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The Midlife Client

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This case study explored the midlife physical, emotional, and role changes of a small sample of women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) to determine how they cope with midlife change, to examine their aging experience within the LDS Church community, and to discover how the LDS faith and church community helped them through the challenges of midlife. According to a qualitative design, the researcher implemented in-depth interviews with 10 LDS women from three cohorts: ages 35-44, 45-54, and 55-65. Three theoretical perspectives were used to frame the study: feminist, social constructionist, and narrative. A qualitative matrix was developed to guide the analysis and reporting process. The findings suggested that the younger cohorts contended with physical and emotional issues such as hot flashes and moodiness. Role change, such as the one that occurs when the children leave home, did not appear to affect the women. They viewed midlife as part of the continuum of life, and all three cohorts of women reported personal growth in their confidence and assertiveness. The LDS Church community was a resource, enabling all of the women to feel accepted and useful for their wisdom and experience. With the increased life expectancy of women and the large number of "baby boomer" women now entering midlife, the issues surrounding aging may be reflected in problems presented by a practitioner's clientele. To meet the needs of an aging female clientele, practitioners are encouraged to understand the physical, emotional, and role changes that occur at midlife and to view presenting problems within the framework of the midlife transition.

INTRODUCTION

The large population of the “baby boomer” generation has and will continue to have a major impact on society (Walker, 2002). As this population continues to age, church congregations are expected to swell (Knapp & Pruett, 2005). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is no exception. Currently, midlife women make up a large proportion of the church membership. According to J. Stager (personal communication, August 9, 2004), who is a statistician for the LDS Church, the global membership of the church in 2004 stood at 12,868,606. The total number of women was 5,687,644, with approximately 2,870,000 women between ages 35 and 65, comprising 22% of the total membership. The projected number of midlife women over the next 10 years is expected to reach 3,642,468, a 27% increase over the present number. It must be noted that this projection does not include converts to the church, the addition of whom could substantially affect this number. Hence it can be projected that midlife women will continue to comprise a significant proportion of the LDS Church membership.

MIDLIFE CHALLENGES, THEORIES, AND TASKS

Midlife transition is a multifaceted stage in a woman’s development and may present many challenges (Levinson, 1996). At midlife a woman’s body begins to change (Cobb, 1993). Menopause marks the end of a woman’s reproductive life (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel,...

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and it is often a critical time for women because of the accompanying physical and emotional effects. Change also occurs in role involvement (Klohnen, Vandewater, & Young, 1996) as children become independent, elderly parents become dependent, and in-laws and grandchildren join the family constellation. Midlife women may also be at risk for life events such as marital separation and divorce (Glazer et al., 2002), health issues (Murphy, 2003), and economic marginalization (Holstein, 2001).

A review of the literature uncovered conflicting theories regarding midlife change. The idea of a midlife crisis has been proposed by various researchers (Jacques, 1965, 1993; Jung & Storr, 1983; Levinson, 1996). Jacques (1965) originally coined the term midlife crisis as a time when individuals begin to realize their mortality. Although researchers have suggested that midlife crisis is common among adults (Jacques, 1965; Jung & Storr, 1983; Levinson, 1978), Shek (1996) concluded that identifying the midlife crisis as a “normative developmental” experience could not be supported. Germain (1994) also rejected the proposition of a midlife crisis. Empirical studies have disagreed in defining the female midlife experience; however, there is a consensus that the midlife transition can be a challenging period and that women must make certain adjustments and adaptations to successfully navigate it. According to Erikson (1982), the main requirement of the midlife transition is to develop generativity, which is the ability to care for other people and to provide support to the next generation. Contemporary researchers have suggested that adaptations include the integration of adolescent images with those of a middle-aged woman (Apter, 1996); the achievement of satisfaction by aligning beliefs, life circumstances, and values (Howell, 2001); the process of progressing from denial to acceptance of aging (Gillet, 1996); and the experience of mourning the loss of the former self (McQuaide, 1998a). Others who have attempted to describe the midlife experiences of women have perceived it as a midlife review (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999), a time of introspection (Levinson, 1996), a mourning of the loss of fertility (Mitchell & Helson, 1990), and a time to cope with the empty nest syndrome, a term commonly used to identify the psychological or emotional condition that may affect women when their children leave home (Lippert, 1997).

**LACK OF QUALITY RESEARCH**

Midlife women are a richly diverse but poorly understood group. Regardless of the vast number of aging women and the concomitant challenges of midlife, the prevailing literature indicates a lack of quality studies (Quinn & Walsh, 1995). Lippert (1997) was concerned that the available literature related to midlife experiences is fragmented, lacks agreement, and contains “myths ... that have little scientific basis” (p. 16). Calhoun (2001) agreed that there are “shortcomings in the existing canon” (p. 55). Banister (1999) noted the lag in research focusing on midlife women. Subsequently, there remains a lack of reliable information. Until recently, incorrect perspectives of the midlife experience have been common (Banister, 1999). New evidence has determined that the negative view of midlife is changing, with the emphasis now on psychological well-being and the positive characteristics of growth development, such as life purpose and self-acceptance (McQuaide, 1998a; Mitchell & Helson, 1990).

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

To date, available information about LDS experiences in the midlife transition is sparse. This research has given voice to the personal and individual experiences of the LDS respondents as they have developed personal understanding of and adjustment to the midlife transition. The main purpose of this study was to determine how women of the LDS faith cope with physical, emotional, and role changes in the midlife transition. Because LDS women have defined roles in marriage and motherhood that are traditional in the sense that the “family is central to God’s plan” (Hinckley, 1995), particular attention was given to role change. A second purpose was to understand the female aging experience within the LDS Church community and to identify how the LDS faith and church community assist these women through midlife challenges.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

Qualitative interviews were conducted with women of the LDS faith within the boundaries of an LDS Stake (diocese) in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. The researcher chose a case study approach because it is an accepted
means of exploration when there is little preknowledge of the phenomenon, valid for developing in-depth understanding of complex and sensitive issues (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2003). Three theoretical perspectives were selected to direct the study: feminist, social constructionist, and narrative.

The feminist aim of the study was to “lift the voices” of aging women (Creswell, 1998, p. 78) and to ensure a reflective, reflexive approach to examining the data. Methodologically, feminist research differs from traditional research in that it removes the power imbalance between the researcher and the subject, begins with the standpoints and experiences of women, and involves participants at all levels of the research process (Brayton, 1997).

The social constructionist perspective suggests that interpersonal reality is constructed through social interaction (Ray, 2000). Personal stories become “shaped by the cultural environment and are a social product” (Ray, p. 2). Thus the social constructionist perspective provided a framework for understanding the development of midlife narratives.

Narrative inquiry views people as “embodiments of lived stories,” shaped by social and cultural narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). McQuaide (1998b) argued that there are alternative midlife stories to uncover. This study provided the opportunity for LDS women to relate their personal stories of midlife aging.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A convenient and purposeful sampling frame consisted of women who met the criteria for inclusion in the study as (a) members of the LDS faith; (b) women who held volunteer positions within the church organization and were active in the LDS community; and (c) women who were in midlife transition, which was defined by age or physical, emotional, and role changes. Various attempts have been made to define middle age. For the purposes of this study, middle age was defined as comprising ages 35 to 65; thus the LDS respondents sampled for this study of midlife transition were within that age range. To interpret the information in meaningful ways, the interviewees were classified by age cohort. Four women ages 35 to 44 were classified as being at the beginning, or the perimenopausal, stage of middle age (National Women's Health Information Center, 2002). Three women ages 45 to 54 were in the middle, or menopausal, stage (Perls & Fretts, 2001). Three women ages 55 to 65 were in the final, or postmenopausal, stage (Cobb, 1993). Of the interviewees, 6 were married, 1 was single, 2 were separated, and 1 was divorced. All were Caucasian and of various ethnic backgrounds (i.e., German, Scottish, American, and Canadian). The greatest number (7) were adult converts to the LDS religion who had been fully involved and active members for a time span ranging from 5 to more than 20 years. The others had been born into LDS families and were raised in the LDS faith.

**Procedure**

Ten face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted. The study participants completed a demographic questionnaire, signed the consent form, and then chose their pseudonyms. Each interview lasted for approximately 2 hours. A second interview was warranted to explore, reflect, and expand the questions, and to ensure the accuracy of the responses. The interview guide was developed through a pilot study with a different group of LDS women to avoid poor techniques or a weak flow of questions. Open-ended questions enabled entry into and encouragement for the telling of the women’s midlife experiences. A laddering technique of questioning provided guidelines for primary data collection and probing techniques (Hoepfl, 1997). Questions were sequenced to begin with the “least invasive and proceed into deeper matter” and to “set the scene, collect contextual information, and assure the respondent” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 80). Additional questions were laddered up to questions of personal philosophy, which “are the core to [the] respondents’ personal identity” (Hoepfl, p. 80). During the laddering process, the researcher could read body language to search for signals indicating the readiness of the respondent to accept even more intrusive questions. Collaborative means were used to remove possible interviewer interrogation pressure or intimidation and thus permit free expression by the interviewee.

A process of collecting, managing, storing, and retrieving the information was implemented to ensure high-quality research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and interpreted. Manuscripts were read for coherence and consistency to enhance understanding of the first-person voice and to address specific questions. Words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were underlined; coded for
themes, ideas, and constructs; and assigned to categories. Chenail's qualitative matrix (Cole, 1994) was used as a conceptual frame to organize the findings, make sense of the data, and ensure the relationship between the data and the literature review. Use of mind-mapping techniques identified connections between ideas and themes. Themes that indicated group consensus were considered primary, and themes that were discussed by three or more of the interviewees or that varied from the primary themes were considered secondary. A peer was enlisted to examine the interviews, assist in developing themes and categories, and unearth potential research bias. The interpretations and the findings were substantiated by the personal narratives of the respondents. The data were organized to convey the richness of the interviewees' midlife transition experiences. In the written text, for example, the responses of the women were presented in a "story-like manner" (Dilollo & Wolter, 2004, p. 5). This triangulation of research strategies supported the research findings.

QUALITY OF THE EVIDENCE

The researcher employed various strategies to establish trustworthiness. Systematic conduct of research, meticulous data recording, and use of a research journal to record personal feelings and interpretations were among these strategies, along with use of investigator skills to "interpret the data in a rigorous manner, rather than reporting selective perceptions" (Bowling, 2002, p. 404). Multiple sources of evidence were employed to ensure construct validity (Yin, 2003). Several analyses were undertaken to confirm the findings and establish the credibility of the data. A qualified external researcher provided an analysis of the data as well as nonbiased feedback. Because the researcher is a member of the LDS faith and is personally involved in the LDS community, it was crucial to the study for her to maintain objectivity and acknowledge the "insider/outsider" conundrum (Rose, 2001). An "insider" might gain more insight by being on an equal footing and sharing a common understanding with the research participants. However, an "insider" might encounter the problem of essentialism, which assumes that all those who are in a particular social category share a common perspective. Consequently, the interviewer and the interviewees may have had too much in common. Thus the researcher was careful to identify and not take for granted easily overlooked behaviors or attitudes that are specific to the LDS Church community or the reasons for them. The reflective nature of the research journal assisted the researcher in keeping the "insider/participant" voice separate from the "outsider/researcher" voice.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A range of primary and secondary themes emerged as the LDS interviewees discussed their personal experiences of midlife transition. Physical and emotional changes and personal responsibility for health were dominant themes.

PHYSICAL CHANGE

The interviewees discussed physical concerns that are typical of many menopausal women: changes in menstrual cycle, hot flashes, low energy, sleep disturbance, and memory loss (Cobb, 1993). Christine, for example, worried about these physical changes:

Physical changes . . . I have noticed that my body does not burn fat as quickly. Like, I cannot eat whatever I want anymore . . . . I have noticed changes in my cycle that aren't the same as they were before . . . . Something my body is doing is changing. The weight thing . . . I don't feel as strong either . . . I need to be a little smarter about how much sleep I get because I can't pull off the amount of energy that maybe I could previously. I have some real energy issues. I mostly take iron or I get physically exhausted or fatigued. It affects my mental state. I guess my mental state is something that I have aged in. I sound ridiculous.

There were differences among the women. For example, the women in the younger cohorts were experiencing physical symptoms, but those in the older cohort were less affected by menopause and felt better (Patterson & Lynch, 1988). Mackenzie, who was postmenopausal, commented, "The only thing that I really have is that I don't sleep the whole night. I wake up a few times but then go back to sleep. Other than that, I haven't really had anything."

EMOTIONAL CHANGE

Emotional change appeared synonymous with perimenopause (Cobb, 1993) and was a dominant theme among the interviewees. Cathy, the youngest of the
interviewees, reported irritability and mood swings:

I don’t know that I had noticed a lot of changes, but I have noticed a few since I said I would participate in this [study]. I think I am getting a little bit moodier. It was from reading the top of the paper “Midlife Changes,” I am thinking that I am not in midlife and I don’t have any changes. Nothing has happened yet. Then I realize there have been a few changes. . . . I have noticed a little more irritability.

Once again, there were differences among the women. Those in the younger cohorts struggled with mood change and irritability. In contrast, the older women reported calmness and serenity, and they did not allude to emotional change.

**Personal Responsibility for Health**

According to Banister (1999), women at midlife begin to “realize they have a responsibility to engage in self-care activity” (p. 10). This concern was evident among the women from all three cohorts. Most of the women had taken their health for granted in the past; however, since reaching the midlife stage, they were more conscious of taking proactive responsibility for their health and well-being. Anne commented, “I know that I need to do something about my health and get into shape and feel good about myself and get rid of all the stress. . . . I can’t change the clock. I can control my attitude!” Mackenzie, the oldest of the women, stressed, “You have to start thinking early about it. It is too late to start thinking about it when you are going through it [menopause].”

**Personal Growth**

Leonard and Burns (2006) emphasized the advantages of aging and suggested that turning points in personal growth increase with age. This was evident among the LDS interviewees, all of whom reported personal growth. They believed that as middle-aged women they had grown in wisdom, confidence, and assertiveness. Cathy appreciated her increased wisdom:

I feel that I am getting a lot more wisdom. I don’t think I am easily offended any more. Where before I could take exception to something and kind of be miffed at that person for a while, then I see that person do an act of service or kindness, and it erases the stupid things that I thought were important, and they are not. This person is good, and they are trying. Whenever I have feelings of being upset or kind of thinking that person is being stupid or whatever, I just think that they have a lot of good qualities and that overbalances the bad things, and I just have to look at that.

In the past, Anne had had low self-esteem. At midlife, she admitted that she has developed more confidence and appreciation of herself:

I can appreciate what I am good at. I can appreciate the value that I have. I have confidence in many things about myself. The inside is well put together, [and] it says I really don’t care what you think of me. I will do it the way I want to do it, and I am going to express my opinions. I can stand up for myself if it is required. I can speak my mind and sort out my feelings and understand what I am thinking and what I am emotionally experiencing.

Women in the three cohorts appreciated midlife growth. The younger women were beginning to note the growth, whereas the women in the older cohort were more assured of their progress. Similar to the findings of Sampselle, Harris, Harlow, and Sowers (2002), the interviewees had an expanded view of their self-worth and “attributed their enhanced development to getting older and gaining maturity” (p. 35).

**Midlife as a New Season**

Klohnen et al. (1996) concluded that many women adjust successfully to midlife transition. Successful transition was evident among the LDS interviewees, who viewed the transition as a positive stage or season in the continuum of life. Elizabeth viewed her life in stages, and she believed that each stage had benefits:

There is a time and a season—a time to have children and be a mother of young children, and then there is a time to have them grow up a little bit, but these different times are a benefit for different reasons. So if I have a better understanding, I don’t think it has anything to do with aging. I think it has to do with different stages of people in your life. I am basically really enjoying this time in my life.

All of the women valued the midlife stage. They viewed midlife as a new season in their lives presenting new opportunities and benefits.
**Freedom from Responsibility**

The phase of life when grown children leave home is often referred to as the "empty nest" (Barber, 1989). The younger cohorts looked forward to the time when their children would be grown and leave home. Cathy expressed her regret about missed opportunities for an education and her desire to have a career. She projected into the future, with the prospect of furthering her career: "I am looking forward to my kids growing up and gone. That will be nice!"

Those women whose children had left the nest enjoyed their freedom and appreciated time for themselves. Jean and her husband had enjoyed newfound freedom after the children left home. When their youngest daughter returned home for a while, they found her presence in the home stressful. Jean commented, "Yes, well, she was gone for a year. We were over a year without any kids in the house. We didn't realize how good we had it until she moved back."

In reference to the empty nest syndrome, the younger women looked forward to their children leaving home, and the older women were grateful for the freedom that resulted from having independent children. The concept of children leaving home did not adversely affect women in any of the cohorts. This finding confirmed statements in the research that fewer childrearing responsibilities are "accompanied by little if any feeling of loss" (Sampselle et al., 2002, p. 56) and an appreciation of independence and freedom (McQuaide, 1998b).

**LDS Church Community as a Resource**

Some theorists have placed a high value on the importance of female relationships (Gilligan, 1996; Mitchell & Helson, 1990; Siebert & Mutran, 1999). Appreciation for female friends, particularly women of the same faith, was reported by women in all three cohorts. HTS is a convert to the LDS Church. Due to her busy work schedule, she has little time to spend with friends. Nevertheless, she has felt assured that her LDS friends were there in time of need:

I know that I could just call [church friends] and say, "Hi, it is me. I am having a bad day. I need to talk. Do you mind shooting the breeze for a few minutes?" Not everybody would fit that bill because not everybody you could relate to on the same level, but there are a quite a few people I could call and lean on because they know we have all been taught that service and support [are] important. So I know if I needed people, I could call them, and they would be there for me. If they called me, I would do my best to be there for them.

All of the women viewed the LDS Church community as a resource and appreciated the auxiliary programs. Tamaris relied heavily on the home teaching program of the church:

My home teacher is someone from church who comes once a month to deliver a scripture message. It is nice to have people in my home and entertain. He will bring a spiritual message or just [be] nice to talk to. I'm glad I have the LDS community around me. I don't know what it would be like not to have them. There are lots of resources in our church. The women's group, the weekly meetings on Sunday, and then monthly we have enrichment activities, where we have lessons and activities—some are spiritually based and some of them are just fun, like crafts or hints for around the house. I think there is a lot of support.

The LDS Church community and women of the same faith were viewed as resources that all of the women relied on for support during times of need.

**Spiritual Resources**

Women from all three cohorts took comfort in spiritual resources. They reported that prayer, scripture reading, and their personal relationship with Deity gave them strength during difficult times. The following comment by Laura, who was born and raised in the LDS faith, shows how in times of trouble, she turns to spiritual sources for comfort. She reminisced about the first time she openly communicated with Deity:

I felt sad and depressed and like nobody cared. I went to my room and got down on my knees and prayed, and I just said, "Heavenly Father, I don't know why I am feeling like this, I feel lonely and sad, and I don't know why, but please help me." After my prayer, I stayed on my knees for a couple of minutes, and all of a sudden, I felt really warm, and my mood completely swung around, and I felt happy, and I knew that He had helped me to change that.

All of the women self-identified as spiritual. They had faith in the power of prayer and used it as a resource daily. These findings confirmed the prevalent belief that
members of the LDS faith receive strength from spiritual principles (Smith, 1981), consider the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be a comprehensive guide to this life (Koltko, 1991), and see religion and religious devotion as "the very root of their identities" (Maughan, 1991, p. 3).

Acceptance in the LDS Church Community

Huffman and Myers (1999) noted that the worth of women is often perceived to be based on sexuality, attractiveness, and youth. Thus older women are seldom valued. In contrast, all of the LDS women, regardless of age, felt valued and respected for their wisdom and experience. As women in the church, the participants noted that they are completely accepted for who they are, regardless of age.

Christine discussed the role of older LDS women. She did not consider age a barrier to being accepted within the LDS Church community:

You feel like you are just as useful as anyone. Everyone is useful. Everyone is needed. Everyone is progressing whether you are young or old, and everyone has a place. There is something for everyone, and you are never too old to do something. There is always something to do, [even if] it is sitting at home doing genealogy. You are still contributing to the Lord's work. You are not diminished just because your capacity is diminished.

None of the women were concerned about aging within the LDS Church community. Sarah, for example, had never considered aging a problem. She is involved in many programs in the church community and stated that she has always felt accepted and needed:

Being in the church for all of my life, I don't know that I would know what someone else does when they age. I don't know [that] I could make a proper comparison because I don't have anything to compare it to.... When you get older, you do genealogy work and work at the temple. You are needed, needed, needed!

All of the women had an intense sense of belonging, noting that they felt completely accepted and respected within the LDS Church community.

Meaningful Roles

Empirical research has indicated that role involvement positively affects women's psychological well-being (Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997). Barnett and Hyde (2001) found that multiple roles are beneficial to mental and physical health and that they increase opportunities for social support and boost self-esteem. This applied to all of the LDS women in this study. They felt valuable, useful, and needed within the LDS Church community. At the time of the interview, Laura held a responsible and time-consuming position in the LDS women's auxiliary. At times, she was frustrated with the heavy responsibility, but she commented,

People realize that you have experience, and they can call on you because of that experience. I think it is important to me because it makes a difference. Yes, I would say that it was. There are some things that I do, and it makes me feel good. I am glad to be doing them... contributing instead of just taking.

Mackenzie and her husband had returned from serving a mission for the LDS Church. She had enjoyed the rewarding experience and looked forward to completing another one. She stated,

In the church, every age is respected, and at every age, you are kept busy in the church. You don't become older and not used for anything. They use you more. I think by being busy spiritually, studying the scriptures, and praying and doing wherever you are asked to do in church... help keep you young as well. I think in the church, you are respected as you get older.

All of the women reported enjoyment and fulfillment from having meaningful roles within the LDS Church. The women feel valued because of their age and experience.

Eternal Perspective of Aging

Hunter and Sundel (1994) suggested that during midlife, issues of mortality and a sense of time running out come to the forefront. In contrast, all of the women in this study had an eternal perspective on aging and viewed midlife as part of the continuum of life. As an LDS convert, HTS commented that she believes in eternal life:

Being LDS tells me there is a reason for this. That this is just not a crappy little life that an egg grabbed a sperm and produced me and I am going to die at the end of it, and there is no purpose. I think because we have the eternal perspective that we know that we have to go
through this, that there is a reason ... I think being LDS and knowing that I have a divine purpose that I am not just here by accident that I am supposed to strive to be a better person and make good choices and help people around me, I think that makes aging not a horrible thing. It's just a different stage. We have different focuses.

Sarah asserted that midlife transition fits into a larger plan. Aging and death are part of this plan:

I don't believe that we came from nothing in the first place when we were born. I believe we existed before we came here, and I believe when we leave here after we die, we will continue to exist. . . . Our existence is never ending. It is eternal.

Being members of the LDS faith and having an understanding of life after death helped women in all three cohorts to view and accept midlife aging as part of the larger scheme of life. There was no concern about time running out.

**DISCUSSION**

This study demonstrated the strength of the qualitative method in its ability to obtain rich descriptions from the interviewees. The approach provided an opportunity for a small group of LDS women to share their personal stories about the midlife transition. As the findings showed, although each woman's midlife context was unique, there were commonalities in their midlife experiences. Some findings were consistent with those of contemporary research regarding the midlife experience, such as the presence of physical, emotional, and role changes; experiences of personal growth; recognition of the importance of roles; and the desire for generativity. There was no indication of midlife crisis. Rather, all of the women accepted the midlife changes as a normal development of life (Germain, 1994; Shek, 1996). The LDS Church community is a resource and a place where all of the women feel accepted and useful for their wisdom and experience. Volunteer roles give them a sense of worth. The women rely heavily on the LDS Church community and on their friends for support. Their religious beliefs are instrumental in assisting them through times of need.

In contrast to findings from contemporary research, the LDS women did not report identity confusion (McQuaide, 1996). Instead, they knew what they wanted out of life. They expressed a desire to develop their talents and abilities, and they anticipated spending more time with their spouses, researching family histories, and serving as LDS missionaries and temple workers. There was no indication that any role change, such as the change that occurs when children leave home, was negative for the women. Instead, they enjoyed a sense of freedom and reported personal growth in their confidence and assertiveness.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

With the increased life expectancy of the baby boomer generation and the increasing number of midlife women, issues surrounding the midlife transition will be reflected in our counseling practices. LDS and non-LDS clients may seek counseling for issues that arise from such developments as the breakdown of a marriage, the departure of children, separation from one's spouse, or the desire to redefine one's identity (Degges-White, 2001). Other clients who may not present with midlife concerns may have problems that are influenced or exacerbated by issues related to aging. Inconsistency of information about menopause, sociocultural influences that perpetuate ageism and sexism, redefinition of self, and concerns with self-care cause uncertainty and instability in women's lives during the midlife transition (Banister, 1999).

Mental health providers are in an ideal position to provide support to women (Patterson & Lynch, 1988). As practitioners, our main goal is to improve our clients' quality of life through effective intervention. To work more successfully with female clients and to help them navigate midlife productively, practitioners are encouraged to understand the physical, emotional, and role changes that occur at midlife and to view presenting problems within the context of the midlife transition.

**UNDERSTANDING THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES OF MIDLIFE**

When meeting with women ages 35 to 65, it is important that practitioners determine which more specific age cohort a client belongs to. Younger women in particular may benefit from information regarding the stages and symptoms of menopause, the benefits and risks of hormone replacement therapy, and alternate
solutions for managing physical changes (Cobb, 1993). Women often need encouragement to balance their life responsibilities and to make time to improve their psychological well-being. They must be encouraged to take an active role in and make informed decisions about their health and well-being. There is no doubt that menopause represents a powerful shift in the body, mind, and spirit of women. Most will benefit from stress reduction techniques such as muscle relaxation and meditation. Being physically active may reduce the perceived severity of menopausal symptoms and enhance psychological well-being (Elavsky & McAuley, 2004). Positive use of leisure also has favorable effects on midlife aging (Parry & Shaw, 1999).

According to Huffman and Myers (1999), women’s responses to menopause are related to the meaning they ascribe to it. Women often turn to popular literature about women and aging for information (Banister, 1999), but they must have accurate information if they are to make informed decisions about health. Participation in an educational program that provides information about midlife experiences may improve women’s attitudes toward menopause, provide relief from the various symptoms, and increase their quality of life (Rotem, Kushner, Levine, & Ehrenfeld, 2005). Education regarding emotional symptoms is important because understanding the expected symptoms may reduce stress (O'Connor et al., 1998). Women may also benefit from having access to resources such as reliable Internet sites and self-help books.

Changes in Roles and Relationships

Role changes are particularly evident during midlife. Thus, predictable events such as children leaving home and family structure shifting should be explored with specific reference to changing roles. Once children have been successfully reared and launched, women may find themselves uncertain as to their parenting roles (Fingerman, 2000). Some fear losing parental control. Developing adult relationships with grown children involves appreciating the maturing adult children and pursuing equal relationships with them by granting them independence. Parents often need assistance in coming to terms with how their adult children have “turned out.”

Although the notion of children leaving home did not adversely affect the interviewees in the study, other women may be susceptible to the empty nest syndrome and could benefit by planning in advance, acknowledging fears, and discussing feelings, as well as pursuing hobbies and interests, establishing regular routines, and maintaining self-care (Fingerman, 2000). It is important to be sensitive to infertile or single women who may not have been able to have children and are particularly sensitive when there is no hope of being able to do so. Postmenopausal women can no longer produce children; however, midlife may be a time of psychological and creative fertility, when women’s “productivity is not determined by reproductive capacity, but by desire, motivation, and psychological capacity” (Degges-White, 2001, p. 10).

Midlife women are vulnerable to strained marital relationships (Degges-White, 2001). The midlife years can be viewed as a time to renew the marital bond. Women can be supported in their efforts to refocus their energies on the positive aspects of their marriage, redefine the couple relationship without children, rediscover their spouses not only romantically but also intellectually and spiritually, and look forward to the next phase of married life. Although members of the LDS Church place great emphasis on marriage and family, they are susceptible to separation and divorce (Mattson & Scharman, 1994) as well as widowhood, and in these conditions will have to make critical adjustments. As they adjust, they may need assistance in dealing with loss, depression, and self-esteem issues, in addition to exploring opportunities to improve their lives and set goals for positive change. In many instances, this process will involve such concrete steps as returning to school, updating a résumé, and undertaking financial planning to ensure greater income security and more rewarding employment options.

During midlife, the addition and acceptance of in-laws and the prospect of grandparenting can be daunting. Anticipating and preparing for this stage will greatly reduce those feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Another significant role change for midlife women often comes with the aging of family members and the increasing dependency of those who are elderly. As members of the “sandwich generation” (Zal, 1992), many midlife women move into the role of caregiver for parents or in-laws and are challenged by increased stress, heavy demands on their time, and the need to balance multiple roles (Riley & Bowen, 2004). Such women often gain from reexamining their present coping strategies, learning stress management techniques, and being encouraged to recruit the help of others and make time for self-care.

Consciousness Raising of Aging Stereotypes
Midlife aging has been construed as a negative period, "despite literature which is inconsistent with that view" (Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001, p. 34). Many women who are in the midst of the midlife transition need to understand and challenge negative societal attitudes toward aging; thus, practitioners must attend to the social and cultural context (Banister, 1999). Confronting the stereotypes about being an aging female in Western society can be effective in helping women to understand society's adoration of youth and to reject ageism (the social construction of age). By challenging preconceived notions, women can be encouraged to embrace their age and focus on their inherent beauty. There is strength in numbers. Aging women are empowered as they are reminded that they belong to an ever-increasing cohort of mature women.

**Encouraging Generativity**

Developmental theory suggests that the baby boomer generation will want to contribute to future generations (Peterson & Klohn, 1995). According to Erikson (1982), generativity involves fostering the growth of others and leaving a legacy through parenting, teaching, or mentoring. Generativity is a strong force; some women's self-esteem may be closely tied to it. Thus, efforts to increase a sense of efficacy and to find meaningful activity can be particularly effective. For LDS women in particular, the counselor can emphasize their individual value in the church community. As women learn to celebrate their personal wisdom and maturity, they become reenergized by the possibility of going on missions, doing family history work, engaging in meaningful temple work, and seeking further spiritual light.

**Providing a Forum for Aging Women**

Menopause was once considered the silent passage—a "powerful and mysterious taboo" (Sheehy, 1993, p. xi). Historically, women practiced a conspiracy of silence, but the women of today are more willing to discuss menopause and the midlife transition (McQuaid, 1998b). Indeed, the women in the study reported a feeling of empowerment when discussing midlife aging and describing the resources they used to navigate it. It is particularly important that female clients be presented with the same opportunities to talk about their lives, express their fears and concerns about aging, explore their feelings of guilt or regret about the past, articulate their hopes and dreams, and discover strengths and inner resources. By doing so, they can rewrite the script for the midlife transition (Gillet, 1996).

**Support System**

Midlife is often portrayed as a time of crisis, characterized by the empty nest syndrome, the burden of caretaking, and pressure to achieve financial security (Hunter & Sundel, 2002). Therefore, women need support, and they look for someone to talk to. Although many opportunities for support may occur in the therapeutic context, McQuaid (1998b) suggested that having friends or confidantes is a predictor of well-being.

**Resources**

As practitioners, we can improve our services to midlife women by educating ourselves about the stages of the midlife transition and focusing attention on the physical and emotional symptoms of menopause. We must be familiar with relevant community programs and resources, such as midlife educational and therapeutic groups, female reproductive and breast health centers, menopause resource centers, and local health care providers. Let us consider implementing programs, workshops, and educational opportunities (Banister, 1999). By doing so, we can help our clients to deal with potentially stressful situations and can facilitate their experience of a successful midlife transition.

**Conclusion**

Large numbers of women are transitioning through a challenging and complicated life period. Societal narratives have focused on the negative aspects of midlife. Markers of midlife such as menopause and the empty nest syndrome can be represented to promote a pessimistic view of aging women. It is important not to overlook the growth and opportunities that are also characteristic of midlife. Midlife women continue to grow in confidence and assertiveness and to fulfill personal goals and desires. The midlife transition is no longer considered the end of traditional femininity. Instead, the midlife transition is a rite of passage that allows women to celebrate their strengths and wisdom and to discover new freedom and creativity. As effective practitioners, we must examine our own attitudes toward aging, reject any preconceived notions related to aging women, and refute negative cultural stereotypes. Most importantly, we must spread the good news that aging is not to be feared. Midlife is a joyous part of the continuum of life. It should be embraced, accepted, and savored!


