8.10: Psychosocial Development in Middle Adulthood

Learning Objectives: Psychosocial Development in Middle Adulthood

- Explain the controversy surrounding the concept of a midlife crisis
- Explain the sources of stress confronting adults in midlife and the strategies to cope
- Summarize Erikson’s seventh psychosocial task of generativity vs stagnation
- Describe the relationships middle-aged adults have with their children, parents, and other family members
- Describe singlehood, marriage, divorce, and remarriage at midlife
- Describe the contemporary roles of grandparents
- Describe friendships at midlife
- Explain how women are uniquely affected at midlife
- Explain the role of religion at midlife

There are many socioemotional changes that occur in how middle-aged adults perceive themselves. While people in their early 20s may emphasize how old they are to gain respect or to be viewed as experienced, by the time people reach their 40s they tend to emphasize how young they are. For instance, few 40 year olds cut each other down for being so young stating: "You're only 43? I'm 48!" A previous focus on the future gives way to an emphasis on the present. Neugarten (1968) notes that in midlife, people no longer think of their lives in terms of how long they have lived. Rather, life is thought of in terms of how many years are left.

Midlife Crisis?

In 1978 Daniel Levinson published a book entitled The Seasons of a Man’s Life in which he presented a theory of development in adulthood. Levinson’s work was based on in-depth interviews with 40 men between the ages of 35-45.
Levinson (1978) indicated that adults go through stages and have an image of the future that motivates them. This image is called “the dream” and for the men interviewed, it was a dream of how their career paths would progress and where they would be at midlife. According to Levinson the midlife transition (40-45) was a time of reevaluating previous commitments; making dramatic changes if necessary; giving expression to previously ignored talents or aspirations; and feeling more of a sense of urgency about life and its meaning. By the time the men entered middle adulthood (45-50), they believed they committed to the new choices made and placed one’s energies into these commitments.

Levinson believed that a midlife crisis was a normal part of development as the person is more aware of how much time has gone by and how much time is left. The future focus of early adulthood gives way to an emphasis on the present in midlife, and the men interviewed had difficulty reconciling the “dream” they held about the future with the reality they experienced. Consequently, they felt impatient and were no longer willing to postpone the things they had always wanted to do. Although Levinson believed his research demonstrated the existence of a midlife crisis, his study has been criticized for his research methods, including small sample size, similar ages, and concerns about a cohort effect. In fact, other research does not support his theory of the midlife crisis.

Vaillant (2012) believed that it was the cross-sectional design of Levinson’s study that led to the erroneous conclusion of an inevitable midlife crisis. Instead, he believed that longitudinal studies of an individual’s entire life was needed to determine the factors associated with optimum health and potential. Vaillant was one of the main researchers in the 75 year-old Harvard Study of Adult Development, and he considered a midlife crisis to be a rare occurrence among the participants (Vaillant, 1977). Additional findings of this longitudinal study will be discussed in the next chapter on late adulthood.

Most research suggests that most people in the United States today do not experience a midlife crisis. Results of a 10-year study conducted by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, based on telephone interviews with over 3,000 midlife adults, suggest that the years between 40 and 60 are ones marked by a sense of well-being. Only 23% of their participants reported experiencing a midlife crisis. The crisis tended to occur among the highly educated and was triggered by a major life event rather than out of a fear of aging (Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, 2007).