

# In the Middle Years: Turning Points

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The number of older people is increasing in America. Even the children of the World War II baby boom are nearing their early middle years. At one time there was little reason to be concerned about changes in the middle years. In days of the Roman Empire, life expectancy was about 23 years, with only small numbers of people living to middle age. By 1900, life expectancy had risen to 48 years. Today a baby boy born in the United States can expect to live to age 69; a girl to live to age 77. What was once considered old is now middle age.

The aging population brought on a surge of new research that acknowledges an enormous variety of lifestyles and a wide range of patterns of successful changes made by adults during early, middle, and later adulthood. Although data are still limited, research observations provide a basis for thought and action during the middle years. They present a broader view that destroys the idea that growing old means becoming poor, sick, and desolate.

Popular literature and the media have credited mid-life changes with a great deal of drama. Much of it exaggerates unrealistic behavior and crises that characterize few people. Its greatest value is in calling attention to the role of change in everyday life. Reading and hearing about the lives of others helps us laugh at and learn to accept our own frailties and similarities.

There is no universal pattern for developmental processes in adulthood. The documented stages of childhood and adolescence do not apply. However, studies of infants show we have noticeable differences in our response to life the moment we are born. Some of us kick and scream about everything, others adapt smoothly and easily. We even have different ideas about how much we want to be cuddled. These personality traits influence our reactions to change whether we're learning to walk, read, to be marriage partners, parents, or retirees.

In addition, adults are complex products of the influences of social events and history, culture, and their natural environments. There are vast differences in our pasts and how we anticipate and control our futures. Whether change becomes a crisis or not depends strongly on adaptive patterns, learned and used, in the past.

Our life histories make it difficult for us to face changes. We become blinded by our expectations of family and society and what they expect of us. A case illustrating this is Laura, a 37-year-old coordinator of a municipal senior citizens program. Class members were telling their most revolutionary life changes. She said, "Getting my G.E.D." After a pause she went on, "I was one of those that married at 15. I had seven children in 9 years. When I was young I thought that's what you did—get married, have children, take care of the house. One morning I got up, dressed, went to the school and took the test and passed."

“Just like that?” class members asked. “It hit you and you did it?”

“No, I’d been thinking about it for 2 years,” was her reply. “I was crawling the walls, but what could I do when I hadn’t even graduated from high school? I had no certificate, no skills, and even felt timid around people. I felt closed off from the world because of it.” Laura was not confident enough to apply for work so she began volunteering. When her volunteer job turned into a funded position she was sure they would look elsewhere to fill the position. They didn’t. Her final comment was, “I think now I’ll go to college.”

Changes in adult life depend on what society is ready to allow and what men and women desire to do for themselves. In the last two decades new freedoms have been won in terms of use of increased time and energy, regulation of pregnancy, sexual enjoyment, educational opportunities, creative and leisure activities,

## Turning Points

Along all adult lifelines, punctuation marks signify outstanding turning points. They move us from a concentration on one set of concerns to another. They affect our style and direction of living.

There is evidence that turning points can be viewed both scientifically and imaginatively. Science provides some understanding of the biological changes and the effects of personal control of health habits, stress reactions, fatigue, and nutrition. Imaginatively, we become knowledgeable about managing change in positive ways. It makes it possible to prevent overloading our coping abilities by anticipating what is to come.

For some people, any kind of change brings turmoil and stress. Living on the boundary of the past and present is hard work and unsettling. Stressful reactions are neither right nor wrong. The hazard lies in not knowing how to bring about a comfortable balance. We are reluctant to believe that changes for the better occur as often as changes for the worse.

An example of avoiding change can be seen in mobile families, where jobs or other circumstances cause frequent moves. Some families rapidly pick up the threads of association and are soon part of their new environment. Others

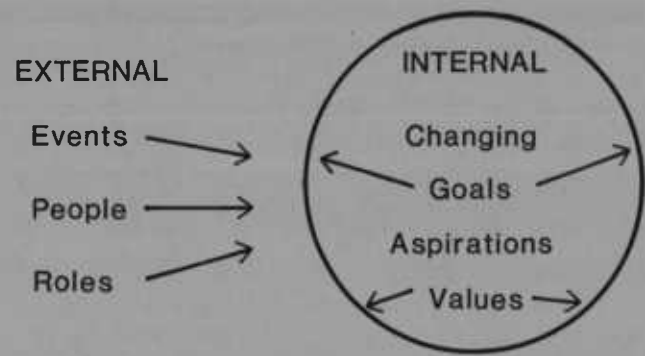
and professional volunteerism. So many choices may cause turmoil at the personal level and bring pressures from the outside. We still cannot change without some resistance from ourselves and others. The childless couple must explain their choice. The woman who takes a job or enters school is suspected of neglecting her spouse and children.

The traditional roles of parenthood and homemaking remain important. For many women, these will remain the most important. But other women want to capitalize on the wide range of opportunities, without rejecting their parental role. Likewise, many men choose to assume a greater role as homemakers or fathers, without rejecting their masculinity or the challenge of work.



are unable to make changes. After a series of moves they withdraw with a “what’s the use” attitude, and don’t make the effort to form new friendships and associations in the new environment.

Turning points have many sources. Some begin internally, perhaps with dissatisfaction with the way life seems to be treating us, or when new aspirations take hold and promote action. External actions force change, such as a special event, people, or changing roles. A family in which the mother goes to work may be on the boundary of change for as long as a year, while everyone accommodates to new responsibilities, expectations, and roles.



To help understand turning points, consider an example from your own life. *What is an example of an important turning point in your life? What was the hardest part of the change? What new behaviors did you develop in making this change? What old behaviors did you leave behind?*

Bruno Bettelheim, in the book *The Informed Heart*, tells a story about the French people fleeing ahead of the invading German tanks in World War II. Frightened families loaded their carts with goods from their homes. Mothers and fathers, children, grandparents, carts, and animals clogged the roadways as they ran from the oncoming tanks. The tanks rolled over everything, scattering carts, clocks, kettles, chairs, and tables

## Barriers to Change

Almost everyone finds turning points difficult. Major changes during the middle years often shift the importance of people, places, and goals. Rooted in beliefs and routines, we fear the discomfort that change brings. Periods of confusion, denial, and anger often come before balance is restored. Coping time may vary from several hours to several years before we readjust. Much depends on the seriousness of the change, our flexibility, and skill.

Many barriers to change are within our own thinking. The habit of realistically looking ahead to future possibilities is one key to successful coping and adjustment.

“I’m too old to make changes,” say people 18 to 80. Research findings shatter the notion that we are fixed in any kind of behavior. It is amazing how much we knowingly and unknowingly change from week to week. Experiences stay with us, but it is possible to unlearn behaviors and relearn more appropriate ones. For some people the middle years may be their first opportunity to mold their own lives. They are free to learn more about themselves, make new choices, and change the course of their lives.

everywhere, killing animals, and even people. Some might have escaped with their lives if they had not tried to take their “old life” with them. A new life awaited them in which many of the artifacts of the past would have little value. Not only material goods, but some of our ideas and behaviors become artifacts of the past when we make turning points. If we try to take too many of them with us we will lose life. *What would you take?*



We can be burdened with the erroneous notion that personality and environmental stresses from childhood prevent successful adult life. More than one “less likely to succeed” high school senior has proved otherwise. Childhood stresses motivate many adults to exceed the expectations of parents, teachers, and even themselves. However, the unfolding of our potential is not automatic. Early experiences must be put where they belong—in the past. Emotions triggered by unfortunate experiences cannot be forgotten but they do mellow and serve to strengthen us. We unintentionally concentrate heavily on what is wrong in our lives. If we give equal time to the healthy, normal, positive aspects we can take charge without blaming others.

Another popular belief is that mid-life is a crisis. This implies that age-related changes bring anxiety and stress. It has the disadvantage of being a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Psychologists use the term to explain behaviors or beliefs we see and hear so often we come to believe they are true. The self-fulfilling prophecy has us believing that a mid-life crisis is unavoidable; an idea that has little validity. For example, most mothers and fathers are relieved when their children are grown and leave home, contrary to predicted sadness in the “empty nest.” Retirement is a crisis for no more than 10 percent of workers. Also, surveys of older couples show greater satisfaction with marital relations in later years after the turbulent years of childbearing and job tension. We are finding that mid-life is not all problems and losses; there

are freedoms and gains as well. When the middle years are thought of as crisis, the power of suggestion overemphasizes normal changes.

Illusions about what life is supposed to be also affect our ability to see or create new alternatives. By age three we have solid notions of how life will be when we grow up. We act it out in our play corners and nursery school. The magic world of storybooks, television, and movies feed these images. We later hold ourselves responsible for fulfilling a perfect picture and measure our performance against it. Continuing with beliefs about our own perfection can be one of our most destructive attitudes. Until the early pictures are modified we can suffer from an inability to take a stand on a new reality. It may mean disappointment and frustration but that is part of our normal human experience.

A common barrier to change throughout life is not knowing what to do. If we maintain a limited focus, the middle years will likely find us at a loss for something to do. One woman said, “First it was the children, then the house we built, landscaped, and decorated. Now the children are more self-reliant and I’m free to do my own thing but I don’t know what it is.” We allow ourselves to be poorly explored warehouses of frustrated ambitions when old roles end.

When we are no longer parents in the childrearing sense what will we be? When we no longer go to work daily and enjoy work-related

## A Life Inventory

Typical age-related behaviors of men and women during various stages of life have been observed by psychologists. Neugarten cautions that set ideas of age-related behaviors may be just another myth. Too often they suggest a “best-time” for us to be doing certain things with our lives. They imply there is a best time to marry, to have children, become grandparents, to be settled in a career, to reach the top, and to retire. Modern young people and adults are living in ways that defy the sequence. They are making life events less age-related; more suited to individual timing and need.

sociability, what then? Sizable numbers of people think the only way out is to change their environment: choosing divorce, running away, or succumbing to mental illness. Others change by adding things from the outside: alcohol, drugs, extra marital affairs, television, or excessive work. None bring the recognition and encouragement that is sought. Hospitals are filled with people whose adjustment style and anxiety result in heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, migraine headaches, depression, and attempted suicides.

According to Richard N. Bolles, in his book *The Three Boxes of Life*, we tend to compartmentalize our activities according to age. We expect to play from birth to age 6; we learn between age 6 to 22 or so; we work until age 65. Then we’re supposed to play again. More and more we see these divisions breaking down. The trend toward spreading play, work, and learning throughout life is increasing. Today almost 10 percent of all people enrolled in post-secondary education are over 35. A large percent are in classes changing their professions, but many are there to enrich their personal lives. Bernice Neugarten, a researcher in human aging, predicts that adult participation in education is the wave of the future in changing patterns of life.



widowhood for women and the heart attack for men brings new attention to health and getting the most good out of the years that are left.

Old age brings new issues. There are adaptation to losses of work, friends, relatives, health, and spouse. There is a yielding of former powers and competencies, but there is also the joy of survivorship. When we are old we do know about life. There comes, for many, a sense of peace and less fear of death. The greatest fear is dependency and deterioration. Old age brings us the knowledge that life becomes more complex but more enriched, not impoverished as some choose to believe.

Since the patterns of life have become less well defined, we still experience some anxiety when events do not occur as expected. For example, children leaving home is not a crisis for most parents. Instead, their not leaving home on schedule is more likely a crisis. Early death of a spouse creates a greater crisis than predictable death in old age. This does not deny the seriousness of either, but we are better able to adjust when changes are on time or at least when we expect them.

There are riddles to be solved all along the lifeline. There are young adults questioning the wisdom of striking out on their own; 35-year olds uneasy with jobs that are going nowhere, middle-agers with new wells of ambition; and empty nesters holding onto children already flown. There are also those who have liberated themselves from expected roles and are now wondering if they have lost some of the warm intimacy and security that could have been theirs.

Looking back we can see where our lives took important turning points. Some of these changes are celebrated with rituals that announce and support our new status: Bar mitzvahs, graduations, engagement showers, weddings, or wakes. Families rally around in recognition that we have many lives within one lifetime. Many characteristics stay the same but most roles are of short duration, entering and exiting from the stage.



## What Can We Do?

A new approach to mid-life brings opportunity to exercise greater thought and control over our destiny. How can we do justice to that? Consider these principles:

- Think through what is valuable to you; set priorities for present and future activity.
- Make changes selectively.
- Keep in touch with your inner and outer world; change for change's sake is usually unproductive.

In the middle years we can plan to exert more organization on our environment. When dealing with mid-life turning points there are a few things we can keep in mind:

- Think about appearance. The way we think about ourselves is reflected in our faces and bodies. It may mean recognizing the shallowness of the double standard that says men become aristocratic; women become old. Women do not have to be 25 to be beautiful. Health, contentment, personality, and character are in our faces and

in our walk and posture. There is as much beauty in the face of a grandmother as in a 5-year old.

- Feel free to find new involvements and exciting challenges. Creativity is not possessed only by artists, authors, musicians, or scholars. It's found in imaginative cookery, loving ways of relating to a partner or older parents, well-planned volunteer projects, handiwork of a craftsman, or a new rose by a gardener. Use strengthens, disuse weakens creativity.

- Help fight the stereotypes of aging: unappealing, boring, inflexible, and useless. Men and women of all ages need to share their doubts and confidences in order to support one another. Create new models for aging.

- Pay close attention to the rules of good health. The capacity to participate in a long full life depends upon wellness and the vitality it insures.

- Remember that our internal clock is more accurate regarding our age and potential than number of years we have lived.

- See our turning points as opportunities to step out and step up with vigor.

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