

*The Second Half of Life: Growing Older*

## The Middle Years

*Middle age.* Many people find the mere mention of these words disturbing. They have mental images of individuals who are unattractive, bored with life, depressed, restless, and less valued than they once were. They may fear the exchange of the admirable qualities of youth for what they perceive to be the unadmirable qualities of age. For these people, the middle years are seen as a direct and unpleasant confrontation with their own aging.

Others anticipate middle age as a time of maturity, self-confidence, new freedoms, stability and security. These people tend to reject the stereotypes of the middle years and view this life stage as a time filled with potential for continuing development. They seek a balance between the young and old in their lives and, thus, experience a successful midlife transition.

What really happens during the middle years? What changes can an individual expect—and what will be the outcomes of these changes? Answers to these questions can dispel many of the myths and misconceptions surrounding our knowledge of the middle years

### When is Middle Age?

No definition for middle age has been universally accepted. Generally we refer to the years between early adulthood and the elderly years as the middle years. However, this period has become even harder to define as people have postponed marriage and childbearing until they are in their late twenties or thirties.

Some people are well into *middle age* by age 35, whereas others seem young even after 40. Some people seem very old at 50; others at 65 display the manners, attitudes and looks of people a decade or two younger.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines middle age as beginning at age 45 and ending at 64. Another group defines it as the years from ages 40 to 60. Others have said middle age starts as early as 30!

With these ranges in mind, middle age is designated here as an era that begins between the ages of 35 and 40 and ends sometime between 60 and 65. Remember, however, that there is nothing magical about chronological ages and there are limitations in using them to define developmental periods.

### Normal Aging Changes in Midlife

Until the 1960s, family life professionals believed that individual growth and development ceased with the end of adoles-

cence and resumed in the later years. Not much happened during the middle years. Now, however, the years between 40 to 60 are regarded as second only to the teenage years in the degree of biological, psychological, and social change experienced by most individuals.

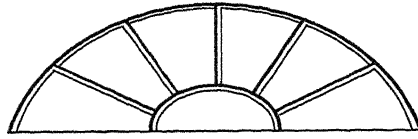
### Changes in appearance

The earliest physical sign that one is approaching midlife may be increasing body weight and change in girth measurements. This is usually more a function of lifestyle (eating and exercising habits) than just a result of growing older. Weight gain is particularly rapid for middle-aged women. Middle-aged men and women are likely to carry excess weight in the trunk of the body, rather than in the legs, as younger people do.

Fat is also being redistributed throughout the body. Fatty tissue begins to disappear from the lips, breasts, and eyelids. The upper lip in particular begins to look much thinner; breasts lose their tone; eyelids become more wrinkled and transparent; and eyes may appear sunken.

The skin becomes thinner and flatter wherever it is constantly exposed to the sun (e.g., the face, hands and forearms). Skin also becomes coarser and begins to lose elasticity. By old age, it does not snap back when pulled up between the thumb and index finger, but returns to its original position slowly.





Hair also changes noticeably. The hair grays and stiffens as the hair follicles age. Individual hair strands thin with age. By age 70, an individual's hair may be as fine as a baby's. When the follicles begin to degenerate, hair is lost.

All of these changes are progressive—they do not begin or end in middle age. However, people seem most conscious of them during their middle years.

### Changes in vision

**Presbyopia** is the term for the natural changes in the eye as one ages. The lens of the eye undergoes numerous changes. The lens is less able to transmit visual images; has less ability to accommodate to shifts in focus; and thickens, becomes stiff and yellows. The differences in visual function produced by these changes include increased blurring of objects, near and far; increased sensitivity to glare; decreased ability to discriminate blues, greens and purples; and changes in depth perception.

Other physical changes also have an impact on vision. Muscular changes limit upward gaze and the extent of pupil dilation. These muscular changes also combine with the body's less efficient transport and use of sugar and oxygen to decrease one's ability to adapt to darkness and to limit the visual field. In addition, changes in blood vessels in the retina can impair night vision.

The breakdown of the vitreous humor (a jelly-like substance behind the lens) results in dark spots ("floaters") that appear before the eye during rapid eye movement.

All these changes are noticeable by age 50, but alterations in the vision processes are probably not an important source of limitation in daily life until around the age of 70. Visual perception and the



processing of visual information do not appear to change much during middle age.

### Changes in hearing

The most important and common problem associated with the aging ear is **presbycusis** (permanent hearing loss). Presbycusis is often associated with a progressive loss of hearing for high frequency tones. It may also be indicated by a loss of hearing for high-pitched tones, problems with speech discrimination, or loss of pure tone hearing.

Presbycusis is caused by degenerative changes that take place throughout the auditory system. For example, the bones in the middle ear may become spongy, limiting their ability to conduct sound. A build-up of wax in the ear canal or fluid obstructing the eustachian tubes can also result in hearing loss.

Degenerative changes in the auditory system are clearly present by the early years of middle age, but few people will be affected by them. Males appear to be more affected than females, especially with hearing loss at high frequencies. At this age remedial solutions are usually easy. One can simply turn up the volume or select better seats at movies and concerts. When talking to someone with a hearing loss, speak in a low voice and decrease background noise (e.g., television).

### Changes in the cardiovascular system

By middle age, the cardiovascular system (the heart and blood vessels) is showing apparent changes. With increasing age, the heart is less able to pump blood through the body and rests longer between beats. The large arteries are less elastic. This stiffness of the blood vessels doubles between the ages of 20 and 60 and is related to the rising incidence of blood pressure in this age group.

**Arteriosclerosis** and **atherosclerosis** are diseases of the blood vessels. Both of these diseases involve thickening of the arterial walls. Lesions or injuries to the arterial walls appear in **atherosclerosis** and the number of lesions increases with the passage of years. Fat, collagen, cholesterol, and small capillaries build up on the site of the lesions, forming plaques. Plaques restrict blood flow through the arteries. In addition, the elastin fibers that make up the walls of blood vessels are split and fragmented at the site of the lesion.

The incidence of atherosclerosis increases in men after the age of 40, leveling off around age 55; rates for women continue to rise until about age 65.

**Arteriosclerosis** involves the same kinds of events as atherosclerosis. It involves the thickening and hardening of the artery walls. Consequently, artery walls lose their elasticity.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of



death among the middle-aged. In this age group, four out of five victims of heart attacks are men. Factors other than advancing age associated with heart attacks are elevated blood pressure, high serum cholesterol, obesity, smoking and genetic background. Stress and personality traits also combine with these factors to influence an individual's risk of cardiovascular disease. For example, aggressive, achievement-oriented, impatient people are believed to be more susceptible to heart attacks than nonaggressive, easygoing, patient people.

### Changes in the respiratory system

How well the lungs supply the body with oxygen seems to relate directly to age. As the muscles operating the chest walls weaken, and ribs and tissues in the chest area stiffen, the lungs cannot expand the way they once did. They become less elastic. This decreases their ability to expel air and to make the oxygen-to-blood transfer to the bloodstream.

Because of the decrease in the amount of oxygen delivered to the bloodstream and the rate of blood flow with age, the amount of work an older person can do is cut down. It is necessary to stop and "catch your breath" more often. A common example is being winded after climbing a flight of stairs.

### Changes in muscles and bones

From the ages of 30 to 70, a person loses approximately 10 pounds of muscle as cells stop reproducing and die. Connective tissue replaces fiber, causing muscles to become stiffer and to tense, relax and heal more slowly.

The remaining muscle grows weaker as the fiber becomes frayed and riddled with deposits of waste material. With changes in the muscle system, routine

tasks sometimes become difficult. Breathing, urination and elimination may also be affected.

Stiffened joints and changes in bone structure may cause reduction in height, stooped posture, and sometimes limitation in mobility. The bones become more brittle and are slower to heal as they lose calcium. The loss of calcium weakens the bones and nearby blood vessels, where the lost calcium may accumulate.

As with all of the others, these changes are progressive. While some begin as early as one's 20s, they usually do **not** affect day-to-day functioning until much later in life, if at all. Regular exercise and proper diet can slow down the effects of changes in the muscles and bones.

### Changes in the reproductive system

A variety of physical changes in the reproductive systems of men and women during the middle years has been documented. The entire period when significant changes in the reproductive system occur for both genders is known as the **climacteric**. For women, this is the transition period from the reproductive to the nonreproductive stage of life.

*Women.* Change in the female reproductive and genital tract is most dramatic between ages 45 and 54. Menopause is an outward signal for women that their bodies are changing. Menopause is the time in an adult female's life when her monthly menstrual period ceases.

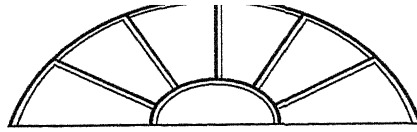
Up to two years prior to the final cessation of her periods, a woman will experience irregular periods (both in timing and amount of blood flow). Other symptoms associated with menopause include "hot flashes" (sudden flashes of heat that may produce sweating and skin redness), chills, excessively rapid heartbeat, dryness of the vagina, dizzy spells, and headaches.

Menopause is followed by some shrinkage of the vaginal walls, uterus, and breasts. All of these physical changes and symptoms are generally attributed to degeneration of the ovaries, which leads to decreased production of the female hormone estrogen.

Women may also express more psychological complaints during menopause. Complaints of anxiety, irritability, impatience and depression are probably compounded from physical change and psychological reaction.

The experience of distressing physical or psychological symptoms at menopause is not universal. Studies have shown that 25 to 35 percent of





menopausal women show no symptoms at all except the cessation of their periods. Most of those who do exhibit symptoms report no more than mild, occasional hot flashes. Only a few women feel incapacitated.

Menopause is a significant symbol in the course of the female life span and, for a majority of women, tends to be less negative and more positive than popular

belief would have it. For some women, simply not menstruating, as well as not worrying about pregnancy, is a benefit. Others may view menopause as a time of stagnation and unattractiveness. For all

women, the worst thing about menopause may be not knowing what they can expect.



*Men.* The course of biological change in the middle years proceeds quite differently for men. In men, no single, abrupt event marks the end of reproductive capacity. Hormone levels and fertility decline over a relatively long period. In reality, there is no "male menopause."

Probably the most dramatic change in the male reproductive system in middle age is the enlargement of the prostate gland. This results in less semen being produced.

Eventually, the prostate becomes rigid and may obstruct the urinary tract. The risk of prostate cancer increases during the middle years.



It has been noted that arteries and veins harden and thicken with increasing age. These changes, along with increasing stiffness of all bodily tissues, contributes to changing sexual function. Erection and ejaculation occur less rapidly in middle adulthood than in early adult

life; however, an erection can be maintained for longer periods in middle age.

Certain dysfunctions of the male hormone production system can occur and are more common in middle age than in earlier developmental stages. Males with these dysfunctions may suffer some of the symptoms of the female menopause: hot flashes, chills, heart palpitations, and irritability. Such dysfunctions are abnormal and occur rarely.

### Changes in response and reaction times

There is overwhelming evidence that psychomotor responses slow with age. Psychomotor skills—that is, skills dependent upon muscular action directly following a mental process—are required for activities that demand quickness, skill and patterns of finely coordinated movements of the body or body parts. For example, dancing, driving and dressing are activities that require psychomotor skills.

By middle age, one's response time is slower in situations in which one must choose how to respond or in which one must make a series of responses. Differences between young and middle-aged people are most significant when both a complex decision and a rapid response are required. Carrying out *unfamiliar* tasks is also more difficult after age 40. The reason for the slowdown and increased difficulty is that the brain takes longer to process information, make decisions and dispatch signals.

Declines in psychomotor speed and response times have been easily demonstrated in research settings. However, little investigation has been done to show how these changes affect everyday life. One point worth noting is that habitual exercisers have faster reaction times than do people who lead sedentary lives or exercise only sporadically.

### The Developmental Tasks of Midlife

There are a number of developmental tasks to be accomplished in the middle years. Developmental tasks are the skills, knowledge and attitudes individuals acquire at different points in their lives. There are many different stage theories that outline these tasks; the model described here is based on life situations.

● *Adjusting to the physical changes of middle age.* The time comes when individuals realize they are a little paunchy or out-of-shape, cannot perform as much physical work without tiring, and perhaps, are not as attractive as in earlier years. The physical changes of aging can no longer be denied—and these changes require psychological adjustments. Individuals must learn to value maturity and wisdom over physical attractiveness, and often, to alter lifestyle and health habits to keep as fit and healthy as possible.



● **Finding satisfaction and success in one's occupational career.** Generally, middle age is believed to be the most productive period of professional and creative work. This age group is due a certain amount of respect in the workplace because of experience and years on the job.

However, it may be a time when individuals begin to feel taken for granted, or bored and disillusioned with their work. It may be a time of unfulfilled expectations.

In either instance, a more positive awareness may develop. People in the middle years often evaluate where they are in terms of where they wanted to be by this time. The past must be integrated with the future, and dreams reassessed in terms of one's life course. It may be necessary to modify earlier dreams, set new goals, and perhaps, make some major changes.

● **Assuming adult social and civic responsibility.** Adults aged 40 to 60 have been called the "ruling class." This age group controls our society and social institutions. They are the norm bearers, decision makers, and office holders. The participation of this age group in community life is essential for society's progress. Ordinarily, community concerns and participation increase during these years.

● **Launching children into responsible, happy adulthood.** As children grow up, their dependency on parents gradually lessens and parental control slowly wanes until the children are capable of managing their own lives. Occasionally, children are dependent because parents will not let go. Some parents go to the other extreme, pushing their children out before they are ready for independence.

In other instances, parents are miserable because

children do not meet their expectations. Part of the developmental task at this point is to let go of the responsibility and control, and not feel guilty when their children make mistakes. The alternative is to deny development of self and children by forcing an unchanging relationship on independent adult children.

● **Revitalizing marriage.** Marital needs depend on what the marital partners have experienced over the years. It is common for marital satisfaction to decline during the early and middle years of the life cycle. Partners may have been busy with other things over the years—establishing a career, raising a family, achieving

educational goals, and participation in community activities—and may have neglected one another. In these cases, the marriage may be in trouble.

Lack of communication, infrequent demonstration of affection, and failure to work out differences can result in misunderstanding, frustration, resentment, and increased alienation. Once the children are independent and the couple is alone again, face-to-face with one another, they have the task of working out problems, eliminating resentments, getting reacquainted and establishing closeness all over again. The challenge is to revitalize troubled marriages. Some cannot do this and the couple divorces in midlife.

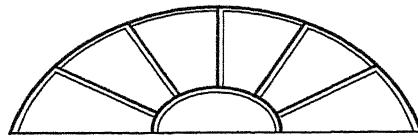
Other couples may have had no major problems over the years. They use the increased freedom that often accompanies the middle years to spend more time together and get reacquainted. Only a small percentage of people are widowed during middle age and have to adjust to living without a spouse.

● **Reorienting oneself to aging parents.** During middle adulthood, children witness their surviving parents encountering a significant time of change in their own life cycles. This is often a sad and upsetting experience as parents endure multiple losses and become increasingly more dependent.

Adult children provide a great deal of support and assistance to aging parents. Middle-agers often assume the responsibility for providing assistance with economic support, personal care, transportation, food, companionship, medical care, housekeeping and home maintenance, or a place to live.

Because of their unique position





between aging parents and young adult offspring, middle-agers are often referred to as the “sandwich generation.” Young adult children may still make demands of middle-age parents and aging parents may now need them. The middle generation is expected to give and to help out, which often puts added pressure on them. Middle-agers must coordinate their own development with the development of at least two other generations.

● **Realigning sex roles.** A realignment of masculine-feminine sex roles is quite common during middle adulthood. Individuals have more time to develop personal aspects that have been neglected during earlier years. For example, men may become more expressive and nurturing, while women may exhibit more objectivity and assertiveness.

These developments lead to more apparent crossings of sex roles, especially among traditional couples. Husbands perform more services formerly provided by the wife (e.g., maintaining social and family contacts) and wives assume some of the husband’s responsibilities (e.g., managing the finances). This realignment of sex roles may be less relevant for contemporary couples, especially dual-worker or career couples. These individuals generally share all responsibilities more equally. At least, they tend not to divide responsibilities according to strict sex role stereotypes.

● **Developing social networks and leisure-time activities.** The middle years often bring a shift in the focus of social activities. Parents in midlife find an increasing need for couple-centered activities and adult friendships assume greater importance.

The middle years may bring an increased interest in having fun, in pursuing one’s own interests and hobbies, or in developing entirely new leisure-time pursuits. Once their children are independent, many people at this life stage are unprepared to use leisure time. They may spend a great deal of time watching television or reading. The challenge is to use leisure time in creative and personally satisfying ways.

● **Finding new meaning in life.** The middle years may be a time of introspection when an individual examines personal feelings, attitudes, values, and goals. The questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I go from here?” often need to be answered as individuals reflect upon their personal identities.

The commitment to address these nine developmental tasks signals one’s entry into and participation in midlife. If the challenges presented by these tasks are met and the accompanying conflicts resolved, the middle years are likely to be a time of continued growth, personal satisfaction and happiness. The stage can also be set for considerable growth and adaptation in later years.

Another view is that if these tasks are not accomplished, the middle years can be a period of stagnation and increasing disillusionment. However, the extent to which these tasks are inevitable and universal is unknown. That is, it has not been definitely determined that everyone must deal with *all* of these tasks and make the transitions required by them.

## Midlife: A Crisis or a Transition?

The existence of a distinct shift involving stress or growth in the middle years has been questioned. Is it a period of personal, marital or other dissatisfactions? Or is it a period of stability and security? Both viewpoints merit examination.

### The crisis view

In the last several years, the word crisis has been associated with adult development. This has resulted in a new critical task in the life course—the *midlife crisis*. Today, it seems people believe they are abnormal if they do not have a midlife crisis.



In American culture, the interpretation of the word **crisis** generally implies personal failure, weakness, and an inability to bear up against stressful **outside** events. This inability to bear up occurs when internal resources and external social support systems are overwhelmed by the changes and developmental tasks occurring in midlife. The result for the individual is a perceived state of physical and psychological distress. This distress, or crisis, may result in positive outcomes for people.

For many people, a midlife crisis begins with the recognition of their own mortality. The individual becomes concerned with time left to live rather than time since birth—a **crisis of time**.

Other identified dimensions of a midlife crisis include:

1. **A crisis of goals and roles.** The individual begins to ask "What have I done with my life?" "Where am I going?" Goals once enthusiastically pursued may no longer seem important.
2. **A crisis of values.** Adults become more aware of current value changes that conflict with their traditional values.
3. **A crisis of authority.** This is particularly realized in relations with children. Parents lose their roles of guide and teacher as their children become adults. Many parents have difficulty letting go of these roles and relating to their children as adults.
4. **A crisis of identity.** This is a result of all the other crisis dimensions. This suggests adults must rethink who they are, what they want from life, what they value and what their roles are. This involves some personal restructuring and adapting to changing situations.

### The transition view

Another view of the middle years rejects the notion that a midlife crisis is a normal life event—that is, that it happens to everybody. Rather, the middle years are seen as a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability but also a period of maximum capacity and ability to handle a highly complex environment and a highly diversified self.

Researchers have found little support that midlife is a time of excessive stress when compared to other age periods. They conclude that for individuals who do experience a midlife crisis, their difficulties may have roots in conflicts and problems originating earlier in the life course. That is, people who have not coped well earlier in life or who have unresolved issues are at greater risk for a midlife crisis.

On the other hand, young adults who exhibit **self-confidence** (the belief that one can cope with most situations and that people will treat one well) and **emotional stability** (having a steady temperament)

have been found to cope well in the middle years and express high levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, those who tend to be less selfish and less cynical in early life also experience higher life satisfaction at midlife. Perhaps individuals with more positive attitudes toward themselves and others are at less risk for a midlife crisis.



### Which view is correct?

Actually, both the crisis view and the transition view are correct. The middle years can be a happy, satisfying time, a time of growth and development, as well as a period of crisis. It is certainly a time of change and any kind of change causes stress. This stress, however, can be a positive motivating force to change one's values, goals, and roles in ways that enable one to achieve more meaning and satisfaction.

Most people do not seem to have a midlife crisis—or at least not a severe one. In fact, most people survive the middle years pretty well.

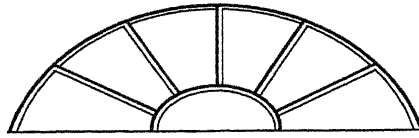
### Conclusion

The middle years are a unique period for individuals as the achievements of youth encounter the anticipation of a diminishing life span. It is a time of changes—physical, social and emotional. However, it is not a phase of life to be dreaded or feared.

Most of the physical changes that occur during midlife do not affect our daily activities or overall health until much later in life. The developmental tasks encountered provide new opportunities for growth and can prepare individuals for managing the tasks of later life.

The way one views and copes with these changes and developmental tasks—indeed, the way an individual has viewed situations or circumstances throughout life—determine if the middle years will be a time of **crisis** or **transition**. Understanding this life stage can certainly enhance one's ability to make this a period of transition, a time of growth and development.





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