**Definition**: Midlife crisis from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

An emotional rather than a physical crisis that can occur in one’s late 40s or early 50s, especially among men. Its cause is the realization that life may be passing one by. The psychologist who coined the term in 1965, Elliott Jaques, referred to the typical age of crisis as 35, but this biblical mean hardly matches the popular conception of “midlife.”

**Summary Article: Midlife Crisis**
from *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science*

One of the most common expectations for the middle years of the life course is that there is an inevitable crisis, but research evidence in this regard is mixed (Lachman, 2004). Approximately 26% of the participants over age 40 in the national survey of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) reported having a midlife crisis. Most life crises, however, were reported to occur before age 40 or after age 50, thus raising questions as to whether a crisis is unique to midlife or to specific birth cohorts (Lachman, 2004).

In one of the earliest discussions of the midlife crisis, Jacques (1965) observed that the midlife crisis in his clinical patients was driven by their fears of impending death. More recent research has shown the usual sources of crises are life events such as illness, marital problems or divorce, job loss, or financial problems, which are not associated only with the midlife period, but occur regularly at other points in the lifespan (Lachman, 2004; Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004). Personality has been identified as a key factor predisposing some individuals to experience crises at transition points throughout the life course. For example, those who are more neurotic are more prone to have a midlife crisis as well as crises at other times in their lives (Lachman, 2004; Whitbourne & Willis, 2006; Willis & Martin, 2005).

Midlife is often a period of reflection and reevaluation, but crisis may be a misleading description of this review process. Even if life changes are made in midlife, they do not always involve a crisis; they may instead involve careful planning, decisions, and choices about new directions, and they may often lead to growth. In some cases, the process of reevaluation and review may be triggered by an unexpected or undesirable circumstance, such as the death of someone close or loss of a job. Traditionally, a life-review process has been associated with old age. Older adults, when faced with mortality or a sense that time is running out, engage in a reminiscence process, and the outcome may be adaptive (e.g., ego integrity) or may result in distress (e.g., despair), as suggested by Erik Erikson. The main purpose of a review at this late stage of life is to make sense of one’s life, to accept it for what it has been, and to move toward a graceful end of life (Neugarten & Datan, 1996).

A life review at midlife can also serve an adaptive function for mental health and positive growth that can have a long-term impact. Stewart and Vandewater (1999) examined the role of the midlife review, which they called the “midlife correction,” in relation to well-being and depression outcomes. They found that, in the process of self-reflection during midlife, using regret as a catalyst for productive change was associated with higher well-being in later life.

Instead of the term midlife crisis, some have used the concept of turning points or transitions to describe significant changes in the life trajectory. Such an experience or realization often leads one to
reinterpret the past and make changes for the future, as well as to modify the way one feels or thinks about life. Wethington et al. (2004) examined in what areas of life turning points occurred and whether they clustered in midlife. The most common turning points involved the work domain, usually a change in job or career. They were most likely to occur at midlife for men but earlier for women. Turning points or difficult transitions may also occur at other points in the lifespan, as suggested by the notion of a “quarter-life crisis” occurring for those in their mid-20s and early 30s as they struggle to find satisfaction in work and meaningful relationships.

It is likely that being in the middle of the lifespan holds special challenges and opportunities for reflection, advancement, or change, similar to being in the middle of the academic semester or a summer vacation (Lachman & James, 1997). Midlife may provide a critical training ground for aging, and it may offer a window on later life. At midlife we can get a glimpse of things to come while there is still time to do something about them. For example, those who suffer functional limitations and disability in midlife are headed for a rough old age unless they take action. The midlife period often involves demands in multiple domains of work, family, and personal health and well-being. There is a need to juggle and balance multiple spheres of life, at the same time as physical changes associated with aging are becoming more noticeable, which may be associated with increased stress. When we surveyed adults from age 25 to 75 about their most frequent problems, the most common problem reported by those in midlife was not being able to get everything done (Lachman, 2004). There is typically still much time left in the life course, but this realization that there are still goals to accomplish can lead to anxiety and pressure, especially if physical symptoms such as fatigue and pain are present.

Although the incidence of clinical depression peaks in midlife, there is emerging evidence that midlife is often a period of enhanced mastery and competence and that a crisis is not inevitable. Recent research has begun to identify the risk factors for poor mental health outcomes as well the protective factors that can enhance well-being in midlife. Classic views of midlife portray it as a period of turmoil and crisis (Neugarten & Datan, 1996), yet other more recent work has demonstrated consistently that midlife is a period of peak functioning, responsibility, and balance (Lachman, 2004). This is especially important, because the well-being of those in midlife has a widespread impact on those younger and older whom they care for and supervise in the family, workplace, and society at large. A focus on generativity, or the concern for others, is the key task that Erik Erikson identified as central to midlife adjustment (Neugarten and Datan, 1996).

In midlife, life goals shift from a focus on growth to an emphasis on maintenance of functioning and avoidance of losses and decline. It is not necessary to ruminate or dwell on the mistakes of the past or to make radical or drastic changes in one’s family or work life. Some in midlife are reflective and take stock of their lives, but others do not.

An adaptive midlife evaluation is aimed at making sense of one’s situation, making choices and plans for the present and future, and taking control over aging-related declines through preventive or compensatory behaviors. Changes may be external and objective or internal and subjective. Today, those in the 40–60 age range (i.e., the baby boomers) are the fastest growing segment of the population (Whitbourne & Willis, 2006). There is a burgeoning interest among scholars of the life course and clinicians in helping adults to navigate the middle years successfully. For those who experience a crisis, the emphasis is on how to cope and adjust without major disruptions to one’s work and family life. As we learn more about the protective factors for healthy adult development, the association of midlife with crisis may be replaced with midlife competence.
See also
Adulthood and Aging; Human Development; Identity Formation.

References

Suggested Readings

MARGIE E. LACHMAN
EILEEN M. KRANZ
Brandeis University

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