

Women's coping strategies and family assistance during the midlife transition

Dr.Hema Khanna

Assoc. Prof., Department of Psychology, Bareilly College, Bareilly(UP)

Abstract

In women's lives, midlife—the time between younger and elder adulthood—has been characterized as a time of change. Women between the ages of 40 and 65 have been the focus of midlife research because they often face a variety of social, psychological, and biological difficulties, including the menopausal transition. Researchers have documented a wide range of stressful events, such as health troubles, family issues, work-related problems, funerals, unfulfilled goals, and financial concerns, but none have pinpointed the most prominent life events that midlife women encounter. Understanding the significance of the events that midlife women consider to be the most difficult was the aim of this study. The Women's Health Center, a long-term study that lasted up to 20 years, enrolled participants. After 15 years of participation in the research, women's most difficult life events were identified using summative content analysis, which combined latent and manifest analytic techniques. "Since you have been in our study (since 2003), what has been the most challenging part of life for you?" was the question that 81 women answered. Changing family ties, rediscovering oneself, rebalancing work and personal life, obtaining sufficient finances, and managing several co-occurring stresses were the most difficult parts of midlife, according to women. Multiple co-occurring stresses, divorce or ending a relationship, personal health issues, and parent death were the most mentioned concerns within these themes. Menopause was cited by few women as the hardest part of their life. In the middle of several co-occurring stressors, women found themselves trying to find balance while dealing with losses and changes, sometimes in a setting with few supports. Menopause was seldom discussed. To properly offer midlife women with tailored health care, future study is required to identify the difficulties faced by more varied populations of women and to get a better knowledge of the dynamics among many co-occurring stressors.

Keywords: Midlife women, Parenting, Challenges, Multiple co-occurring stressors, Health concerns

I. Introduction

In women's lives, midlife—the time between younger and elder adulthood—has been characterized as a time of change. Women between the ages of 40 and 65, who frequently go through several social, psychological, and biological changes, have been the subject of studies on midlife. According to Smith-DiJulio et al. (2008), they include the biological transition of menopause, developmental changes associated with the aging/emerging self, and situational transitions like divorce, taking on parental caregiving duties, or starting a family. Participants in Woods and Mitchell's (1997) study on the definition of midlife reported a wide range of stressful experiences, including health issues, family issues, work-related problems, deaths, unfulfilled goals, and financial worries.

The frequency with which women reported health issues was comparable to that of their parents. For these ladies, death was also a frequent occurrence. Adolescent children, domestic abuse, divorce or separation from a spouse, and relationship breakups were among the family's issues. Workplace disagreements, downsizing, and trouble getting a job were among the issues at work. These middle-aged women also expressed dissatisfaction with achieving their goals, such as not being able to finish a course of study or not having enough personal time while working. They also faced financial strains including not being able to buy necessities or pay a child's college fees. Throughout the course of the study, the participants also recorded their felt stress levels in a health diary (Woods et al., 2009).

Employment, a history of sexual abuse, depression, a negative assessment of age changes, and lower reported health were all substantially correlated with higher felt stress levels. The menopausal transition itself was unrelated to felt stress, even though symptoms including hot flashes, insomnia, trouble focusing, and depression were linked to higher levels of experienced stress. Significantly reduced levels of felt stress were linked to improvements in role load, social support, and economic sufficiency. It was unclear which stressors were most important to SMWHS participants, even though they assessed their stress levels over a long period of time and reported stressful occurrences during midlife. Asking midlife women about the difficulties they encounter is one way to learn about the experiences that are most important to them.

"Challenges" are situations that test one's strength, skill, or ability and call for a lot of mental or physical effort and perseverance. A stressor, on the other hand, is a stimulus or danger that puts actual or

perceived demands on a person's body, emotions, intellect, or spirit. In this study, the term "challenge" is interwoven with courage and strength, providing for the potential that not all obstacles would be seen negatively or as unpleasant. The terms "challenge" and "stressor," as well as "challenging" and "stressful," were interchangeable in this study because of the original survey instrument's design.

According to recent research, women have experienced menopausal symptoms like forgetfulness or trouble concentrating (cognitive function), mood swings, and difficulty sleeping (Woods et al., 2003), as well as difficulties brought on by racism like disparaging comments and discriminatory acts like sexual harassment (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2008). Managing many duties due to women's multiple roles is an often-mentioned midlife difficulty. Many women in their midlife have been married or in a relationship, have previously had children (some are young, others are going for work or education), have their own employment, run their households with or without aid, and take care of their elderly parents.

In a study of stressors reported by 299 women between the ages of 18 and 66, Kenny (2000) discovered that midlife women had more stressors than younger or older women. They also identified roles involving work, family, and eldercare as sources of stress, but they did not specify which of these sources was most prominent. Some women have the experience of ending a long-term relationship in their midlife. Women may suffer from a much lower household income in addition to emotional harm. Compared to younger divorced women, midlife women are more likely to feel lonely and distressed after a divorce (Sakraida, 2005). Midlife women start to have health issues of their own, including heart issues (Stevens and Thomas, 2012) and trouble sleeping (Hall et al., 2014). Recent research indicates that women's stressful experiences may be linked to some of these health issues. An 18-item version of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview Life Events Scale (PERI), which assessed eight areas—school, work, romantic relationships, children, family, criminal and legal matters, finances, and health—was used by researchers for the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN) sleep study to examine extremely stressful life events. Compared to women with low to moderate chronic stress profiles, those with high chronic stress levels reported insomnia, awakening after sleep onset (WASO), and worse subjective sleep quality (Hall et al., 2014). According to McEwen (2003), allostatic load is defined as the buildup of stress over time that impacts health and causes preclinical symptoms of illness. Allostasis, which is adaptive in the short term (McEwen, 2007) but can return to chronic stress in the long run (allostatic load), is the capacity to attain stability and sustain homeostasis during changing situations by physiological or behavioral mechanisms. Certain everyday occurrences can lead to long-term stress, which causes "wear and tear" on a woman's body and allostatic load (McEwen, 1998). Epinephrine and/or cortisol mediate physiological reactions to stress, which raise blood pressure and heart rate. Atherosclerosis, which raises the risk of myocardial infarction and stroke, can arise from persistent increase of these responses over time (McEwen, 2007).

Therefore, long-term exposure to stressors or difficulties may lead to health issues and allostatic load. Which life events are the most distressing for midlife women? These are some of the unresolved concerns regarding their experiences with stress. For women in their midlife, which of these life events is the most difficult? Although research on midlife women has shown a variety of stressors, the effects of stressful life events and perceived stress on symptoms, subclinical changes, and diagnosed diseases like cardiovascular disease, no studies have yet identified the most significant obstacles for midlife women. The goal of this study was to determine which situations midlife women found most difficult when they thought back on more than ten years of their lives.

II. Methods

Sample

The 1050 Health Questionnaire was used to collect data from eligible research participants (N = 81), especially responding to the following question: "Since you have been in our study, what has been the most challenging part of life for you?" Midlife women with a mean age of 38.3 years (SD 3.0 years) at enrollment in the parent study were eligible for inclusion in the current study; they were around 53–54 years old, had an education of 16.6 years (SD 2.7 years), and had a mean household income of 30,000 Rs (SD 14,782). The majority (86%) had jobs. The study's eligible women reported being widowed (1.2%), divorced or separated (16.7%), married or partnered (76.2%), and never married or partnered (6%).

Of the eligible women, parents made up the majority (67%). Table 1 shows that family income, work status, and marital status were similar for women whose data were included in the current analysis compared to those who were not. Age, years of education, and race/ethnicity all showed significant differences; women in the present research were younger, had more years of education, and were less likely to be parents.

Table 1- Sample Features for Eligible and Ineligible Women in the Challenges of Midlife Women in India at the Beginning of the Study (2003–2024)

Characteristic	Eligible N = 81	Ineligible N = 319	p value ^a
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Age	38.3 (3.0)	41.2 (4.7)	<.0001
Years of Education	16.4 (2.6)	15.8 (2.7)	<.0017
Gross Family Income	35,000 (15,782)	30,000 (14,258)	= .1210
Characteristic	% (N)	% (N)	p value ^b
Currently Employed	85%	86.3%	= 0.9428
Marital status % (N)			
Never married/partnered	6% (5)	7.1(30)	=0 .7211
Married/partnered	76.2% (64)	68.0% (224)	=0.1028
Divorced /separated	16.7% (14)	23.8% (103)	=0 .1469
Widowed	1.2% (1)	1.9% (8)	=0 .6634
Ever a parent			
Yes	61.7%	70.9%	0.0268
No	25.0%	27.0%	0.8673

^a independent t-test

^b Chi-square test

Analysis

The study employed the Summative Content Analysis technique, as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), to identify life situations that midlife women identified as obstacles while looking back over a 15-year period. Summative content analysis is a technique used by researchers to employ coding to analyze data content and find themes related to the experiences of study participants. In keeping with the methodology, the content analysis of the data in this study began with the identification and quantification of important words or phrases in the text to comprehend the contextual usage of the words or phrases. The categories of the Life Event Questionnaire (Norbeck, 1984) were the source of some of the key words and categories that were found prior to analysis, while other categories were discovered directly from the text.

This initial level of analysis is known as manifest content analysis, according to Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (Potter, 1997), where the appearance of the specific word or content is examined rather than the meaning that is inferred. To get a first impression, each response was first read. Key words or phrases in women's responses were circled in subsequent readings to create a classification system. Five themes were identified from the women's replies, and each major topic was accompanied by a list of categories. The women recognized one to five different sorts of obstacles, as indicated by the replies, which were listed under the relevant category and varied from one sub-category to five sub-categories.

The authors of this study were able to find patterns in the data and contextualize the codes by counting important words and phrases. This process, which Morse and Field (1995) refer to as latent content analysis, a component of the summative content analysis, approached the authors to discover meanings. Aligning the textual evidence with the authors' (all content specialists) interpretation of the data ensured the conclusions' internal consistency or credibility (Weber, 1990).

III. Results

Five themes emerged from the difficulties faced by midlife women: "Searching for balance in the midst of multiple co-occurring stressors while coping with losses and transitions, for some in a context of limited resources." 1) Modifying family dynamics; 2) Reestablishing a work-life balance; 3) rediscovering oneself; 4) Obtaining sufficient resources; and 5) Managing several co-occurring stressors. Every theme was separated into other categories. If a response included more than one challenge, each challenge was counted separately and added to the category of multiple co-occurring stressors. For instance, there would be three other kinds of problems in addition to the Multiple Co-Occurring Stressor challenge if a response included parenting a teenager, a husband's health, and a parent's passing.

"Searching for balance in the midst of multiple co-occurring stressors while coping with losses and transitions, for some in a context of limited resources" was the overarching theme that emerged from the data analysis. This theme encapsulated the experiences of all study participants and permeated the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. In addition to attempting to harmonize their personal and professional lives, women expressed difficulties with evolving family connections, especially those involving many generations of family members, such as parents and children. They also had trouble rediscovering who they were in the setting of shifting relationships. For many, obtaining adequate financial resources presented difficulties. Managing several co-occurring stresses presents a notable set of difficulties. Below is a more thorough discussion of each of these.

Changing family relationships

The subject of Changing Family Relationships describes how women's relationships with various family members, husband/partner, kids, elderly parents, siblings, and in-laws—were evolving.

Changing relationships with partner

Changes in their long-term relationships with their partners were cited by some women as the main source of stress in their lives. These changes included a partner's deteriorating health and the need to care for them, a long-term relationship ending in separation or divorce, or an unexpected death. Some women cited many challenges, particularly those who reported divorce or splitting up with a boyfriend. One lady described an all-encompassing life problem, for instance, as "my divorce, my children leaving home, and my parents dying all in the same 2-year period." The biggest obstacle, according to another woman, was "the death of my brother and my divorce the same year." For many research participants, a partner's deteriorating health presented another new problem in their lives. Women said that it was difficult to deal with their husbands' deteriorating health, which included heart attacks, depression, disability, surgery, high blood pressure, resistance to being more active, and drunkenness. "The most challenging has been watching my husband sink more and more into alcoholism and not being able to stop him," a research participant shared. "The challenges have changed from year to year- [year] I had an ectopic pregnancy- and infertility before/after-0 kids," said another mother. [years]-Balancing full-time employment and graduate school was difficult. Husband's health issues and incapacity are the most difficult right now. The change from an old spouse to a new one was the most difficult event for other midlife women. One lady, like others, had "Losses and transitions –death of both parents, divorce from long-term partner, beginning a new life with a new partner and his child" as part of her midlife struggle.

Changing relationships with children

Parenting difficulties, such as foster parenting, raising stepchildren, leaving children, children moving back in, children moving out (Empty Nest), the death of a child, or dealing with infertility, were among the relationship upheavals that many of the study's women experienced.

Many of these problems were linked for some of the ladies. Parenting adolescent adolescents posed a new difficulty for most mothers in the research. Others found foster or step-parenting to be the most challenging. "Foster-parenting teens, most often teens who have been victims of abuse," one mother said. Another said that she was facing a new problem in her life: raising stepchildren. "Dealing with being a blended family," she clarified. It was challenging to raise stepchildren who would prefer not to have me around. For others, the complexity of parenting was increased by having to deal with more than just teenagers. One survey participant, like many other women, noted several difficulties, including "my current job, my daughter from age 15-18, my mother's death, and my husband's unemployment."

For other women, it was also difficult when children moved back home or left the house (for example, to attend college). "Family life – Change from having little children to them all growing up and leaving – changing relationship with husband because of that and personal changes" was difficult, according to one mother. "Getting older, stiffer, clumsier," according to a mother whose child returned home. It was hard to see my circumstances change, take care of two aging parents, and have an adult kid relocate home without any money. "My son dying in [year] from suicide" was one study participant's worst midlife obstacle. A midlife problem for the study's childless women was realizing that biological parenting will never be a part of their lives. "The challenges have changed from year to year – [year]," one lady thought. I was infertile both before and after my ectopic pregnancy, which prevented me from having any children. [years] It was difficult to balance full-time employment with graduate school. The biggest obstacle right now is my husband's health issues and incapacity. "Accepting that I would never be a biological parent, never have my 'own' children, and possibly never become 'important' to my two stepchildren (now grown and living away)," said another lady. It's difficult to deal with everyone else's pregnancies, baby showers, and "kid talk."

Changing relationships with aging parents

The ladies discussed their experiences with aging parents, including caregiving, parent death, health issues, and relationships with parents. "Caregiving for parents and losses are challenging – Losing father [year], father-in-law [year], mother-in-law [year], and only having my mother still living," one lady said, echoing others. The most difficult aspect of midlife for several research participants was losing a parent. The most difficult aspect of midlife, according to others, was "experiencing my parents' death" and "losing my dad to brain cancer." "Within four months, my mother had a severe stroke, my father died, and a month later (to the day) my mother passed away," recalled one lady. "Parents getting old" and "Dad's health" were mentioned as the most difficult things for other research participants who still had their parents.

Changing sibling relationships

The loss of a sibling, relationship challenges with siblings, and the desire for peaceful sibling relationships were the three main themes regarding women's evolving relationships with siblings. The most difficult aspect of midlife was described by women as "the death of my brother in [year] and my divorce the same year" and "Dealing with not getting along with my older sister."

Reestablishing a work-life balance

Re-balancing work and personal life was necessary for many women in the present research due to difficult jobs and careers, unemployment, juggling many responsibilities, job loss and unemployment, obtaining a job with health benefits, and approaching retirement. Out of the 81 women in the research, just three said that their jobs were the most difficult aspect of midlife.

Most women found it challenging to juggle several responsibilities and feel overworked. "Balancing all aspects of my life - as a mother, as a wife, as a teacher and as a woman and as the major head of the household (cooking, cleaning, etc.) currently is the greatest challenge of my life," one woman said, echoing other women. Others found that "getting into a more interesting career," "dealing with personal health issues like a breast cancer diagnosis, going through a divorce or losing a partner, losing a job and looking for new employment with benefits" were the biggest obstacles. "Finding and sustaining suitable employment with health care benefits," one lady explained. The biggest problem she faced in her midlife was "having intermittent medical coverage caused me to postpone surgery for three years."

Re-discovering oneself

For many of the women in the present research, self-discovery was crucial. The five sub-themes pertaining to the self were health challenges, existential concerns, self-acceptance and self-esteem, going back to school, the menopausal transition, and personal changes. Numerous ladies shared their health issues. Heart surgery, arthritis, chronic pain, breast cancer, a car accident that reduced the woman's ability to use her right hand, a blood clot in her thigh, and, as one woman put it, "getting older, stiffer, clumsier" were among the health issues. Women concentrated on interpreting or evaluating different facets of their lives.

Some of the women concentrated on finding new relationships, while others concentrated on accepting that they would not be able to fulfill their life's ambitions due to their restricted number of active years. Many ladies expressed their newfound self-acceptance and satisfaction with who they were. One survey participant came to the same conclusion as others: "Becoming more comfortable with myself." The hardest part was accepting who I am and improving my self-esteem. Some women went back to graduate school or chose to complete the degree they had already begun to rediscover who they were. Remarkably, just four of the 81 women in the present research said that their menopausal transition symptoms—such as hot flashes, mood swings, memory loss, and heavy uterine bleeding—were the most difficult part of midlife.

Coping with multiple co-occurring stressors

As shown in the previous paragraphs, many of the women in the current study had to cope with several stresses during their midlife years, several of which happened at or around the same time. When describing their most difficult situations, most women noted many co-occurring stresses. "Dealing with stress—job stress, health stress, social stress, family stress, etc." said one lady. It appeared to spiral out of control for a while. According to several women, juggling several responsibilities and being overworked were the worst aspects of midlife. "Balancing all aspects of my life - as a mother, as a wife, as a teacher, and as a woman and as the major head of the household (cooking, cleaning, etc.)" and "fulfilling obligations of work and family" were two instances.

IV. Discussion

In the middle of several co-occurring stressors, the participants found themselves trying to find balance while dealing with losses and transitions—for some, in a setting with few supports. Changing family ties, rebalancing work and personal life, rediscovering oneself, obtaining adequate resources, and managing several co-occurring stresses were among the themes of issues faced by this group of midlife women. A helpful foundation for comprehending the importance of various kinds of difficult experiences is provided by research on oneself in connection to others (Miller and Stiver, 1997). Many women's life revolves around taking care of family members with whom they are connected or affiliated. The ability to establish and sustain connections is the foundation of women's associations.

One method to characterize how women's relationships are established is by caring for others (partners, children, parents). The possibility of ending a relationship is perceived by many women as a complete loss of identity as well as a loss of connection. Losses were highlighted in this study because many women said that the hardest part of changing family connections in midlife was divorce and losing their parents. While many midlife women manage the menopausal transition and their children moving out, the aging and death of their parents

(Perrig-Chiello et al., 2005) and the impact of divorce (Sakraida, 2005) pose more significant long-term challenges for these women, according to Dare and colleagues' ethnographic qualitative research study from Australia (Dare, 2011).

Women still face several obstacles at work in addition to interpersonal problems. Hochschild's "Second Shift" provides a thorough description of the prevalent experience of overwork (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). For American women, the array of duties they take on outside of work continues to be overwhelming, and many lack access to assistance with childcare and domestic upkeep. In fact, Hochschild noted that after returning home from work, women performed what amounted to a "second shift." Launching children can therefore be liberating for their mid-life mother as well as the late adolescent and young adult offspring. Most of the recent research on women's numerous responsibilities, including work-family conflicts, has been on younger, reproductive-age women who have children in preschool or school.

The term "sandwich generation" was coined to characterize the compression of midlife women's lives by the demands of their parents and children due to the recognition of the ongoing difficulty of midlife women juggling the conflicting demands of work and family, as well as the addition of caring responsibilities for their parents (Raphael et al., 1993). Women had to re-discover themselves in the context of their shifting relationships in addition to juggling work and personal obligations. According to Miller and Stiver (1997), a woman's sense of self and value is frequently based on her capacity to establish and sustain relationships, and these bonds—rather than breakups—can result in robust, healthy growth.

Individual growth occurs through connection, as demonstrated in the Re-discovering Self category. Women connect with one another by establishing connections that promote mutuality or progress. As a result of the connection, mutuality helps both parties grow and develop. When a woman with breast cancer connects with others who have a different health issue or with a breast cancer support group, this mutuality may show up. Questioning their existence, meaning, or other existential issues that come up in midlife and discussing them with someone they have mutuality with might help women grow. Women's interest in the next phase of their life was evident in their accounts of the difficulties associated with self-discovery.

The present study has several advantages. This study is the first to look at midlife women's accounts of the difficulties they faced throughout a 15-year reference period. The most often mentioned difficulties throughout the previous fifteen years of midlife, as described by the women themselves, were included in the study's findings.

These findings are significant because they highlight the difficulties that midlife women face most frequently. They may also assist healthcare professionals in identifying women who are at high risk for allostatic overload, which can result in heart disease, stroke, or sleep issues. Examples of this include persistently high blood pressure and persistently high cortisol levels due to prolonged high levels of stress. Additionally, these findings will be useful to providers in tailoring treatment and identifying resources and interventions to support this age group of women who fulfill several tasks and the obligations that go along with them.

V. Conclusion

Five areas covered the overarching topic of trying to find balance in the face of several co-occurring stresses while, for some, managing transitions and losses in a setting with few supports. Multiple co-occurring stresses were the most mentioned problems. It is necessary to investigate various co-occurring stresses further. It's possible that a single stressor, like divorce, triggers several linked stresses. For example, death of life partner precipitates loss of income, loss of children and separation from a relational network of shared acquaintances of the pair. Additionally, experiencing a single stressor—like the onset of a chronic illness—may come before experiencing additional stresses, including losing one's job, having to move, or dealing with the financial strain of paying for prescription drugs. Women may be able to comment on a number of stressors that better reflect their experiences in midlife by asking about a focal stressor and its effects.

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