



# THE MIDDLE YEARS of LIFE

1.

## PRIME TIME

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**L**ife begins at 40!" While some midlife (40-65) people say this is true, others spend time and energy fighting their 40s and 50s. Advertisements suggest that we must remain "youthful" and other more subtle messages help plant the suspicion that after the vitality of youth, there is nothing left but a rapid withering away.

Years ago, when life expectancy was less than 50 years, this notion may have been true. But today, because of improved medical and health care, we are likely to have 75 years or more to live, learn and experience. Research studies suggest that life can be divided into four major divisions called "eras." These eras are designated by age but actually overlap one another by as much as two to six years, depending upon each person's individual development. These eras of life are:

|                             |             |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Childhood and Adolescence — | age 0-22    |
| Early Adulthood —           | age 22-45   |
| Middle Adulthood —          | age 40-65   |
| Late Adulthood —            | age 65 plus |

As you can see, middle adulthood is a long period in the middle of life that blends into old age, which can also be a long time.

## Middle Adulthood

Adulthood is the time of peak physical capacity. Most body functions reach full growth and development by the middle 20s and for the next 20 or 30 years—or longer—decline so gradually that change is almost unnoticeable. By about the age of 50, enough bodily change usually has occurred to be noticeable, but how much change occurs varies enormously from one person to another. Inherited characteristics, nutrition and exercise, for example, can affect the level of the peaks reached, how long people stay at those peaks and how quickly they decline thereafter.

Midlife is a time of good health for most people. Health problems can strike at midlife as at other times, but for the most part, if midlife people keep themselves fit, they can maintain their health and do the things they like and need to do.

Some predictable physical changes do occur in the middle years of life, however. A subtle change in metabolism means that people may have to fight harder against gaining weight. During the 40s the hairline recedes, hair thins out and most men and women in our country become gray-haired. The skin loses its elasticity. Posture and movements become less graceful because of stiffening joints and loss of resiliency in muscles. And all men and women experience a change in reproductive capacity. These physical changes are normal events of midlife, not health problems.

**P** psychological changes that occur in midlife are not closely related to age. "Life events," or turning points,

provide important signals for any psychological changes that might occur. Lillian Troll points out that it is not being 40 or having lived 40 years that moves a man or woman to re-evaluate his or her condition. It is, rather, such circumstances as having been married 20 years, being at the peak of a career, taking a job for the first time, or divorcing, or seeing the youngest child move out of the home.

Popular literature and the media have portrayed midlife changes as dramatic and punctuated with crises. Actually, few people experience crises. Our individual responses to life, which we have had since birth, influence our reactions to change, whether we're learning to walk, to be marriage partners, or to be retirees. Some of us kick and scream—others adapt smoothly and easily.

## Our Choice

The middle years of life can be a complex, tiring, exhilarating experience and a time of fulfillment. The quality and, to a great extent, the quantity of our midlife are up to us.

A wise approach to midlife, according to Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist at Oregon State University, can bring opportunity to exercise greater thought and control over our life events. We need to keep the following principles in mind:

**T**hink through what is valuable to you; set priorities for present and future activity.

**M**ake changes selectively; change for change's sake is usually unproductive.

**K**eep in touch with your feelings and your environment.

**T**hink about appearance. The way we think about ourselves is reflected in our faces and bodies. Health, contentment, personality and character are in our faces and in our walk and posture. There is as much beauty in the face of a grandparent as in a 5-year old.

**F**eel free to find new involvements and exciting challenges. Creativity is not possessed only by artists, authors, musicians or scholars. It's found in imaginative cookery, loving ways of relating to a partner or older parents, well-planned volunteer projects, handiwork by a craftsman or a new rose by a gardener.

**H**elp fight the stereotypes of aging: unappealing, boring, inflexible and useless.

**P**ay close attention to the rules of good health. The capacity to participate in a long, full life depends upon wellness and the vitality it insures.

**S**ee our life events as opportunities to step out and step up with vigor.

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