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## Men in midlife: A literature review

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## Men in midlife: A literature review

### Abstract

According to Newton (1983), midlife "is a time for appraisal and review, a time to assess possibilities for change, and create new choices that will form the basis for a good-enough life in middle adulthood (p. 448). Levinson (1978) describes midlife transition as being a bridge between early adulthood and middle adulthood, when men come to terms with their past and prepare for the future. He feels that everyone goes through transition periods in their lives at various life stages. For some, midlife is a time for crisis. Brim (1976) noted that this crisis is both rapid and substantial, resulting in a disruption of an individual's inner identity.

MEN IN MIDLIFE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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by  
Gary Wayne Cox  
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## INTRODUCTION

### Definition of Male Midlife Crisis

According to Newton (1983), midlife "is a time for appraisal and review, a time to assess possibilities for change, and create new choices that will form the basis for a good-enough life in middle adulthood" (p. 448). Levinson (1978) describes midlife transition as being a bridge between early adulthood and middle adulthood, when men come to terms with their past and prepare for the future. He feels that everyone goes through transition periods in their lives at various life stages. For some, midlife is a time for crisis. Brim (1976) noted that this crisis is both rapid and substantial, resulting in a disruption of an individual's inner identity.

According to Farrell and Rosenberg (1981) the recent interest in middle aged men is the result of the increasing life span of men in general and the decrease in children and family size. Our society has shifted its focus from child-centered toward adult-centered, with emphasis on middle age and its issues of physical changes, identity, and meaning of life. Also, as the women's movement progresses, men are becoming more self-conscious and self-examining concerning roles and traditional values. As a direct result both sexes are more aware of the development that can occur throughout an individual's life cycle.

It is generally accepted that the middle life time span for men ranges between ages 34 and 45 (Sagal and DeBlassie, 1981). Farrell and Rosenberg (1981) feel that it would be a mistake to tie the stages of adult development too closely to a time table because there are no predictable chronological events that define the transition from young adulthood to middle age. Levinson (1978) is more specific in pinpointing the midlife transition period for men as beginning at age 40 or 41 and lasting about five years. Based on his research, Levinson doubts that a true midlife transition can begin before the age of 38 or after the age of 43. Today, however, the average adult person is 45 years of age and the number of middle-aged individuals has increased 200%, indicating that the phenomenon of men dealing with midlife crisis will continue to impact our society (Conway, 1984).

Levinson (1980), in his study of 40 men in the midlife decade (ages 35 to 45), stated that during a midlife crisis period 80% of the subjects he studied had tremendous struggles with self and their external world, facing a moderate to severe time of crisis. "Every aspect of their lives comes into question, and they are horrified by much that is revealed. They are full of recriminations against themselves and others. They cannot go on as before, but need time to choose a new path or modify the old one" (Levinson, 1980, p. 247).

Because of the many upheavals involved in a midlife transition counselors need to be aware of the core issues and how to effectively deal with them. There are four major areas of conflict for men in midlife transition. One area is the realization of physical decline and mortality which may manifest itself in an abnormal fear and focus on the physical body. The second core issue, psychological changes, may be seen in feelings of exploitation, misunderstanding, and depression. Another central issue is personal relationships, and this is seen in marital conflicts, divorce, role reversals, jealousy toward children, extramarital affairs, and general confusion of roles and responsibilities. The fourth main issue is career conflicts which may be seen in career despair, conflicting aspirations, and potential career change as one looks for more meaningful work. By understanding the major concerns of men in midlife a counselor can effectively assist men in working through and dealing with the transition period without becoming sidetracked with its symptoms.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### Theoretical Constructs of Midlife

Medinger and Varghes (1981) reported from recent investigation that many adults experience regular, cyclical episodes of mental crises, regardless of the quality of their actual circumstances in life. Much of the stress of a midlife

transition period comes as a result of the struggle to reconcile old life systems with new ones. These stress episodes seem to proceed and motivate each new integration of differentiated aspects of life experiences which cannot be integrated with the individual's established system of beliefs and values. The safety of the old way will conflict with the appeal of the risky new direction in life. The authors feel the decisive factor in dealing with the stress lies within the individual's locus of control. Those individuals with an internal locus of control have greater resources with which to cope actively with stress, as they feel the outcome of a crisis depends on their own behavior. Those with an external locus of control and an undifferentiated self practice avoidance and reinforce the cycle of stagnation.

Levinson (1980) feels that every individual must work through at least five psycho-social periods in their development from ages 18 to 45. According to Newton (1983) these five stages are as follows:

1. Early Adult Transition (17-22 years)
2. Building A First Adult Life Structure (22-28 years)
3. The Age 30 Transition (28-33 years)
4. Building A Second Adult Life Structure (33-40 years)
5. The Midlife Transition (40-45 years)

Levinson (1978) cites four dichotomies in the fifth stage which are the main issues with which men in midlife must deal. In the first dichotomy, Young/Old, men deal with the discrepancy of sensing their age and feeling young while living in an in-between

stage. During the second dichotomy, Destruction/Creation, men experience the painful knowledge of their physical decline and inevitable mortality and the hurtfulness of relationships between self and others. They feel the strong desire to be more creative, nurturing, and valuing of others. In the third stage, Masculine/Feminine, men must come to terms with the masculine and feminine parts of themselves. In the final dichotomy, Attachment/Separateness, men must integrate their powerful need for attachment to others with their opposite but equally important need for separateness.

Dealing with these dichotomies is both an internal and external process, tied into our cultural and social institutions, as well as into the individual's personality. Levinson (1978) also reports that the natural state of an individual is to be in the process of becoming something different while remaining in many respects the same. Levinson believes each of the stages comes out of the previous one and leads to the next, and he believes that all the stages are necessary. Therefore, a key factor is helping the crisis individual to realize that it has not been smooth prior to the age of 40.

#### Areas of Influence

There are four major areas of influence affecting the male as he approaches middle age. They are the realization of physical

decline and mortality, psychological changes, personal relationships, and career influences.

#### Physical Decline and Mortality

We live in a competitive world that values productivity and youth and not quality of life (Conway, 1984). The typical male spends approximately one quarter of his life growing up and three quarters growing old, with the energy within the body gradually slowing down. As Conway (1984) presents the dilemma, "a young man lives through his body; an old man lives against it" (p. 24).

Moss (1979) presents the fact that testosterone will have no significant loss unless a specific disease occurs. However, Cohen (1979) and Rogers (1980) report that there is a gradual decline in both testosterone and cortisol, as well as the secretion of androgens, for men from about 30 years old and on. Accordingly, this has a declining effect on sexual activity as well as physical strength. There is also loss of both hair and teeth from 30 years on which causes increased awareness of the aging process.

Medinger and Varghes (1981) feel that a growing awareness of the parameter of our human existence causes men to view their lives in terms of the time they have left to live rather than the number of years since their birth. In like manner, as friends begin to die of heart attacks and the male experiences funerals of friends, the presence of life ending becomes apparent (Farrell and Rosenberg, 1981). The reality of death may be the catalyst that

triggers midlife, in that "men see themselves in a headlong race toward deterioration" (Merriam, 1980, p. 32). Also, their concerns over physical deterioration are confirmed by peers and family as well. As a result, men may begin more than ever to want to master the use of time and reorder their priorities.

### Psychological

Merriam (1980) captures the underlying thought of psychological influences in his statement, "Unlike an adolescent who is struggling to force an identity, a man in midlife wonders who he has become" (p. 40). Along with the realization of physical limitations comes the reality that the individual cannot accomplish in the span of a single life everything he had desired to do and that much will have to remain unfinished and unresolved. This is accompanied by a great sadness and the unconscious wish for immortality (Merriam, 1981; Newton, 1983).

The male in midlife crisis may feel he has attempted too little, has not stretched himself enough, not seized opportunities. He may, in fact, question whether it has been worth all he has given up and whether he wants to continue in the same direction with the years he has left (Conway, 1984). Mass media implies that only youth is both valuable and desirable. Therefore, the middle-aged man begins a search for self-esteem, wanting to be valued by others in a world that values youth (Conway, 1984).

There is a decreased feeling of being in control of the world, one's life course, time, self-behavior and values (Rogers, 1980). In addition, Rogers reports that the midlife male may need to believe that he is distinctive, unique, and that he counts for something special and that his life is improving.

Psychologically, men in midlife seem to be caught between adolescent children and aging parents, between valuing the aged for their wisdom and experience and a world that values only youth (Conway, 1984). Males in midlife experience the trapped feeling of being too radical for their parents and too reactionary for their kids. There may also be feelings of loneliness that stem from the lack of expression of feelings. As a result, the men are unaware that nearly all men in midlife share and experience the same trauma.

As men develop a growing awareness of aspects of their personality to which they have denied expression or have repressed in service of their roles as provider to their families, they may develop feelings of exploitation, misunderstanding, depression, anger, frustration, and rebellion (Conway, 1984). They may feel trapped as if they are living other peoples' goals and feel angry with others and themselves for allowing it to happen. There appears to be no sudden biological event that causes these emotional changes as compared to female menopause. However, male midlife crisis is accompanied by depression, anxiety,

irritability, self-pity and overall unhappiness with life. It is generally accepted that all men go through a positive or negative midlife time. Men who lack flexibility, such as the hard driving, success-oriented, future-oriented males have more negative midlife experiences (Conway, 1984).

#### Personal Relationships

Merriam (1981) describes middle aged men as being in the generation squeeze. Being in the middle of three generations and responsible for all three adds pressure. There exists pressure from expectations by the children and by his aging parents, as well as being responsible for himself and his spouse. He must emotionally and financially support more people during this time than at any other stage of life. Squeezed from both ends of the life span, the male may feel that he is caring for three generations, with seemingly no gratitude or relief, no credit, no help, and no immediate end in sight.

Along with being cultured to be strong, males are taught not to cry, feel pain or hurt, not to be frustrated, confused or disappointed with life. In some men, admitting a problem is to destroy the quality of the man within (Conway, 1984). All of this comes at a time in the male's life when his energy and stamina are beginning to decrease and he may be trying to reconcile the discrepancies between his life aspirations and achievements and their gap with reality.

Dependent parents may trigger the realization of the male's personal mortality and further dependence on his children, as well as the possibility of becoming a grandparent himself (Cohen, 1979). The needs of his parents may be in conflict with his own personal needs and goals, as well as creating some family conflict in the marriage.

Cohen (1979) and Moss (1979) both report that during the middle life period some psychological age changes take place for husbands and wives, almost a role reversal. Older men become more diffusely sensual, more sensitive to incidental pleasures and pains, less aggressive, more affiliated, more interested in love than conquest or power, and more present than future-oriented, more dependent and less concerned about career aspirations. At the same time women are aging in the reverse direction, becoming more independent, less sentimental, more domineering, aggressive, and achievement-oriented. Therefore, the wife grows away from providing nurturance and support of her husband and being his source of recognition, affection, and valuing him when he needs it the most.

This process takes place when children are aging to the point of leaving for college and/or starting families of their own, or entering the job market. As a father, the male in midlife crisis begins to realize his limited influence over his children and sense a loss of control and feelings of loss in general. In a

youth-oriented culture he may become jealous of his children's career opportunities, stamina, and sexual vigor.

All of these changes in personal and family relationships may be acting simultaneously with his sexual and physical decline period. Fearing the worst and afraid to tell anyone about it, the male in crisis may panic and become involved in an extramarital affair to restore his self-esteem. This is a very high risk time for divorce and remarriage. The man may marry a younger woman who will meet his nurturing needs and flatter his ego. Davidson (1979) and Moulton (1980) agree that a second marriage by a middle-aged man to a younger woman is often a tremendous strain on his earning capacity, physical energies, and human resources. Also, the threat of competitiveness from younger men for his attractive younger wife is always present.

#### Career

Conway (1984) feels that by midlife many men have been promoted in their work with greater responsibilities until they literally become incompetent. Many men realize that they are over-extended in their work, but because of the fear of a younger man taking over, they will continue to push beyond their limit. They then are released rather than moved back to levels of their competency.

During midlife, when a man begins to feel his physical limitations, he also begins to fear that never again will he do so

much, so well, in his career. This triggers an evaluation or reflection of his personal career development and a major internal change. He perceives the discrepancies between dreams and aspirations and the reality of his present and anticipated future in the job. The male in midlife then develops a state of despair and may adjust his career aspirations downward to fit reality (Brim, 1976).

Isaacson (1981) reported that 76% of the men who changed a high status career, did so to find more meaningful work. As men grow older the emphasis shifts from competition and achievement to satisfaction and fulfillment in relationship to their job.

## CONCLUSION

### Implications for Counselors

Conway (1981) describes the emotional upheaval which occurs during a midlife crisis period as being "like a rabbit in a trap with the options of waiting for the hunter to come to nab him or chewing off his own legs and escaping into life maimed. The hopelessness of the choices causes him to be intensely depressed, immobilized by fear, to distort reality, and react in irrational panic" (p. 22). Men in midlife transition have an internal emotional crisis going on in a society in which men are still being cultured to hide their thoughts and feelings for fear of being vulnerable, weak, and unmanly. It is this intense emotional

entrapment that necessitates counselor involvement in male midlife issues.

Men are often constrained by issues of power, intimacy and reduction of pain (Scher, 1981). However, their desire for control may be personally suffocating and restrictive. They are also conditioned to suppress emotions and feelings and not to nurture themselves. Men are reluctant clients and seek permission to feel, to be weak, to need, to be dependent, to demand, or to fail and will be appreciative at gaining permission (Scher, 1981). And yet because they feel compelled to work out their own difficulties they may be resentful that some one had the power to bestow it. Therefore, counselors must be aware of their own beliefs about men and their own desires about how men should behave if they are to successfully assist their clients in becoming less enmeshed in the values of the traditional male role (Cohen, 1979). The issues of genuineness, pride, commitment, embarrassment, feelings of being hurt and put upon are all very sensitive issues to men in midlife transition and must be handled with care by counselors.

It is the counselor's task to aid the individual without being a part of the system that restricts him, and to help him change both the external and internal demands of being different. Therefore, an effective counselor must be strong and aware of contemporary male plights as they allow men to explore their feelings and reactions by nurturing an awareness for emotional

introspection. Counselors must respect the client's own abilities and inabilities to develop positive personal relationships built upon trust. A counselor's goal should be to liberate men from the restraints of the male role so they can appreciate themselves and responsibly be and do what they wish. In effect, counselors help men care for themselves, develop self-esteem, and be free.

### Interventions

The interventions used with men in midlife will depend upon the main issues involved. If the problems are a result of a lack of knowledge concerning the normal physical and sexual changes of aging, education is then needed in these areas. If it is a socialization issue Cohen (1979) feels it is very important to understand an individual's male socialization values in order to effectively deal with them. If an individual has been socialized around the values of strength and control and is denying his emotional and nurturing needs, then a counselor should help him learn the value of cognitive problem-solving abilities. Both Cohen (1979) and Davidson (1979) cite the following challenges by Erikson which stress the blend of physical and intellectual powers and would be helpful in counseling men in midlife:

1. Valuing wisdom versus physical power.
2. Socializing versus sexualizing in human relationships.
3. Widening involvement outside immediate family.
4. Mental flexibility versus mental rigidity.

If the main issue is centered in the loss of youth and power, Merriam (1981) feels it would be beneficial for midlife men to assume the role of mentor to younger men. It allows the older to form a covert position of authority, while at the same time giving him a chance to vicariously relive young adulthood. This also provides a second chance to father and be a friend to a younger man.

For an individual lacking in behavioral responses, counselors need to aid in developing such responses. Brammer and Abrego (1981) believe that because midlife is a time of new experiences, individuals need to develop new behavioral responses in order to effectively work through the period. Therefore, if counselors can aid individuals in developing new behavior responses, the individuals will be able to work through this transition period much more successfully and rapidly.

Brammer and Abrego also believe that the following are integral for an individual working through transition:

1. Shock and immobilization.
2. Denial (dealing with minimization or denial and facing the truth).
3. Depression (blame and depreciating themselves through strong self-messages of inadequacy out of proportion to reality).
4. Letting go (experiencing the feeling, a cognitive experience of recommitting oneself to let go of resistance to change and to flow with the experience).
5. Testing options (exploring new options on a tentative basis).
6. Search for meaning (involves an active commitment to changing one's values, views, or behaviors).
7. Integration (renewal, reforming assumptions, changing values, risking new behaviors resulting in a new lifestyle, a

readjustment of behaviors, change in conditions, emerging into a normal course of living).

The effective counselor will adapt the intervention to the individual's main area of concern.

### Summary

We live in a society with a definite age prejudice toward youth. However, as we worship youth, older individuals seem to have nothing to live for, and younger individuals have no particular motivation to grow up. Men in middle life face multiple personality and role changes brought about by self and others. Some of these changes deal with throwing off the last illusion of great success, accepting children for what they are, burying parents and admitting immortality, recognizing a decline in sexual vigor, decline in interests, and decline in energies. These changes may occur in the relatively short period of 10 to 20 years. These changes depend upon many factors, such as biological, psychological, sociological, historical and economic variables. There is no concrete evidence that these changes are related since they may occur around the age of 40. There does not seem to be any logical progression of stages or patterns in personality changes, and one event may not trigger another. The degree of crisis has been correlated with sex role socialization (Cohen, 1979).

Cohen (1979) feels most men have been trained by socialization to be domineering, aggressive, logical, competitive, unemotional, confident, stoic and tough. Self-disclosure for men has been barred while independence and self-reliance have been encouraged. Due to difficulty in enacting these roles in later life because of physical changes, men may begin to question these traditional roles internalized in their youth. The reassessing of personal values, goals, and physical abilities may then create a great deal of internal conflict and stress. Cohen then hypothesized that more "masculine" males will have more difficulty adjusting to midlife transition. Sagal and DeBlasie (1981) seem to agree in that they feel that a strong, masculine socialization, or lack of it, may help explain why some men find coping with their aging relatively easy, while others find midlife extremely fragmenting.

One fact is certain; if men live long enough, they will reach middle age. Davidson (1979) feels the male need is knowing how to channel one's energies wisely rather than squandering the energy on greater consumption of goods, younger individuals, sex, or whatever other outlets are available. In time, the growing pains of middle age will pass, much like those of youth, and once again men will develop a comparatively steady and happy stage of life, even after this crisis period in life has occurred (Wortley and Amatea, 1982).

It is of major importance for counselors to understand their own internalized perceptions of the male role. The counselor can then become a model, instructor, and guide in helping men in midlife to overcome restrictions created by male socialization. It is the responsibility of counselors to explore with their clients the ramifications of changes and then help them arrive at a workable approach to their worlds, and to assist men in meeting new demands and conditions in the reorganization of thoughts, values and behaviors by modeling androgenous behaviors (Scher, 1981).

It is evident in reviewing the literature that much of the "crisis" in midlife transition for men ties directly into male socialization and male roles. By helping men to learn to express and experience emotional flexibility the counselor can help in resolving the internal conflicts of men in midlife.

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