

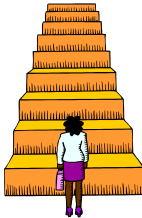
FEAP NEWSLETTER

A Series of Educational Articles from your Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

Midlife: Challenge, Opportunity or Crisis?

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"Oh, she's just menopausal...he's just having a midlife crisis..." These phrases in our current society are often used to describe midlife, a misunderstood but important developmental phase of life. **What is midlife really?** Midlife is a *normal developmental phase* - meaning we all go through it - usually falling between ages 35 and 65. Midlife is now recognized as a period of life much like adolescence, where important identity adjustments, transitions and a new awareness occur.



Challenge, Opportunity or Crisis?

Midlife is the second identity challenge in life with adolescence being the first major one. During adolescence the task was to separate from our families and define who we are as individuals, our values, likes and dislikes. This separation and growth phase is often characterized by rebellion. In midlife the task is to redefine who we are *now*, without the external messages of who we *should be*. Any rebellion that occurs in midlife is usually in reaction to the

shoulds we still feel bound to.

By midlife most of us have created families, a network of friends, careers and reached something of a plateau with these endeavors and finally have some time to reflect on life, our place in it, how the past years have been spent and how we want to spend the upcoming years. It's during this reflection and exploration that many people experience what is stereotypically called a *midlife crisis*. The crisis lies in the internal struggle to shed some old values that no longer hold meaning for the person and to try on new values. Some people mistakenly believe that midlife is a time to return to adolescence and will rebel again, or try to return to the activities that were meaningful during that period. This usually backfires. Moving forward into midlife with new awareness about who we are as people is the task.

Midlife is a Life Stage Characterized by:

- **Life review** – what have I accomplished personally, socially, with my family, in my career, etc? What have I not accomplished that I

thought I would by now?

- **A search for meaning** – what really matters to me versus what society says should matter? What is my place in life, what connections make sense to me now, what's really important?
- **Awareness of mortality** – time is moving on...what old goals do I still want to achieve and what new ones shall I set?
- **Physical changes** – women's hormonal changes are seen as the focus of midlife for many people but in reality, everyone is confronted by physical changes such as graying hair, the need for bifocals, etc. These changes force us to confront midlife.

How Can We Age Gracefully?

The few longitudinal studies that exist in response to this question suggest that people who are *happy, content, and satisfied* as they move into their 60's and 70's are those who:

- Practice a healthy lifestyle such as not smoking, using alcohol minimally, regularly exercising and eating well;

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- Staying flexible and positive;
- Developing good coping strategies;
- Maintaining social relationships; and
- Continuing to learn.

Fortune, luck, family history, or childhood temperament have far less to do with healthy aging than the controllable factors such as lifestyle, social connectedness and attitude.

Strategies for Enhancing the Midlife Years

Do “Take Stock” of your life – spend some time reviewing your life, your previous goals, and what you have achieved and be sure to recognize the positives such as raising a family, maintaining a job and supporting yourself/family, getting through adversity. Power, money, public successes aren't necessarily your personal benchmarks.

Don't wait for something to precipitate a crisis in midlife – poor relationships, health problems, unplanned job changes, aging parents can precipitate the midlife crisis. Look at your life to see what you can control, make reasonable changes, explore your interests and consider new avenues/expressions.

Give credit to the challenge of midlife for women AND men - Don't undermine or dismiss

others' feelings as “just a midlife crisis or just menopause.” This denies the person's feelings and possible struggles and cuts off avenues for the person to open up and explore his/her feelings – especially for the person who isn't inclined to talk about feelings.

Nurture the relationship with your partner



He or she is probably going through some midlife challenge as well. How can you best move through this together *and* individually? It's critical that this be done to help the partner relationship come out of this phase as strong as possible for both individuals and for the couple.

Develop the important personal relationships - friends who nourish, accept and connect with you are valuable. You may find yourself making new friends or giving up some old friends.

Strengthen family relationships - having more adult-to-adult relationships with adult children; letting go of old resentments, putting things in perspective, realizing that life is short so why fuss?

Consider counseling - to help move through this

phase. Unresolved family issues, childhood traumas, self-esteem problems, and difficulty with relationships, substance problems, marital problems can intensify during this phase of self-exploration. Don't put off counseling any longer.

Optimize your health - nutrition, rest, exercise, taking care of your body, being good to your body – makes you feel better emotionally too.



Renew your stress management strategies - exercise, yoga, meditation, reading, bubble baths, etc.

Remain positive and flexible - look for the good, give up the negatives, avoid the routines, find new experiences, rekindle spontaneity. Do something fun.

Dare to Dream - what lies ahead that you still want and can do? Set some goals.

Seek Spirituality – it's never too late to become more reflective, finding strength from something outside of you. The meaning of life and death is a normal quest and finding peace with these issues allows you to enjoy the present more.