

In the Middle Years: Changing and Growing



The middle years—a time of joy, pain, change, and stability . . . and what you want it to be.

What does middle age mean to you? Does it mean the “prime of life” or a “dead end?” Do you see opportunities for personal growth?

You may find the middle years to be a relatively stable, tranquil period. Or, the years may be a time of considerable turbulence and major life changes. Regardless, you are likely to be confronted with adjustments, challenges, and choices.

Adjustments often must be made due to changing health and physical capacities and changing relationships with spouse, children, parents, and work. Making such adjustments can be stressful, particularly when values are challenged and there are new demands, decisions, expectations, and responsibilities. But, the challenges also can be rewarding, resulting in personal growth and fulfillment. Much depends on how you approach midlife and respond to life changes and challenges.

Change is not always easy. While you may be enthusiastic about some changes, you may have ambivalent feelings or become extremely anxious about others. Many middle-aged people experience these emotions.

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Major Changes



Parenthood

The relationship between parent and child is never static; therefore, as childhood has its stages, so does parenthood. As parents in your middle years, you'll probably find you have a less significant role to play in the lives of your children. The energy and resources you previously directed to child rearing now require new outlets. This transition may produce a sense of relief, or it may be difficult. One woman, after devoting her energies to raising children, may look forward to the freedom and opportunities offered by children leaving home; another may feel a deep personal loss.

A psychological reorientation often is required at this time. Children must be seen as adults and allowed to make their own decisions and set their own life goals. Parents who continue to rely solely on the parental role for self-worth or communicate guilt to their children make the development of a fulfilling relationship with their children difficult.

Establishing a more independent relationship may also be a difficult adjustment for your children. For instance, parents who begin to alter their roles sometimes feel somewhat "locked in" by their children's expectations that they remain the same.

You may undergo some introspective evaluation of your performance as a parent. You may feel pride in your children's accomplishments. Or, you may view yourself a failure if your children are not career-oriented, family oriented, or concerned about "money in the bank." It helps when you can say, "I did my best. Now my children have major responsibility for their lives."

Today's middle-aged parents have had to prepare their children for life roles, lifestyles, and experiences for which they may have had little or no experience, except indirectly through the media and conversations with their children. In this way, the teacher-learner roles are sometimes reversed: It is the children who may teach, the parents who learn and accept. You may find long-held values challenged. Owning an expensive car or a large home, getting an education or being married—symbols of success for your generation—may be considered foolish and unnecessary by your children.

Social movements—civil rights, feminist, and sexual liberation—have been major forces forming the values of young people and challenging the values of parents. One of the major shifts is toward the ideology that there is no longer one right or best way to think, or live. It is important as a parent to recognize that your children also are a product of today's society and not only of your making. Some of your values may not be their values.

An unexpected change that some middle-aged adults experience is re-integration of an adult child into the home. A divorce, psychological problems, death of child's spouse, or health changes may again necessitate a child and/or grandchildren returning to one's home.

Marital Relationship

Your relationship with your partner may be altered as the parental role decreases. This may be the first time you are alone in 25 years. Often, this adjustment takes as much effort as the initial adjustment in marriage. You may need to learn to relate to each other again as husband and wife and to discover how each feels, thinks, and values.

Some couples find this adjustment easy. Research indicates that for many, satisfaction with the marriage relationship increases with age, and, in particular, after the children leave home. Some adults describe these years as bringing new intensity and pleasure to their marriage. This pattern of positive adjustment is most likely to occur when couples have built their relationship throughout the child-rearing years.

Other couples find they are strangers after the children leave home. They have grown apart and now share little in common; they are different people with different needs and life goals. Those who remained married for "the sake of the children" may divorce.

The middle years is a time not only when marriages end by divorce, but also by the death of one's spouse. With both death and divorce, people

must cope not only with the loss of their mate but also face some basic decisions: What am I going to do? Should I begin working? How do I organize my life as a single person? Re-evaluation occurs about one's identity, self-concept, and future plans and goals.

Aging Parents

You may find new demands placed on you when your parents' health, social, or financial situation declines. Middle-aged adults sometimes must make decisions about their parents' lives.

What should I do? Where can I turn for help? These common questions are faced when: "Mother can no longer live alone," "Your dad had a stroke, is paralyzed, and needs your help," "Father is feeble now; he needs a nursing home."

Whether or not to place a parent in a nursing home is one of the most difficult decisions. Most older parents, however, will not need nursing home care. Less than 5 percent of adults over age 65 live in long-term care facilities. Contrary to popular opinion, living in a care facility is a positive experience for many older people and their families.

If your childhood relationship with your parent has been poor, assuming greater responsibility for your parent can be difficult and create tension. You may feel conflict between feelings of obligations to your parent and responsibilities to job, family, and self.

Your perception of a parent may need to change. If you have valued a parent's strength and independence, adjusting to a parent's increasing dependence may be difficult. The person who feels overwhelmed by guilt for not living up to parental expectations often has difficulty developing a fulfilling relationship. The person who has continually tried to please parents may feel anger related to not being able to live as he or she wants, particularly if parents' demands increase.

You may see yourself in your parents and feel you are one step closer to old age. You may be faced with the questions: "What will I be like when I am old? How will my children feel about me?"

The World of Work

For some people, the middle years is their peak time of achievements and capacities. Work demands and pressures, however, may be at the highest. Some feel trapped in their jobs and perceive they have no other option but to remain in the same job until retirement. Others find new, more personally fulfilling work roles.

Advancement opportunities may decrease. Some people realize there is no further upward mobility on the success ladder—they have gone as far as they can hope to go. Younger people may be a source of increasing competition. As a result, these things affect a person's self-image, ambition, and feelings of potency and achievement. This is particularly true for the individual who put all of his or her life into work.

Women often face the decision of whether or not to work, and, if so, the degree of commitment and intensity of involvement to put into it. For many women, the "emptying of the nest" becomes an opportunity to pursue an occupation, return to school, or become active in the community. These decisions may create friction in a marital relationship if a woman feels free to pursue her interests but her husband feels trapped or under pressure in his work.

The middle years is also a time to begin planning for retirement, if you have not already done so. Research shows that pre-retirement planning relates to a more satisfying adjustment in the later years.

The Physical Self

Change in body image commonly confronts the middle-aged person. The aging process becomes more visible as hair grays, skin wrinkles, body firmness decreases, and fat distribution changes. It has been said that "during middle age, men and women stop growing at both ends and begin to grow in the middle." Physical strength and endurance declines. The middle-age man may find that he can no longer play as long at basketball or

run as fast as his teenage son. The newspaper print may seem smaller. Such changes are normal, but adjusting to them may be difficult, particularly for people who place a high value on youthfulness. To avoid looking old or to keep "young," some people use hair dyes and cosmetics, dress in youthful-looking clothing, or initiate a vigorous exercise program.

During middle age you may realize that your body can no longer be taken for granted. Your body is not always willing to do whatever you might wish. It also cannot be ignored, for it makes demands on you. The incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, cancer, and diabetes

increases so that body monitoring and checking for disease symptoms becomes more important.

Confronted with so many changes, it is not unusual for middle age people to feel they are carrying an unbearable burden. As pressures, changes, and demands increase, a person may feel unable to cope. Middle-aged people have been likened to donkeys: "They carry an incredible load and receive a good many kicks to boot."



Changing Values/Goals

The middle years have been characterized as the "re-years." Words descriptive of this life phase begin with "re," a prefix meaning "to do again, to go back": reassess, re-evaluate, rekindle, relearn, review, reappraise, restructure.

The middle years are a time when values and goals are often evaluated. Adults who have focused on self and personal goals may begin to place a greater value on their relationship with their spouse and family. A man may question the importance of his occupation. Or, people who concentrated on the family or devoted energies to attain goals set by others may begin to explore more individualistic goals.

Personal values and attitudes also may be altered. Or, you may commit yourself more strongly to existing values after examining them.

Questions commonly asked by the middle-aged person are: Who am I? What is life all about? Is what I am doing with my life worth it? What do I really want for myself and my family?

Reassessment of self is a prevailing theme. Sinclair Lewis captured this theme in the following excerpt from *Babbit*:

He plodded into the house, deliberately went to the refrigerator and rifled it. When Mrs. Babbit was at home, this was one of the major household crimes. He stood before the covered laundry tubs eating a chicken leg

and half a saucer of raspberry jelly, and grumbling over a clammy cold boiled potato. He was thinking. It was coming to him that perhaps life as he knew it and vigorously practiced it was futile; that heaven as portrayed by the Reverend Dr. John Dennison Drew was neither probable nor very interesting; that he hadn't much pleasure out of making money; that it was of doubtful worth to rear children, merely that they might rear children who would rear children. What was it all about? What did he want?

Who Am I?

This life stage has been likened to the identity crisis of adolescence, but it differs in that usually there is less concern about what others think, less looking to others for approval or disapproval or for standards to live by. This may be the first time you are self-oriented. Earlier decisions and choices that were primarily other-oriented may no longer be desired or considered appropriate.

The "shoulds" that previously directed your behavior may be challenged. Too often individuals are still operating by societal and parental guidelines. People who continue to live on the basis of "shoulds," without fulfilling their needs, are likely to spend the last years of life feeling regret, anger, or frustration. For some, these "shoulds" may create fears about taking a step toward change.

How Much Time Do I Have?

Time perspective changes for many middle-aged adults. When young, you might have felt you had "all the time in the world." As you approach midlife, you may feel that time is closing in and, for the first time, death is considered a real possibility. As friends and peers die, physical capabilities change, parents decline in mental and physical abilities or die, you may begin to recognize that time is not finite, that "I will not live forever."

Time generally becomes restructured in terms of time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth. As one man said, "It's as if you've gotten to the top of a hill and now can see all the way down the other side. You're not going to suddenly fall off, but now you can see the end."

Doors may seem to be closing and opportunities narrowing. A sense of urgency may be felt: "If I am going to achieve my goals, I must do it now; if I don't do it now, I may never get another chance."

Personal Activity: Life Line

1. Draw a line to represent your life from birth to death. This line may take any form: circular, straight, squiggly. Mark an "X" on the line to indicate where you are at now in your life.

2. Explain why you drew the line as you did and put the "X" where you did.

3. Discuss your perception of time in relation to the future, the present, and the past.

Am I in Control of My Life?

The person who feels in control of life generally experiences a greater life satisfaction. Many middle-aged adults feel a greater sense of

competence and control than at any other time in their lives. This is particularly true if they perceive themselves "on time" or "ahead of time" in relation to social events and work and personal goals.

Your perception of control influences how you proceed in life, approach a crisis, and make decisions. If you feel an internal sense of control, you probably feel a sense of power over your environment and decisions. On the other hand, if you feel control is external, you probably feel you have little or no control over what happens and you may be unwilling to make decisions. You may feel at the mercy of other people, social constraints, or fate.

The sense of inner control has been shown to be an important factor influencing successful adaptation to change during midlife. People who are externally controlled tend to experience more psychological distress and illness.

What is your locus of control? Is it internal or external?

Personal Activity: Determining your locus of control

1. Complete the Locus of Control Scale on page 7.

2. Score your answers according to the scoring instructions on page 8.

3. Did you find that you feel your choices are largely outside of your control? Or, did you find you have a sense of control over your life?

4. Develop steps to increase your control over your life.

There are experiences in life in which a person will not always have control. For example, adult onset diabetes may reflect genetic factors over which one does not have control. However, a person has considerable choice in seeking treatment, following the prescribed regimen and in coping behavior.

What Have I Accomplished?

Stocktaking is characteristic of the middle years. Dreams, goals, and achievements are often assessed. There is a looking at “where have I come from, where am I now, and where am I going.” Earlier goals are compared with the present reality. Such questions may be asked:

- What have I gained from this marriage?

What have I given up?

- Is this career depriving me of personal happiness?
- Why didn't I finish my education? Should I go back to school?
- Is there still time to have a child?
- What is it I really want to do?

You may feel you have not accomplished earlier goals. Even relatively successful people sometimes experience regrets, recognizing that their achievements have been obtained at the cost of denying or suppressing other aspects of life or their personalities. For example, the successful businessman may feel a sense of loss if he has not developed a close relationship with his family; the career woman may regret that she did not have a family. The woman who has been primarily a wife and mother may feel disappointed because some of her potentials were never realized. The woman returning to school may question her competence—do I have what it takes to be successful?

This stocktaking is characterized by an increased focus on the inner self. Men and women often seek to develop the unfulfilled aspects of their lives. Men often become more affiliative and women more assertive.

People react differently to stocktaking. Those who feel “trapped” and driven by desperation may make impulsive decisions, some to be regretted later. Others, overwhelmed by feelings of “not having made it and probably never will,” become depressed, apathetic, and unable to make decisions. Still others view it as an opportunity for growth.

Personal Activity: Taking stock of myself

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What are the personal goals I have fulfilled? How do I feel about them?
2. What are the personal goals I have not fulfilled?
3. Which of my unfulfilled goals are really important to me?
4. What do I want to do for the rest of my life?
5. What are the steps I can take to begin to fulfill my two or three most important goals. List the steps.
6. Set a date to begin taking the first steps.

Your Future

The middle and later years of life are to a large degree what you make them. You can change and continue to grow. But, remember, change for the sake of change is not productive. The growing

adult makes changes only after consideration of special needs, responsibilities, and preferred lifestyles. Growth will be rough at times—growing at any age is not easy.

What do you want your middle years to be—a dead end or a gateway to opportunity? The choice is yours.



Locus of Control Scale



Below are 11 pairs of statements. For each pair, select *one* statement that is closest to your opinion. In some cases, you may find that you believe both statements; in other cases, you may believe neither one. Even when you feel this way about a pair of statements, select the one statement that is more nearly true in your opinion.

Try to consider each pair of statements separately when making your choices: do not be influenced by your previous choices.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. a....Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck. | b....People's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make. |
| 2. a....In the long run, people get the respect they deserve in this world. | b....Unfortunately, an individual's worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries. |
| 3. a....Without the right breaks, one cannot be an effective leader. | b....Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities. |
| 4. a....Becoming a success is a matter of hard work; luck has little or nothing to do with it. | b....Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time. |
| 5. a....What happens to me is my own doing. | b....Sometimes I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking. |
| 6. a....When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work. | b....It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow. |
| 7. a....In my case, getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck. | b....Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin. |
| 8. a....Who gets to be boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first. | b....Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability; luck has little or nothing to do with it. |
| 9. a....Most people don't realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by accidental happenings. | b....There is really no such thing as luck. |
| 10. a....In the long run, the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones. | b....Most misfortunes are the result of lack of ability, ignorance, laziness, or all three. |
| 11. a....Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me. | b....It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life. |

Abbreviated scale from *The Pre-Retirement Years*, Vol. 4, Manpower R&D Monograph 15 (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, 1975), 225-357.

Scoring Instructions

Assign the score either (1) or (2) to each of your answers, then add the total.

- | | |
|----------------|-----------|
| 1. a = E° (1) | b = I (2) |
| 2. a = I°° (2) | b = E (1) |
| 3. a = E (1) | b = I (2) |
| 4. a = I (2) | b = E (1) |
| 5. a = I (2) | b = E (1) |
| 6. a = I (2) | b = E (1) |
| 7. a = I (2) | b = E (1) |
| 8. a = E (1) | b = I (2) |
| 9. a = E (1) | b = I (2) |
| 10. a = E (1) | b = I (2) |
| 11. a = E (1) | b = I (2) |

° External Locus

°° Internal Locus

Scores range from 11 to 22 in order of increasing control. Plot your score on the following continuum:

External Locus	Internal Locus
11	22

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