

Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

Mental Health Quick Notes

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Midlife Crisis

Ever look into the mirror only to find that you have gained weight around the middle and don't know how? Ever want to trade in the family van for a flashy new Mazda Miata? If so, you may be experiencing what approximately 70 million Americans currently grapple with today, midlife crisis. Midlife crisis is a process occurring between ages 40-60, give or take a few years. It is a "natural process" that was first described by Carl Jung. It was later elaborated on by Gail Sheehy in her book, New Passages. Sheehy refers to the stage as the "second adulthood" or another chance to become the person that you were meant to be. Sheehy also refers to this stage as the Deadline Decade, a time when an individual grasps that there is a finite amount of time to search for personal meaning and authenticity. Erik Erikson calls this phase a "crisis of generativity to be endured and resolved during this part of the life cycle".

Signs that you may be experiencing a midlife crisis:

- questioning the meaning of life as well as decisions made a long time ago
- Changes in sexual drive and performance
- confusion about who you are, or where your life is going
- belief that your life has been a failure
- Lifestyle changes
- Needing adventure and excitement
- Unwanted physical changes (weight gain, hair loss, etc.)

Men & Midlife Crisis

Midlife crisis for men and women are similar but differ in several ways. This stage in a man's life has been referred to as "male menopause" or Irritable Male Syndrome. Because men, in general, do not express feelings openly and often keep their emotions to themselves, undiagnosed depression and suicide rates for men actually increase as they age. A recent study indicated that 80% of all North American suicides are males and of the 80% a great number of these occur at midlife. Men report a loss of individual identity as they take on the role of son, father and husband. Seventy percent of men experiencing midlife crisis indicate that their biggest problems revolve around sex in their marriage.

Women & Midlife Crisis

Midlife crisis for women can be harder to identify. The identity of women in general is often tied to their relationship with their husband and children. However, in these changing times, women are no longer valued just for their reproductive capabilities. Women often feel the need to wear many hats, making their lives quite complicated. Due to the increased need to multi-task, three quarters of women aged 40-54 years state that their lives are "much too complicated" according to a recent article in *Time* magazine.

Midlife for women can be a time for growth and change in order to achieve greater levels of independence. An estimated two-thirds of divorces filed among people aged 40-70 are initiated by women. Women are twice as likely to be living alone as men. Middle-aged women of today also believe that they will stay healthier longer than previous generations. An article in *Time* magazine claims that "women are joining gyms at twice the rate of

their male peers" and women feel that menopause is in fact a very freeing time for them. While dream fulfillment has a tendency to dwindle for men aged 35 and older, women (who often put their dreams on hold during their child-bearing years) tend to strive toward unmet goals and desires. Thirty-six percent of women aged 50-64 reported that they had fulfilled a dream, as compared to 24% of younger women and 28% of their male peers according to *Time*. Finally, because of women's tendency to nurture and act as emotional gatekeepers, four out of five women over age 50 state that having a job helping others is important to them.

Ways to cope:

- If you are thinking of making changes, explore your reasons for the changes
- Try to discuss feelings, decisions, and desires with loved ones who often have a point of view other than yours
- If you want to make major decisions in your life, do the necessary research— look before you leap
- If you are feeling very dissatisfied with your life, talk with a therapist who can help you cope with this necessary phase of life as well as the reasons that distress you
- Find creative and healthy ways to be selfish and meet long time goals, dreams and desires. The payoff could be great!
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Contributed by: Sandra Wiley, MSS

Recommended Reading

- Sheehy, Gail (1995). *New Passages*. New York, Random House.
- Sheehy, Gail (1998). *Understanding Men's Passages: Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives*. New York, Random House.
- Gibb, Nancy (May 16, 2005). Midlife Crisis? Bring It On!, *Time*.

Staff of the Month



Sandra Wiley, MSS

Sandy is a licensed clinical social worker who works with individuals, couples, and families around such issues as depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders.



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Joni is the Accounts Manager for RSA. One of Joni's many jobs is to assist clients in determining their health insurance benefits when they are seeking treatment. When not at work, Joni is usually found with her family, in her garden or on her horse.

Development Crises of the Family

Families come in many configurations today but basically a family is a group of individuals bound by blood or relationship who live together long enough to develop patterns of interactions. Families, like individuals, experience normal phases in a life-span and, therefore, some predictable problems arise along with these phases. Below is a sketch of some of the more common crises of a family:

Phase 1: Mate selection: This is also known as the “falling in love” phase. Interestingly, most people select a mate based on proximity. Also, many people seem to be attracted to the opposite of themselves and to qualities of their own families. Problems occur in selecting a mate when one of the couple does not “fall in love” at the same point as the other. If the pursuer is not able to pull back sufficiently at the right time, the one pursued feels like they are losing themselves to the couple and they will retreat.

Phase 2: Courtship: This phase follows the intensity of falling in love. During this phase some of the romance may start to fade and this may concern some individuals in need of this type of attention and they may question their decision to move ahead. The couple also starts to negotiate together about other friendships, family ties, handling step-children, money and intimacy. Spoken and unspoken rules for the couple are invented at this time. Crisis occurs at this phase if one of the members of the couple breaks one of the rules.

Phase 3: The Joining of Two Families through Commitment: This phase marks the end of the romantic period and the beginning of the couple as part of a larger world. Now, the couple is not only connected together, but to step-children, in-laws, and ex-spouses. Often more is expected of the couple by their extending families than was when they were single. The couple is expected to make themselves into a distinct family, picking mutually agreed upon values and practices from their families of origin. They are expected to distance themselves from their extended families. Couples also evaluate friendships that they had prior to their commitment and decide which ones suit them as a couple. This pruning process for the new family can be very isolating and, for the less mature couples, can cause a turning away from each other through bickering and outside alliances.

Phase 4: Families with Infants: In this phase it is important for families to pull inward as they nurture their infants. This is a time of selflessness in the families' life and the couples are expected to grow up. The crisis in the marriage exists if one or both members become frightened of the expectations of parenting and passing on their deficits to the next generation. Some fear the loss of the other spouse to the child and their loss of status as the “child-like one” in the family. This can lead to increasing work hours, affairs, excessive playing of games, handing childcare responsibilities over to babysitters and relatives and even abuse by the intimidated spouse. Some partners can react to the change in the status of the marriage with depression. Usually, the depression is experienced by the care giving partner who is reacting to the excessive caretaking needs and the loss of support and companionship of the spouse.

Phase 5 Families with Small Children: This is a time when families start to turn outward as their children begin to move into the outside world. Raising children is a slow process, with the most normal children having several imperfections at a time. Anxious parents may see the normal but non-average child as flawed and create insecurity and rebellion in the child. Parental anxiety is usually the product of unresolved family dilemmas from their childhood. A crisis can occur in this phase if the family becomes too child-focused. The parents transfer their own dreams and desires to their children which shifts the focus and the power away from the couple and onto the children.

Phase 6: Families with Adolescents: This is a particularly conflictual time to parent due to the fact that most parents have conflictual memories of their own adolescence. But there is no greater need for family stability than during adolescence. Even though adolescents seem to only turn to their friends for advice, the family backdrop of unwavering support is critical for the adolescent to become independent. The adolescents' newfound begrudgery of their parents can create a crisis of uselessness in the parents. Parents can feel like they wasted all their sweat and tears on an ungrateful child. Some parents may then define the normal experimental acts and mistakes of this era as character deficits of their child, creating a great deal of dissention which may affect the child launching.

Phase 7: Launching Children: This phase is typified by a redefining of the children as young adults and, thus, necessitating parents and children interacting differently. If there are no other caretaking needs impacting the parents, such as caring for their parents or grandchildren, this is a time for couples to refocus on their relationship in a meaningful way. Depending on how the couple has fared through the child raising, this can be a time of independence and enjoyment or a time of realignment, stress and conflict. Young adults who feel positive in leaving their parents behind can launch with an eye to a future. Those who are concerned with the welfare of parents will leave with a worried backward glance. If the child is too concerned for the parents, they may return home to regulate the unease.

Phase 8: Couples in Retirement: The most dramatic turning point in the aging process for many is the process of retirement. Retirement, for most adjusted couples, can happen at the pinnacle of their wisdom and maturity bringing them the comfort and liberation from the pressures and ambitions of youth. Retirement, however, is fraught with danger because with it may come boredom, lack of stimulation, and depression. The couple becomes more interdependent but at the same time they may bicker a lot more as they are forced to spend more time together in many times, tighter quarters. Many couples will eventually relax into this phase while others may face a crisis as they negotiate the loss of meaning that their career provided and the confused roles that will occur as they split the duties at home.

Phase 9: Aging and Death of a Partner: Any couple who makes it beyond retirement has somewhat accepted the interdependency of their relationship for good or bad. At this point, the death of a partner signals the death of intimacy for some individuals. Beyond the loss of a life mate, the crisis also affects the grown children who may become the caretakers of the aging parents. The children may need to control the transportation, the family home, the finances and healthcare of the parents. The entire family feels the adjustment in the redistribution of duties but the aging person feels the loss of independence the most.

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