change in a crisis, and understanding this can help us confront the ambiguity around the virus, as we navigate it far into the future.
Allyson S. Graf is an assistant professor of psychology who earned her PhD in lifespan psychology from West Virginia University. She trusts in the principles presented in this idea paper because they are grounded in the scientific method and decades of research on lifespan development. Science is not rigid; it recognizes that what we know is ever-changing, fluid, and flexible. When done right, science builds on and embraces new findings that revise how we think about life cycle stages and the impact they have on our lives.