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### **Midlife Stress**

Midlife stress occurs naturally through the aging process but can be the result of an external psychological stressor due to loss or change such as occupational stress, health concerns, parental bereavement and divorce. Coping with the psychological suffering associated with these stressors brings challenges throughout all stages of life, but when it occurs during midlife it can be complicated by heightened or unique feelings of bewilderment. For men, recognition of their own mortality and sense of purpose in life can drive the experience of midlife stress. For women, this experience may be derived from feelings of emptiness and sadness, physical changes related to menopause and the challenges of the addition of roles such as becoming caretakers for elderly parents.

Midlife stress is used synonymous with the popular term, 'Midlife Crisis.' Historically researchers have focused on detailing the challenges and changes that occur during childhood, adolescence and even later life. However, there is a gap in the research on the midlife life-phase. One explanation of this is the debate of clearly delineating when midlife begins and ends. Some sources describe midlife as occurring between 40 and 65, while others suggest a cultural marker for adulthood is age 30. However, a large-scale research initiative funded by the National Institute on Aging, the Midlife Development in the U.S. (MIDUS), has begun bridging this gap. MIDUS is a multidisciplinary longitudinal study that incorporates several disciplines such as psychology, epidemiology, medicine, sociology and anthropology. The role of psychological, behavioral and social factors on variations in age-related concerns of health and over all well-

being give important points to consider for understanding the cause of midlife stress and how to treat it.

According to the 2010 U.S. census, there are over 85 million people between the ages of 40 and 59, who hold crucial roles within the family, community and work levels. Transitioning through this life-stage does not mean one will experience stress, rather it can be a time of accomplishment and attainment. For some individuals, midlife can be a stage of development that forces adults to cope with challenges such as health problems, failure to achieve life goals, job loss, health problems of parents or other family members, divorce and bereavement. Therefore, it can be a period of reflection and review of achievements, discontentment with lifestyle, confusion and boredom that can lead to drastic changes to fulfil these goals.

Carl Jung is credited with coining the term 'midlife crisis' and identified five crucial phases of midlife that can help understand midlife stress. The context of midlife processes occurs through a phase known as accommodation which begins in childhood and stems from a need to adapt, please and meet the expectations of those around us to gain acceptance and approval. Our innate preferences may be contradictory to the preferences of the outside world and thus our perceptions become modified to fit the social context. The second stage includes the concept of separation in which the preferences or behaviors that were accommodated in early life are brought into question. Often, there is a rejection of this accommodated self which leads to uncertainty and doubt of our true preferences known as the third stage called liminality.

At this point in time, individuals may feel their life has no meaning or direction, a period of 'no man's land'. This period of uncertainty lessons in severity as the individual adopts new preferences and roles to better understand the self through a process known as reintegration. The final stage, individuation, is a period of acknowledging and integrating the internal conflicts to

create an appropriate balance of the self. This may include accepting dynamic aspects of our character that may be undesirable. This process leads to a balanced and more mature individual. However, these life stages do not adhere to a sequence of events, rather an individual may go through these stages multiple times or take several years to overcome the uncertainty and conflict of identity. In fact, this can be a painful process that includes psychological/emotional distress that is unique to different experiences. It is not surprising that common life events can have adverse effects on later life. Thus, a focus on promoting psychological and physical health in midlife can ameliorate these effects.

### **Further Reading**

Aldwin, C. M., & Levenson, M. R. (2001). Stress, coping, and health at mid-life. *The handbook of midlife development*, 188-214.

Jung, C. G. (1969). The stages of life. In Read, H., Fordham, M., Adler, G., and McQuire, W. (eds.), *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. (originally published 1933).

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