

# Mid-Life – A Time of Crisis or New Possibilities?

---

**Yana Weaver**

---

## **Key words**

Individuation, will to meaning, personal growth, lifespan development, owning experience

## **Abstract**

With age our knowledge, emotions and the way we behave mature. The commonly held view of mid-life crisis is that it is an emotional state of doubt and anxiety in which a person becomes uncomfortable with the realization that life is half over. It is a potentially stressful period as it usually involves reflection and re-evaluation of one's accomplishments. It usually occurs between the age of 35 and 50 and lasts between 3 and 10 years. This paper compares and contrasts what might be taken as Freud's view on middle age, Jung's idea of individuation, Frankl's idea of will to meaning and Rogers' idea of personal growth: ideas that have relevance to middle age. It also reflects on Erikson's and Peck's view of middle age as a stage in the lifespan development. This paper relates the idea of middle life crisis with Yalom's research on meaning in life and Spinelli's idea of owning experience. It argues that middle age should not necessarily be seen as a time of crisis and loss but of growth and new possibilities.

## **Psychodynamic view**

According to the psychodynamic view, the major psychological changes occur during childhood. More specifically, as Freud postulated, all three stages of psychosexual development are completed in early childhood. Therefore, the argument follows, any crisis occurring in middle life is caused by the 'disorders of ego' related to the developmental experiences in childhood. Thus those suffering from psychogenic neurosis, caused by the conflict of different drives and/or clashes between parts of the psyche developed in childhood, should be treated in psychoanalysis by revisiting and resolving those early experiences. The end-goal of all activity throughout life is the re-establishment of individual equilibrium which has been disordered in childhood (Wood et al. 2002). Adulthood, according to Freud, is the 'product' of childhood, an end point rather than a stage for change in its own right. Freud wrote in 1907 that 'about the age of 50 the elasticity of the mental processes on which treatment depends is, as a rule,

lacking. Old people are no longer educable' (as cited in Cohen, 2006, p.1). Freud, as Cohen noted, was 51 when he wrote this and a great deal of his work was completed after his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Jung's individuation**

While Freudians considered all crises of middle age to be linked with childhood, Jung talked about middle life less in terms of crisis but more in terms of an important period of growth and maturation. Furthermore, while Freudians mostly were dealing with patients suffering from neurosis caused by 'disorders of ego' and who needed to adjust to social ('normal') requirements, the majority of Jung's patients were ... 'socially well-adapted individuals, often of outstanding abilities, to whom normalization means nothing' (Jung, as cited in Storr, 1973, p.82). So 'crisis' or maturation in middle age was not aimed at achieving equilibrium between the self and the requirements of the social world but at deepening the meaning of existence for those individuals who have achieved success. These individuals, as Jung stated, were suffering from ... 'senselessness and aimlessness of their lives' (as cited in Storr, 1978, p. 82). Understanding a crisis of this nature and subsequent emergence from it would only have some meaning to those of middle age. Individuals who have negotiated their youth successfully have usually, according to Jung, developed one side of themselves. They are intelligent and successful but feel something is lacking in their inner life. For example, a good standard of living was generally assumed to be something to aim for in twentieth century Western Europe and America. But it appeared that more was not necessarily better and people continued to search for something else that they described as 'quality of life' (Storr, 1978). Jung's patients were disenchanted by their wealth and prosperity. His idea was that through 'Individuation' – integration of wholeness, serenity and harmony within himself and cultivation of the inner self – one overcomes middle life crisis (Storr, 1978). To be able to reach those aspects of self that have been neglected, Jung suggested, one needs (in analytical therapy with the help of the analyst) to consider the personal underlying values. All people have them – they are influenced by the collective assumptions and the dominant way of life of the culture they belong to. Apart from exploration and re-evaluation of these values and exploration of dreams and phantasies, individuation also means a conscious acceptance of the whole balanced self - neither neglecting nor overdeveloping any part of the self. A person who achieves this state does not get emotionally puzzled any more and does not negate any part of his/her nature. An essential part of this new integration-of-self attitude is acceptance and preparation for death. By understanding and accepting self, others and most of all by preparing for death, one accepts and acknowledges that this awareness is more important than a good

material standard of living. Jung describes it as a 'religious' attitude, although a person who achieved this does not have to belong to any religion; it is a spiritual quest (Storr, 1978). Jung did not think that all people go through the process of individuation. Only those whose consciousness is overdeveloped and who have been detached from their unconsciousness can be encouraged in analytical therapy to take this journey. Neurotics who suffer from weak ego (typically Freudian patients) should not be tempted towards this kind of thinking (Storr, 1978). For the same reason, individuation does not have much relevance for young people. Although Jung's ideas related to individuation are generated through his self-analysis and analysis of his rather particular group of patients, some of Jung's followers would argue that individuation is a natural development process which everyone undergoes for the most part unconsciously (Storr, 1978).

### **Some existentialists' views**

Viktor Frankl, the existential therapist, challenged the psychodynamic view that a determined end-goal of all activity throughout life is the re-establishment of individual equilibrium. Frankl did not see people as mainly trying to gratify their drives and satisfy their instincts in order to maintain or restore their inner equilibrium. He thought that people are oriented towards the world of potential meanings and values (Frankl, 1967). Frankl, as did Jung, also talked about the existential emptiness of people. A cross-sectional survey conducted at a Vienna Hospital in the 1960s, showed that 55% of those screened (both neurological and psychotherapeutic patients) expressed signs of existential frustration. More than half of those stated that they had experienced the feeling that life is meaningless (Frankl, 1967). This existential vacuum, as he called it, may be explained by the instincts and traditions that have been lost by man in the process of becoming a truly human being. Some basic animal behaviour patterns have been lost for ever and man no longer relies on instinctive responses; he has to make choices. More recently, tradition is no longer a powerful guide to what he ought to do. Very often he does not know what he wishes to do. Instead, as Frankl suggested, he conforms to the wishes of others (wishes to do what others do) or behaves in a totalitarian manner and does what others tell him to do (Frankl, 1959). Existential vacuum is usually expressed as boredom with life. Although in constant race against time, we see how people lack ideas about how to add some spiritual experience in their free time. Technological progress, the reduction in the number of working hours and the increase in leisure time, Frankl predicted, would create a society in which people would not know what to do with their newly acquired free time. As an example of this, Frankl mentioned 'Sunday neurosis', a type of depression affecting people

who lack content in their lives when the busy week is over (Frankl, 1959). Frankl did not talk about a mid-life crisis as such but by talking of 'Sunday neurosis', 'the neurosis of unemployment' and 'the psychological crisis of retirement and ageing people' he implied that the search for meaning became paramount at a certain level of maturity. Frankl noted how people think about their survival only when under immediate threat. But when continued survival is not threatened, people look for meaning in life. Frankl emphasised the importance for people of the 'will to meaning' or finding a sense of purpose in life. The sense of purpose in life must be constructed by each person on their own at a given moment. Further, the meaning of each individual life is not something to be invented but discovered in potentialities which are to be found in the world rather than within oneself. He emphasised the objectivity of this endeavour and responsibility with which each individual should respond to the questions of life. He stresses ...'that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche...' (Frankl, 1959, p.115). One way, suggested by Frankl, in which personal meaning may be sought is through actions, in particular creative activity. Other ways are through experience of nature, through art or experiencing love. But the meaning of existence is not fulfilled by creative activity only. In a situation of unavoidable difficulty and tragic circumstances of suffering, pain and guilt, meaning may be found in fortitude (Wood et al., 2002). For those troubled with noögenic neurosis (caused by an existential vacuum) Frankl recommended logotherapy, a therapy that explores man's search for meaning in which the role of the existential therapist is to be with the client on their journey of discovery of their own meaning. As Frankl put it ...'what matters is not the meaning of man's life in general....one can search only for the concrete meaning of personal existence, a meaning which changes from man to man, from day to day, from hour to hour' (Frankl, 1967 p.57).

Yalom also emphasised the idea that search for meaning is intrinsic to our existence and that it needs to be discovered rather than given. One of the reasons why people need meaning is that it creates values which in return confirm one's sense of meaning (Yalom, 1980). Common values bind people together and form a shared belief system which tells individuals what they ought to do. But the meaning of life is intertwined and masked with other existential anxieties about isolation, freedom and death. In the case of death anxiety, one of the arguments that Yalom follows is that human beings wish to transcend death and leave something behind that matters. Like Frankl, Yalom does not say explicitly that these concerns are related to middle-aged people only but he illustrated this particular idea with a case study of a patient of his – a 55-year-old composer whose forthcoming birthday made him contemplate the meaning of life – implying that these concerns are more natural at this stage of life.

The notion of ‘self’, whether in the middle or any other stage of life, as understood by the existential-phenomenological model is always constructed through a particular experience (Spinelli, 1994). Each person also develops strong (sedimented) beliefs that are the building blocks of self. These beliefs are complex: not just personally, but culturally and socially derived. They are sometimes irrational and distorted but always very strong and it is difficult to change their interpretative power. Usually when there is incongruence between the believed and experienced self, a person is faced with choice; either to embrace the experience or to find some way of alienating it or, as Spinelli put it, ‘disowning’ it (by for example ‘forgetting’ it or avoiding reflecting on it). In many cases in order to maintain the status quo, preserve the self-construct and maintain the position in their social world, people tend to go with the latter option and avoid reflection. In the therapeutic setting, in the process of creating ‘a new’ self, people sometimes undermine the importance of their relations to others. Any changes in fundamental beliefs of any individual could have consequences for the relationships of that individual on both a personal and social level. If the client does not consider the implications of changes of their self-construct for their relationships with others, as Spinelli suggested, usually one set of disowned self constructs is replaced with another equally ‘disowned’. Examples of this, Spinelli noted, could be seen in many cases of ‘mid-life crisis’. Instead of exploring changes that brought about this ‘crisis’ and trying to accept them and ‘own’ them, a client would replace one set of self-constructs with another, neither being congruent with his experience (Spinelli, 1994). What Spinelli suggests, it seems to me, is that to negotiate a mid-life crisis successfully does not require the individual to make changes in order to construct a new ‘self’ but to face, explore and accept experiences that mid-life brings and make an effort in *owning* them. Reflecting on Spinelli’s presentation of the self being constructed through personally and socially developed sedimented beliefs, it would be interesting to explore to what extent a ‘crisis’ of middle age might be viewed as a socio-cultural construct itself and how many people ‘feel’ it because it is an idea that has been internalized by their culture or society.

### **Rogers’ personal growth**

Similarly to Frankl, Carl Rogers, one of the founders of the humanistic approach to psychotherapy, explored some existential questions that people ask themselves such as ‘What is my goal in life?’, ‘What am I striving for?’ and ‘What is my purpose?’ These are the questions that every individual asks himself at one time or another, some calmly and some in agonizing uncertainty (Rogers, 1961). Rogers also stated that each individual must answer these questions in his own way. In Rogers’

writings, they were not explicitly linked to middle age, but as generally people tend to ask themselves these kinds of questions when they are free to choose, it could be taken that they are more common later in life. Rogers postulated that people's behaviour is goal-oriented but instead of libido being the driving force, there is a basic tendency towards developing their potentials or tendency for 'personal growth'. From his counselling experience, Rogers noted that people embark on the process of personal growth not only through action but also by moving away from a part of their self with which they are not content. Rogers, as Frankl did, noted that many people did not know what they wish to do, but knew that they needed to move away from something. Rogers noted that through client-centred therapy, people gradually become more aware of their own situation, more open to experience and changes, accepting others and trusting the self. This process of 'becoming a person' is never completed – it continues throughout life (Rogers, 1961). Thus it could be said that middle age for Rogers represents a stage in the developmental process when confronting the existential questions related to personal growth.

### **Something positive?**

Erik Erikson, a neo-Freudian, also considered that psychological development continued throughout life. He suggested that each stage of a person's life requires the resolution of an issue which could be, if negotiated properly, turned into a 'virtue'. Each stage is built on what has gone before and becomes a part of that person's ego development (Wood et al. 2002). So crisis is present in the form of a major 'issue' that needs to be resolved in all stages of lifespan development. Erikson considered middle adulthood (40-65 years) to be characterized by the concern about the legacy one will leave behind and growing awareness of mortality. Those who negotiate these concerns in a healthy way are 'generative' - they care about others and issues outside themselves. Those who do not negotiate these issues in a healthy way remain focused on their own needs and become self-absorbed (Wood et al. 2002). Although Erikson's theory was one of the very few which made explicit the role of development in later life, he considered that most developmental changes occur in adolescence. The primary concern of middle age is coming to terms with death.

Peck (as cited in Wood et al. 2002) argued that this view was too narrow to account for all the issues that are of concern in the last forty years of life. To address this, Peck attempted to characterize the crisis of middle life in more detail. One area of potential crisis is when one values physical powers more highly than the wisdom that come with age. There is the need to come to terms with a loss of physical strength. But at the same time people gain (one hopes) wisdom in dealing with self and others. According

to Peck, it is wrong to deal with life problems by relying on physical capability. Another area of crisis could be if one fails to redefine partners in terms of their personality rather than viewing them as sexual partners only. Another relationship crisis is related to the ability to make new emotional bonds when children leave home and parents die. The fourth and final crisis of middle age, according to Peck, occurs if people fail to keep a flexible and open attitude to life; very often people of middle age are closed to new ideas (Wood et al. 2002). All these issues are viewed as potential sources of crisis but also, if negotiated well, they can be seen as opportunities for satisfaction and personal growth. By looking at mid-life issues in more detail, Peck actually viewed later life positively.

Yalom also supports Erikson's idea of the life developmental cycle. He mentioned George Vaillant's longitudinal study to illustrate how people's concerns from the age of 45 onwards are more long term and self-transcending rather than being personal and self-centred, characteristic of adolescence and early adulthood.

Cohen (2006) also thinks that growing old could be filled with positive experiences. The challenge is to recognise it and nurture it. Only 10% of middle aged people, Cohen found in the research he conducted (2006), described middle life as a time of crisis. Far more said that they felt more secure and eager to follow a new sense of quest and personal discovery. They thought that they could use the knowledge and experience they had gained to organize their life in a more creative way.

### **Does culture play a part?**

Theories about meaning of life and midlife crisis are culturally specific rather than universal. Erikson and Peck's remarks about life span development are based on Western concepts of when people retire, their children leave home and when they stop having sex. While there is evidence that sexual activity declines with age, some evidence also suggests that it could play an important role in people's relationships well into their 70s and beyond (Wood et al, 2002). Further, there is a vast difference between western and eastern attitudes to nature and by implication to life. Yalom points out that the westerners' view is analytical and objective in contrast to the oriental view which is subjective and integrative. While the western world considers past and present as preparation for a 'point' in the future which is always goal-oriented, the eastern world never assumes that there is a problem in life that needs to be solved: ...'instead, life is a mystery to be lived' (Yalom, 1980). Within the western world, views on the purpose of life have changed a great deal through history. The early Christians valued contemplation above all else, while the Calvinists, whose theological system has influenced the West's ideas towards the purpose of life ever since, valued hard work. Those who

do not fit in feel guilty and worthless (Yalom, 1980). The differences are evident within contemporary culture as well. Frankl referred to a survey revealing that 25% of his European students said they were to a degree in an 'existential vacuum', while amongst his American students it was 60% (Frankl, 1959). In his book 'Man's Search For Meaning' he made this distinction again by saying '...to the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy'' (Frankl, 1959, p140). But happiness, as Frankl put it, can not be pursued but can only be a by-product when a reason to be happy is found. It seems that some form of mid-life crisis occurs when people see their lives in terms of their expectations and missed potentialities, but in this process of reflection, they tend to overlook the valuable contributions they made in the past. Frankl mentioned how these 'realised values' in the past are neglected when 'measuring' how useful a person is to society. As he put it ...'today's society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and in particular, it adores the young.' (Frankl, 1959, p. 152). Frankl's study of existential vacuum in the sixties and Cohen's recent study on mid-life crisis have different results. The question is whether this is due to a general maturation of western society, or perhaps the same phenomenon has been looked at in a different way; Frankl focused on negative experience of ageing while Cohen's survey highlighted positive experience. Further, most of the research on this subject has been focused on the male life cycle and the results have been generalized to the whole population. Yalom referred to a recent feminist study offering an important corrective of this view. Middle-aged women, having devoted the first half of their lives to their families, have different desires (from their middle-aged male counterparts) for the second half of life. While traditionally men become more altruistic at this stage of their life, having achieved success, women now have their first experience of having time for themselves since marriage (Yalom, 1980).

Ageing brings losses and challenges. By accepting inevitable losses and embracing challenges one can find ways to reach individual potential and in the process maintain physical and mental health. Erikson's theory of lifespan psychological changes and Frankl's ideas of striving for deeper meanings resonate with my own experience of middle age. An interesting area for more research would be to investigate the positive experience of ageing. Knowledge and experience gained through ageing brings spiritual maturity and serenity, which can benefit not just the individual but also societies as a whole – 'happy' people are productive people. The alternative seems to me unproductive and unnecessarily bleak.

## Conclusion

While most psychodynamic theorists see middle life as a product of childhood, some, such as Erikson and Peck, consider it to be a stage in the lifespan development. Reflection and re-evaluation of one's accomplishments does not have to be seen necessarily as a time of crisis and negative experience. Facing existential questions, usually associated with the middle stage of life, is not easy; it often entails conflicts between what one is and what one should or could be (or between one's beliefs and experience), but it also opens up new possibilities. It could be said that growth and maturation underlie existentialist and humanistic ideas associated with search for meanings: Jung's individuation, Frankl's will to meaning and Rogers' personal growth. But the good things of middle life do not just happen; the meanings should be actively searched for through creative work, experience of love and fortitude and acceptance and 'owning' of the whole self. In doing so, I believe, one can come closer to achieve one's own individuation, deepen the meaning of one's own existence and continue one's own process of personal growth.

**Yana Weaver** has a background in economics and psychology. She is currently in the second year of a Doctorate course in Counselling Psychology at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling Psychology, Regent's College, London.

*An earlier version of this paper was originally submitted as a course requirement essay at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling Psychology, Regent's College, London. I am very grateful to Tony Babarik, my tutor at the time, for his suggestion to submit the paper for publication.*

## References

- Cohen, G. (2006). 'The myth of midlife crisis' Jan. 16 2006 issue of Newsweek - the article adapted from 'The Mature Mind: the Positive power of the Aging Brain', Basic Books, [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10753221/site/newsweek/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10753221/site/newsweek/) accessed on 23 February 2007.
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's Search For Meaning*. London: The Random House.
- Frankl, V. (1967). *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- Spinelli, E. (1994). *Demystifying Therapy*. London: Constable and Company Ltd.
- Storr, A. (1973). *Jung*. London, Fontana.

**Yana Weaver**

Wood, C., Littleton, K. and Oates, J. (2002). Lifespan development. In Cooper, T. & Roth, I. (eds.) *Challenging Psychological Issues*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Yalom, I.D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.

Copyright of *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* is the property of Society for Existential Analysis and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.