

Male Midlife Development

Jack H. Medalie, MD, MPH
Cleveland, Ohio

Clinical experience and several long-term studies have shown that fundamental changes in attitude and behavior continue to occur throughout adult life. An understanding of development during middle age helps put into perspective the mystifying and unusual behavior shown by a minority of middle-aged adults. Levinson delineates alternating phases of structure-building periods (six to eight years) with transitional upheavals of four to five years' duration. The latter includes one in the early 40s and again in the 50s. Vaillant emphasizes a career consolidation stage between Erikson's young adulthood (intimacy) and the generativity stage of the 50s. This consolidation stage corresponds in many ways to Levinson's transitional stage of the 40s. Vaillant also makes the point that maturity in midlife is reflected by the changes in the use of more mature adaptive mechanisms (corresponding somewhat to Hamburg's coping behavior) as the adult moves toward the 60s. Development tasks during middle age include adjusting to bodily changes; achieving career goals; readjusting to the marital dyad, adult children, and aging parents; and planning for security in old age.

Middle age may be a pleasant and satisfying stage of life, although often it is beset by recurrent upheavals. Stories abound of middle-aged escapades such as the well-respected, 43-year-old minister who abandoned his church, his congregation, his wife and children, and left town in a sports car with a 23-year-old stripteaser. Dressed

like hippies, they roamed the country for a few years, then separated, and he returned to his hometown to put his life back together. Is this common? Is this unusual? Why does it occur? This paper will consider middle age in some detail to try to understand events of this stage.

From the Department of Family Medicine, School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Medalie is Dorothy Jones Weatherhead Professor and Chairman of Family Medicine. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Jack H. Medalie, Department of Family Medicine, School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, 2119 Abington Road, Cleveland, OH 44106.

Definitions

Midlife

Definitions of midlife are many and various. Midlife involves a stage of mind, an awareness

that the peak years of life are passing.¹

Midlife is a period of stock taking when one's expectations, hopes, and wishes are balanced against reality.

Midlife is the period lasting from after the children leave home until retirement.²

Midlife is from the age of 40 to 65 years; some authors say it starts at 35 years.

Midlife is a change in time perspective—one no longer calculates the time since birth, but rather the time left to live.³

Transitions

During the course of the life cycle, each person passes through a number of expected and known stages or phases, eg, beginning school, adolescence, graduation from school, starting work, marriage or living together, parenthood, retirement. These are developmental or expected transitions.

There are, however, unexpected events or changes, such as severe injuries, accidents, death of a close family member (spouse, parent, or child), sudden acute or severe illness such as a myocardial infarction, failure at work or school, or a divorce. These are unexpected transitions and often become crises when the usual coping patterns are inadequate to deal with the situation. Sometimes an expected transition that occurs during a time other than the usual age or time range can also be traumatic, eg, puberty at 23 years, or a first pregnancy at 13 years or at 42 years.³

Models of Adult Development

In 1950 Erikson⁴ published *Childhood and Society*, in which he outlined a model of development he called the eight stages of man. He described man's ego development from birth to death, building on psychoanalytic theory, but adding the subtle influence of the sociocultural environment. This model rapidly became the standard against which every developmental subject was com-

pared. Infant and childhood development has been carefully studied for many decades, but it is only in the last few years that publications by Levinson et al,⁵ Gould,⁶ and Vaillant⁷ have appeared reporting on long-term studies of adult development. This article will briefly describe the results and theories from a few of these studies as they reflect on development during middle age.

Levinson and his colleagues⁵ at Yale studied for five years (1968 to 1973) a sample of 40 American-born men aged between 35 and 45 years. Despite the relatively small sample, this intensive study resulted in some interesting findings and concepts. The foundation of their theory of development is the concept of individual life structure that evolves through a sequence of alternating periods. Relatively stable structure-building periods of six to eight years are interspersed with transitional structure-changing periods of four to five years. During the transition periods, 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. These periods are often marked by vast upheavals, as seen in the early 40s (midlife transition) and again in the 50s (50s transition) (Table 1). 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. Some of these changes are destructive to the person and his family, but generally these upheavals, like those of adolescence, are part of adult development.

The following major components of the life structure Levinson defined develop in each successive adult phase:

Forming and modifying a dream. A man forms a dream about himself in early adulthood that is modified or given up in middle adulthood, leading each man toward his own balance of stability and change.

Forming and modifying an occupation. Between the ages of 17 years and the early 30s, most men enter an occupation. Some stay in the same occupation all their lives, but more examine it again in their 30s before concluding that this should be their career. During the 40s (midlife transition) a man may become unhappy with his position and begin to complain about his income and look at possibilities of change in work location, and he may become a disruptive force to those around

Table 1. Models of Adult Developmental Periods

"Traditional"	Erikson	Vaillant*	Levinson*	Age (yr)
Puberty and adolescence	Identity vs role diffusion	(Defense mechanisms)	Early adult transition	20
Young adulthood	Intimacy vs isolation	Identity vs isolation (career choice)	Entering the adult world Age 30 transition	30
Adulthood	Generativity vs stagnation	Career consolidation	Settling down Midlife transition	40
		Generativity vs stagnation	Entering middle adulthood Age 50 transition	50
Maturity (old age)	Integrity vs despair	Integrity vs despair	Culmination of middle adulthood Late adult transition (Late adulthood)	60 70
*Studied men only				

him. He feels he has not progressed satisfactorily, and no one is helping him. In the early 50s transition he weighs what he wanted to do against what he has done because he feels this may be the last time he can actively do something about it. Is he a success or a failure? Should he stay in his same position or move? Often he feels he should move, but the position of his children, wife, or parents makes that venture too risky, so he stays on, frustrated and angry for a few years. Although most men go through this process, it is only a minority who experience an extreme upheaval sufficient to cause a crisis for themselves and their families.

Love-marriage-family formation. During adulthood there is a gradual integration of sexuality and affection. Family relationships require continuing developmental work. With the nature of society changing drastically as a result of technological advances and rapid change in cultural values, it is surprising that most people remain married, or remarry, and achieve a relatively stable family life. Gradually a man achieves a better balance between his work and his family and becomes in-

creasingly a mentor to his children as well as becoming more supportive of his wife's needs for accomplishment outside the home.

Forming mentoring relationships. Relationship to a mentor, and later becoming a mentor, is a very important aspect of adult development that has not received sufficient attention. A mentor acts as guide, teacher, and sponsor. He has skill, knowledge, virtue, and accomplishment that a young man hopes someday to acquire and surpass. The relationship between mentor and young man is a nonsexual love relationship, and like any love relationship, it rarely runs smoothly. During their early 40s many men reach a stage at which they no longer need their mentors; ending this relationship can be painful and lead to intense feelings. Mentoring relationships, unfortunately, seem to be the exception rather than the rule, and the middle-aged adult who does not experience the satisfaction of being mentor misses a great deal. One wonders to what extent this kind of relationship is part of the process that Erikson⁴ calls generativity. It might be mentioned that for women who are

moving up the occupational ladder, there is often no role model, and worse, no mentor to help them. Such women, in turn, may find it difficult to be a mentor to others, particularly to one of the opposite sex because most mentor relationships involve sex-laden values.

Forming close friendships. Deep friendships formed in early life or adulthood often last throughout one's life. Middle-aged men form numerous superficial relationships and often have a wide network of acquaintances. Levinson makes the tentative generalization that close friendships with men or women are rarely experienced by American men. If this is true, it is an unfortunate deprivation.

Increasing individuation. Changing his relationship with himself and the outside world is also a task of a man in middle adulthood when, during transitional periods, he has the task of reintegrating each polarity: young-old, masculine-feminine, destruction-creation, and attachment-separation. In middle adulthood he tends to move to the right of each polarity, that is, move more to old, to feminine, etc.

A second study of adult development, again involving men only, is the fascinating Grant study, begun in Boston in 1937, which investigated 95 healthy men beginning in their teenage years and continuing for 35 years. Vaillant⁷ joined the study in 1967 and reported some of the findings in 1977. Among the interesting and important findings, three stand out.

Between Erikson's stages of intimacy in young adulthood and generativity of the 50s, Vaillant names an intermediate stage, career consolidation (Table 1). During this period, one important inner change is the acquisition, assimilation, and finally casting aside of nonparental role models or mentors. (The absence of these role models and mentors for women often impedes their career consolidation.) Eventually, most Grant study men outgrew the crassness and the narrowness of career consolidation.

Between 40 and 50 years of age, men leave the compulsive, unreflective busywork of their occupational apprenticeships and once more become explorers of the world within. The turmoil of middle age exerts an effect on the conformity of the 30s similar to the effect of adolescence on the preadolescent period. The midlife crisis of radical change does occur but is rare in community sam-

ples, ie, crisis is the exception, not the rule. The 50s are a quieter time than the 40s. Important life issues of the 50s are flagging sexual prowess and "complaining" joints; deterioration, not death, is the enemy. With advancing age, sexual differentiation becomes less pronounced as women become more masculine and dominant while their voices deepen and facial features sharpen. In a complementary way, men become more feminine and less dominant and their faces soften and breasts enlarge.

Another important point Vaillant emphasizes is distinguishing ego development from biological (physical maturation), cognitive or intellectual, and psychosocial development. He further states that ego development is related to the maturation and evolution of mature defenses, and illustrates that adaptive mechanisms change throughout the life cycle. Maturing into the generative adulthood stage, a person uses progressively more mature defense mechanisms and fewer neurotic or immature ones. In other words, mental health, or an integrated mature personality, is reflected, to a large extent, by the type of adaptive styles used. This point is very important, and Table 2 shows the 18 coping mechanisms that Vaillant discusses.

In the Grant study, the evolution of mature defenses seemed surprisingly independent of social and genetic good fortune; that is, the human ego grows in adversity as well as prosperity. Later in the book, however, Vaillant states that social supports (belonging to a stable family, a church, or a tennis club) were strongly correlated with mature defenses.⁷ Vaillant's last point, unlike Levinson's, is that the age at which a given stage is mastered varies enormously. Results similar to those in the Grant study were obtained in a long-term study of 392 men from high-crime, inner-city neighborhoods who were originally examined during their junior high school years in the 1940s and reinterviewed at the ages of 25, 32, and 47 years,⁸ suggesting that the validity of Vaillant's conclusions cuts across socioeconomic classes.

Developmental Tasks of Middle Age

The major developmental tasks of middle age are listed in Table 3.

Mature	Neurotic	Immature	Psychotic
(Common in healthy adults)	(Common in everyone)	(Common in severe depression, personality disorder, and adolescence)	(Common in psychosis, dreams, and childhood)
Sublimation	Intellectualization		
Altruism	Repression		
Suppression	Reaction formation	Fantasy	Denial of external reality
Anticipation	Displacement	Projection	Distortion
Humor	Dissociation	Hypochondriasis	Delusional projection
		Passive-aggressive behavior	
		Acting out	
From Vaillant ⁶			

Adjusting to bodily changes
Achieving career goals, satisfactory income, and standard of living
Readjusting to the marital dyad
Leisure-time activities
Relationships with children and parents
Grandparenting
Security in retirement, old age, and widowhood
Adequate medical coverage
Social and civic activities

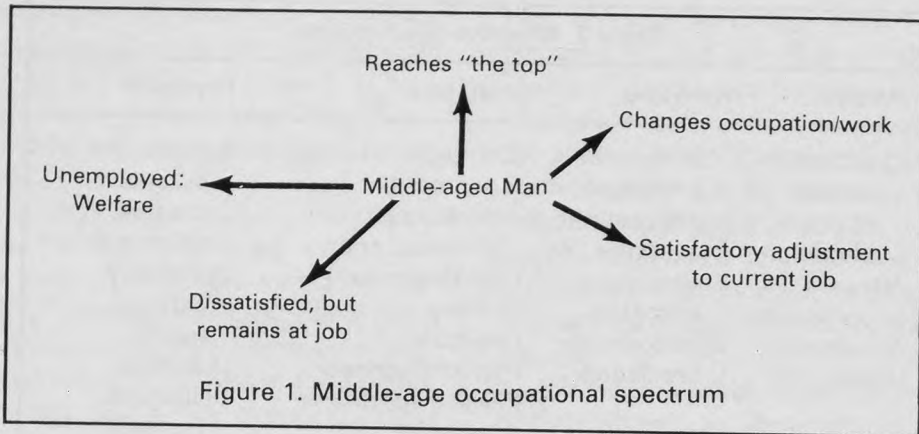
Male	Female
Erection takes longer	Most inhibitions overcome
Orgasm slower in coming	Orgasm is more regular but may be less forceful
Ejaculation delayed and less forceful	Libido varies greatly
Libido varies greatly	

Adjusting to Bodily Changes

Coming to terms with one's bodily changes as reflected by aging and deterioration creates a problem accentuated by the high value American culture places on youth and beauty. The changes include a gradual decline in strength, graying of hair, baldness, skin wrinkling, change in distribution of fat and muscle (middle-age spread), reduction in response speed, changes in joints (more arthritic complaints), slight decrease in hearing, change in visual acuity, decreased caloric intake, less sleep

during any 24-hour period, increased sensitivity to drugs, urinary capacity changes necessitating night rising, changes in such biological parameters as blood pressure and glucose,⁹ and changes in sexual physiology.

Sexually, in both men and women, there is a diminution in size and increase in firmness of genital organs, eg, ovaries, testes, and uterus (Table 4). Secretion of sex hormones gradually decreases. The ability to have satisfying sexual intercourse should not decrease with aging, but unfortunately as the result of fears of inadequacy,



anxiety, and other reasons related to this stage of adult development, approximately 20 percent of men experience impotence and 10 percent or more or women experience nonorgasmic frigidity by the age of 65 years. Some estimate that at least one fourth of couples have sexual problems or dissatisfaction at retirement. Sometimes these sexual fears lead to such reactions as men dating women who are in their teens or early 20s. In so doing, they often destroy their family life, displaying what Vaillant would designate as immature, nonetheless human, coping mechanisms.

Achieving Career Goals, Satisfactory Income, and Standard of Living

Society expects that by middle age one should be fairly well off financially, have a pleasant home, and be able, when necessary, to give financial aid to children and parents. These goals, plus personal ambitions and dreams, make the drive toward such achievement very important. At times, especially during depression and unemployment, the drive toward such goals is not only stressful but also unsuccessful. Hundreds of adults today have seen their dreams as well as their possessions and savings vanish in the wake of current economic situations. Even with employment, conflicts related to jobs and careers reach their peak between 40 and 50 years of age. Blue-collar workers often realize that their upward mobility is limited to seniority pay increases, while professionals are

often at the threshold of reaching their highest achievement in status, skill, and power. Those who do not make it (ie, the second-level professionals and managers) are often susceptible to stress-related disorders such as heart attacks, hypertension, and ulcers. As a result of "not reaching the top," many adults in their transitional stages search for a new identity through a new job, career, or life style (Figure 1).

Readjusting to the Marital Dyad

As the children leave home, there is a decreased investment in parenting, and there comes a psychological realignment to living in a house with only a spouse. The vast majority of people adjust to this very well, judging by studies of parents done two years after the last child left home. Both personal and marital satisfaction appear to rise to their highest levels. A minority, however, do find this period intolerable, a situation that can lead to divorce. The couple now must spend more time together in mutually satisfying activities as well as allowing for and supporting each other's independent pursuits and interests, including those associated with leisure-time activities and hobbies. For groups that live as extended families or as part of networks of kin relationships, as in many rural or urban lower socioeconomic groups, there is never an empty-nest stage, so the readjustment to a marital dyad may not be a distinct stage in their life cycle.

Relationships With Children and Parents

During middle age there is a continuous modification of roles and status relating to the couple's children and parents in a three- or even four-generation family system. The helpful, protective parent of young children becomes a mentoring but hassled parent of teenagers, followed by a period of being a senior colleague to young, adult children. Finally comes the adjustment to increased dependence on their now middle-aged offspring. The middle-aged adult then is forced to adjust to his teenage and adult children while dealing with his own aged parents and adjusting to a renewed relationship of living alone with his spouse. Strange as it may seem, most adults traverse this stage without severe upheavals or crises.

Grandparenting

Usually a delightful period in the life cycle, grandparenting provides a great deal of the pleasure of raising infants and children without the daily hassles. However, some grandparents, such as parents of teenage single mothers, have a great deal of responsibility and actually raise their grandchildren for the first few years while their daughters finish school or earn a living.

Security in Retirement, Old Age, and Widowhood

Planning for security in old age through pension funds, annuities, life insurance, investments, and so on, is vital for all people in their 50s and 60s. As part of this planning they must make sure that there is and will be adequate medical coverage in case of serious illness and hospitalization.

Social and Civic Activities

With lessened responsibility for children and increased leisure time, many middle-aged and older people turn to more active participation in social, political, and civic activities. Unless an issue such as nuclear disarmament attracts young

activists, the majority of people at any civic gathering probably will be middle-aged or older. Such activities are important in that they extend the social-support network of the adults, leading in most cases to increased personal satisfaction and improved health.

Summary

The adage that the basic patterns of behavior are essentially fixed by early age, with only minor subsequent modifications, is not valid. Fundamental changes in behavior occur during adult life,¹⁰ and systematic in-depth studies of male adults have brought a new understanding of the commonly "mystifying" behavioral changes in "normal" adults.

The alternating periods of transition and structure building (Levinson), the career-consolidation stage (Vaillant), the maturing use of adaptive mechanisms (Vaillant), and the coping behavior (Hamburg) as the middle-aged man moves into the generativity phase (Erikson) have important implications for the personal and professional lives of many family physicians.

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