Midlife Adult Health and Well-being: Signs of Despair or Rays of Hope?

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31st Annual Colloquium on Aging
September 27, 2019
Presentation Agenda

• Midlife: definition and qualities
• Deaths of despair study
• Relationships: strengths and challenges
• Midlife health in romantic relationships
• Implications
• Discussion
Defining Midlife

- Generally, between 50 and 64 years of age
- Qualitatively different
  - Health variability
  - Daily challenges, competing demands
  - Multiple, dynamic roles
  - Potential for productivity and success
- A “pivotal period” (Lachman et al., 2015)
Midlife development as a priority

• Growing importance
  • By 2030, 1 in 5 Americans will be of retirement age
  • Increasing numbers will engage in longer working lives
  • Determines quality of aging

• Pressing needs
  • Identify characteristics that set the stage for optimal health in mid-life adults
  • Develop strategies that promote health and well-being and prevent illness in this population
“Deaths of despair” study

• Case and Deaton (2015, 2017) using stats from the U.S. CDC, 1999 - 2015

• Identified death rates for white non-Hispanics at midlife (45-54 years) were rising, not falling as they had in the past
  
  • Largely accounted for by increasing death rates from drugs, alcohol, and suicide

• Used data from multiple countries to show that other nations have made progress while U.S. fell behind
Signs of despair – ongoing research

• Nationally representative study examined 4 indicators of despair: depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, marijuana use, heavy drinking
  
  • Each indicator increased as the cohort aged
  
  • Consistent patterns across education, geography, race/ethnicity

Gaydosh et al. (2019)
Opioid epidemic

- Midlife period presents unique risks
  - High rates of prescribed medications
  - Variability in health symptoms and conditions
  - Adverse effects and interactions

Han et al. (2019)
Prescription drug misuse & consequences

Example: suicidal thoughts

This is complex: Longer-term processes and dynamics need continued attention (Jalal et al., 2018; Science)

Schepis et al. (2019)
Rising divorce

• Romantic relationships also pose challenges

• Between 1990 and 2010, the overall trend in US divorce rate was flat

• Middle-aged (50-64) and older (65+) adults had increasing divorce rates
  • Not predicted by empty nest, retirement, or onset of chronic illness
  • More connected to marital quality and economic resources

Brown & Lin (2012); Lin et al. (2016)
Close relationships

• Older adults report more positive feelings and fewer relationship problems

• Older adults behave in ways that reduce tensions

• Positivity bias

• Not just individual factors: Input from social partners -- who are similarly aged -- contributes to more positive social and emotional experiences

Fingerman & Charles (2010); Luong et al. (2011)
Problem solving and emotion regulation

- Emotional processing, social behavior, and emotion regulation are skills that improve over time or with development.

- Midlife individuals are able to draw on experience to solve problems and handle social situations effectively.

Blanchard-Fields et al. (2007)
The Heart Failure Study

Coyne et al. (2001)

Positive relationships have a robust impact on recovery outcomes
Focus on couples’ conflict

Relationship conflict is closely connected to:
- individuals’ adjustment and development
- relationship outcomes
- health and well-being of people close to the relationship (especially children)

Research program on capturing relationship differences, broadly defined

Cummings & Davies (2010); Fincham (2003)
Midlife couples’ conflict in daily life

- 55 mixed-sex couples from the community
- Most frequent topics of disagreement included communication, habits, and chores
  (For comparison, couples living with school-aged children reported children, chores, and communication; Papp et al., 2009)
- Conflict discussions about money, children, leisure, and personality lasted longer

Papp (2018) Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy
Midlife couples’ conflict in daily life

• Males reported their partners initiated conflicts concerning habits and relatives

• Females reported their partners initiated conflicts about communication

• Recurrent conflict topics: money, habits

• New: leisure

• Conflicts concerning communication and habits were handled in relatively angry ways

• Conflicts about children were relatively depressive

• Conflicts about leisure and friends were relatively constructive

Papp (2018) Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy
Romantic partners and health

• Demonstrate similarity along many health-related factors

• Ranging from taste and smell preferences to common lifestyle behaviors, including diet, exercise and substance use
  • Particularly strong in middle and later life

Groyecka et al. (2018); Meyler (2007); Polenick et al. (2018)
Romantic partners and health

• Spousal behavior and attitudes predict individual health behavior, at times more so than the individual’s own motivation

• Partner’s chronic stress predicted (more than individual’s own) increased waist circumference over time for men and women

• Midlife partner drinking at one point in time predicted (more than a person’s own) the other person’s drinking at later time point

Birditt et al. (2019); Dishman et al. (1985); Windle & Windle (2014)
Improving relationships across the lifespan

• Make an effort
• Be creative and novel
• Keep moving forward
• Create a sense of security
• Spend time together
• Communicate clearly

• Expect to be tested
• Practice good mental hygiene
• Learn to handle difficult issues
• Be a good listener and responder
• Work on accepting your partner
• Look out for yourself
• Seek support when needed

Implications for healthy aging

• What determines “healthy” or “successful” aging?

• Behavioral determinants identified: smoking status, physical activity level, body mass index, diet, and health practices

• Policies should enhance opportunities across the lifespan to modify lifestyle factors

• Additional screening for drug use and its consequences

• Incorporating partner/dyadic efforts in health promotion interventions may increase the effectiveness

Bradbury & Karney (2014); Franks et al. (2004); Owen & Corfe (2017); Peele et al. (2005)
Thank you!

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