

Middle Adulthood: Psychosocial Development

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General Information

Middle adulthood usually is characterized by:

- Most authority/power
- Highest income
- Most responsibility of lifetime

Also true that roles are less constricting than before

Potentially Troubling Changes

- Recognition of growing old
 - Death of close relative from next older generation, or friend/colleague just a few years older
 - For parents, adjustment to children growing older
 - May reach limits of vocational potential
 - Questions regarding decisions about generativity
- Midlife Crisis?

- *Midlife crisis*—a period of unusual anxiety, radical reexamination, and sudden transformation widely associated with middle age, but probably more related to developmental history than to chronological age

Middle Adulthood: Psychosocial Development

Personality Throughout Adulthood

- Personality is a major source of continuity
 - provides coherence and identity

In other words, people seek, interpret and react to life events in ways that reflect their distinctive traits, and these remain stable throughout adulthood, *even in the face of sometimes dramatic changes in peoples' lives.*

- There are five basic **traits** that characterize personality and that become stable by midlife.

Stable Traits :The Big Five

- *Extroversion* = outgoing, assertive, and active
 - *Agreeableness* = kind and helpful
 - *Conscientiousness* = organized, deliberate, and conforming
 - *Neuroticism* = anxious, moody, and self-punishing
 - *Openness* = imaginative, curious, artistic, and willing to have new experiences
- (It is also true that as people grow older, they tend to become a little *less* neurotic and open, and a little *more* agreeable and conscientious)

- Traits determined by
 - genes
 - culture
 - experiences during early childhood
 - experiences and choices made during adolescence and early adulthood
- **Ecological niche** = the specific lifestyle and social contexts adults settle into that are compatible with their personality needs and interests. In other words, *people make choices that fit their personality.*

- *Gender convergence*—a tendency for men and women to become more similar as they move through middle age
 - *Gender crossover*—the idea that each sex takes on the other sex’s roles and traits in later life.
- In general, men become more nurturant, considerate and tender (less “masculine”) and women become more assertive and self-confident (less “feminine”)

Family Relationships in Midlife

- Family is most important support system
 - If one’s own family is not doing that job, “fictive kin” may be found
 - treated as family by this group
- #### Partners
- Having an intimate relationship is a source of happiness, comfort, and self-respect
 - Achieved through marriage for 70 percent of middle-aged Americans
 - For some divorced, widowed, or never-married middle-aged adults, intimacy may be achieved by cohabitation (~5%)
 - Friendships also are important to single adults

Marriage

- During middle adulthood, couples often regain some of the closeness of early marriage
 - less stress from kids
 - higher incomes
 - more time together
- In general, marital relationships are likely to get better over time (with every year of marriage, divorce becomes less likely)

Divorce

- after years of marriage, divorce has more impact
 - reduces income, weakens family ties when long-terms social bonds especially needed
- Most divorced remarry within 5 years
- Second marriages end in divorce more often than first marriages do

Aging Parents

- Relationships with parents improve with time as middle-aged adults develop a more balanced view of this relationship (forgiveness/admission of mistakes by both sides are relevant)

Siblings

- Siblings often become closer to each other in the second half of life than in early adulthood
- They help one another with problems with teenage children, stressful marriages, and family contacts

Adult Children

- Relationships improve with maturity of “children”
- Seven-nation survey: 75 percent of middle-aged parents communicated with adult children several times a week

The Myth of the Sandwich Generation

- *Sandwich generation*—generation of middle-aged people who are supposedly “squeezed” by the needs of the younger and older generations
 - Some do feel pressured, but most are not burdened by such obligations
 - they enjoy filling needs or—
 - may choose to take on some (or no) responsibilities
 - Most choose *not* to provide financial or caregiving help to older generation
 - one study shows less than 20 percent provided help of any kind