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In the Middle Years: Facing Adulthood

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Seasons of a Man's Life. Although his research included only men, additional studies show that women go through the same developmental periods. However, the specific issues are different. Everyone between 40 and 50 undergoes a period of inner turmoil and self-questioning that leads to critical decisions about their lives.

Many psychologists consider age 40 to be the "noon time" of life. Changes made later probably result from yearnings that have always been present. The seeds for change are likely buried under the rush of everyday activity, work, and family rearing. The signals of middle adulthood appear in the early thirties with the gradual shedding of a childhood focus on self. It's called the process of "individuation," the taking on of one's own thoughts and actions. This process extends throughout the rest of life.

Not long ago people believed that between the rapid growth of childhood and the declining years of old age a long holding pattern developed where the skills learned during youth were used and maintained. New insights now suggest that imagination, creativity, and accomplishment reach their peak in the middle years. Goals or life style changes are not only desirable, but necessary.

Along with greater self-satisfaction comes a movement away from self over-indulgence toward increased commitments to others. In the middle years we can influence the lives of others if we are willing to do so. Our knowledge, experience, and skills make it possible to decide about work, family, and the community. This has its advantages and disadvantages because we have our own problems to resolve. We sometimes feel sandwiched between children and old people in a struggle between generations. Often the young and old join forces leaving middle adults feeling trapped and frequently exploited. There are

"Are the middle years really prime time?" Some say it's true while others waste time and energy fighting their forties and fifties. Many adults hope that life begins at 40, but inside there's a growing fear that maybe it doesn't. A widespread, manufactured suspicion suggests that maybe after the vitality and growth of youth there is nothing left but withering away into old age and senility.

Fifty years ago this notion was somewhat true because the lack of medical and health care shortened human lifespan. But today's longer life expectancy means we are likely to have 75 years for living, learning, and experiencing. All ages hold promise for new beginnings, for professional conquests, intellectual and emotional progress, shedding old anxieties, continuing present interests, and strengthening self identities.

Dr. Daniel Levinson, a Yale University psychologist, studied the characteristics and sequence of changes experienced by men in their middle years. The findings appear in a book, *The*

economic pressures from both generations and economic pressures to provide for one's own security. Children and old people cost a lot of money, largely supplied by the generation in the middle.

In spite of myths and speculations about how to manage the passage through life, few rules make sense to everyone. When someone makes a dramatic switch in career, marriage, or style of living, it causes concern among relatives and friends. People question the practicality of grandma starting college, an engineer giving up

Eras of Life

Can we accept and welcome opportunities for beginning new activities that are more rewarding and challenging? The research of Levinson supports four major divisions of life between birth and death. These divisions, called "eras," are designated by age but actually overlap one another by as much as two to six years. Age appropriate developments occur to everyone during these time spans. Intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth constantly change us. Sometimes this change happens in spurts, but rarely as rapidly as the explosive physical changes occurring during puberty. If the internal psychological work, called developmental tasks, is not done the eras that follow will be affected. The eras of life are:

Childhood and Adolescence	— age 0-22
Early Adulthood	— age 22-45
Middle Adulthood	— age 40-65
Late Adulthood	— age 65 plus

Nearly everyone feels anxiety when moving from the familiar to the unknown; from one era to the next. But just as the developmental tasks of adolescence should be accomplished within a given time, so must the tasks of early, middle, and later adulthood.

Among the influences shaping our lives, attitudes determine how successfully we are able to resolve the challenges presented. Test your attitudes against the following beliefs:

a career to become a metal sculptor, or a couple suddenly divorcing after 25 years of marriage.

What is the best thing to do? Settle down and live out the expectations of decline and boredom or lose ourselves in a pursuit of youth? Is it possible that when human relationships or careers are no longer fulfilling, courage and imagination can restructure present situations?



Mark an "A" for agree, "D" for disagree.

-The happiest time of life is childhood.
-There is nothing left to live for after your children are grown.
-You are never too old to learn.
-You are too old to change.
-Your spouse does not understand you.
-Other people get all the breaks.
-Everyone takes advantage of you.
-The middle years is a time of poor health.
-Your age is a good reason for disagreeable behavior.
-You have done all you can for your grown children; the rest is up to them.
-The middle years is a good time to do what you always wanted to do.
-Now is the time to spend some money just for the things you'd like to have.
-There are advantages to being older.
-One must live in the present and the future.
-You usually accept people even though their ideas and appearance are unconventional.

If you agree with more than seven of these statements, take a serious look at your attitudes toward aging. Your attitudes are much more important than the years you have lived. If attitudes do not change, they will affect you like a paralyzing disease. They ruin your fun and limit your pursuit of new adventures. They fix you rigidly in place and show in your posture, your walk, your mannerisms, and your personality.

Dr. Levinson says that in each era there are rhythms described as seasons. We are all aware of the rise and fall of our energies and curiosities, periods of questioning, or restlessness that keep appearing and reappearing. Comparing life with the seasons is familiar. Pieces of life show that seasons can last several years or as little as a month. Each day has its seasons: the beginning, the end, and the in between. Each season has its virtues and limitations shaped by its own special vitality, beauty, opportunity, energy, and weariness. We can recognize the seasons of our days by the surges of productive energy that disappear in the afternoon or the other way around.

Being Young/Old

The emphasis on youth in our society is a problem as we try to maintain a positive self-image in middle and late adulthood. A look in the bathroom mirror reveals we're not fooling anyone about the passage of time. Should that send us into a slump for the next 30 years? Should we run to the drugstore for a face pack or something to alter our depression?

Inside we have a past linked with images, traditions, and morés. Many of these are questioned or lightly regarded today. We may have grown up surrounded by relatives and friendly neighbors. We believed that marriage lasted forever and old people were wise and worthy of respect. Now half our friends are divorced and some of our children too. We don't know who lives down the street, and they don't know us either.

In a letter to the "caught generation," Dr. Clark Vincent, Bowman-Gray School of Medicine at Winston, S. C., wrote that the respect we were taught to give our parents is likely denied us by our children. We appreciated everything our parents were able to give us because times were tough. Now we receive little appreciation for what we have tried to give our children. Even our way of life is openly scorned. It seems that yesterday's ideas of good sense are today's nonsense. We cannot be reckless or foolish, but our best resources are flexibility and a willingness to adjust our attitudes and actions to changing circumstances.

All seasons are shaped by the past, concerns of the present, and goals for the future. The seasons of middle adulthood are socially, psychologically, and physiologically promising and demanding, all at the same time. The middle years are not a long, monotonous stretch of time between childhood and senility, instead they may be the most vital, productive period of life. Opportunity knocks if we refuse to waste time doing things we hate or put off doing what we enjoy.



Consider the idea that being young or old is not tied to any particular age. "Being young" creates visions of babies, 24-inch waistlines, or long distance runs. But that is not all.

We are young at any age in relation to the newness of an experience. Grandma Moses was a young painter at 70. We are always young when we undertake a new experience: learning to play golf, relearning study habits, or entering a new career brings back feelings of bewilderment and clumsiness like those experienced when we learned to skip rope. Upon entering a new era or season of life we are similarly old in the skills learned during the past season, but young in the skills necessary for the approaching season. Change leaves us like the lobster who outgrows its shell and discards it on the beach. A period of vulnerability to attack and limited bravery follows while the new soft shell hardens. The individuation process mentioned earlier does not come easily when we're outgrowing a comfortable old shell.

Being young/old even throughout late adulthood is an exciting way to enhance life in ways we never dreamed possible during youth. Invented cultural stereotypes too often dictate what we should be and what we can expect. Major crises and stresses of adulthood often result from events we didn't expect or that produce more challenges than anticipated.

Being Mature

We recognize the continuous impact of change, but most of us cling to a dream called the "maturity myth" by George and Nena O'Neill in *Shifting Gears*. From infancy parents and teachers lead us to believe that if we make the "right choices," rewards of the good life are assured. It suggests that choosing the right career, spouse, and mortgage is a passport to maturity. According to the myth, the life of the mature person is stable because good decisions are made confidently with the approval of family and society. External needs satisfied, we can settle down for the rest of our lives. Emotional security is assured after making marriage and career decisions. With a wonderful partner there are no worries about sex life. Lastly, the myth promises a future both predictable and manageable if we work hard and stay honest.

Not everyone swallows the maturity myth; some swallow only part of it. However, crises and stresses reported by 40 year olds indicate that many people build their life around some false promises. The job, the boy, the girl, the house, the club all looked different at 20 than they do at 40. The middle aged man says: "There's money in the bank and my credit is good, but there seems to be something wrong inside me." Women say, "I'm beginning to wonder what I'm going to be when I grow up."

Maturity, according to the dictionary, is being brought to completion through an orderly process of growth. It implies a peak condition followed by deterioration. The definition may apply to products, but does not explain the variations of the human journey. The demands we place on ourselves, the demands others place on us, and recurring events make arrival at total maturity nearly impossible. For most of us maturity is a "once-in-awhile" state. Sometimes all systems are "go," other times we wrestle with the parts of our thinking and actions that need realignment.



Overcoming the maturity myth creates anxiety and confusion. We are at a loss as to what to do when long held beliefs are challenged. For those whose past efforts have gone badly, it is an opportunity to choose a new life structure. Maturity is a process of working toward bringing about a balance between our inner needs and pressures from outside events and people. The middle years present options for satisfying our needs for affection, exercising self-limitations, expressing ourselves creatively, and securing inner peace and contentment that have been neglected.

There is a practical side of our Western culture pointing toward traits found in the maturing personality.

Check yourself as to how you feel about your MQ (maturity quotient).

-1. Have a broad sense of self. (View myself as a person with goals and roles to fulfill in home and community.)
-2. Relate warmly with intimate and nonintimate contacts. (Personality that accepts many kinds of people joyfully and respectfully.)
-3. Feel secure in self-acceptance. (Have decided I'm an okay person in spite of my imperfections.)
-4. Think and act with zest. (Dedication and enthusiasm for new adventures, learnings; add creatively to old efforts.)
-5. See yourself objectively, even humorously. (Enjoy yourself as a serious person with light, funny characteristics as well.)
-6. Live in harmony with your own philosophy of life. (Act in ways that demonstrate what you believe is what you are.)

The first condition of maturity is to judge ourselves rather than others. How you rate yourself is affected by sex, past experiences, social activity, financial security, and most importantly, the era and season you are in.

Mastering Adulthood



Around the age of 40 most of us question the way our life is going. Whether it starts with children leaving home or a boring job becoming insufferable, it usually means facing the fact that we've spent more time pleasing others and meeting their expectations and standards than our own. The next move is difficult because our life map shows "road under construction." All we have to guide us are the preservatives built up within ourselves during previous eras.

The underlying need is to survive biologically. Keeping the body healthy and fit must be primary to fully enjoy all the years ahead. Unresolved stresses during the middle years eventually show up in physical symptoms of premature aging. As humans left cavemen existence, many survival dangers disappeared. But the new way of life brought social and psychological survival challenges.

Social survival concerns the recognition we crave as individuals or part of groups. It depends upon how well we adapt to people around us and the social status we desire. A person who aspires to great wealth during youth may feel like a failure if this is not achieved by 40. The loss of a dream may be so devastating that nothing else seems to matter. Some people base their social survival on glories achieved during youth or glorification of their children. Others surround themselves with a wall of work or activity to avoid any questions about their survival. The older woman covered with cosmetics and teen style garments tells the world she's surviving. Many people are surviving, but only on the surface.

Psychological survival differs from social survival in that it is internal and relates to feeling good about ourselves. It is not too difficult to appear to be well adjusted in social survival while internal fears and anxieties threaten biological survival.

Whatever our marital state, job status, or parenting situation we can expect a variety of mid-life upheavals. Problem solving methods in the middle years are dependent on the years of self-talk that set the stage for feelings about ourselves. Watch and listen to unhappy, bored, or humorless people. Do their misfortunes come from faulty upbringing or does most of it stem from habits of looking at clouds with black linings?

Revising life expectancies during the middle years is not equally critical for everyone. Some people like themselves and their lives as is. However, for those who need change, knowing what can be anticipated makes it more manageable. The problem areas generally faced are choice anxiety, lack of skills, lack of assurance, and inadequate information.

Choice anxiety. Making choices was easier when there were fewer options. Fear of making mistakes creates choice anxiety. Since we are human we cannot avoid mistakes. Choices about jobs, leisure, spending, and family behaviors along with divorce, remarriage, and in-law problems challenge us. Can we stick to the same roles and attitudes forever or shed them when they are no longer appropriate? What you choose does not reflect your worth as a person, it only reflects a selection made to satisfy a current need.

Lack of skills. Few of us were taught that learning is continuous. Whether it's a new job, an artistic skill, or a method of operating a new microwave oven, we are at the mercy of those with special competencies. Skills in interpersonal relationships, methods of thinking, and ways of caring for ourselves require revision constantly. Without updating, we're soon extinct like the dinosaur.

Lack of assurance. Many people live out of contact with relatives. They feel terribly alone and desperate in the face of new problems. Social and psychological survival requires interaction with others. Doubts about yourself and irrational responses to situations are relieved when shared with others you trust.

Inadequate information. What we know is microscopic in comparison to what is available.

Even if we constantly seek information to make survival easier, we still will not know it all. Now is the time to open ourselves to learning. It is estimated that we use only 10 percent of our potential; the middle years provides an opportunity to make new use of our talents.

Sometime in the middle years everyone looks back and realizes that the progress made no longer looks the same as when planned. A young woman says: "Ever since I was 10, I planned on my Ph.D. I'm 26 and I have it. It seems like the end." Many women plan for marriage and children but

no further. Men plan for a career and a family but no further. No road maps are printed for after the plan. With careful consideration we each must shape our lives to meet our special needs and preferred life-style as well as our obligations to others and society.



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