9.1: Introduction to Middle Adulthood

Skills to Develop

- Explain trends in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy.
- List developmental tasks of midlife.
- Summarize physical changes that occur in midlife.
- Explain physical changes that occur during menopause.
- Describe variations in cultural responses to menopause.
- Contrast menopause and andropause.
- Explain the relationships between the climacteric and sexual expression.
- Discuss the impact of exercise on health in midlife.
- Describe the ideal diet for middle aged adults.
- Describe cognitive development in midlife.
- Compare midlife students with younger students and their approach to learning.
- Contrast the expert and the novice.
- Evaluate the notion of the midlife crisis.
- Define kinkeeping and the impact of caregiving.
- Describe Erikson’s stage of generativity vs. stagnation.
- Compare types of singles.
- Contrast intrinsic and utilitarian marriages.
- Classify types of marriages based on Cuber and Harroff's model.
- Discuss communication in marriage.
- Describe the stations of divorce.
• Discuss issues related to re-coupling including remarriage and cohabitation.
• Describe personality changes in midlife.
• Discuss work related issues in midlife.

Introduction

Middle adulthood (or midlife) refers to the period of the lifespan between young adulthood and old age. This period lasts from 20 to 40 years depending on how these stages, ages, and tasks are culturally defined. The most common age definition is from 40 to 65, but there can be a range of up to 10 years (ages 30-75) on either side of these numbers. The mid-thirties or the forties through the late 60s can be our guide. Research on this period of life is relatively new and many aspects of midlife are still being explored. This may be the least studied period of the lifespan. And this is a varied group. We can see considerable differences in individuals within this developmental stage. There is much to learn about this group. In the United States, the large Baby Boom cohort (those born between 1946 and 1964) are now midlife adults and this has led to increased interest in this developmental stage.

This is a relatively new period of life. One hundred years ago, life expectancy in the United States was about 47 years. Life-expectancy has increased globally by about 6 years since 1990 and now stands at 68 years and ranges from 57 years in low-income countries to 80 in high-income countries (World Health Organization, 2011). This number reflects an increase in life expectancy in Africa due to availability of antiretroviral medications to reduce HIV/AIDS, and a decrease in Europe and in countries in the former Soviet Union. Life expectancy in the United States for those born in 2007 is now at 75.9 for white males, 80.8 for white females, 70.0 for black males, and 76.8 for black females (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). The U. S. ranks 42nd in the world and has been declining in rank. Children born in the U. S. today may be the first generation to have a shorter life span than their parents. Much of this decline has been attributed to the increase in sedentary lifestyle and obesity. See the Washington Post article, U.S. Deaths Rise by 50,000 in 2005, for more details.

Of course, longevity is not the only consideration. How long can we expect to lead health lives? Healthy life expectancy, or the years one can expect to live in good health, is 67 for males and 71 for females in the United States. It is higher in Japan with a healthy life expectancy of 72 for males and 78 for females. Certainly, living healthier lives is the goal. In the United States, Canada, and other countries where people live well in midlife, there are new concerns are about the aging process, the impact of lifestyle on health, productivity at work, and how to best spend the second half of life.

Developmental Tasks

Lachman (2004) provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing midlife adults. These include:

1. Losing parents and experiencing associated grief.
2. Launching children into their own lives.
3. Adjusting to home life without children (often referred to as the empty nest).
5. Becoming grandparents.
6. Preparing for late adulthood.
7. Acting as caregivers for aging parents or spouses.

Let’s explore these tasks and this stage of life.

REFERENCES:


