

New Perspectives on Midlife: A Pivotal Period in the Life Course

Margie E. Lachman
Brandeis University



**Rethinking Adult Development:
New Ideas for New Times
Clark University
October 18-19, 2018**

<http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/lifespan/>

Research Supported by NIH/NIA- PO1 AG20166, U19-AG051426, RO1 AG17920, P30AG048785

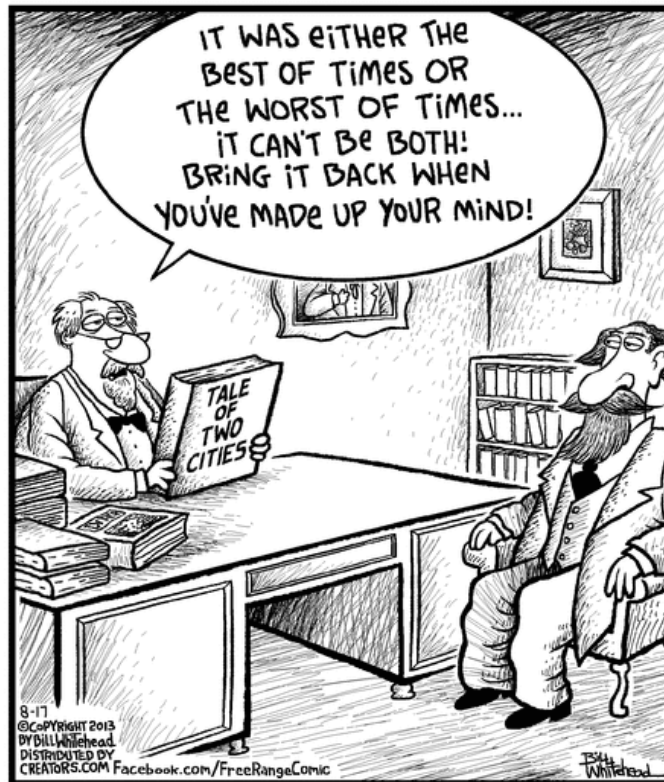
Overview

- Images of Midlife
- Early Theories and Studies of Midlife
- Midlife in the United States Study (MIDUS)
- Lifespan Developmental Approach
- Midlife as a Pivotal Period in the Life Course
- Conclusions and Future Directions



Images and Views of Midlife

- The Good News and the Bad News
- The Best of Times; The Worst of Times



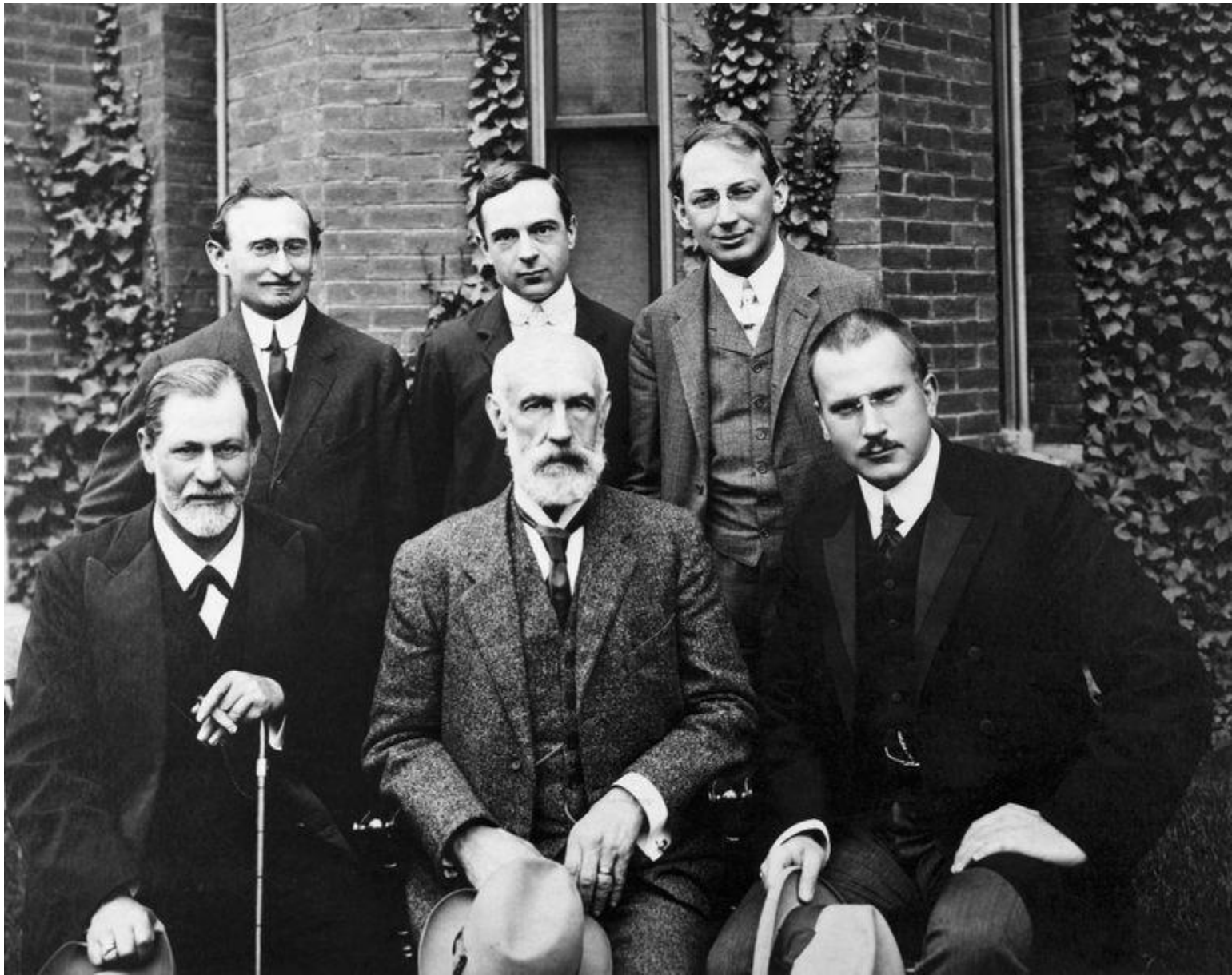
Midlife as the Peak or Prime



G. Stanley Hall, at age 78- *Senescence, The Last Half of Life* ([1922](#)).

“Our life, bounded by birth and death, has five chief stages :
(1) **childhood**, (2) **adolescence** from puberty to full nobility
(storm and stress),
**(3) middle life or the prime, when we are at the
apex of our aggregate of powers, ranging from
twenty-five or thirty to forty or forty--five and
comprising thus the fifteen or twenty years now
commonly called our best,**
(4) **senescence**, which begins in the early forties, or before in
woman, and (5) **senectitude**, the post--climacteric or old age
proper.” (p. vii).





1909 Group photo in front of Clark University: Front row: Sigmund Freud, **G. Stanley Hall**, **C. G. Jung**; Back row: Abraham A. Brill, Ernest Jones, Sándor Ferenczi. Photo taken for Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts publication.



The Four Seasons of Life: Middle Age- The Season of Strength Strength Currier and Ives 1868



THE FOUR SEASONS OF LIFE: MIDDLE AGE.

"The Season of Strength"

Not in the Land of "Middle Age" only,
But in the Land of "Middle Age" only,
In the Land of "Middle Age" only,
And in the Land of "Middle Age" only.

THE FOUR SEASONS OF LIFE: MIDDLE AGE.

Not in the Land of "Middle Age" only,
But in the Land of "Middle Age" only,
In the Land of "Middle Age" only,
And in the Land of "Middle Age" only.



Steps of Life- Inverted U-19th Century

Stages of Woman's (Man's) Life from the Cradle to the Grave

The Life & Age of Woman

The Life and Age of Man



Kelloggs & Comstock
1848 - 1850



Burford, William B.
c1883



Trajectories of Depressed Affect- Lowest in Midlife

- Sutin et al. 2013
- **The Trajectory of Depressive Symptoms Across the Adult Lifespan**
- *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2013 Aug 1; 70(8): 803–811.
- doi: [10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.193]



Midlife as the Nadir



The Voyage of Life, 1842

Thomas Cole



Childhood



Youth



Manhood



Old Age



The Voyage of Life, 1842

Thomas Cole

- Between youth and old age
 - Gloomy, troubled, dark clouds, stormy
 - Trees splintered
- River difficult to navigate- Dangerous rapids
- Bleak rocky landscape
- He no longer steers the boat
- He yields to praying



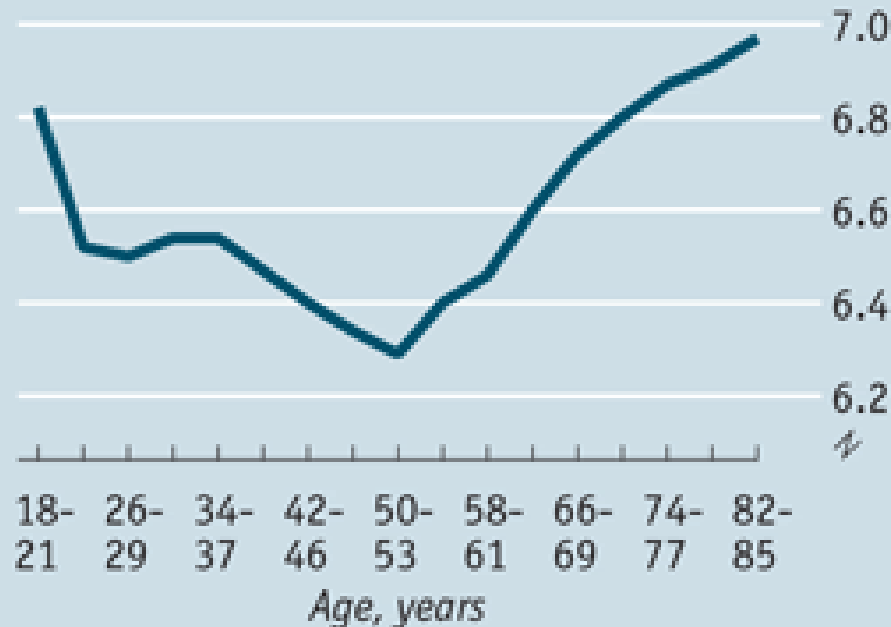
Manhood



Midlife: The U-Bend of Life

The U-bend

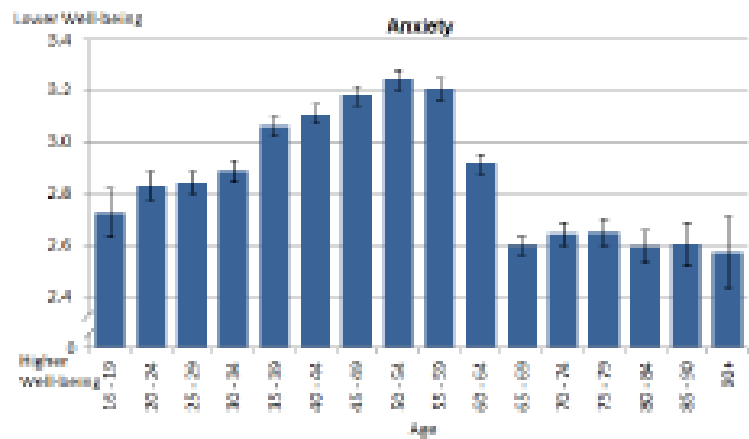
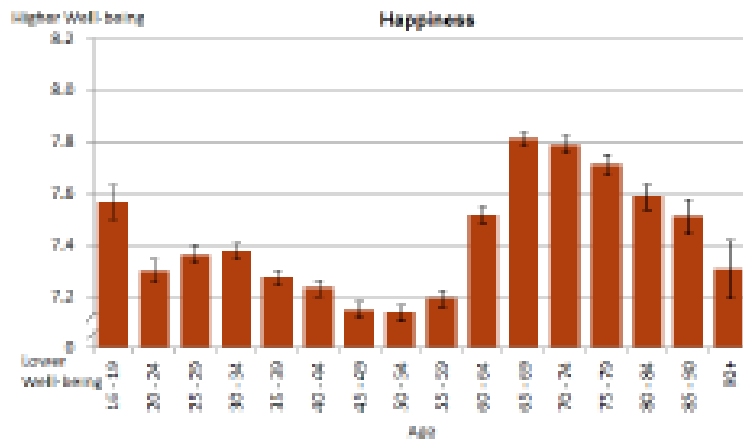
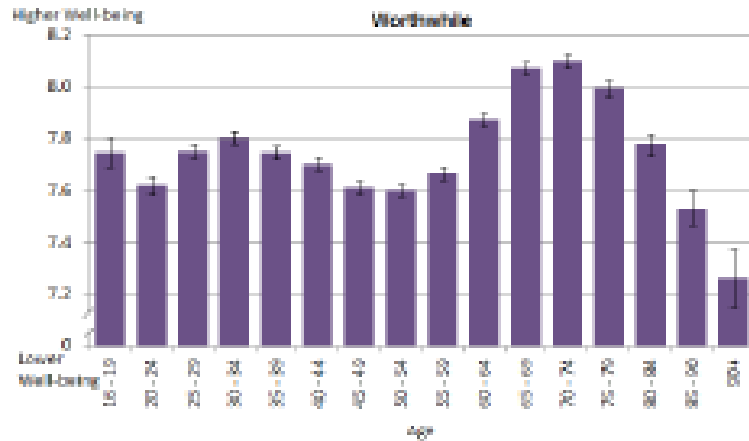
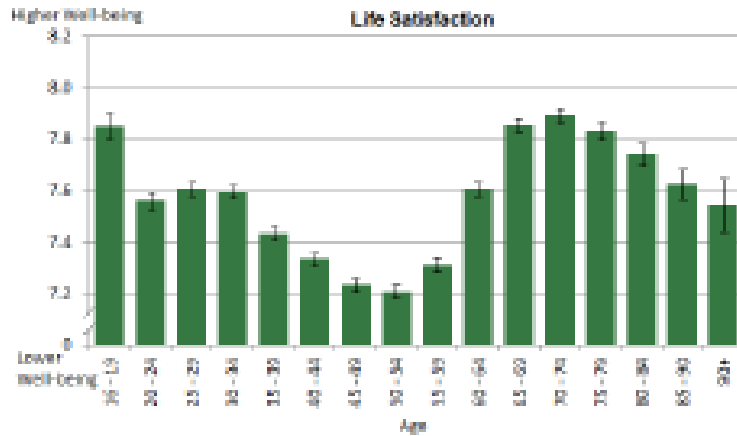
Self-reported well-being, on a scale of 1-10



Source: PNAS paper: "A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States" by Arthur Stone



Midlife Dip in Life Satisfaction and Happiness and Peak in Anxiety



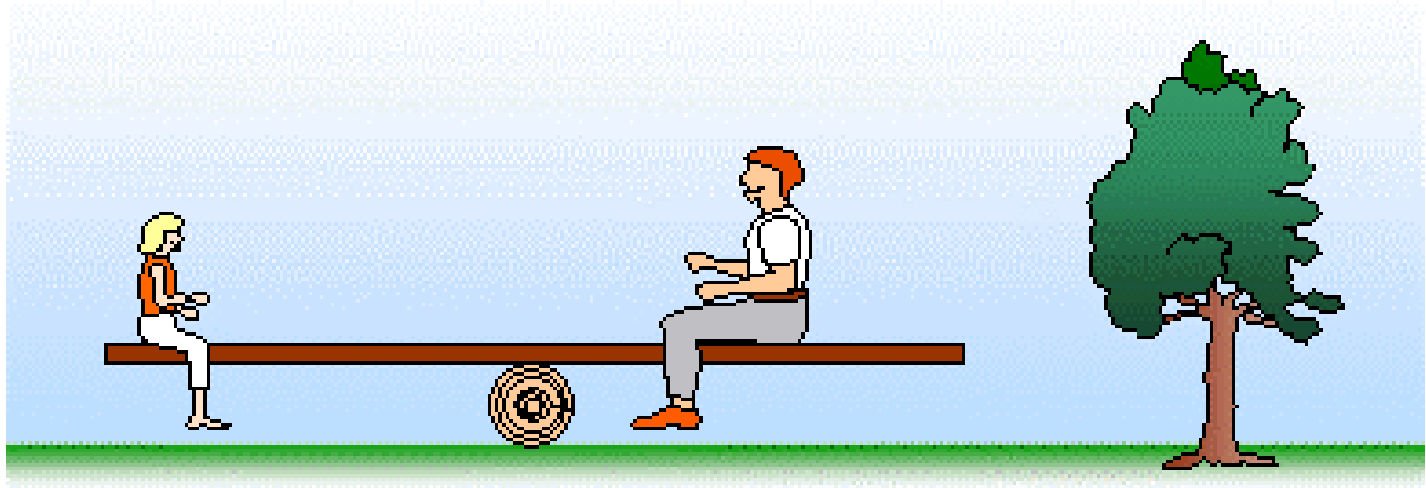
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/atwhatageispersonalwellbeingthehighest#at-what-age-is-personal-well-being-the-highest>



The Midlife Crisis



Up, down, and stable?



Balance



Early Theories and Studies of Midlife 1930's-1970's

- Carl Jung- Afternoon of Life -1933
- Erik Erikson- Generativity- 1968
- Elliott Jaques- Midlife Crisis- 1968
- Bernice Neugarten- On-time, Off-time-1968
- Berkeley and Oakland Growth Studies- 1970's
- Gail Sheehy- Passages- 1974
- Daniel Levinson- Seasons of a Man's Life- 1978



Views of Midlife-1980's

- Period of quietude, not much happens
- Except menopause and empty nest
- Developmental Psychology and Gerontology did not focus on middle age
- Middle-aged studied by Sociologists in roles such as parents, couples, divorced, workers, unemployed
- Focus on those who went to therapists for help-
Midlife crisis
- Need for a more representative view



Calls to Explore Midlife

“The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot merely be a pitiful appendage to life’s morning.” (Carl Jung, 1933)

“Midlife is the last uncharted territory of the life course.” (Bert Brim, Chair of the MacArthur Foundation Network on Successful Midlife Development, 1990-2000)



Midlife in the United States (MIDUS)

- A National Survey of Health and Well-Being

- Data available through ICPSR
- <http://www.midus.wisc.edu/>



- **MIDUS Time 1:** 1994-96; Ages 24-75 (N = 7,100)

- MIDMAC- MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development

- **MIDUS Time 2:** 2004-06; Ages 32-84 (N = 4,955)

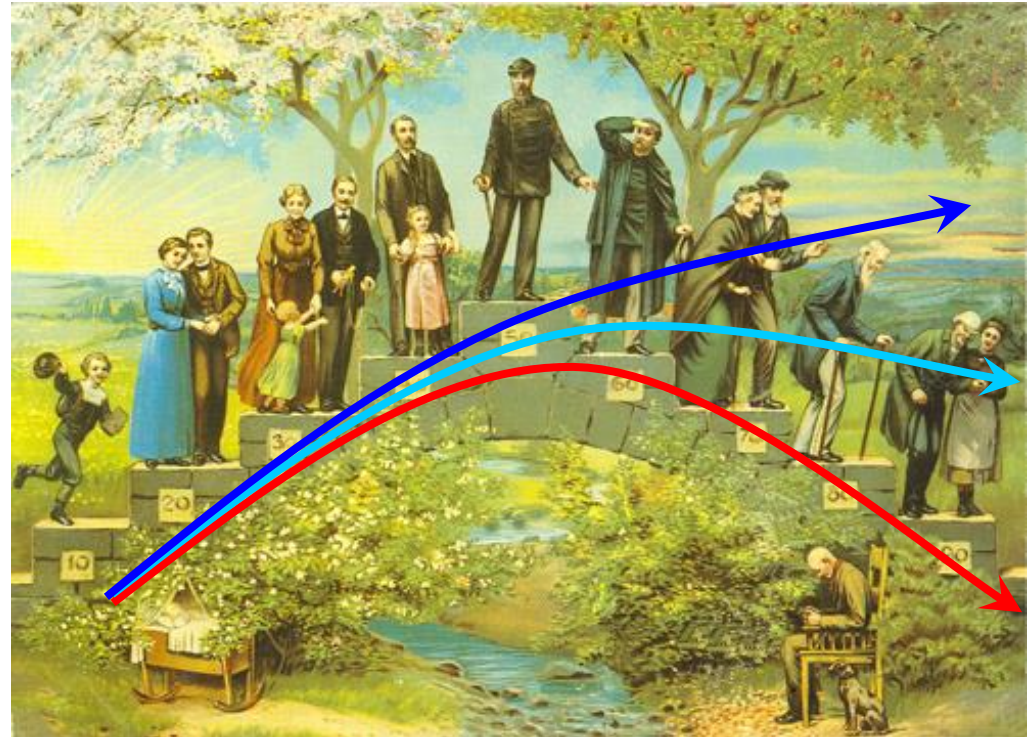
- National Institute on Aging- University of Wisconsin Survey Research Center
- *Longitudinal retention rate, adjusted for mortality = 75%*

- **MIDUS Time 3:** 2013-2015 (N= 3294) *Adjusted retention rate 77%*



Lifespan Developmental Approach

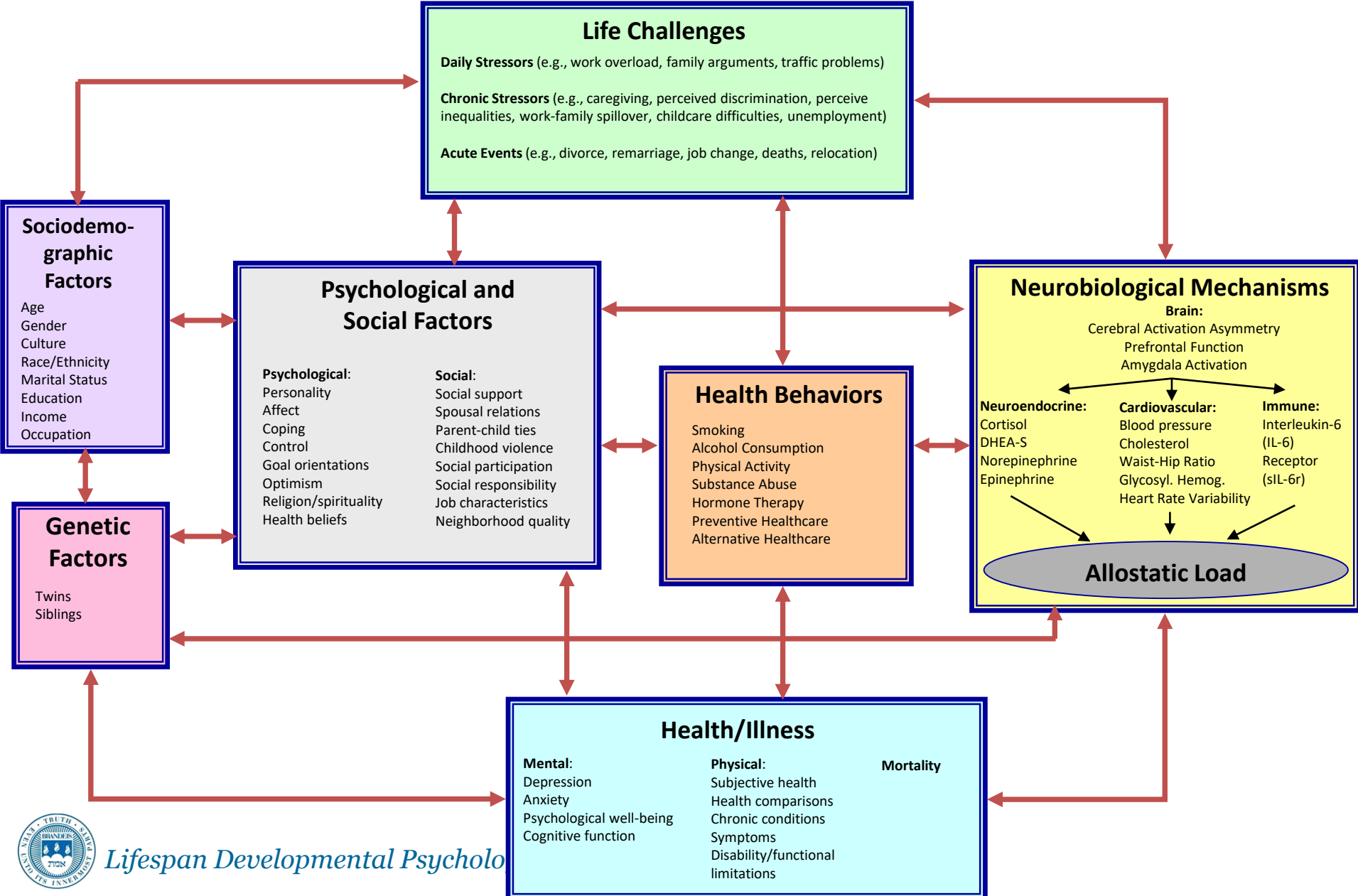
- Lifelong development
- Gains and losses
- Distal/proximal influences
- Variability (e.g. by cohort)
- Plasticity and controllability
- Prevention



Paul Baltes and colleagues- 1990's



Pathways to Health and Well-Being in Midlife: A Biopsychosocial Approach (MIDUS)

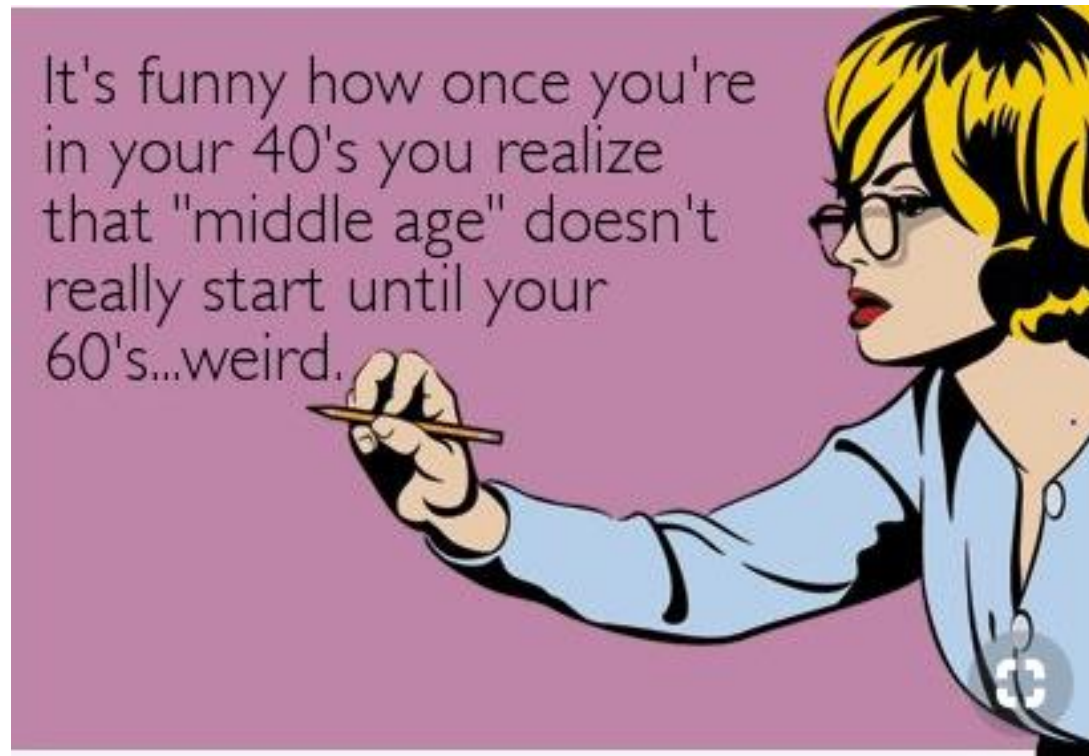


What or When is Midlife?

- Event or role based, position in the family or work setting
- Chronological age 40 to 59 (+ or – 10 years)
 - 27.8% of total U.S. population is 40 to 59
 - 50.2% of total U.S. population is 30 to 69
- Subjective age- How old one feels



Subjective Age (60 is the new 40)



Generations Currently in Middle Age

Generation Name	Births Start	Births End	Youngest Age Today	Oldest Age Today
Baby Boomer Generation	1946	1964	53	71
Generation X (Baby Bust)	1965	1979	38	52
Xennials -	1975	1985	32	42



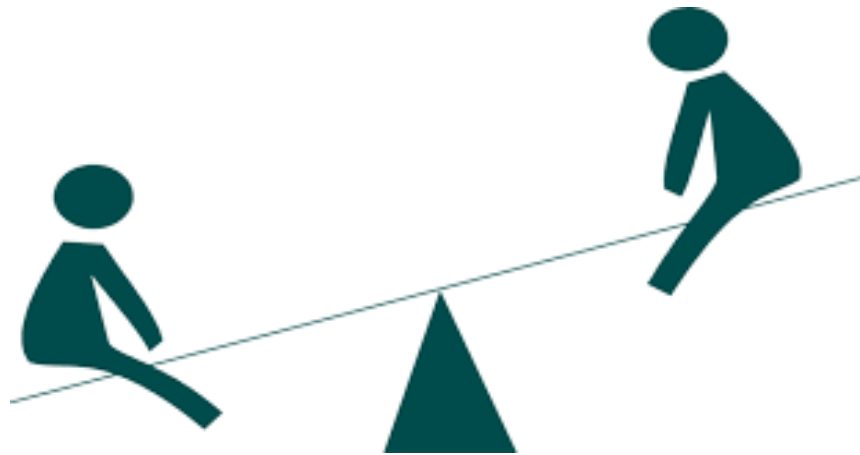
Midlife as a Pivotal Period in the Life Course

Definition of Pivotal:

- central, everything related to the topic depends on it.
- of crucial importance in relation to the development or success of something else.



Pivot point: most commonly located at
the **midpoint** between both ends



“It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you’ll see that everything changes.”

– Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987)
University of Minnesota Press, p. 23.



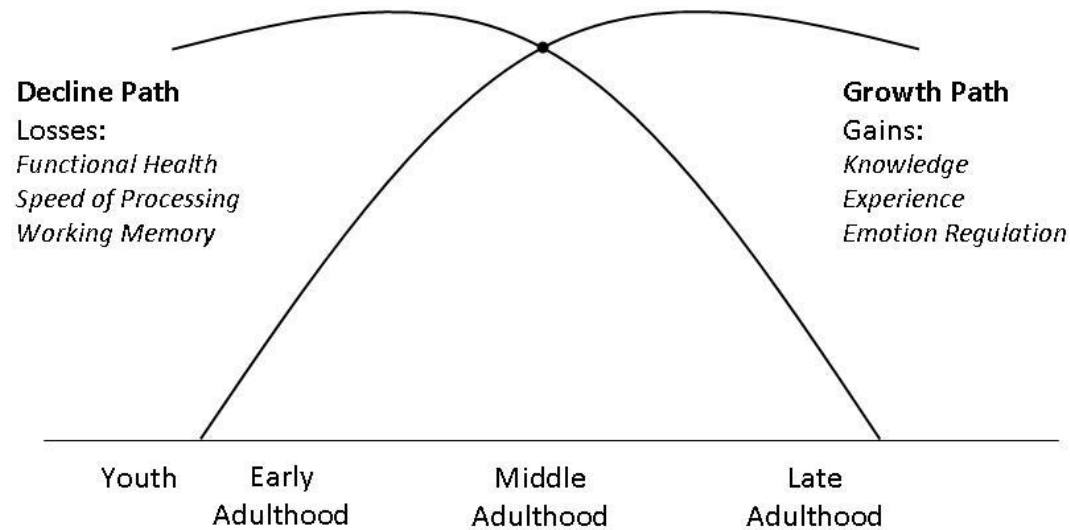
Midlife a Pivotal Period: Key Themes

- Intersection of growth and decline (balancing gains and losses; peak functioning)
- Linking earlier and later periods of life (early life effects on midlife; midlife effects on later life)
- Bridging younger and older generations (responsibility and care for those younger and older; mentoring; intergenerational teams)

Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015



Midlife as a Pivotal Period: Gains and Losses

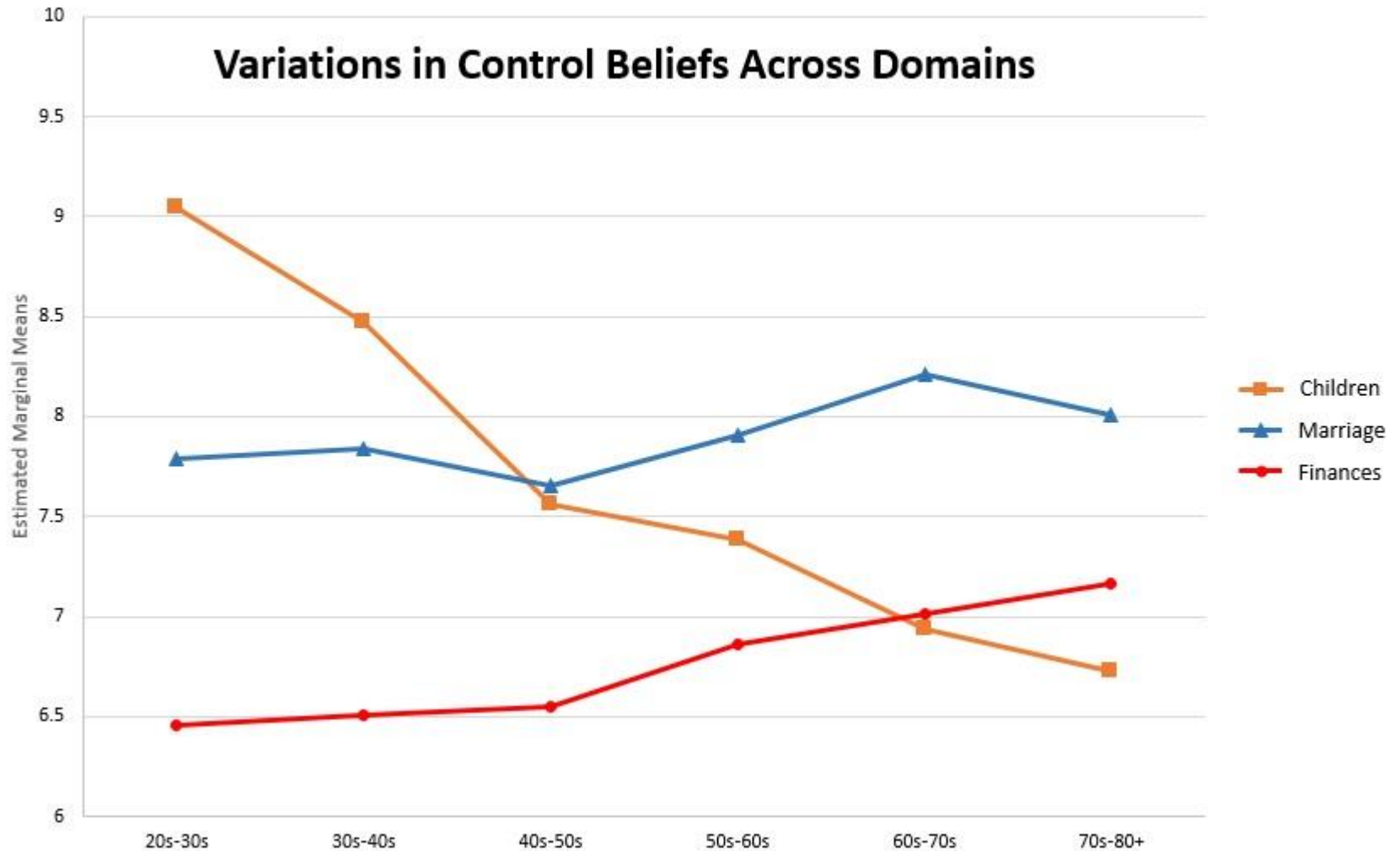


The Example of Control Beliefs

- Two major sources of control one showing gains or stability and the other losses; midlife is at the crossroads of these trajectories
- Gains in control come from acquiring experience, developing mastery, approaching a peak of knowledge, competence and expertise.
- At the same time there are declines in functioning and performance with increasing constraints tied to aging and society (e.g., age discrimination, rapid technology changes).
- Can compensate for or counteract the losses and declines by using assets, strengths and skills.



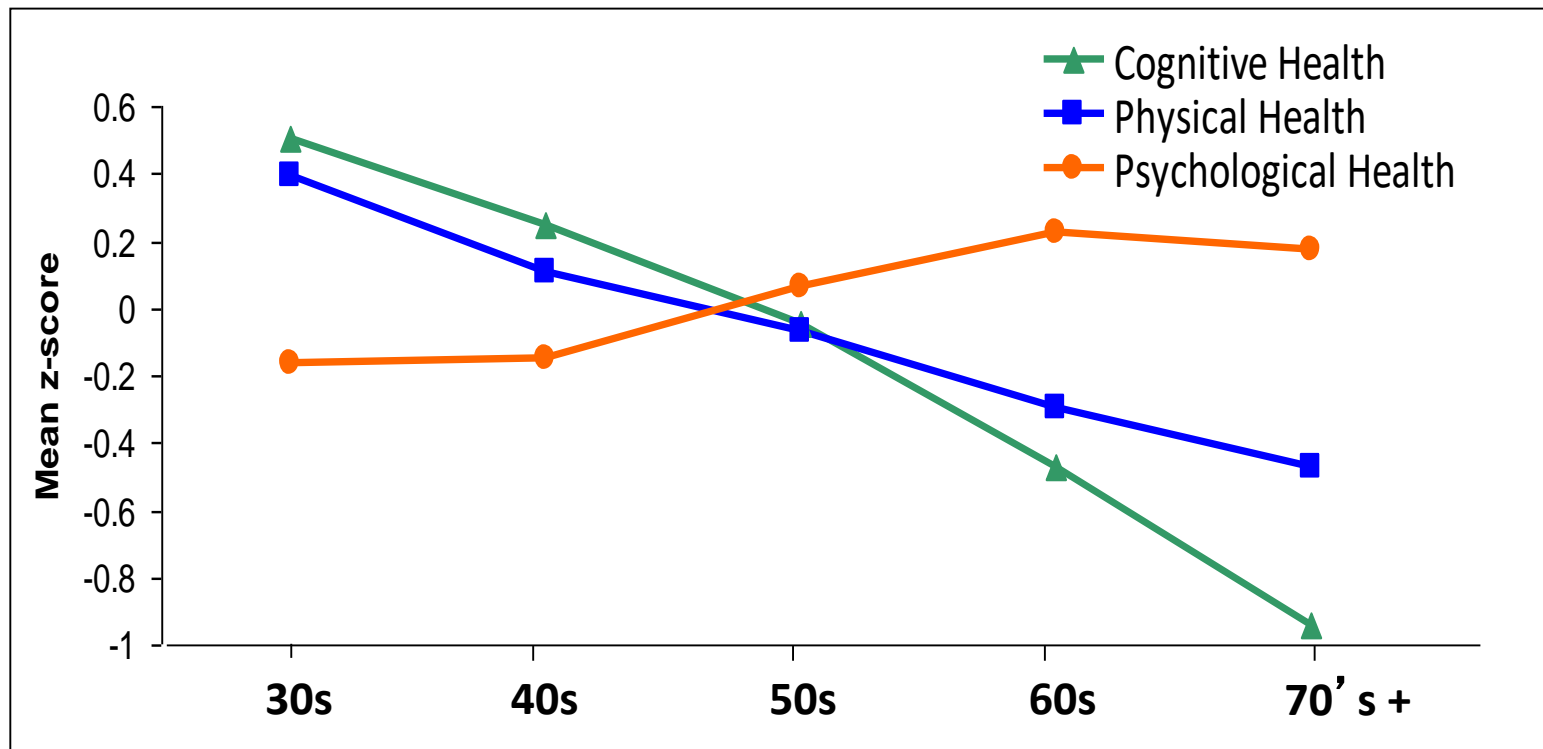
Control Beliefs (MIDUS 2)



Paradox of Aging (MIDUS 2)

- Losses in Physical and Cognitive Health, and Gains in Psychological Health- Age Differences

Better

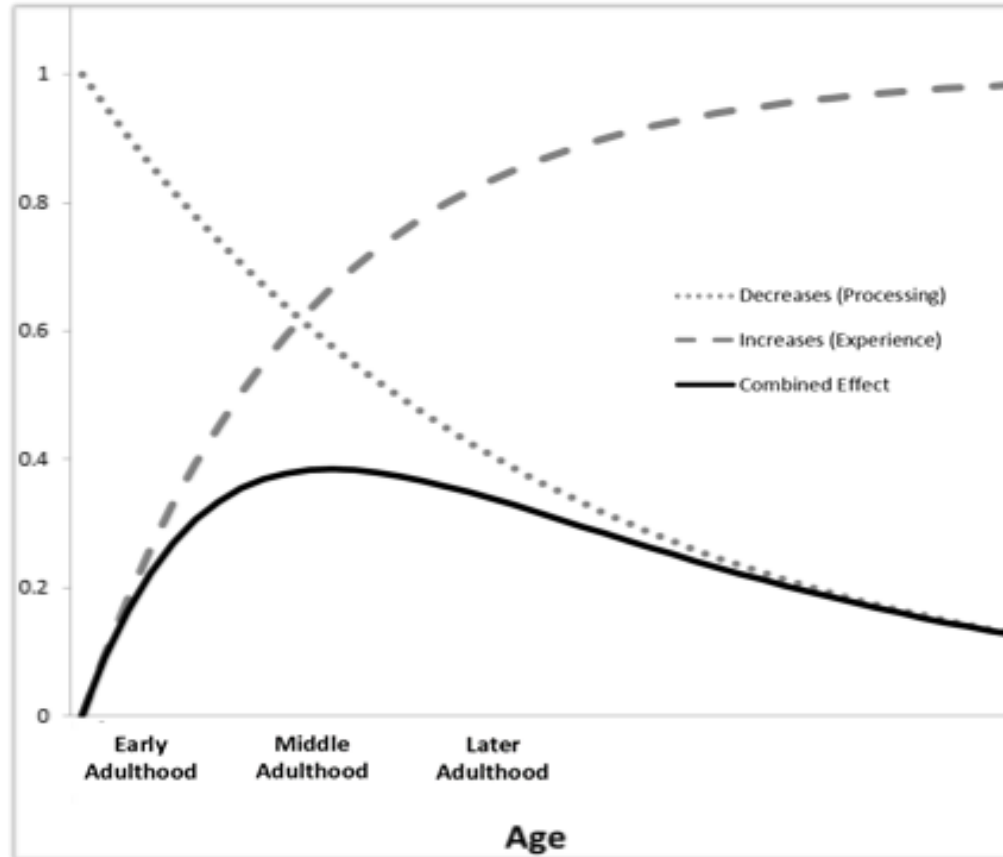


Worse

Age Group



Midlife at the intersection of growth and decline: A double exponential function shows a peak in midlife (Lachman & Jaffe, 2017; Sloan Project)



Dotted line shows the decrease path (e.g., processing new information), the dashed line show the increase path (e.g., knowledge and experience), the solid line is the combined effect of gains and losses.

Midlife a Pivotal Period

- Intersection of growth and decline (balancing gains and losses; peak functioning)
- Linking earlier and later periods of life (early life effects on midlife; midlife effects on later life)
- Bridging younger and older generations (responsibility and care for those younger and older; mentoring; intergenerational teams)

Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015



Early Life Effects on Midlife

- Childhood adversity (Levine et al., 2018)
 - lower socioeconomic (SES) environments,
 - being mistreated by parents
- Increased risk for chronic diseases (e.g., metabolic syndrome), poor cognition, and earlier mortality (Levine et al., 2018)
- Mechanisms (Miller et al., 2011; Schreier & Chen, 2013).
 - Proinflammatory tendencies – biological residue
 - Hormone dysregulation
 - Unhealthy behaviors
 - Reduced physical and psychosocial resources



Protective or Buffering Factors

Plasticity and Resilience

- Psychosocial resources (e.g., warm family environments) may play a buffering role in protecting health despite adversity (Miller et al., 2011).
- Sense of control moderates the effects of low socioeconomic status (SES) on health (Lachman & Weaver, 1998)
- Educational attainment in adulthood mitigates effects of low SES in childhood on midlife cognition (Liu & Lachman, 2018)



Midlife Effects on Later Life

Healthy behaviors and adaptive psychosocial resources in midlife lead to less decline in cognitive and functional health in later life

Protective Factors

- Physical activity
- Social relationships
- Cognitive activity
- Sense of control
- The more the better
- It's not too late to intervene

(Lachman & Agrigoroaei, 2010; Agrigoroaei & Lachman, 2011)



Midlife a Pivotal Period

- Intersection of growth and decline (balancing gains and losses; peak functioning)
- Linking earlier and later periods of life (early life effects on midlife; midlife effects on later life)
- Bridging younger and older generations (responsibility and care for those younger and older; mentoring; intergenerational teams)

Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015



In the Middle



The young and old, alike, rely on those in the middle to provide resources, make decisions, and solve problems.



Adult Children Effects on Midlife Parents

Longer period of dependence; Family structure changes

- More education
- Delayed work force entry
- Less likely to marry or later marriage
- Fertility changes
- Financial constraints
- Living at home –refilling the nest
- More contact via phone, text, email

Opportunities for Midlife Parents' Well-Being and Growth

- Generativity
- Purpose in life, Meaning
- Mastery; Success in parenting goals

Fingerman, 2017



Older Parents and Midlife Adult Children

- Caregiving increasing because parents living longer and dementia increasing
- Mobility high in U.S.- Parents may live far away (long-distance caregiving)
- Women in workforce
- Divorce, remarriage, blended families
- Smaller families- Fewer siblings to help take care of parents
- Bereavement- Death of parents



Is there a Sandwich Generation?

- Having children later
- Parents living longer
- More women in workforce
- Work family conflict or balance
- 47% of adults ages 40-59 have a living parent over age 65 and are raising or supporting a child
- 15% in midlife are providing financial support to both an aging parent and a child
- 38% in midlife report that both their grown children and their parents rely on them for emotional support.
- Multiple roles can be stressful and take a toll on the mental and physical health of those in midlife
- Multitasking- Executive Functioning

Pew Report (2013)

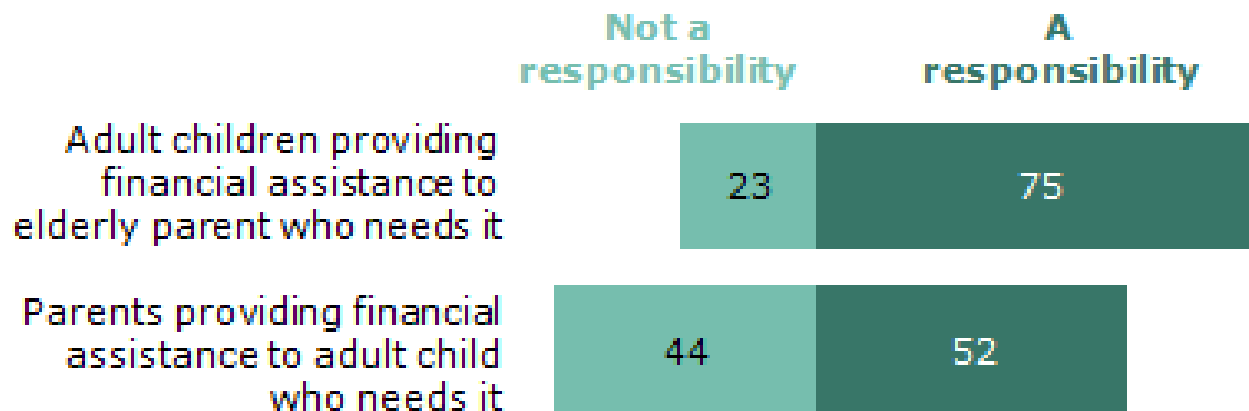
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/>



Financial Assistance to Parents and Adult Children

Public Says Providing for Elderly Parents in Need Is a “Responsibility”

% of all adults saying each is ...



Notes: Based on all adults. “Don’t know/Refused” responses not shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2013)

Q17a,b

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/>



Conclusions and Future Directions

Midlife:

- a period of ups and downs, peaks and valleys
- a time of great demands from family and work
- need to balance multiple roles
- heightened generativity, caring, and concern for others in the work, family, and community spheres
- need to address own needs for meaningful work (paid or unpaid), health, and well-being



Conclusions and Future Directions

Explore variability and differences

- Cultural (e.g., Filial piety, moral obligation, laws-- India, China)
- Generational, cohort
- Ethnicity and race
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status



Conclusions and Future Directions

- Interventions to reduce stress and promote greater well-being
 - Stress experienced by a parent can affect the child at a young age.
 - Find meaning and experience growth in the face of adversity
- Implications for policy changes
 - Work and family balance
 - Caregiving support and respite
 - Education and retraining in midlife
 - Health care
- Prevention
- **The well-being of those younger and older in the family, workplace, and society in general depends to a large extent on the well-being of those in the middle. Understanding midlife can have far-reaching consequences.**



Acknowledgements

- Victoria Sorrentino
- Alycia Sullivan
- Xin Lin
- Yujun Liu
- Lifespan Lab
- Sloan Foundation
- MacArthur Foundation
- National Institute on Aging

