

The Male Midlife: A Period of Change or Crisis?

Middle age may be a pleasant and satisfying stage of life, although often it is beset by recurrent upheavals. Perosa and Perosa (1983) reported that interest in adult development has culminated in the notion that adulthood is a dynamic period characterized by struggle and change. This paper will focus its attention on the male midlife period, and the purpose of this study is to take a look at some of the changes that take place during this crucial period of a man's life. A review of the literature will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What is a male midlife transition, and what does it encompass?
2. Do the changes at midlife constitute a midlife crisis?
3. What are the issues and the nature of the significant changes in men at midlife?
4. What are the positive aspects, if any, of the male midlife transition?

Midlife Transitions

During the course of the life cycle, each person passes through a number of expected and known stages or phases (Medalie, 1984). D. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, M. Levinson, and Braxton (1978) stated that around 40 a crucial developmental change occurs. Early adulthood is coming to an end and a new season begins to make itself felt. The Mid-life Transition, which lasts from about 40 to 45, is devoted to the termination of early adulthood and the initiation of middle adulthood. Levinson et al. (1978) saw this transition period as one in which the past is reappraised (consciously or unconsciously), and new possibilities are explored in one's self as well as the outside world so that a basis for a new choice or direction is made.

Midlife Crisis

Whereas there is disagreement among researchers on the question of whether middle age is actually a crisis rather than just a series of transitional events, there does seem to be agreement that

major changes take place in the lives of individuals during middle age and that some people deal with these changes better than others (Cohen, 1979). Ciernia (1985b) stated that the midlife years can be years of stress for a man, and during this period men may experience turmoil which has been referenced as a "midlife crisis." A crisis can imply change in personality (Brim, 1976), a change in values (Ciernia, 1985b), or a sense of stagnation (Levinson et al., 1978). However, a review of the literature does not indicate consensus as to what extent such a crisis exists, nor the precipitating factors that influence its development (Ciernia, 1985b).

According to Levinson et al. (1978), the Mid-life Transition may be rather mild, but when it involves considerable turmoil and disruption, we speak of a mid-life crisis. In fact, they reported that a great majority of the men in their study --about 80 percent--experienced a tumultuous struggle, and the Mid-life Transition for their subjects was a time of moderate or severe crisis. Further, a developmental crisis is precipitated when a man begins to feel that his old life structure no longer fits his newly evolving self. For Brim (1976), the concept of "crisis" in mid-life and at other times implies a rapid and substantial change in personality.

Brandes (1985) believes that any personality syndrome that is widespread and firmly believed in probably has a cultural rather than an organic origin. According to him, people undergo regular, predictable transformations of life structure at certain ages, and age 40 seems to be the most commonly cited dividing point between stages of adult development. Nichols (1986) stated, "Turning forty is like having a bad case of spring fever. The symptoms are familiar--a feeling of stagnation, disequilibrium, and mild depression" (p. 18).

Most men at transition to midlife do not report directly that they are in a crisis, but indirect measures such as depression scales, symptomatic behaviors, or projective measures indicate that this group may be plagued with deep-seated self-doubts or confusion (Tamir, 1987). There are

those who report symptoms at 40 as being dissatisfaction and depression, organic decline, and career changes (Brandes, 1985). However, Tamir (1987) reported that even though midlife crises of radical change do occur, they are rare in community samples; i.e., a crisis is the exception, not the rule.

Arnold and McKenry (1986) conducted an exploratory study of participants in a divorce support group which sought to determine the prevalence of a mid-life transition or crisis among divorced individuals. The findings provided support for the reality of a mid-life transition and/or crisis for a majority of the participants and for the salience of a mid-life crisis as a factor in their divorce. However, the subjects were significantly more likely to perceive their spouses' mid-life crisis as related to the divorce than their own crisis.

A sample of businessmen who reported having midlife crises had the highest score on death concern. There was a significant association of more severe crises and higher scores on death concern. Older respondents reported having greater crises than younger ones, and Ciernia (1985a) interpreted these results as providing support for the proposition that mid-life crises exist for men and that death concern is related to such crises.

Perhaps the most important difference between critical phases of the young and middle-aged is the fact that the older person becomes aware of the limited time left for achievement in addition to dealing with the many problems associated with midlife (Berglas, 1983). According to Nichols (1986), we have two great fears: fear of life and fear of death. The fear of death becomes more prominent in midlife. Our first confrontation with our own mortality may have deep thoughts about death; we may feel sad and probably dread it. But there is little evidence that we are terrorized by the knowledge that death waits ahead (Van Hoose, 1985).

Midlife Changes

The question as to whether men's midlife transition represents a crisis can not be completely answered from the review of the literature. However, several major issues have been identified as confronting men at mid-life, making this a potentially frustrating and stressful life transition (Julian & McKenry, 1989). Medalie (1984) reported that it is during these periods that some men make significant visible or less visible changes in one of the areas of life style, interpersonal relationships, and occupation. Nichols (1986) saw this period of time as one in which specific discontent may be focused on a stagnant career, a joyless marriage, or the feeling that physical powers are declining. The major issues that will be considered in the remainder of this paper revolve around personal disorganization, physiological changes, career issues, and family system changes.

Personal Disorganization

Although the research to support the descriptive construct of mid-life crisis is contradictory and inconclusive, increasingly research is indicating that both men and women are exhibiting a striking incidence and prevalence of many signs of personal disorganization at this stage of the life cycle (Arnold & McKenry, 1986). Ciernia (1985b) noted that writers describing the period of midlife in men often refer to signs of increased personal disorganization which can be attributed to midlife crises. He further reported that three of the more commonly referenced problem areas are increases in divorce, alcoholism, and suicide.

Divorce

While the number of divorces for midlife men has increased since 1970, the percentage decreases relative to younger ages (Ciernia, 1985b). In terms of the timing of divorce, the data

clearly indicate that divorce is much less likely to occur at midlife than earlier in life (Rollins, 1987). Further, Tamir (1987) concluded that there is no upsurge in divorce at middle age, and about one-half of all divorces occur within the first several years of marriage. On the other hand, Berglas (1983) stated that perhaps the most significant increase in the divorce rate can be found among couples in their midlife, some who have been married for more than 20 years.

Alcoholism

Brim (1976) indicated that data on alcoholics and heavy drinkers show no notable age-clustering during men's middle years. In fact, Ciernia (1985b) reported that a review of available data indicate that heavy drinking actually reduces with age rather than increases.

Suicide

While suicide has been cited as a problem area in the male midlife crisis, Ciernia (1985b) stated that data indicate that suicides for younger men have increased since 1970 but decline during some of the middle years and then begin to increase in later life. He concluded that it appears that maladaptive behaviors in midlife are not being unusually expressed by suicide.

Physiological Changes

One of the primary issues confronting the male as he enters the middle years of his life revolves around the physical changes that are occurring (Cohen, 1979). Biological cues are dramatic for the male as increased attention centers upon his health, and there is a decrease in the efficiency of his body (Neugarten, 1968b). Mayer (1978) described this period as a time of life when a man begins to worry about his body; his cholesterol count goes up and his energy level goes down.

A report of health ratings by Bayer, Whissell-Buechy, and Honzik (1981) suggested a slight deterioration between the fourth and fifth decades that continues in the men but not in the

women. They found that the most consistent source of malaise in men throughout the middle years is the digestive system. While problems with the genitourinary system increase as men age, the most common abnormality in men is hypertension.

Cohen (1979) reported that while there is no male equivalent to the female's menopause, there are changes in hormonal levels that have an effect on the physical status and well-being of the individual. Beginning at about 30, there is a gradual decline in the secretion of the hormones testosterone and androgen, which affect sexual activity as well as physical strength. Weg (1987) identified a period labeled as the male climacteric, which is accompanied by a range of physiological, psychological, and social changes. Clinical data about the male climacteric are characterized by generalized loss of well-being, fatigue, increased irritability, poor appetite, a difficulty with concentration, diminished libido, and occasional impotence (Weg, 1987).

Brandes (1985) concluded that the male sexual drive decreases with age, but this process generally occurs gradually and may be more the result of cultural influence rather than biological degeneration. He elaborated further that if men are told often enough that their sexual energies should decline at 40, then on reaching this age, they may begin to notice for the first time the impact of long-term, gradual libidinal changes. As a result, sometimes sexual fears lead to such reactions as men dating women who are in their teens or early 20s (Medalie, 1984). As Berglas (1983) stated, a midlife man may be "proving his ability to attract a younger woman for what may be a last fling before he stops running the race" (p. 21).

Although a man's bodily and mental powers are somewhat diminished after 40, they are ordinarily still ample for an active, full life throughout middle adulthood (Levinson et al., 1978). To Weg (1987), physiological alterations in the male sexual system during midlife are minimal. However, she reported that signs among many middle-aged men of functional changes in sexual

responsivity and libido may include decreased frequency of intercourse and excitation, a gradual increase in the refractory period between erections and orgasms, and increased time needed to stimulate the penis for erection. Yet, she pointed out that the idea of a dismal, loveless, sexless future based primarily on the supposed major anatomical and physiological changes in the reproductive system is a myth of midlife sexuality.

According to Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny (1982), none of the physiological changes described is sufficient to alter significantly the interest and pleasure in a couple's sexual life. Weg (1987) believes many couples simply do not make enough time for a meaningful sexual exchange and the nurturing of intimacy. She cited a clinical study of 30 middle-aged married couples and found that a major common quality among these couples was the minimal time or energy they gave to their marital and sexual relationships.

Career Issues

One of the major components of the life structure that Levinson et al. (1978) defined in early adulthood was the formation of a dream. For men, the dream more often related to his work or career. A dream formed in early adulthood is modified or given up in middle adulthood. It is during the 40s (midlife transition) when a man may become unhappy with his position as the result of measuring the aspirations and goals that were set up in young adulthood (the dream) against actual achievements of middle age. Brim (1976) stated that there is a pervading sense of great sadness in midlife men of unfulfilled dreams, and it is the resolution of this crisis that is crucial to Levinson's theory.

Drebing and Gooden (1991) reported on a study of sixty-four midlife men who filled out questionnaires examining whether they had a Dream, and whether they experienced or anticipated experiencing success or failure of that Dream. The results support the conclusion that whether a

man has a Dream, and the degree to which he experiences success in achieving it are significantly related to his mental health status during the midlife transition.

The midlife transition is also a period during which the man recognizes the disparity between what he has gained from living within a particular life pattern and what he now believes he wants out of life (Bozett, 1985). Levinson et al. (1978) stated that a man must deal with the disparity between what he is and what he has dreamed of becoming.

Because the middle-aged male has determined that there is a disparity between what he has reached and what he really wants, work and career issues become a major component of the transitional processes that occur during mid-life (Cohen, 1979). This disparity may result in the midlife male's self-assessment where he may begin to compare his peaks with others (Tamir, 1987). Looking at his options may result in changes or recommitment to the status quo. Tamir further stated that as a result of not reaching the top, a man in his transitional stage may search for a new identity through a new job, career, or life style.

Family System Changes

During midlife, significant family system changes occur, and Cohen (1976) believes much of the changes relate to roles that both men and women are called upon to fulfill. She further hypothesized that the more "masculine" male will have more difficulty adjusting to mid-life transitions, thereby adding to upheavals in the family system.

The traditional male role as described by most researchers is one that stresses achievement, power, and lack of emotional involvement (Cohen, 1979). However, Arnold and McKenry (1986) reported that scholars have long noted that a sex-role convergence takes place at mid-life wherein men move toward the passivity, sensuality, nurturance, and emotional expressiveness previously repressed in their instrumental "good provider" role. On the other hand, women

become more autonomous, aggressive, and achievement or career-oriented as their nurturing function nears completion. It is not uncommon for many middle-age fathers to be highly invested in their children and to be more vulnerable than mothers to the empty nest syndrome, wanting to keep the children home longer (Bozett, 1985).

Julian and McKenry (1989) reported that the current issue concerning the role of aggression in the lives of human beings is a salient one in the study of men's adult development. In a study designed to examine empirically a biological basis of aggression, it was found that testosterone levels of men at mid-life were negatively related to marital satisfaction, the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, and androgynous characteristics. Julian and McKenry (1989) stated that these findings are consistent with the psychosocial sex-role convergence theory, which indicates that such relationships and behaviors are critical to the well-being of men at midlife.

Medalie (1984) stated that both personal and marital satisfaction appear to rise to their highest levels as children leave home. Additionally, Brim (1976) stated that there is a good bit of solid research reporting that couples rate the post-parental period as one of the best in their marriage. According to Skolnick (1987), there is evidence that the quality of marriage will improve at the state of life when the demands of dependent children are reduced and greater time resources are available for maintaining the marriage relationship. This was in contrast to an earlier report that findings supported neither the corrosion hypothesis--that marriages inevitably decline in satisfaction over time--nor the U-shaped hypothesis--decline in marital satisfaction while children are in the home and improvement thereafter (Skolnick, 1981). Medalie (1984) stated that it is a minority that do find this period intolerable, a situation that can lead to divorce.

Bozett (1985) described this period as one during which there may be an alteration in the marital relationship. Changes in the marital relationship during middle age could come with the

realization of the couple that their energies as a couple have been focused totally on child-rearing, and not on the maintenance of a vital marital relationship (Cohen, 1979). Couple companionship, goals, sexuality, roles, and retirement may be issues that require discussion if not negotiation during this critical time (Bozett, 1985).

A Positive Way of Viewing Male Midlife

There is a growing realization that middle age for the male is not necessarily a crisis and can also be perceived as a beginning or a renewal of personal growth and positive change (Weg, 1987). Mayer (1978) stated that now there is a new way to look at strange things happening to mid-life men: not as symptoms of something wrong, but as signs of something right and normal and necessary. If dealt with courageously and wisely, the midlife crisis can be a glorious opportunity for setting new directions (Mayer, 1978).

Levinson et al. (1978) concluded that the mid-life crisis is a predictable stage of development that all men go through. Even though this period has its threats, it also offers opportunities for new personality growth and life changes never before possible. In fact, a person who denies that his life must change, for better or worse, is losing an opportunity for personal development (Levinson et al., 1978). Levinson further stated that "if conditions for development are reasonably favorable, and if impairments from the past are not too severe, middle adulthood can be an era of personal fulfillment and social contribution" (p. 27).

Midlife is a time of individuation, and to the extent that individuation occurs during midlife transition, a person can become more compassionate, more reflective and judicious, less tyrannized by inner conflicts and external demands, and more genuinely loving of oneself and others (Levinson, 1986). Neugarten (1968a) reported that older men are more receptive to affiliative and nurturant promptings. The quality of a male's love relationships may well improve

as he develops a greater capacity for intimacy and integrates more fully the tender, "feminine" aspects of his self (Levinson et al., 1978).

Conclusion

Both qualitative and quantitative research indicate the experience of a midlife crisis exists and that maladaptive behaviors occur at this time of life. Because of the complexity of the subject, it is difficult to identify specific behaviors as related to a crisis. However, according to Ciernia (1985a), there is ample evidence that this can be a disruptive time of life.

A "male mid-life crisis" will occur for some men if there are multiple, simultaneous demands for personality change (Brim, 1976). Yet, as a whole, Brim (1976) believes this period of time can be viewed as a time of transition from one comparatively steady state to another, and changes, even when they occur in crisis dimensions, may bring for many men more happiness than they had found in younger days. Bozett (1985) referred to this period as one of restabilization, an outcome of the midlife transition.

Van Hoose (1985) reported that midlife is a time of re-evaluation when men will attempt to determine whether they have succeeded or failed, moved forward, or stagnated. Some men will not like what they have become and will make major changes in their life. New questions and problems will emerge in midlife and new strategies for coping with them must be developed (Van Hoose, 1985). Whatever his life condition, every man in the early forties needs to sort things out, come to terms with the limitations, and consider the next steps in the journey (Levinson et al., 1978).

Perhaps the best way for a male to relate to a potentially critical time of life known as midlife is to learn to make the proper adjustments. The middle-aged male, observing some deterioration of his physical powers, should be able to turn away from valuing the strength and

power of the young male toward recognizing the value of the cognitive and problem-solving abilities of the middle-aged male (Cohen, 1979). Van Hoose (1985) suggested two possible adjustments for midlife males: (a) come to value wisdom over a youthful appearance and physical strength, and (b) instead of responding to a loss of sexual virility by seeking liaisons with younger women, understand what is happening, know this is a change and not the end of his sexual life, and adjust to it.

Unless our lives are hampered in some special way, most of us during our 40s and 50s become "senior members" in our own particular worlds, however grand or modest they may be (Levinson et al., 1978). Midlife can certainly represent a crucial time of transition, and the essence of a successful transition is to shift one's life interests and concerns to the development and achievements of the younger generation. This relates to Levinson's concept of generativity, and Bozett (1985) stated that generativity refers not only to investment in the future through one's children and creative achievements, but also to one's relationship to and caring about the next generation of adults.

Changes in family, work, and health, especially anticipated changes, do not necessarily have to be interpreted as losses by those who experience them. Though the life events of middle age may produce new stresses for the individual, they may also bring occasions to demonstrate an enriched sense of self and new capacities for coping with the complex problems of this period.

A Personal Note

To me, life is a growth process, and growth can only be made possible through change. Change is growth, and growth is change. Midlife is a significant period of change which simply gives us males an opportunity to find ways of adjusting and coping to just another phase of life.

As a result of this course, I have learned a little bit more about not only what is happening to me personally, but what is evidently happening in the lives of other men in their 40s and 50s. Hopefully, it will give me a better background in helping frustrated men, going through a critical time of life, through my practice as a counselor.

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