

Men at Midlife: Transitional Strategies

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James M. Harris III, Ph.D.(Cand.) LPC  
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Men between the ages of 40 and 65 go through a period of transition from the vitality and confidence of adulthood to the more sedentary and uncertain period of later life. This is both a developmental stage and a cultural ideology. There are many stressors which make this transition difficult including physiological changes, occupational uncertainty, and family life changes. A successful transition is most possible with a passionate goal, proper diet and exercise, sufficient mental stimulation, a healthy network of male friends, and the help of a good mate.

Midlife, rather than 'middle age', is the term that is now used to describe that period of life between the ages of approximately 40 to 65. It seems to denote less of a crisis and more of a normal developmental period of life (Sheehy, 1999). Today this age group is roughly equivalent to the 'baby boomers', those born between 1946 and 1964. To the men in this stage there resides a growing confidence that they are getting better with age. They generally feel more compassionate, more sensitive to others, and better able to cope with others (Shweder, 1998).

Erik Erikson saw this as stage seven, middle adulthood. The conflict is Generativity vs. Stagnation with the important event being parenthood. Men at this stage are caught between their children who are leaving home and their parents who are becoming dependant. Each adult must find some way to satisfy and support the next generation

(Golan,1986). George Vaillant sees this period as a time of developing the mature ego defenses of altruism, humor, suppression, anticipation, and sublimation.

This is a time in the life of a man when he must deal with the pairs of personality polarities within him (Sell, 1991). One major battle is with young vs. old. We live in a culture that places such high regard on youth. Fitness, attractiveness, and virility are all idealized and represented by the young. The receding hairline, the growing waistline, and the increasingly undependable male organ all remind the man of the loss of youth. Change is in the air along with the smell of fear - fear of loss, fear of death, fear of the future. Helplessness can be quickly followed by hopelessness (Hart,2001).

Another polarity, feminine vs. masculine, is especially emphasized in our modern American culture. Men are expected to be more sensitive than ever before while maintaining their manliness. Also dealt with in this stage of life is destructive vs. creative and attachment vs. independence (Sell, 1991).

But is midlife a developmental stage or an accepted ideology of decline? Are physiological decline, memory loss, sexual dysfunction, hair loss, and general fatigue the inevitable product of the years that have passed or has our culture so indoctrinated men that they are the product of self-fulfilling prophecies? Unlike women, who can point to the physiological sign of menopause as the start of a new stage of life, the beginning of midlife has no unique distinguishing mark to announce its arrival. Some men first are aware of midlife at a certain birthday. The fortieth birthday was formerly that date, but now it seems that fifty is what forty used to be. The first gray hair, the death of a father, the birth of a grandchild, and the double take in the mirror from seeing one's own father can be the event that ushers in the reality of midlife (Sheehy, 1999).

Another factor that seems to add to the confusion is the whole concept of change. Women are, by nature, creatures of a cyclical nature. Approximately every twenty-eight days since puberty, they are brought full circle biologically. And what man can understand change to any level comparable to a woman who has born a child? But change can take many forms and all are accompanied by stress. And it is in the dealing with the stresses of this stage of life that crisis are made or averted.

One such stressor is the empty nest. The anticipation of being alone at last is soon joined by the question of what's next? The time to mend broken or wounded relationships with sons and daughters seems to have passed as the door shuts behind them in their departure. Men often turn to their own father for reconciliation at this time(Genovese, 1997). But just how empty is that nest? We live in an age of boomerang kids. About one-third of all males between 25 and 34 live with their parents (Sheehy, 1999). Many have returned after failed marriages or unsuccessful ventures in the world of commerce. Their wounded egos and shattered dreams now become a problem shared with parents who thought their job was done. And the weight of the added financial burden can be heavy indeed.

This is not an easy time for dad. He is caught in the middle. His own father, who he is finally ready to embrace, is in decline and too weak to lean on. Turning to the son, who had so often in the past waited for dad to have more time, but finding the son now has his own life and there is no time for dad.

Another stressor is retirement. The future is not as secure as it once seemed. The generous pensions of the past have gone the way of the long-term bond between employer and employee. Every fluctuation of the stock market, every spike of the interest rate, every

announcement of the cost of living demands recalculation of the size of the nest egg which is being built for the future. Social security has become a misnomer. Where in 1990 there were five workers to pay the way for each retiree, by 2030 there will be less than three. What happened to the security? It's not found at the job. Middle management, often the haven of men in this age group, is the first target of the number crunchers when expenses are cut for the sake of a healthier bottom line. Replacing one middle manager with two secretaries may do wonders for the unemployment rate, but the odd man out often has nowhere to go (Sheehy, 1999).

There are also physiological changes that become undeniable at this stage of life. The loss of hair can become a Samson-like symbol of diminished strength. The parasympathetic nervous system begins to fail causing a loss of steadiness that can be mistaken for nervousness. It is not uncommon for men to try to forestall the effects of age by returning to the gym or attempting some long imagined feat of physical prowess - scaling a mountain or running a marathon.

At age forty testosterone levels routinely begin to decrease at the rate of one percent a year (Hart, 2001). To further emasculate the man in midlife, erectile dysfunction becomes more common. The roots of this problem are not always physical. Issues of unresolved anger and power struggles in the marriage can be just as debilitating as alcohol, cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, fatigue, and prostate cancer. Viagra, once thought of as the holy grail of pharmacology, can relieve the physical symptoms but is no cure for problems of intimacy (Sheehy, 1999).

Marriage is not immune to the stress of midlife. Women see this part of their lives as fulfilling. New found autonomy is combined with alliances made with the children to

force new expectations on the man of the house. Mrs. Cleaver doesn't live here anymore. Father does not always know what is best. The differences in styles of crisis management have become polarized. The opposing roles of the optimist and the pessimist and the different voices of anger and fear that once provided balance now are a source of alienation (Golan, 1986). And still men don't talk. They stonewall. If pushed for more, they fight or, more often, take flight (Sheehy, 1999).

So what is a man to do? Some have chosen unsuccessful transitional strategies. They live in denial. Or they turn to alcohol or drugs. Or they trade in the old wife for a newer, shinier model. Such flights of fancy are often short and almost always end in flames.

Success is more likely to come to those who deal with the issues at hand rather than the affect. The physiological decline can be blunted by a healthy diet and regular exercise. And it is not just the body that needs exercise. The mind needs stimuli. Men that have returned to college to pursue what once were dormant dreams have rekindled the passion that were thought to be the exclusive property of the young. There is no age limit on growth. To those who continue to dream, continue to grow, and continue to strive, the wisdom and experience of age can more than compensate for what the years have taken (Sheehy, 1999).

Men who develop a network of men friends have been found to be more likely to have a crisis-free midlife experience (Sell, 1991). This involves moving from competition to connection. Investment in others is always a wise strategy. Becoming a mentor has been found to be a profitable experience for both teacher and pupil. And nothing seems to provide a man with a greater chance of a successful midlife transition than a good wife.

Men need not suffer a crisis during this period of transition in their lives. The stressors are real but can be dealt with. Understanding the changes and making adjustments to them provide the key. Life is not over with the end of youth. Many have used this time to pursue unfulfilled dreams and can say the best is yet to come.

#### Recommended reading

Farrell, M. & Rosenberg, S. (1981). *Men at midlife*. Boston: Auburn Publishing Company. This is the oldest (1981) of the sources cited but maintains a place of importance because the authors divide the middle-aged man into four subgroups rather than looking at them as one homogenous group. These subgroups are referred to by other sources.

The first subgroup is the Anti-Hero type. These men are on the outskirts of society. They don't like sports, television, or popular culture. They are unlikely to vote or go to church. They are not satisfied at their job (which they feel is a dead end). Their wives are most likely to work outside the home. They do seem fairly satisfied with their marriages and sex life. Of the four types, they are the most likely to describe themselves as drinking more than they should, have the hardest time getting up in the morning, are the most likely to admit everyday faults, the most likely to report of health problems, and they are "the ones who come closest to experiencing a midlife crisis" (p. 80). They represent 12% of the middle-aged male population.

The Transcendent-Generative type represents 32% of the middle-aged male population. They are the most likely to report, "in general, life has measured up to expectation" (p.82). They are satisfied with their jobs, their wives, their children, and their health. They are the least depressed, the most hopeful, the most open, the least prejudiced,

and the healthiest. “Rather than ... a crisis, they seem to have moved through each phase of life with relative ease and a growing sense of self-assurance.” ( p.80)

The Pseudo-Developed type represents 26% of the middle-aged male population. On the surface they appear very similar to the healthy Transcendent-Generative type, but a closer look reveals a pattern of denial and projection. They score by far the highest on the tendency to present a favorable façade. They have real problems dealing with ambiguity, are the most ethnocentric, and very likely to be strict authoritarian at home. They are the least likely to report ever having trouble with their wives but the most likely to have unsatisfying sexual relations. According to the authors,

The composite picture of these men indicates that they are making use of a variety of living strategies, attitudinal configurations, and psychological defenses to avoid confronting the stresses of midlife. In general, they attempt to cope by playing ostrich, refusing to acknowledge their own feelings, distress, or the unhappiness of those around them. They present to the world, and perhaps to themselves, a façade of integration. (p.84)

The fourth type is the Punitive-Disenchanted type that represents 30% of the middle-aged male population. They are the least happy, the most depressed, the least hopeful, and score the highest in areas of identity diffusion and alienation. More of these men see themselves as old. They are not considered as going through a midlife crisis because “these men seem to be have experienced a chronic sense of alienation, identity diffusion, and depression” (p.86).

The detailed statistical analysis of these four groups of men make this book valuable to the counselor as source material. There are a great number of case studies on a

variety of very practical topics, which could be of value if selectively assigned as homework to the patient.

Sell, C. M. (1991). *Transitions through adult life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. This represents a good source for the conservative pastor counselor with a lot of practical application involving the church as a therapeutic community, while at the same time citing a broad base of secular authorities as well. Chapters 11 through 17 are about middle adulthood. The author seems to lean a lot towards Jung, but is very knowledgeable with all the relevant authors. One section in chapter 13, The kind of church middle adults need, would be very relevant to the church leader who is ministering to the middle-aged crowd, but very practical Christian application is made throughout the book. One such helpful application was,

Authenticity and intimacy can compromise the most noble gifts the church can give its adults. God's forgiveness allows them to admit past mistakes. God's grace fosters a willingness to be honest with oneself and others. Being genuine means being willing to admit a midlife upheaval if it occurs. Apparently, many members of Christ's church are embarrassed by the midlife confusion. They equate maturity with stability. When they get destabilized, they wonder where their faith went. They end up pretending all is under control when inside they are seething with anxiety. Such pretense of maturity prevents maturity from happening ( p.133).

Genovese, R. G. (1997). *Americans at midlife*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey. This book has some very practical advice at the end of each chapter. For instance, in the chapter on economic security at midlife, the author gives six steps for increasing your chances to stay employed. Step three is "Keep your skills current and, better yet,

increase them or develop skills in a new area of interest. Go to back to school, if that is an option, especially if your employer offers reimbursement" (p.16). In this same chapter is found six steps for finding a new job, ten steps for starting retirement planning, and five steps on investing money. The Appendix is also full of useful information including names and addresses and phone numbers of organizations, support groups, and other resources. as well as computer software and on-line resources. It is in the area of financial and family relations stressors that this concise book excels.

Shweder, R. A. (1998). *Welcome to middle age!* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This book consists of eight essays representing a diversity of cultural traditions and how they define and deal with midlife. Chapter one is an introductory article that puts belief in midlife decline as a cultural creation. Gullette says,

In the United States in the twentieth century, aging no longer means a geriatric physical process, and it can begin long before the marked events like retirement or the last of the children leaving home. Although widely shared, its core is a private emotion: fear of being not-young. In other words, it is a culturally cultivated chronic disease with an adolescent exposure and a no-later-than-midlife onset.

(p.17)

Chapter seven deals with the subculture of the counter cultural generation of the 1960's through a longitudinal study that began in 1974. If a client was from this subculture, this would be a valuable resource. Chapter eight is culturally specific to Harlem and would be useful in an urban setting.

Golan, N. (1986). *The perilous bridge*. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.

This book is full of information and is well written. It would be a good source book to have for any counselor dealing with midlife issues.

Part one of the book consists of chapter two, Theoretical approaches to mid-adulthood, which gives thumbnail sketches of important contributors to various perspectives of midlife. The author looks at psychodynamic, developmental, sociological, and women's perspectives. A chapter follows this on the types, assessment, and treatments of transitional problems. Part two covers many areas of potential pitfalls in the transition to midlife. The author covers biophysical, psychological, vocational, and relational reactions. One important sobering fact brought out while talking about psychological reactions was suicide. According to Golan,

Those who actually commit suicide are usually men who are middle-aged or older, while those who attempt to take their own lives but fail are most often younger women.... When a middle-aged man talks about taking his life, he should be taken very seriously. Such a man often chooses more violent means, with a greater assurance of lethality, such as a gun... A majority of those who succeed in killing themselves have seen a physician during the previous month and have told someone, either overtly or in a disguised form, that they intend to commit suicide (p.65).

The author intersperses illustrative stories to make the reading interesting and easily applicable.

Sheehy, G. (1999). *Understanding men's passages*. New York: Ballentine Books.

This is by far the most comprehensive and up-to-date book available. It is thoroughly

researched, full of interviews, medical commentary, and illustrations and testimonies. To a man going through this stage in his life, as well as to his spouse, this will be informative and interesting reading.

Many of the other sources cited seem to approach midlife predominately from the perspective of all the potential problems a man faces at this point in his life. This book takes a more positive approach, dealing with the possibilities and the developmental tasks that can bring a man through this stage of life successfully. For instance, from Part II, Flourishing forties, Sheehy writes, "The major task of midlife is to give up all your imagined safety providers and stand naked in the world, as the rehearsal for assuming full authority over yourself" (p.42). In Part III, Fearless fifties, she says, "A man who approaches the second half of life, still valuing his physical strength and the aggressiveness to make things happen, can find a new challenge in developing the more creative, intuitive, nurturant side of himself. If he cultivates this side, he can be even more enduringly effective" (p.98) and further, "So many men are desperate just to hang on to what they have, they fight change. This is a terrible mistake" (p.99). Sheehy adds, "Drawing upon his experience and greater patience, the older man must learn new strategies for exercising power, particularly over younger people" (p.119).

This author is not writing from a Christian perspective, but many of her observations and conclusions are right on. For instance, one statement repeated several times in several ways is the most important single factor in a successful transition through midlife is a good mate. This agrees with Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived.

Hart, A. D. (2001). *Unmasking male depression*. Nashville: Word Publishing.

This book, as the title implies, deals mostly with the related issue of depression. While

male depression is certainly not limited to midlife, there is no doubt that much of what makes midlife a crisis for some is rooted in depression. A number of the chapters are of particular interest: Chapter 10, Male midlife blues (about male menopause), Chapter 11, When depression strikes below the belt (about impotence), and Chapter 15, Healthy fathering. I would especially recommend Chapter 14, Living with a depressed male, as homework for the spouse of a depressed midlife male.

The author was the dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and integrates scripture with his insights. One example is in Chapter 14, Living with the depressed male, where Hart says,

Try to listen more than talk. Perhaps the most important thing you can do for your depressed loved one is listen. Romans 12:15 tells us to “weep with those who weep” (KJV) and listening is as good as, if not better than, our biggest tears. In fact, how can you “weep” if you don’t understand?”  
(p.228).

Koenig, H.(1994). *Aging and God*. New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press. This is a big volume that deals with a lot of Church issues. More emphasis is placed on the more aged but there are some spiritual issues that are very enlightening to those coming from a Christian perspective. His Fourteen Spiritual Needs are very good information to those in mid-life.

A need for meaning, purpose, and hope

A need to transcend circumstances

A need for support in dealing with loss

A need for continuity

A need for validation and support of religious behaviors

A need to engage in religious behaviors

A need for personal dignity and sense of worthiness

A need for unconditional love

A need to express anger and doubt

A need to feel that God is on their side

A need to love and serve others A need to be thankful

A need to forgive and be forgiven

A need to prepare for death and dying (p.156-172).

References

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