

CHAPTER 12



Midlife

At 20, I was so anxious about life. But there is nothing like 35 years of living to teach you who you really are. I mainly credit the life-changing experience of having twins with making me mature. Children lock you into the fact that you have a mission larger than yourself. The hard times strengthened me, too: raising my babies as a single mom before meeting Declan, taking care of Dad during his final years. At age 50, I have zero fears about physical aging. Getting through menopause was no problem; my sex life is better now than at 25! My anxiety relates to my mind. Now that the kids are grown, I'm passionate to make a difference in the world. I want to return to school to get a public health Ph.D. But can I succeed in the classroom at my age? Am I too old to get a job?

Then there are anxieties about time. I'm watching my new grandbaby during the week, while my daughter is at work. Day care is ridiculously expensive. Most important, I can't let Liam spend his first year of life with strangers. Child care is a grandma's job!

Still, I'm up for these challenges, since I can rely on my life love, Declan, to cheer me on. In most ways, I'm the same person as at 20—just as outgoing, caring—but much wiser, of course. And, it's now or never. I feel the clock ticking when I look around. My friend Charron recently died of cancer. My brother retired after having a stroke last year. I get inspiration from Mom—at age 80, still the youth group director at church. Mom—well, she's supposed to be old, but she's really middle-aged.

When you think of middle age, what images come to mind? As is true of Jamila, you probably think of people at the peak of their powers: confident and mature. You might think of wisdom, a more balanced,

less ego-involved perspective on life. You could imagine vigorous, happy grandparents, or daughters overburdened by caring for their parents in old age. You might worry about feeling more unattractive and not being interested in sex.

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In this chapter, devoted to the long life stage that psychologist Carl Jung (1933) poetically labeled “the afternoon of life,” we’ll explore these worries, joys, challenges, and changes.

Let’s start by scanning the territory. When *are* people middle-aged? What are some classic ideas we have about this long life stage?

Setting the Context

Middle age is supposed to start at 40 and end at about 60 or 65 (Etaugh & Bridges, 2006; Lachman, 2004). But in U.S. surveys, roughly *half* of all people in their late sixties and early seventies call themselves middle-aged (Lachman, 2004). They may be right. When three top-ranking 2021 U.S. politicians — Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, and Mitch McConnell — clocked in at *close to 80*, can we pinpoint any age when middle age ends?

Table 12.1 spells out common ideas we have about this long time of life. In the next sections, I will explore each question in depth. Let’s begin with that nagging fear spelled out in item one: As we reach our forties and fifties, don’t we feel less attractive and lose our passion for sex?

Table 12.1: Five Core Questions About Development in Middle Age

1. As I get older, will I feel worse about my looks and be less interested in sex?
2. As I get older, will I grow more intelligent?
3. As I get older, how will my personality change?
4. As I get older, will I become wise?
5. How can I be happy *throughout* the adult years?

Physical Development

When Jung made his evocative statement, “We cannot live life’s afternoon by the program of life’s morning,” he was alluding to the fact that, during the second half of adult life, we must abandon our quest for physical beauty in favor of deeper concerns. But do aging adults *really* care less about looking sexy and young?

Midlife Body Image

Given the billions we spend on Botox and body lifts, the answer is no. In fact, as I mentioned earlier in this book, feeling physically appealing is centrally important to happiness at every age — and this is equally true among midlife women and men (Newton, Russell, & McAdams, 2017).

The good news is that, perhaps because their reference point shifts upward (“How do I look compared to people my *own* age?”), female body dissatisfaction does not increase in middle age (see Rodgers & DuBois, 2016). The fact that world-class sex symbols — such as Dolly Parton and Cher — are still going strong in their late 70s proves women don’t have to give up their sexuality until well into the evening of life.

Still, just as during adolescence (see Chapter 8), similar body-image issues plague vulnerable midlife women — feeling deficient by comparing yourself to the idealized images of “older” movie stars (“Why don’t I look as sexy as Cher?”), subscribing to a 50-something version of the thin ideal (“I feel so overweight. Why can’t I look like

Learning Outcomes

- Compare changes in sexual performance for aging women and men, making reference to the impact of menopause on women.
- List some keys to having a good body image and gratifying sex in middle and later life.



A couple in their fifties will probably feel just as attractive as they did in their twenties, provided they take care of their bodies and don't expect to look exactly like their 20-year-old selves!

menopause The age-related process, occurring at about age 50, in which ovulation and menstruation stop due to the decline of estrogen.

my 20-year-old self?”). (See Hefner and others, 2014.) These negative attitudes (no surprise) impair sexual desire (Koch and others, 2005). How does *physical* sexual capacity change as men and women age?

Exploring the Physiological Sexual Changes

The age-related sexual findings for men and women are different. Older men need more time to develop an erection. They are more likely to lose an erection before ejaculation occurs. Their ejaculations become less intense. By their fifties, most men are not able to have another erection for 12 to 24 hours after having sex (Masters & Johnson, 1966).

Because their sexual apparatus does not critically depend on blood flow, women can be just as orgasmic at 80 as at age 20. Unfortunately, however, especially in late middle age, women are more apt than men to turn off to sex (D. M. Lee and others, 2016). The reasons, as I implied earlier, are environmental: being without a partner (due to widowhood or divorce); having an older spouse with a chronic disease; not having people respond to you as a sexual human being. Menopause indirectly affects sexuality, too.

Menopause typically occurs at about age 50, when estrogen production falls off dramatically and women stop ovulating. Specifically, the defining menopause marker is not menstruating for a year. As estrogen production declines, a woman's menstrual cycle becomes irregular. During this sexual winding-down period (called *perimenopause*), as Table 12.2 shows, many people have physical symptoms such as night sweats and hot flashes (sudden sensations of heat) (Lerner-Geva and others, 2010).

This estrogen loss causes changes in the reproductive tract. After menopause, the vaginal walls thin out and become more fragile. The vagina shortens, and its opening narrows. The size of the clitoris and labia shrinks and blood flow decreases. It takes longer after arousal for lubrication to begin (Masters & Johnson, 1966; Saxon, Etten, & Perkins, 2010). Women don't produce as much fluid as before. These changes can make having intercourse so painful that some women stop having sex.

Baring the *Real* Sexual Truth

By now many readers might be sadly thinking, “I'd better enjoy my current sex life, because my sexual self will probably evaporate by my late fifties or when I'm 65.” Not so fast!

Table 12.2: Stereotypes and Facts About Menopause

- The stereotype:** Women have terrible physical symptoms while going through menopause.

The facts: Researchers find that an upsurge of minor physical complaints does occur during the few years preceding menopause: lack of energy, backaches, and joint stiffness. Many women experience hot flashes and some sleeplessness. Still, there is variability from person to person, and complaints vary from culture to culture. In one study, while fewer than half the women in a Scandinavian poll reported difficult symptoms, 2 out of 3 U.S. women did (Nappi & Kokot-Kierepa, 2010).
- The stereotype:** Women are very moody while going through menopause.

The facts: Worldwide, women tend to show a minor rise in anxiety and depression right before and after menopause (Mulhall and others, 2018; Tang and others, 2019). So, statistically speaking, this common perception is true.
- The stereotype:** Women feel empty, “dried up,” old, and asexual after menopause.

The facts: Actually, this idea is false. Many women find menopause a relief. For instance, one-third of the women in Taiwan and almost half of all Australian women in a cross-cultural study said that they were happy not to have to deal with a period every month (Fu, Anderson, & Courtney, 2003). In another Danish study, at menopause, most women felt that they were entering a freer (and sexier!) stage of life (Hvas, 2001).

Yes, statistically speaking, sexual desire does decline in women and men in late middle age (D. M. Lee and others, 2016; Waite and others, 2017). However, as you saw in Table 12.2, because they are liberated from anxieties about getting pregnant, after menopause some women report that their sex lives improve. Their slower arousal-to-ejaculation tempo makes older men more physiologically in sync with women, as females generally require more time to become fully aroused (see Masters & Johnson, 1966).

And if you assume that male performance difficulties signal the death of sex, think again. In one survey, while admitting their problems were troubling, middle-aged and older men rejected the idea that erectile capacity defined their sexual selves (Thompson & Barnes, 2013). Many reported becoming better lovers during life's afternoon (and evening). Eighty-four-year-old Owe shared this delightful under-the-covers account:

[Sex is] more carefree . . . lying naked . . . caressing each other's bodies and saying tender words . . . fondling the genitals. . . . Back then it was . . . arousal and everything was over. . . . This is elongated; it can stretch over an entire . . . day.

(quoted in Sandberg, 2013, p. 269)

This lovely description makes sense of why, in one survey, older couples described sex in similar ways: It's about intimacy, communication, and authenticity. The only group who disagreed were sex therapists — who, by focusing on what goes wrong physically, believed that sex automatically becomes dissatisfying with age.

Table 12.3 summarizes the male and female changes in this section and offers advice for staying passionate about sex as you age. Now, let's look at the question that first enticed researchers to study adult development: How do we change intellectually as we grow old?



A 60-something couple may be just as passionate now as ever—if they have a more inclusive definition of intimacy.

Table 12.3: Staying Passionate About Sex with Age

FOR MEN	
Problem	Solutions
Trouble maintaining or achieving an erection	1. Understand that physiologically slowing down is the norm, and do not be alarmed by problems performing. Sexual relations need to occur more slowly. Also understand that these changes may make you a more sensitive lover as you grow older. 2. Stay healthy. Avoid sexually impairing conditions such as heart disease. If possible, avoid medications that have sexual side effects (such as antidepressants and blood pressure pills). 3. If troubled by chronic problems performing, explore the medical and surgical options that can help.
FOR WOMEN	
Problem	Solutions
Possibly, poor body image; no sexual signals coming from the outside world	1. Stay sexy, be conscious of your physical appearance, but don't compare yourself to midlife movie stars or your 20-year-old self. 2. Find a partner (there may be many!) who appreciates you as a sexual human being.
Vaginal pain and lack of ample lubrication	3. Use over-the-counter lubricants and consider hormone replacement therapy (but discuss this with your doctor).
Concluding advice for both sexes: Don't accept the stereotype that sexuality declines with age. Sex has the potential to become more emotionally gratifying (meaning, affection-centered) as people grow old.	

Tying It All Together

1. Imagine you are in your fifties. You can expect to feel *just as good/far worse* about your physical appearance as in your twenties, and you will probably *care less/be just as interested* in how you look. (Select the correct options.)
2. Pick the correct sex: Who changes the most in terms of physiological sexual performance with age?
3. Cynthia has just reached menopause. Pick the *false* statement:
 - a. Cynthia has not menstruated for a year.
 - b. Cynthia will definitely feel washed up and old.
 - c. Cynthia may find having sex more painful.
4. Summarize in one sentence how lovemaking changes with age.

Answers to Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.

Learning Outcomes

- Explain typical changes in intelligence during adulthood.
- List tips for keeping midlife intellectual capacities fine-tuned.

Seattle Longitudinal Study The definitive study of the effect of aging on intelligence, involving simultaneously conducting and comparing the results of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Cognitive Development

When do you think we reach our intellectual peak? Your answer will probably be at around age 40 or 45 rather than 20 or 25 (Sternberg & Berg, 1992). But do we *really* get more intelligent with age? According to the Seattle Longitudinal Study, it depends (Schaie, Willis, & Caskie, 2004; Schaie & Zanjani, 2006).

Exploring the Lessons from Standard Intelligence Tests

The Seattle Longitudinal Study, carried out a half century ago, was a landmark because it controlled for the contrasting biases of cross-sectional and longitudinal research. Since older people, especially in the mid-twentieth century, were less likely to go to college than younger cohorts, cross-sectional studies that compared different age groups at a single point in time overestimated negative, age-related cognitive change. But, because only the most elite, intellectually capable volunteers return to be tested over years, longitudinal studies were skewed in a positive way (Baltes & Smith, 1997; see Chapter 1).

To compensate for these contrasting biases (cross-sectional research is too negative, longitudinal studies are too positive), the researchers developed a brilliant solution: Conduct *both* studies simultaneously and compare their results to get a true picture of how intelligence changes with age. Moreover, the Seattle study was unusual because the researchers used an intelligence test measuring separate *kinds* of abilities to get a panorama of how different intellectual skills change during adult life.

The psychologists first selected people enrolled in a Seattle health organization who were seven years apart in age, and then tested them and compared their scores. Next, they followed each group longitudinally, testing them at 7-year intervals. At each evaluation, the researchers selected another cross-sectional group, some of whom they also followed over time.

Figure 12.1 shows a few results. As we would predict, expect to reach your intellectual peak around the late forties or early fifties (Schaie, 1996; Schaie, Willis, & Caskie, 2004). But notice the differences from skill to skill. On tests measuring our knowledge base, such as vocabulary, scores improve into the sixties (Larsen, Hartmann, & Nyborg, 2007). But, when a measure involves doing something new very fast (such as the word fluency measure in the chart), losses start as early as the forties (Ardila, 2007). Now let's look at a theory that puts this pattern into a larger perspective, and so tells us *exactly* how we behave intellectually in the real world.

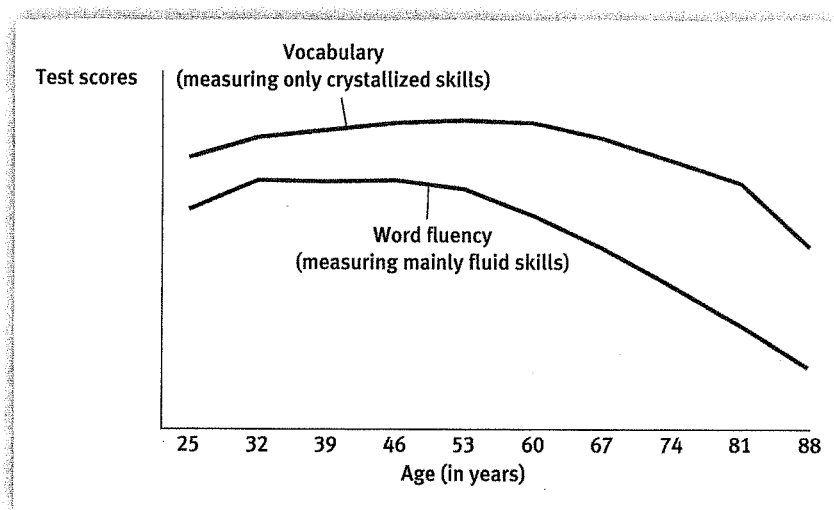


Figure 12.1: Changes in two intellectual abilities over the decades in the Seattle Longitudinal Study

Notice that scores on a test demanding a heavier component of fluid skills (word fluency, which asks people to name as many words as they can starting with a letter, such as A, within a time limit) decrease after the late forties, while scores on a totally crystallized test (vocabulary) stay stable into the sixties. But, in general, intellectual abilities reach a peak at about age 50 and decline in old age.

Data from Schaie, 1996

Two Types of Intelligence: Crystallized and Fluid Skills

Psychologists divide intelligence into two categories. **Crystallized intelligence** refers to our knowledge base, the amount of information we have accumulated over the years. **Fluid intelligence** involves our ability to reason quickly when facing new intellectual challenges.

Because it depends on our nervous system being at its biological peak, fluid intelligence is at its high point during the twenties and then declines. Since crystallized intelligence measures stored knowledge, this ability tends to increase well into late middle age. However, at some point (probably in the sixties), crystallized IQ declines because our forgetting outpaces the new knowledge that we can absorb.

So, in situations demanding quick performance and multitasking, people notice their abilities declining at a relatively young age. In your late thirties, it's harder to catch a football while keeping your attention on the opposing team. At age 45, you have more trouble juggling cooking and talking with dinner guests than at 25. In old age, these accelerating fluid losses, as I will describe in Chapter 14, progress to the point where they truly interfere with daily life.

The distinction between fluid and crystallized intelligence accounts for why people in fast-paced jobs, such as air-traffic controllers, worry about being over the hill in their forties. It makes sense of why airline CEOs or professors reach their professional peak in their sixties (but not much beyond!). Anytime an activity depends heavily on quickness, being older presents problems. Whenever an intellectual challenge involves stored knowledge, people improve into their fifties and beyond.

crystallized intelligence A basic facet of intelligence, consisting of a person's knowledge base, or storehouse, of accumulated information.

fluid intelligence A basic facet of intelligence, consisting of the ability to quickly master new intellectual activities.

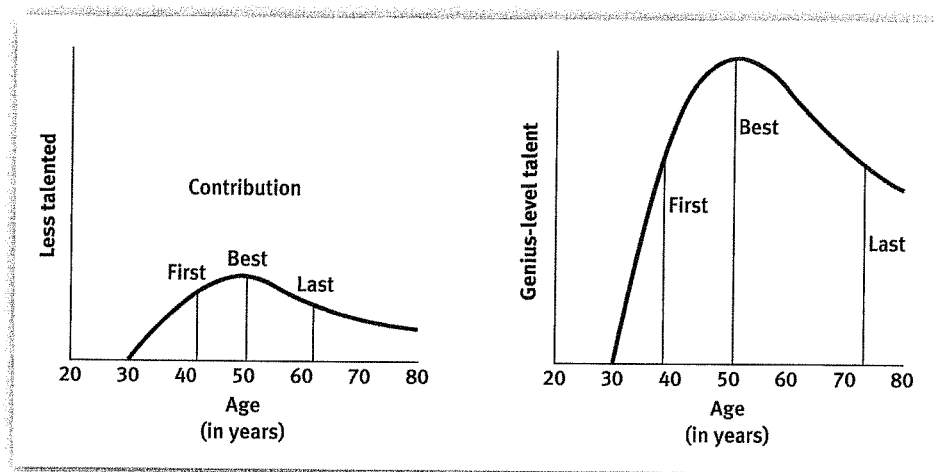


As his passion demands speedy mental processing, a gaming guru may feel "old" in his thirties. But a 60-year-old professor would probably describe his teaching as better today because his job depends almost exclusively on crystallized skills.

Figure 12.2: Age-related changes in the career paths of geniuses and of less eminent creators

This chart shows that people reach their peak period of creativity in midlife. However, the most gifted geniuses stand head and shoulders above their contemporaries at every age.

Data from Simonton, 1997



Suppose you are an artist or a writer. When can you expect to do your finest work? Researchers find that when a creative activity is dependent on being totally original, such as dancing or writing poetry, people perform best in their thirties (see Simonton, 2007). If the form of creativity depends just on crystalized skills, such as writing nonfiction or, in my case, college textbooks (yes!), people reach a peak in their sixties (Simonton, 1997, 2002). But in tracing the lives of people famous for their creative work, one researcher discovered that who we are *as people*, or our enduring abilities, outweighs the changes that occur with age. As Figure 12.2 shows, true geniuses outshine everyone else at any age (Simonton, 1997).

So, creatively or career-wise, expect to reach your peak in late middle age (in most fields). Still, expect to be the same person — to a large degree — as when you were young. If you are exceptionally competent and creative at 30, you can stay exceptionally competent and creative at 70, or even 95.

From Sigmund Freud, who was putting forth masterpieces into his 80s, to Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed world-class buildings into his ninth decade of life, history is full of examples showing that creativity burns bright well into old age.

Staying IQ Smart

Returning to typical creative people, such as you and me, what qualities help *any* person stay cognitively sharp? What causes our intellectual capacities to decline at a younger-than-usual age?

Health Matters As I implied in the chapter-opening vignette, the first key to staying mentally sharp as we age lies in staying physically “young.” Telling evidence comes from a mammoth U.S. study that tracked thousands of adults. After testing physiological functions spanning heart rate to glucose metabolism, body mass index to cortisol levels, scientists devised an overall body deterioration score they labeled **allostatic load** (Karlman and others, 2014). As Figure 12.3 shows, this global index of body dysregulation was strongly related to performance on executive functions tests. Putting these findings concretely: As an adult with an allostatic load of 2.7 (the seventy-fifth percentile), you would rank almost three years older in your ability to quickly process information than someone the same age with a score of 1 (the twenty-fifth percentile)!

The most compelling research relates to the connection between being physically fit (that is, exercising) and having a well-tuned mind. Physically fit older and midlife adults consistently perform better on cognitive tests. Exercise, as I imply below, may even physiologically change the brain (Gourgouvelis, Yelder, &

allostatic load An overall score of body deterioration, gained from summing how a person functions on multiple physiological indexes. Allostatic load predicts cognitive performance during adult life.

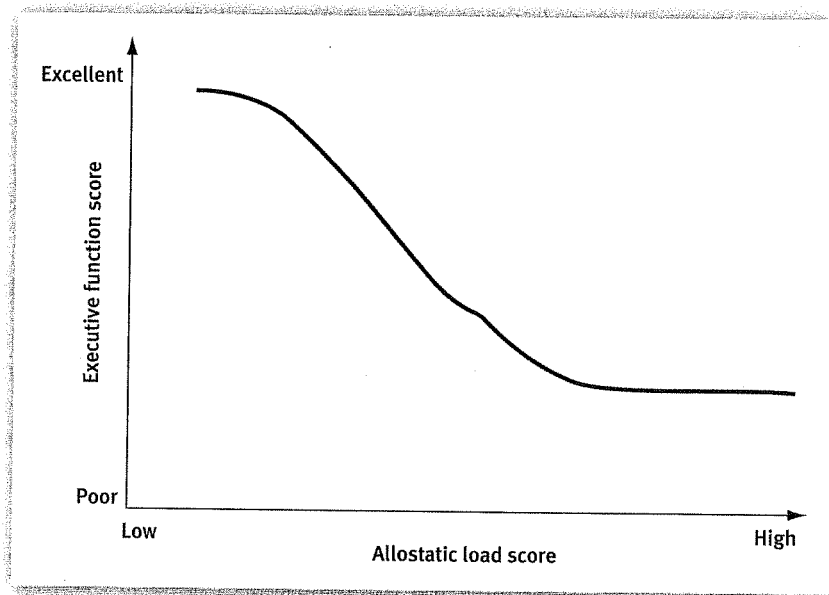


Figure 12.3: How allostatic load relates to scores on measures of executive functions in more than 1,000 U.S. adults with an average age in their late fifties This chart shows concretely that body deterioration (measured by allostatic load) is intimately tied to cognitive functioning in midlife (not just over age 65).

Data from Karlamangla and others, 2014, p. 391

Murphy, 2017; Hwang, Castelli, and Gonzalez-Lima, 2017; Jonasson and others, 2017; Williams and others, 2017; Zhao and others, 2020)!

Mental Stimulation (with People) May Matter Because, as I discussed in Chapter 3, environmental stimulation promotes synaptogenesis, the second key to staying intelligent should be a no-brainer: Exercise your mental capacities.

People who work in challenging jobs become more mentally flexible with age (Schooler, 1999, 2001; Schooler, Mulatu, & Oates, 2004). Careers that demand complex people skills — from hosting talk shows to coaching college students — keep midlife people mentally on their toes (Finkel and others, 2009). So one intellectual insurance policy is to follow my advice in Chapters 10 and 11: Find a compelling, flow-inducing career.

But wait a second! Don't adults who are intelligent and well-educated to begin with gravitate toward demanding, flow-inducing jobs? Couldn't *selection forces* account for why these people become more mentally adept as they age? To prove that mental stimulation promotes cognitive growth, we might have to conduct an impossible (but fun) decades-long experiment: Assign young people to participate in a *Jeopardy!*-like quiz show, then compare their IQs to those of a control group in later middle age.

The good news, however, is that, while we can't carry out this study with our species, it's more acceptable to experiment on rats. When researchers put rats in a large cage with wheels and swings and compared their cortices with a control group, this treatment produced thicker, heavier brains (Diamond, 1988, 1993). Let's tentatively accept the idea, then, that just as physical exercise may change the brain, challenging life experiences promote resilient minds.

In sum, people in their forties and fifties are at the peak of their mental powers. But they will have trouble mastering new cognitive challenges (tasks involving fluid skills) when under time pressure. To preserve their cognitive capacities, adults should take care of their health, become physically fit, and seek out stimulating work. And you can tell any worried 50-year-old family member who is contemplating getting a new degree, like Jamila in the chapter-opening vignette, to go for it!



Obviously, Becky Hammon needs to take care of her health in order to coach the San Antonio Spurs basketball team — but the interpersonal challenges involved in dealing with these young athletes will keep her “on her toes” intellectually during her older years.

INTERVIEWS

Keeping a Fine-Tuned Mind

Now let's look at the lessons the research offers for any person who wants to stay mentally sharp as the years pass.

- Take care of your physical health and exercise, exercise, exercise!
- Stay (or become) passionate about learning new things.
- As challenging interpersonal activities matter most, search for careers (like teaching or sales) that involve people-oriented work.
- Understand that as you get older, tasks involving complex information processing will be more difficult. To cope with these losses, you might adopt the following three-part strategy devised by developmentalist Paul Baltes, called **selective optimization with compensation**.

selective optimization with compensation Paul Baltes's three principles for successful aging (and living): (1) focus on our most important activities; (2) work especially hard in these top-ranking areas; and (3) rely on external aids when we cannot cope on our own.

As we move into later middle age and notice we cannot function as well as before, Baltes believed that we need to (1) *selectively* focus on our most important activities, shedding less important priorities; (2) *optimize*, or work harder, to perform at our best in these important areas of life; and (3) *compensate*, or rely on external aids, when we cannot cope on our own (Baltes, 2003; Baltes & Carstensen, 2003; Krampe & Baltes, 2003).

Let's take Mr. Fernandez, whose hobby is gourmet cooking. In his fifties, he might decide to give up some less important interest, such as tennis, to conserve his strength for the time he spends at the stove (*selection*). He would need to work harder to prepare difficult dishes that demand split-second timing, such as his prize-winning soufflés (*optimization*). He might put a chair in the kitchen rather than stand for hours, or give up preparing entire dinner party feasts and rely on his guests to bring an appetizer or dessert (*compensation*). ■■



As they age, people who delight in their cooking skills can still prepare gourmet feasts, provided they rely on some meal preparation help from their dinner guests.

Although Baltes devised these guidelines to apply to successful aging, they are relevant to anyone striving for work-life balance: from parents struggling to handle careers and children, to students strategically selecting which courses need the most study time. And isn't finding the correct work-life balance critical to becoming mature? Do we *really* grow emotionally and become mature as the years pass?

Tying It All Together

1. Mick is a paramedic and Arturo is a psychologist. Pick which man is likely to reach his career peak earlier, and explain the reasons why.
2. The intellectual skill that is likely to *increase* in midlife is *expanding your vocabulary/learning a new video game*, which is a *crystallized/fluid* skill. (Select the correct options.)
3. If Rayan's allostatic load score is elevated for her age, you can predict that she will perform *worse/better* on mental processing tests.
4. Teneca says, "I've got too much on my plate. I can't do anything well." Identify the theory discussed in this chapter that would be most helpful in addressing this problem, and explain what this theory would advise.

Answers to the Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.

Emotional Development

We actually have *contradictory* views about emotional growth during adulthood. One idea is that we don't change: "If Agné is irascible in college, she will be bitter in the nursing home." Another is that entering new life stages and having life-changing experiences propel maturity: "Since getting married, I'm a more stable person"; "Coming close to death after my car accident transformed how I think about the world." Do people stay the same or get more mature as years pass? Actually, they do both!

Exploring the Big Five

The main way psychologists measure personality is by ranking people according to five basic temperamental qualities. As you read this list, take a minute to think of where you stand on these largely genetically determined dimensions, which Robert McCrae and Paul Costa (1990) name the **Big Five**:

- *Neuroticism* refers to our general tendency toward mental health versus psychological disturbance. Are you resilient, stable, and well-adjusted — someone who bounces back after setbacks? Or are you hostile, high-strung, hysterical, and impulsive — a person others might label as psychologically disturbed? (Children with serious externalizing and internalizing tendencies would rank high on neuroticism.)
- *Extraversion* describes outgoing attitudes, such as warmth, gregariousness, activity, and assertion. Are you sociable, friendly, a real "people person," someone who thrives on meeting new friends and going to parties? Or are you most comfortable curling up alone with a good book? Do you get antsy when you are by yourself, thinking "I've got to get out and be with people," or do you prefer living a reflective, solitary life?
- *Openness to experience* refers to our passion to seek out new experiences. Do you adore traveling the world, adopting different perspectives, having people shake up your preconceived ideas? Do you believe life should be a continual adventure and relish getting out of your comfort zone? Or are you cautious, rigid, risk-averse, comfortable mainly with what you already know?
- *Conscientiousness* describes the kind of efficacious, worker personality described in Chapters 10 and 11. Are you hardworking, self-disciplined, and reliable — someone people count on to take on demanding jobs and get things done? Or, are you erratic and irresponsible, prone to renege on obligations and forget appointments — a person your friends and co-workers can't trust?
- *Agreeableness* has to do with kindness, empathy, and the ability to compromise. Are you pleasant, loving, and easy to get along with; or stubborn, hot-tempered, someone who continually seems offended and gets into fights? (Agreeable people, for instance, have secure attachment styles.)

Hundreds of studies show that our Big Five rankings have consequences for our lives. Because extraverts are upbeat and happy, they have more fulfilling relationships (Butkovic, Brkovic, & Bratko, 2011; Cox and others, 2010). People low in agreeableness are more likely to be lonely in later life (Itzick, Kagan, & Zychlinski, 2020). Ranking low on openness is related to xenophobia, meaning disliking other racial groups (Crawford & Brandt, 2019; Federico & Aguilara, 2019); but this

Learning Outcomes

- Classify the Big Five dimensions, making reference to conscientiousness in promoting adult success.
- Describe which attributes foster generativity.
- List the defining attributes of wisdom and the conditions that foster this quality.
- Summarize the research on happiness during adulthood.

Big Five Five core psychological predispositions — neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness — that underlie personality.



Look at these exuberant women enjoying themselves at a party and you will understand why extraverts are generally happy (and also why simply being around a “people person” makes us feel more upbeat). How would you rank yourself on extraversion and each of the other Big Five traits I just described?

finding varies from nation to nation (Fatke, 2019) and may apply only in Western democracies (Alper & Yilmaz, 2019). Conscientiousness predicts a cornucopia of positive effects, from avoiding addictions (Dash and others, 2019) to academic success.

Because it has such widespread pluses, let’s now pause to look specifically at why conscientiousness drives a successful life.

At the core of conscientiousness (and to some degree openness) is having good *executive functions* — thinking through our actions and modulating our emotions. Therefore, it makes sense that this Big Five trait is closely related to doing well in school (Sobowale and others, 2017; Song &

Shi, 2017; Sorić, Penezić, & Burić, 2017). Actually, conscientiousness predicts achievement in most life realms.

Conscientious adults have more stable marriages (Razeghi and others, 2011). They are less likely than their contemporaries to be unemployed (Egan and others, 2017). Study after study suggests conscientious people are healthier (Stoll and others, 2017) and live longer than their peers because they take such good care of their health (Hampson and others, 2013; Strickhouser, Zell, & Krizan, 2017; Sutin and others, 2013).

Take Gia, who ranked high on conscientiousness at age 10. Her hard-working personality ensured that she was accepted at a good college, graduated at the top of her class, and got an excellent first job. As she traveled through her career, Gia was praised for her industriousness, earned promotions, and eventually landed an executive position at a firm. Gia was committed to her marriage, had the emotion-regulation talents to communicate well with her mate, and — because we match up by *homogamy* — selected a conscientious spouse, who also helped encourage her to exercise and eat right (Williams and others, 2019). At age 55, Gia’s life is a testament to the power of hard work in building a fulfilling life.

Now, imagine Brett, your emerging-adult friend, who ranked low on this Big Five dimension. In his teens, Brett became ensnared in alcohol and drugs (Dash and others, 2019), so he never made it through school. Because Brett was so unreliable, he continually lost jobs and — over the decades — had several bitter divorces. His children rejected him for being an absent dad (Le Vigouroux and others, 2017). At age 60, Brett has serious health concerns and appears years older than his age. His decades of failure have left your friend penniless, lonely, and depressed.

These descriptions suggest that because our nature (or basic temperamental traits) shape specific life experiences, we should become more like ourselves as we age. Due to *evocative and active* processes, Gia’s conscientious personality paved the way for her to outshine her peers at each adult stage. Brett and Agné (mentioned earlier in this chapter) were set up to fail socially and work-wise, and became bitter over time.

Therefore, what’s astonishing is that twin studies show personality gets *less* heritable as we age and encounter the random ups and downs of life (Bleidorn, Kandler, & Caspi, 2014; Briley & Tucker-Drob, 2014; Specht, Bleidorn, and others, 2014). And, although the main theme is consistency (who you basically are as a person probably won’t change), the good news is that during adulthood many of us *do* get more mature.

Making the Maturity Case

One early influence fostering maturity is confronting the typical challenges of adult life (see Hutteman and others, 2014). As I suggested in Chapters 9 and 10, after leaving the cocoon of our families, we need to emotionally grow up. And, although some research suggests there is also a tendency to become more agreeable as we move from youth to middle age, conscientiousness is the Big Five trait that increases most (Wagner, Lüdke, & Robitzsch, 2019).

A delightful example of the power of adult relationships to mold our character (meaning the Big Five trait of conscientiousness) comes from a German study exploring personality changes in relation to the living arrangements of emerging adults. While young people who cohabited with roommates did not increase much in conscientiousness over a 4-year period, moving in with a romantic partner was accompanied by a real boost in that core trait (Jonkmann and others, 2014). Bottom line: Close, adult encounters — of the romantic kind — force us to toe the maturity line.

But emotional growth doesn't just stop after we assume adult roles. People grow more emotionally hardy well into their older years (Specht, Bleidorn, and others, 2014). According to a cross-sectional study examining the prevalence of mature personalities in huge samples of German and Austrian adults, the percentage of women classified as resilient floated upward from a low during emerging adulthood to a high in old age (Specht, Luhmann, & Geiser, 2014).

In creative studies conducted in Switzerland and the United States, researchers offered evidence that midlife and older people have a less egocentric, more altruistic attitude toward life (Freund & Blanchard-Fields, 2014). When asked to imagine owning an apple orchard, older age groups were more prone to choose an ecology-friendly harvesting strategy over one that maximized profit. Midlife adults were more apt to donate what they earned from participating in the study to a social cause than were young people provided with the same choice. This generosity was not related to age differences in wealth, as it also appeared when controlling for income.

Obviously, these findings are averages. There are many selfish, “out-of-control” 60-somethings. Perhaps you have a friend who peaked emotionally in high school and went on to have an unhappy life: the teenage football star who descended into drug abuse, your senior prom queen who now lives homeless, on the street.

Can we identify the core quality that propels emotional growth (and happiness) during adult life? The answer is yes!



This volunteer named Frances, whose passion is cultivating gardens of fresh food for low-income families, embodies the fact that altruism ideally flowers during the second half of adult life.

Generativity: The Key to a Happy Life

By now you should be impressed by the power of conscientiousness to predict life success. But while knowing where we stand on the Big Five can predict our journey's outcome, it tells us nothing about the twists and turns of that journey itself. Think of three friends who rank high on conscientiousness. One person might be a full-time mother; another might be a store manager; another might have found the outlet for his conscientiousness through being a nurse. To really understand what makes human beings tick, we must move closer and interview people about their lives. This is the strategy that Dan McAdams decided to employ to explore personality during the adult years. Let's eavesdrop on one of this psychologist's interviews, with a woman reflecting on the life-shattering experience of seeing her then 4-year-old son being hit by a car:

When I got there, he [Jeff, who is now a healthy 18-year-old] was lying . . . unconscious. . . . That feeling of being helpless . . . while I was sure I was watching my son die was a turning point. I decided [to become] an E.M.T.

(quoted in McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993, p. 228)

In listening to these stories, McAdams realized the power of random life events in shaping personality. Although this woman might have always ranked high in conscientiousness, the *specific* path her life took was altered by this pivotal experience. To really understand development, we must get up close and personal and talk to people about their missions and goals.

Table 12.4: Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Life Stage	Primary Task
Infancy (birth to 1 year)	Basic trust versus mistrust
Toddlerhood (1 to 2 years)	Autonomy versus shame and doubt
Early childhood (3 to 6 years)	Initiative versus guilt
Middle childhood (7 to 12 years)	Industry versus inferiority
Adolescence to emerging adulthood (teens into twenties)	Identity versus role confusion
Early adulthood (twenties to early forties)	Intimacy versus isolation
Middle adulthood (forties to sixties)	Generativity versus stagnation
Late adulthood (late sixties and beyond)	Integrity versus despair

Examining Generative Priorities

Actually, McAdams's career mission has been to scientifically test the ideas of the pioneering theorist who *does* believe that our goals shift dramatically at different life stages: Erik Erikson. Does **generativity**, nurturing the next generation, become our main agenda during midlife? Is Erikson (1969) right that being generative is the key to happiness during "the afternoon" of life? When people in their forties or fifties don't feel generative, are they stagnant, demoralized, and depressed? (See Table 12.4.)

To capture Erikson's concept, McAdams's research team constructed a questionnaire to measure generative concerns. (You can see the first 10 items on this scale in Table 12.5.) The researchers also explored generative priorities by telling participants to "list the top-ranking agendas in your life now" (see McAdams, 2001).

When the scientists gave their measures to young, middle-aged, and older people, they found few age differences in generative attitudes. People were just as likely to care about making a difference in the world at age 20 or 50 or 85. The researchers did discover differences in generative *priorities* — with emerging adults ranking very low on this scale (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998). Young people's goals were centered

generativity In Erikson's theory, the seventh psychosocial task, when people in midlife find meaning from nurturing the next generation, caring for others, or enriching the lives of others through their work. According to Erikson, when midlife adults have not achieved generativity, they feel stagnant, without a sense of purpose in life.

Table 12.5: McAdams's Generative Concern Scale

True	False	
☐	☐	1. I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences.
☐	☐	2. I do not feel that other people need me.
☐	☐	3. I think I would like the work of a teacher.
☐	☐	4. I feel as though I have made a difference to many people.
☐	☐	5. I do not volunteer to work for a charity.
☐	☐	6. I have made and created things that have had an impact on other people.
☐	☐	7. I try to be creative in most things that I do.
☐	☐	8. I think that I will be remembered for a long time after I die.
☐	☐	9. I believe that society cannot be responsible for providing food and shelter to all people who are homeless.
☐	☐	10. Others would say that I have made unique contributions to society.
How do you score on this scale measuring overall generative motivations?		
Information from McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1993, pp. 1008–1015.		
Generative Options: 1. T, 2. F, 3. T, 4. T, 5. F, 6. T, 7. T, 8. T, 9. F, 10. T		

on identity issues. A 20-year-old might say, “I want to make it through college and get a good job” or “My plan is to figure out what to do with my life.” Midlife and older adults were more likely to report, “My mission is to help my teenage son,” or “My goal is to work for justice and peace in the world.”

This makes sense. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, prosocial behaviors are in full swing by toddlerhood. There is no reason to think that our basic human drive to be nurturing changes at any life stage. But, just as Erikson would predict, we need to resolve issues related to our personal development before our primary concern shifts to giving to others in the world.

Is Erikson right that generativity is the key to happiness during adult life? The answer is yes, as long as we define happiness in the right way. If we imagine happiness as “feeling good” (**hedonic happiness**), generativity has nothing to do with living a happy life. But, if we consider this term in its richer sense, as having purpose and meaning (**eudaimonic happiness**), then yes, highly generative people have exceptionally happy lives (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Versey, Stewart, & Duncan, 2013; Zucker, Ostrove, & Stewart, 2002).

When people don’t have generative goals, do their lives lack meaning? Do adults feel *stagnant*, as Erikson described — aimless and purposeless? Read what one researcher had to say about Deborah, who, in her late forties, scored very low on generativity in a study of women’s lives:

In reference to the birth of her first child, Deborah wrote, “All actions automatic. No emotional involvement . . . ; totally self-preserving but very unpleasant.”

(quoted in Peterson, 1998, p. 12)

As this case history suggests, giving birth does not automatically evoke generativity. Some people who never have children, such as Florence Nightingale, the pioneer of modern nursing, can be worldwide beacons of generativity. In fact, when we think of U.S. icons, such as Rosa Parks, the ultimate generative activity occurs when people change society in an enduring way.

Examining the Lives of Generative Adults

Do the childhoods of people who commit their lives to changing society differ from more typical adults? To answer this question, McAdams’s research team selected community leaders who scored at the upper ends of their Generative Concern Scale and had them tell their life stories. Would these autobiographies differ from those of adults, like Deborah in my previous example, who ranked low on Erikson’s midlife task?

The answer was yes. The life stories of highly generative adults had themes demonstrating what the researchers called a **commitment script**. They often described early memories of feeling “blessed”: “I was my grandmother’s favorite”; “I was a miracle child who should not have survived.” They reported feeling sensitive to other people’s suffering from a young age. They talked about having an identity revolving around generative values that never wavered from their adolescent years. A 50-year-old minister in one of McAdams’s studies was a teenage prostitute, then a con artist who spent two years in a federal prison; but, throughout her life, she reported, “I was always doing ministry.”

The most striking characteristic of generative adults’ life stories was **redemption sequences** — devastating events that turned out in a positive way (McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001). In the example I just mentioned, the woman minister might view the humiliation of being sent to prison as the best thing that ever happened, the experience that turned her life around. According to McAdams (2006), early memories of feeling personally blessed, an enduring sensitivity to others’ misfortunes, caring values, and, especially, being able to turn personal tragedies into growth experiences are the core ingredients of the commitment script and the main correlates of a generative adult life (see also Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011).

hedonic happiness Well-being defined as pure pleasure.

eudaimonic happiness Well-being defined as having a sense of meaning and life purpose.

commitment script In Dan McAdams’s research, a type of autobiography produced by highly generative adults that involves childhood memories of feeling special; being unusually sensitive to others’ misfortunes; having a strong, enduring generative mission from adolescence; and redemption sequences.

redemption sequence In Dan McAdams’s research, a characteristic theme of highly generative adults’ autobiographies, in which they describe tragic events that turned out for the best.



Hulton Archive/Getty Images



Image Asset Management/World History Archive/A&E Fotostock

The lives of Florence Nightingale (top) and Rosa Parks (bottom) show that exceptional generativity lies in making a difference in the world.

There is a fascinating ethnic aspect to exceptional generativity. McAdams found African American men and women were overrepresented in his highly generative community-minded adults (Hart and others, 2001; Jones & McAdams, 2013; McAdams, 2006; Newton & Baltys, 2014). Does coping with discrimination — plus a strong grounding in religion — make African Americans unusually sensitive to human suffering and so prone to devote their lives to the greater good? In support of this possibility, themes stressing progress toward overcoming adversity were central in highly generative African Americans' autobiographies (McAdams & Bowman, 2001).

Now that we know being generative is vital to having a fulfilling life, let's tackle that pinnacle of human thinking — wisdom.



Trending in Developmental Science: Exploring Wisdom

Aristotle, the ancient philosopher whose ideas are the basis for much modern thinking about wisdom, believed wise thinking involves the ability to thoughtfully direct our lives. Wise people, one study showed, effectively tailor their responses to the situation. They efficaciously change events they can control and face life's uncontrollable blows — be they accidents or fatal diseases — by modifying their attitudes (Haines and others, 2016). But wisdom involves more than competently directing the self — it demands a unique approach to life.

What *exact* qualities define wisdom? As I implied in Chapter 7, we can't get answers from traditional intelligence tests. Some of the finest test-takers (experts at analytic intelligence) — as Robert Sternberg pointed out — consistently make unwise choices in life (see Sternberg, 2019). One strategy has been to expand Piaget's stage theory of cognition beyond *formal operations* to spell out a unique form of intelligence called **postformal thought**. How does postformal thinking differ from Piaget's formal operations? Let's draw on these distinctions, and the ideas of other experts (see Grossmann & Dorfman, 2019), to spell out four defining qualities of being wise.

postformal thought A uniquely adult form of intelligence that involves being sensitive to different perspectives, making decisions based on one's inner feelings, and being interested in exploring new questions.

- **Wise thinkers embrace uncertainty.** As I described in Chapter 9, when adolescents reach formal operations, they can solve problems like real scientists. Wise adults realize that most real-world problems do not have "scientifically correct" answers. They understand that they need to flexibly weigh different possibilities in order to make the *best* decisions in the face of the complexity of life.
- **Wise thinkers are sensitive to other people's perspectives.** Wisdom requires a different skill set than solving Piaget's pendulum test. Wise people are experts in *mind-minded* reasoning (see Chapters 4 and 5). They are attuned to relationships and adept at putting themselves in other people's shoes.
- **Wise thinking involves self-transcendence.** Adopting this other-centered orientation means going beyond our own perspective. Rather than simply making decisions based on their personal needs ("Only I can come out on top!"), wise people distance themselves from their egos and select the best choices from everyone's point of view ("Let's compromise so we *all* win!").
- **Wise thinking demands humility.** Striving for compromise requires understanding that we don't have all the answers to life. Rather than blindly saying, "What I believe is true" or "I'm the one that's always right," wise people are humble (Krause, 2016). They believe they *always* have more to learn about people and the world.

Now imagine that you are confronted with the challenge below. What is the wisest way to respond?

You get a frantic call from a college acquaintance. This person says that she has hoarded several bottles of tranquilizers and plans to kill herself within the next week. What should you say, think, and do?

People who blurt out statements like: “This is ridiculous. . . . Life is not given to us or taken away. . . . You must immediately stop!” are definitely not showing wisdom. In fact, I believe this kind of knee-jerk moralizing might put a suicidal person over the edge! Wise thinkers approach this problem in a thoughtful, humble way:

I don’t believe in suicide, but I need to know more. . . . What is causing these feelings? It seems . . . good . . . to bring the conversation . . . to . . . pleasant memories—but . . . everyone might respond differently. I’ll . . . base my response on what I know about this friend.

(quoted in Wink & Staudinger, 2016, p. 310)

Clearly, if we were contemplating suicide, we would hope to have the second kind of friend! But again, we are faced with the issue relating to *validity* that I discussed in connection with Kohlberg’s moral development scale in Chapter 9: Does wise thinking on artificial vignettes relate to acting wisely in life? It’s one thing to behave like the ancient philosopher Socrates, who spent his days pondering the meaning of existence rather than going about daily life, but what happens when you immerse yourself in the messy challenges of the world?

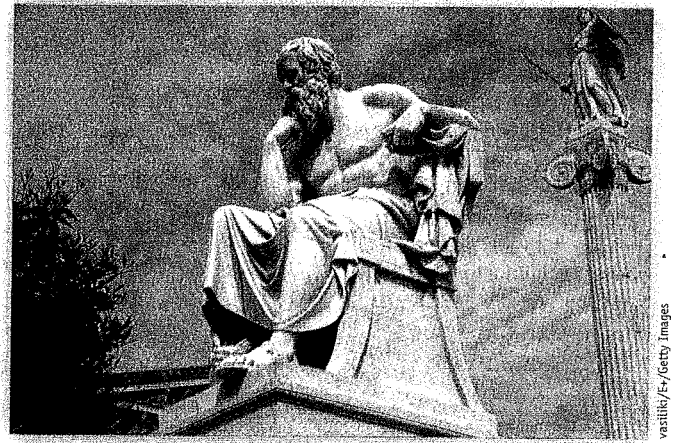
Are people *generally* wise, or does wise reasoning vary from situation to situation? To answer this question, researchers asked volunteers to keep a diary listing the upsetting events they experienced within the past few days (Grossmann, Gerlach, & Denissen, 2016). When confronted with specific problems, how did volunteers cope, think, and react?

As the psychologists predicted, scores on self-transcendence and perspective-taking differed greatly, depending on how ego-involving the task. A woman might be a model of maturity at reasoning out a friend’s problems, but fly into a rage when people criticize her *own* life. It’s easier to objectively present the pros and cons of gun control if you haven’t lost a loved one to a drive-by shooting or lived through a horrific school massacre.

Yes, people do vary in their basic *capacity* to reason wisely. Having exceptional *executive functions* is necessary to look at problems from many different points of view. One landmark longitudinal study of Harvard men showed late-life wisdom could be predicted from being open to experience and highly generative earlier in life (Ardelt, Gerlach, & Vaillant, 2018).

But life-changing personal experiences are part of the mix (Igarashi, Levenson, & Aldwin, 2018). When researchers asked midlife adults to describe an event that caused them to become wise, respondents cited *off-time* traumatic blows—being diagnosed with cancer, a loved one’s premature death, losing a home in a disaster. As with generativity, it was critical to transform these traumas into growth experiences (redemption sequences): “When I lost my job during the coronavirus, I realized that family is all that matters. That so-called worst year of my life was really my best time of life.” (See Weststrate & Glück, 2017.)

This research implies that wise reasoning should reach a pinnacle in later life. After all, old age is when traumas accumulate (poor health, loss of loved ones, etc.). But unfortunately, using the test I described above, which requires complex cognitive challenges such as sifting through divergent possibilities, wisdom does not grow with age (Glück, 2018). This quality may even peak in youth (Kunzmann and others, 2018)! The only component of wise thinking that increases over the years is compassion, being able to immerse ourselves in a fellow human being’s world view (Ardelt, Pridgen, & Nutter-Pridgen, 2018).



The ancient philosopher Socrates became the universal model of wisdom because his mission was to continually ponder and question the meaning of life (in Socrates’s timeless phrase, “the unexamined life is not worth living”)—but adopting this humble, removed approach to understanding our human condition differs from being emotionally involved in living itself.

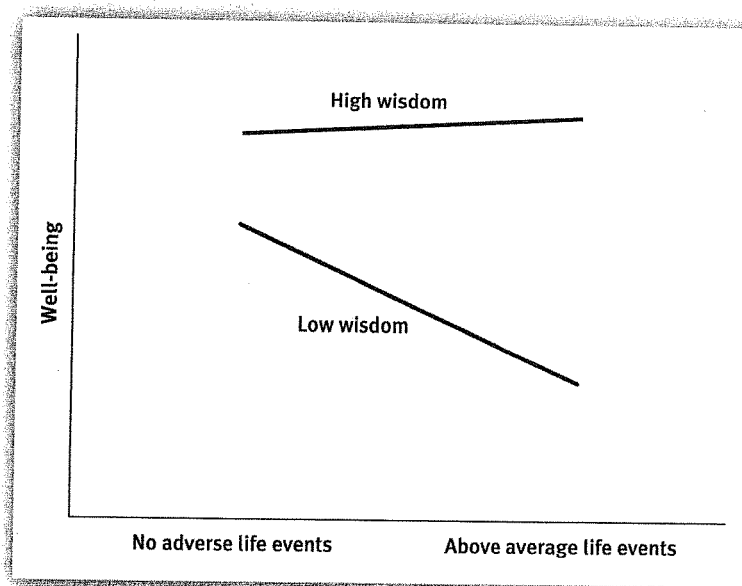
After losing their home in an Oregon wildfire, perhaps a couple can develop a wiser perspective on life: “Material things do not matter; nothing is more important than our love.”



Figure 12.4: The relationship between experiencing adverse life events, wise thinking, and well-being in old age

In this study of almost 1,000 older adults, notice that wisdom made a dramatic impact on a person's ability to preserve their mental equilibrium in the face of upsetting late-life events.

Data from Ardel & Jeste, 2018



Still, for the fortunate older adults who *do* possess this ability, wise reasoning has a vital function. Researchers tested wisdom in older people and then related these scores to the number of traumas the person had undergone within the past few years and measured satisfaction with life. Notice in Figure 12.4 that wisdom was *somewhat* related to overall happiness, in the absence of adverse events. But wise older adults were able to preserve their mental equilibrium (and stay happy) when confronting the losses of old age (Ardelt & Jeste, 2018).

The bottom line is that wise thinking and happiness are *intimately intertwined*. From a difficult divorce to the deaths of loved ones, wisdom helps immunize us when we face the inevitable storms of adult life. ■■

Targeting Hedonic Happiness

Now that we know that wisdom and generativity are the two keys to true happiness (in its eudaimonic sense), let's explore what makes us feel upbeat in our daily lives. After scanning the interesting happiness facts in Table 12.6, what follows are three research-based tips to brighten your days.

Tip #1: Act in Harmony With Your “Best Self” We assume that people are happiest when they feel upbeat. But we really feel fulfilled when we are sad or angry — if these emotions are congruent with our “true” self. In one interesting cross-cultural study, people reported feeling best about themselves when they experienced the emotions they wanted to experience, a pattern that even applied to people who yearned to feel more pleasure in life (Tamir and others, 2017). Using the experience-sampling method described in Chapter 9, researchers found that when emerging adults were implementing their four top goals (graduating from college, being a caring person, etc.), their moods dramatically rose (Wang & Milyavskaya, 2020). Therefore, to feel happy, behave in ways that make you feel proud of yourself — even if you are doing things you *thought* might make you unhappy, such as feeling justifiably angry or studying hard to get an A in this course!

Tip #2: You Will Get More Happiness Bang for Your Buck if You Use Your Money to Buy Experiences and Donate to Causes We assume that our hard-earned funds would be best spent on concrete possessions such as a new car. But, *provided we have ample funds to satisfy our basic needs*, that isn't true. In order to feel joyful, it's best to purchase experiences, like cruising to the Bahamas, going to a concert (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015), or simply buying ourselves time to relax.

Table 12.6: Happiness Stereotypes and Statistical Facts**"Youth is the happiest life stage."**

Answer: *Wrong!* While emerging adults are happier than midlife adults, cross-sectional studies in Western nations agree: People tend to be happiest in their 60s and early 70s (much more about this surprising finding in Chapter 13)!

"Money can't buy happiness."

Answer: *That's true, but only once we are fairly comfortable economically.* Around the globe, low-income people are significantly less happy than their more affluent counterparts. Once our survival needs are satisfied, the correlation between income and happiness becomes weaker—although it still exists. The main reason is probably not that getting more "things" matters, but that money buys quality family and leisure time. And satisfying relationships (and experiences), as the text describes, are highly related to reporting a happy life.

"I'll be happy when I get my career in order, become famous, and have the funds to eat at that five-star restaurant every night."

Answer: *Sorry, not really.* According to a phenomenon called the *hedonic treadmill*, when we win the lottery, graduate from college, or (in my case) get a book published, we are thrilled at first—but then we revert to our normal happiness set point ("So I got an Oscar last year. What's my next blockbuster film?"). Therefore, when these activities become routine, piling on-kudos or engaging in pleasurable activities such as indulging in gourmet food no longer provides an emotional boost. The good news is that the hedonic treadmill also applies to negative events. We adjust and then our "natural" happiness returns.

"Being successful makes us happy."

Answer: *Actually, the reverse may be true.* As I described in Chapter 1, due to an evocative relationship, temperamentally joyous infants naturally elicit loving responses from the world. *Even controlling for other forces*, infant happiness predicts later IQ and academic success. The reason may be that when we feel optimistic and upbeat, we are more willing to embrace difficult challenges such as working hard for a goal. Therefore, *being happy* powers self-efficacy, which in turn gives us the motivation to succeed!

"Because happiness is an inner state, the nation we live in makes a minor impact on personal happiness."

Answer: *Wrong!* Our government greatly affects personal well-being. Nations (such as Finland and New Zealand) where citizens feel confident that their leaders are fair, generous, and not corrupt rank highest in the happiness charts. Even when a nation is *generally getting far richer* (has a rising GDP), if income inequalities between the rich and poor accelerate—the prime case is India (see Figure 12.5)—citizens' well-being declines. Just like real mothers and fathers, we need authoritative, benevolent, trustworthy governments to construct fulfilling lives.

Information from Angelini and others, 2012; Bergsma & Anelli, 2011; Chang and others, 2018; Coffey, 2019; Conzo and others, 2017; George, 2010; Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2019; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2019; Helson & Soto, 2008; Huang, 2019; Jorgensen, Jamieson, & Martin, 2010; Ladd, Daniels, & Kawachi, 2009; Lall, 2018; Quoidbach and others, 2019; Windsor & Anstey, 2010.

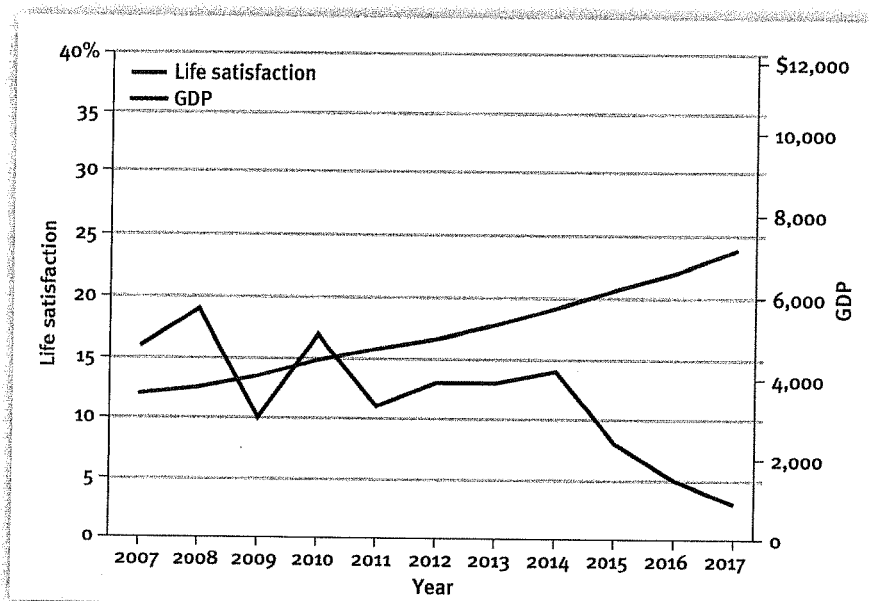


Figure 12.5: In India, life satisfaction goes bust as economy improves Notice from this chart that at the same time that India's economy took off, life satisfaction in that nation declined. In 2017, only a dismal 3 percent of the population reported being highly satisfied with life. One reason, I believe, is that this new individualistic focus on competition and personal success collided with millennia-long collectivist roots, causing a loss of citizens' sense of meaning (recall my Chapter 11 discussion of India's shift to personal choice in marriage)—graphically showing that a nation's affluence does not necessarily equate to a happier life.

Data from Lall, 2018

When adults were given \$40 and asked to spend that money either on a material purchase or in some time-saving way, people reported feeling in a far better mood when they used the money to buy time — for instance, by hiring someone to prepare dinner that day (Whillans and others, 2017). And when students were given \$20 and randomly assigned to use that money for themselves or donate to a favorite charity, people who gave their money away felt far happier at the end of the day (Aknin and others, 2019). Bottom line: Again, science shows that giving (not receiving) is what gives human beings a true emotional boost!

Tip #3: Reach Out to Different Kinds of People As I pointed out in Table 12.6, our personal happiness depends on the nation where we live. It's not just wars or poverty that make people miserable, but having a "tribal" (*us* versus *them*) worldview. In one international survey, nations with citizens prone to adopt this bad group/good group mentality — being frightened of outsiders, such as immigrants — ranked at the low end of the happiness scale (Conzo and others, 2017).

So one key to feeling better about your life is to reach out and talk (meaning, share experiences, but don't argue) with groups you might otherwise avoid, such as the conservative next door if you are a committed liberal, or, if you are an evangelical, the atheist down the street. Again, when we focus on just our *own* group winning, we all automatically lose!

Promoting Happiness Prior to Midlife

Now let's summarize these lessons as they apply to *future* midlife adults.

For Readers in Their 20s and 30s By now I've laid out a scientific roadmap for becoming fulfilled as human beings (hooray for science!). Target your most important priorities. Spend time on these top-ranking goals. Prioritize experiences over things. And, as prosocial actions produce fulfillment from infancy on, inject generative activities into your life!

For Educators I hope I've convinced you that wise reasoning is important to teach. However, as we all know, there has been an alarming rise in tribalism and hate speech (the antithesis of wise thinking) in recent years (Ambrose, 2019; Glück, Sternberg, & Nusbaum, 2019). Therefore, Robert Sternberg (2019) believes that by stressing academic efficacy (getting into college, doing well on tests), schools are neglecting opportunities to socialize children for a fulfilling life. Can't we spend time teaching young people to think wisely both for their *own* future happiness and for society's well-being? ■

Wrapping Up Flourishing in Middle Age

Now, let's summarize *all* of this section's messages for people in their forties and beyond:

- Understand that you are apt to feel just as physically attractive today as at 20 — and that having a positive body image (which you can achieve by not having unrealistic expectations and making the most of your current self) is important to feeling upbeat.
- To keep your mind fine-tuned, exercise, take care of your physical health, and put yourself in mentally stimulating situations involving people.
- Use selective optimization with compensation to cope with age-related losses.
- Develop a generative mission and practice wise thinking.
- And, finally, use the tips I suggested in this section to boost your daily mood.

Tying It All Together

- If you are in your twenties, which *two* changes can you expect as you reach midlife?
 - You will be more conscientious.
 - You will have different priorities, caring more about nurturing the next generation.
 - You will be more rigid.
- A friend is contemplating getting a divorce because she says her husband “works too much. He doesn’t give me the attention I need.” Name the advice a wise thinker would *not* give to this friend.
 - “Dump his a**!”
 - “Think of what is going on from your husband’s perspective — for instance, is he trying to make a life for you two? Can you compromise?”
 - “There may be no ‘right decision’; but whatever choice you make, look at all the angles.”
- You are giving your cousin tips about feeling fulfilled and happy during midlife. Which item should *not* be on your list?
 - Live a calm, stress-free life.
 - Live a generative life.
 - Live according to your values.
 - Cultivate wise thinking.
- Explain in a sentence why wise thinking promotes happiness.

Answers to the Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.



SOMETHING TO CONSIDER: Midlife: Take McAdams’s Generative Concern Questionnaire  Achieve

Social Development

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, classic midlife events such as grandparenthood (or even caring for disabled parents) give us a great chance to behave in a generative way. Now, let’s examine the ups and downs of these “aging phase of life” roles.

Grandparenthood

The (Lakota) grandparents always took . . . the first grandchild to raise. They think that . . . they’re more mature . . . and they could teach the children a lot more than the young parents. . . . I’m still trying to carry on that tradition because my grandmother raised me most of the time up until I was nine years old.

(quoted in Weibel-Orlando, 1999, p. 187)

This comment from a Native American grandmother reminds us that every adult role, from spouse to worker to grandparent, is shaped by our culture. Native American grandparents — especially in rural areas — are more apt to view raising their grandchildren as the ideal approach (Dennis & Brewer, 2017; Henderson and others, 2017). In mainstream Western society, grandparents only raise grandchildren when there is a problem in family life (Y. Lee & Blitz, 2016; more about this later).

Still, in every nation, at certain times, we want the older generation to be very hands-on. Isn’t it better, as Jamila in the chapter-opening vignette believed, to have

Learning Outcomes

- List the functions that grandparents serve in families.
- Summarize problems that contemporary grandparents may face.
- Survey situations that make parent care particularly stressful.

a loving grandma watching your baby rather than sending that precious child to day care while you work? Perhaps, this suggests, grandparents have a special evolutionary function.

Exploring the Grandparent Mission to Care

Because human beings are the only species with female bodies programmed to outlast the reproductive years, evolutionary theorists argue that menopause evolved to offer an extra layer of mothers, without their own child-rearing distractions, to care for the young (Coall & Hertwig, 2010). Put bluntly, grandmas help our species survive.

In our culture, grandparents do their lifesaving selectively. As **family watchdogs**, they step in during a crisis to help younger family members cope (Dunifon, 2013). This lifesaving function can move center-stage after traumas like divorce. In one interesting study, having a caring close grandparent protected children's well-being, especially after sons and daughters endured a high-conflict divorce (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2019). During attachment upheavals, the value of this extra protective layer shines through. Grandparents are the family's safety net (Troll, 1983).

Grandparents can function as mediators, helping parents and children resolve their differences (Kulik, 2007). They serve as cheerleaders and advocates ("Wow, you got on the honor roll. Nana is SO proud!") (Dunifon, 2013). They can be the family cement, keeping cousins close. From Christmas get-togethers to Thanksgiving dinners, "Grandma's house" is often the focal meeting point—the place where cousins regularly reconnect. As one developmentalist put it:

Grandparents serve as symbols of connectedness within and between lives; as people who can listen and have the time to do so; as reserves of time, help, and attention; as links to the unknown past; as people who are sufficiently varied, flexible, and complex to defy easy categories and . . . roles.

(quoted in Hagestad, 1985, p. 48)

You may notice this complexity and flexibility in your own family. One grandparent might be a shadowy figure; another may qualify as a second mother or best friend. Some grandmas love to jump on trampolines; others show their love in "baking cookies" ways. An intellectual grandparent may take you to lectures; a fishing grandpa may take you to the lake.

Which Grandparents Are More or Less Involved?

What forces determine how involved a particular grandparent is likely to be? Gender matters. Grandparenthood is typically a more emotionally central role for women than men (Danielsbacka & Tanskanen, 2016; Jang & Tang, 2016). This life role even enhances a woman's psychological state. Babysitting after the transition to grandmotherhood, one study showed, was linked to better mental health (Condon, Luszcz, & McKee, 2018).

Therefore, as you might imagine, physical proximity makes a difference—whether grandchildren live around the corner or miles away (Hakoyama & MaloneBeach, 2013). Grandchildren's ages also matter. Even when grandparents are very hands-on during childhood, children naturally leave the grandparent orbit as they grow up. As one man lamented, "We'll come for Thanksgiving and she'll . . . say, 'I gotta meet my friends' . . ." (quoted in Bangerter & Waldron, 2014).

These quotations—from a study exploring grandparent-teenager closeness—suggest that technology can erode these barriers of distance and age. Here is how

family watchdogs A basic role of grandparents, involving monitoring younger family members' well-being and intervening to provide help in a crisis.



Stockbroker/SuperStock



Jose Luis Pelaez/Getty Images

From jumping on trampolines to taking the grandchildren to the local lake, grandparents fulfill this joyous life role in their own distinctive, personal ways.

one woman described a FaceTime call with her 13-year-old granddaughter: “[I]t was like she and I were hanging . . . out” (quoted in Bangerter & Waldron, 2014, p. 93). And by following your grandchild on social media, you can feel connected without having *any* conversation: “If I called, they would never tell me . . . anything.” Regular smartphone bonding boosts both grandparent and grandchild well-being (Mueller & Foran, 2020).

Grandparent Problems

Grandparents take pride in the fact that they are free to “be there” to lovingly listen, babysit, and leave the disciplining to Mom and Dad. But grandparents are really very constrained. It’s crucial to hold your tongue and not criticize your child’s parenting, because your access to the grandchildren depends on having a good relationship with the generation in between (Lou and others, 2013; Sims & Rofail, 2013).

Now imagine your barriers as a paternal grandmother, the mother of a son. Because women are closer to their own mothers (versus their mothers-in-law), paternal grandparents are in danger of “not being there” as much as they would like.

Being in this situation created heartache for a friend of mine, when her daughter-in-law moved across the country to be close to her own mother in Seattle, rather than stay in New York City — transforming my friend into the distant grandma she never wanted to be.

The allegiance to one’s family of origin can have devastating effects after a divorce. When a wife gets custody, and especially if she remarries and has other children, she can lock her ex-husband’s parents out of the family’s life (Sims & Rofail, 2013).

When people are robbed of seeing their grandchildren — whether due to divorce, being a disliked paternal grandparent, or disputes with a biological child — you might think the legal system would help. You would be wrong (Gair, 2017). Yes, many states have legislation allowing grandparent visitation depending on “the best interests of the child.” But consider the situation in Florida (and Canada), where these statutes have been struck down as unconstitutional, in favor of the idea that parents alone are totally free to decide who their child sees (Beiner and others, 2014).

Then there is the opposite situation — feeling compelled to “be there” more than you want. Let’s spell out a typical scenario: Your daughter or son wants you to watch the baby full time while they are at work. You don’t want to disappoint your child, but you want your own life. You may be working and need the income. Or you may feel resentful about being a caregiver because you love your job. The conflict is especially intense when grandparents assume the most demanding commitment — becoming full-time parents again.

Caregiving grandparents take full responsibility for raising their grandchildren. In recent decades, the number of parenting grandparents have doubled in the United States. Concern about the stresses these grandparents face is increasing throughout the affluent world (du Preez, Richmond, & Marquis, 2017; Tarrant and others, 2017).

Caregiving grandparents must cope with a variety of burdens, from financial issues to fears that social service agencies want to send their grandchildren to foster care (Tarrant and others, 2017). But the main issue relates mourning the fact that their son or daughter cannot take on the parenting job, often because of drug issues (Lent & Otto, 2018), domestic violence (Sandberg, 2016), or mental health problems (Rubin, 2013).

How does being a full-time parent again feel? As you might expect, caregiving grandparents may feel angry at being forced into this “off-time” role. But they often feel a generative, “watchdog” responsibility to protect their flesh and blood (Hayslip &



For grandmas such as this woman, spending the day with her grandson and her daughter-in-law is an absolute joy. Still, she must be careful not to criticize the younger generation’s child-rearing skills or risk being cut off from future visits.

caregiving grandparents

Grandparents who have taken on full responsibility for raising their grandchildren.

Developmental Psychology Videos

Grandparents as Parents

In this video, you will hear from caregiving grandparents about the joys and challenges of being a parent for the second time.  Achieve

parent care Adult children's care for their disabled older parents.

Patrick, 2003; Y. Lee & Blitz, 2016). Here is what one woman had to say to the police after her drug-abusing daughter took off with a grandchild and stole her car:

[They said], "Ma'am, . . . your grandson will be . . . in the [state protective services system]." I said, "I will fight [this forever]."

(quoted in Climo, Terry, & Lay, 2002, p. 25)

These women, mainly in their late fifties, had mixed emotions about their situation: "Some days I feel . . . blessed . . . [O]ther days I want to . . . cry" (quoted in Climo, Terry, & Lay, 2002, p. 23). They sometimes described redemption sequences: "God has given me this wonderful little boy. . . . How many people get the opportunity to do it a second time?" (p. 26).

Parent Care

Ask friends and family members and they will tell you that becoming a grandparent is one of the joys of being middle-aged. Joyful feelings do not come to mind when we imagine caring for older parents. Researchers who study **parent care** use words like *burden*, *hassles*, and *strain* to describe this midlife role (Hunt, 2003; Son and others, 2007).

Caring for parents violates the basic principle in Western cultures that parents give to their children, not the reverse (Belsky, 1999). So it makes sense that, while older people may welcome help from siblings or a spouse, they prefer being the "givers" (help-providers) with an adult child. Moreover, as you might expect from the vow "in sickness and in health," older spouses find caregiving less burdensome than daughters or sons do (Perrig-Chiello & Hutchison, 2010).

Actually, let me get personal and relate all of this to Chapter 11. When older people are happily married, sacrificing for a chronically ill spouse is *not* a burden. It's definitely a "labor of love" (more about this when I discuss my husband's congestive heart disease in Chapter 15).

Unfortunately, this is often not true with parent care. Because caring for an ill parent — like hands-on grandparenthood — typically falls on women, it can cause a daughter or daughter-in-law to cut back her work hours or leave her career (Naldini, Pavolini, & Solera, 2016). If, as is increasingly true, a caregiving child is in her sixties or above, parent care may put a damper on that child's retirement plans or interfere with the need to care for a frail, disabled spouse. More rarely, this person is pulled between two intergenerational commitments, caring for an older parent and watching the grandchildren full time.

At this point, I need to set the record straight: The conflict traditionally called the "sandwich generation" — people pulled between caring for their *young* children and disabled *old* parents — is fairly rare. Since parent care typically occurs in the fifties, that job usually occurs during the empty nest, grandparent stage. Moreover, the stereotype that people have a predictable "midlife crisis" is another myth. Research shows it doesn't exist for most adults.

Finally, the belief that in Asia children are committed to caring for aging parents is false (Freeman and others, 2010; Hashizume, 2010). China and Japan are in the midst of an elder-care crisis because adult children need to move to the cities for work (and now, women have careers), leaving older parents alone in rural areas (Ito & Morikawa, 2020; Liu, Lu, & Feng, 2017).

Given that — as was true of grandparenthood — the society we live in shapes our attitudes toward parent care, how stressful, *personally*, is this role?

The answer is "it varies" (Merz, Schulze, & Schuengel, 2010). If the older adult's needs are not that intense, a child is not working, and there are female siblings available to share the burden (Grigoryeva, 2017), caring for an aged parent is not very burdensome (DiRosa and others, 2011). But coping with other stressful commitments such as working and caring for the grandchildren full time, and especially feeling that one's brothers and sisters are ungrateful (Amaro & Miller, 2016), is a recipe for depression and poor health.

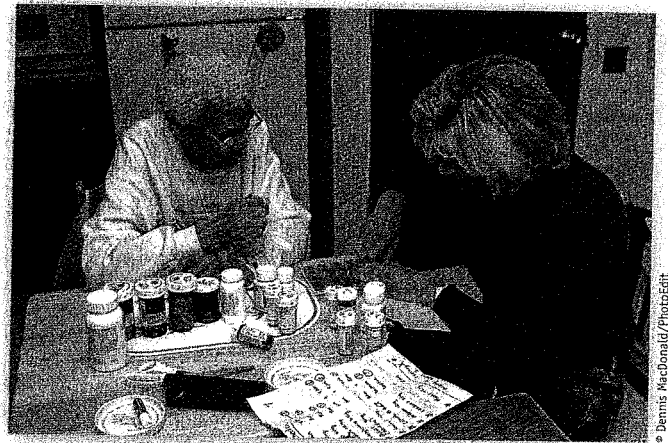
The older person's personality looms large. Parent care, as you will see in Chapter 14, poses particular challenges with Alzheimer's disease.

Still, caring for a disabled parent can have the opposite effect. It may offer its own *redemption sequence*, giving children the chance to repay a beloved mother or father for years of care (Kramer & Thompson, 2002).

Final Thoughts: On Wisdom, Multiple Midlife Roles, and Life Stresses

Negotiating relationships with frail older parents, working full time and caring for the grandchildren, coping with the reality of physical decline — all of these forces may explain why some cross-sectional surveys suggest middle age is the “least happy” phase of adult life (see Lachman, 2015). And to add to these stresses, we may confront the burden of coping with pandemic-related concerns — job losses, fears of infecting older loved ones. Still, let’s remember that, to paraphrase Jung, coping with “afternoon-of-life” challenges is the perfect lesson to teach us to be wise.

How do happiness and well-being change as we move into later life? Stay tuned for the next chapters.



A middle-aged daughter may see caring for her aging mother as a redemption sequence, provided she has few other commitments and feels this is an opportunity to repay her beloved parent for a lifetime of love.

Tying It All Together

1. Yangki is 4 years old. Statistically speaking, she is probably closest to her *maternal/paternal grandmother/grandfather*, and she will feel *the same/less close* if this person lives *far away/close by*. (Select the correct options.)
2. *Paternal/maternal* grandparents are most at risk of not seeing the grandchildren after a divorce.
3. Explain in a sentence or two why people are most likely to be full-time caregiving grandparents and how they often feel about this “off-time” job.
4. Imagine you are caring for your disabled mother. Which force should make your job feel *easier*?
 - a. You don’t have other family commitments.
 - b. You are of Chinese heritage.
 - c. Your mom has Alzheimer’s disease.

Answers to the Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.

SUMMARY

Setting the Context

Although the boundaries of middle age span from about age 40 to the early sixties, many older adults describe themselves as middle-aged.

Physical Development

Feeling physically attractive is vitally important at every age, and, contrary to our stereotypes, most people do not feel worse about their looks in middle age. However, making unrealistic negative comparisons can promote female midlife body distress; age-related negative physical changes in erectile performance affect men; and, for women, **menopause** has the side effect of making intercourse more painful. First-person accounts of old-age sexuality belie the gloom-and-doom decline message,

suggesting that older people prioritize intimacy and that sexuality endures into later life.

Cognitive Development

The **Seattle Longitudinal Study** — the definitive research exploring age changes in IQ — showed that we reach our intellectual peak in midlife. However, on measures that require mastering new information quickly, declines start by the early forties; on tests requiring stored knowledge, scores increase until the sixties. The reason is that there are two basic cognitive skills, called fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence.

Fluid intelligence, our capacity to master unfamiliar cognitive challenges quickly, is at its height early in adulthood and then declines. **Crystallized intelligence**, our knowledge base,

improves well into middle age. In professions that heavily depend on crystallized knowledge—as opposed to fast information processing—people do well into their sixties. Creativity reaches its peak in midlife, although our basic talents predict our real-world performance (at any age) best. Staying healthy, measured by having a low **allostatic load**, exercising, and searching out stimulating interpersonal jobs can slow age-related cognitive decline. Using **selective optimization with compensation** helps people successfully cope with age-related losses and have a better work-life balance at any life stage.

Emotional Development

Personality both changes and doesn't change during adult life. Research on the **Big Five** traits shows personality is fairly stable as we age, and scores on basic traits such as extraversion, openness to experience, and the other core dimensions of personality predict a variety of life outcomes. In particular, conscientiousness sets us up to be healthy and successful in work and love. Still, people grow in conscientiousness as they assume adult roles and become more resilient and altruistic as they move into middle age. Dan McAdams's research exploring Erikson's **generativity** shows that our priorities shift to "other-centered concerns" during midlife. Generativity, while not related to **hedonic happiness**, is at the core of **eudaimonic happiness**—living a meaningful, fulfilling adult life.

In their autobiographies, highly generative adults produce a **commitment script** and describe **redemption sequences**—negative events that turned out for the best. The fact that African Americans tend to be exceptionally generative suggests that adversity—handled productively—produces emotional growth.

Psychological research on wisdom grew out of studies exploring an adult Piagetian stage of development called **postformal thought**. Wise thinkers search for the best answers in the face of real-world

complexity. They are empathic and try to make the best decisions from everyone's perspective; they are humble, realizing that they don't have all the answers in life. Wise thinking in the real world varies, depending on how ego-involved we are in situations. Age does not necessarily produce wisdom, but adults report growing wiser after traumatic experiences. Wise reasoning may allow older adults to preserve their happiness in the face of life stresses.

To foster eudaimonic happiness, young people should engage in generative activities. Educators should teach wisdom to promote personal (and society's) well-being. Science reveals surprising happiness facts, and offers tantalizing tips for feeling happy in daily life.

Social Development

Grandmotherhood may have evolved to help our species survive. In our society, grandparents act as **family watchdogs**, stepping in when the younger family members need help. Gender, physical proximity, the grandchildren's ages, and especially people's relationship with the younger parent generation determine people's involvement in this joyous but constrained life role. Because women tend to be closer to their own mothers, paternal grandmothers are at risk of being less involved with the grandchildren than they want. At its extreme, people may be cut off from seeing the grandchildren after a divorce or due to having alienated the parents. The opposite extreme, being forced to be too involved, occurs with **caregiving grandparents**, who must become full-time parents again.

Parent care is another family role that some middle-aged daughters may assume. A variety of forces affect how women feel when caring for a disabled parent, and this life role can sometimes promote emotional growth. Midlife stresses, while producing a decline in happiness, are the crucible that can help make us more mature.

KEY TERMS

allostatic load, p. 344

Big Five, p. 347

caregiving grandparents, p. 359

commitment script, p. 351

crystallized intelligence, p. 343

eudaimonic happiness, p. 351

family watchdogs, p. 358

fluid intelligence, p. 343

generativity, p. 350

hedonic happiness, p. 351

menopause, p. 340

parent care, p. 360

postformal thought, p. 352

redemption sequence,
p. 351

Seattle Longitudinal Study,
p. 342

selective optimization
with compensation,
p. 346



ANSWERS TO Tying It All Together QUIZZES

Physical Development

1. You will feel *just as good* about your physical appearance as you did in your twenties, and you will probably be *just as interested* in how you look.
2. Men
3. (b) Cynthia won't necessarily feel old and washed up after she reaches menopause.
4. Lovemaking becomes more leisurely and centered on emotional intimacy.

Cognitive Development

1. Mick will reach his career peak far earlier than Arturo because his job is heavily dependent on quick action and decision making (fluid skills). A psychologist's job depends almost exclusively on crystallized skills, such as stored knowledge (expertise), which increases with age.
2. *Vocabulary*, which is a *crystallized skill*, should increase in midlife.
3. Rayan will perform *worse* on mental processing tests.
4. The theory that applies to Teneca's problem — "too much on his plate" — is Baltes's selective optimization with compensation: He needs to (1) prioritize and shed less important jobs, (2) work harder in his top-ranking areas, and (3) use external aids to help him cope.

Emotional Development

1. (a) and (b)
2. (a)
3. (a)
4. Because wise thinking allows us to step back from our immediate feelings and look at the larger picture, it helps preserve our sense of well-being when faced with upsetting events.

Social Development

1. Yangki is probably closest to her *maternal grandmother* and she will feel *less close* if this person lives far away.
2. Paternal grandparents
3. Full-time caregiving grandparents typically take on this role when their children are unable to be effective parents, and they may have mixed emotions about this job: feeling physically overwhelmed and terribly upset that their child is troubled but having a sense of pride that they are fulfilling this generative mission.
4. (a)

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