



# **MIDLIFE LOSS**

**Coping Strategies**

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# MIDLIFE LOSS

## Coping Strategies

Edited by  
**Richard A. Kalish**

Foreword by  
Robert Kastenbaum



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## *Dedication*

*It is usually the honor and privilege of the editor to write a book's dedication. In this case, the tables are turned, and it is the chapter authors who dedicate Midlife Loss: Coping Strategies to its editor, Dr. Richard Kalish, who died in April 1988, after a brief illness. "Dick," to some of us, was a friend and colleague to all of us—someone with whom to share a story or simply a glass of wine, someone with whom to laugh at the strange exigencies of the academic enterprise or the latest gossip. The creation of this book was prompted by Richard's own entrance into the middle years, his own experiences with the losses and the rewards of middle age. As such, it was a very personal effort for him. Completing the chapters after his death also became a very personal effort for us as friends and authors because it brought back many fond memories of Dick.*

## Foreword

The man who envisioned this book is no longer with us. Richard A. Kalish would have made a terrific old man. He was an acute listener, an accomplished story spinner, and a superb improviser. Outraged, merry, contemplative, fantastical, scholarly, or compassionate, Kalish was—in all his moods—a person who radiated a zest for life. He seldom went through the motions, be it as teacher, researcher, or friend. There is little doubt that Kalish's continued openness to experience would have added further stories to his repertoire and a deeper burnish to his attractive personality.

*Midlife Loss: Coping Strategies* is only in some respects the book that Kalish intended. In first planning this work, he had no reason to believe it would be among his final contributions to the understanding of adult life. He thought he would not only be around to see this book into print but would also have the opportunity to make many other scholarly contributions. There is little doubt but that he would have taken full advantage of an opportunity to share "last words" carefully distilled from a long and productive career.

The circumstances involved in the completion of this book also limit our opportunity to enjoy the full range and distinctive tang of Kalish's thought. It seems to me, for example, that he would have found ways to lighten up, if not actually sabotage, the prevailingly serious tone of this book. The Kalish that some of us had the pleasure of knowing over many years was a sharp observer of sociocultural foibles and a gadfly of unimpeachable credentials. "Middle age and losses," one can imagine him muttering. "Isn't that depressing enough without expecting us to actually *cope* with them? Are we condemned to being forever responsible and competent? I bet the next thing they're going to say is that loss and suffering are really good for us, like a bowl of sullen oatmeal and a nice piece of cold liver. Where does it say that we *have* to cope?"

Kalish and I actually did have a conversation along these lines in



which we both imagined a scenario featuring the “Developmental Patrol.” This was an elite law-enforcement squad, ever on the alert to identify those malefactors who deviated from the guidelines and expectations of developmental psychologists. The youth who stubbornly clung to habits of an earlier phase was a target, as was the elder who failed to disengage. Almost by definition, the middle-aged person was the “usual suspect” to be rounded up whenever something went amiss in society. The middler was obliged to cope not only for him/herself but for practically everybody else as well. The name of the game was “No Game.” Cope, cope, cope, and (the rub) it’s good for us! The reward for being such a diligent middle-ager was to grow old (gracefully, if not full of grace) and learn to meet still another set of specifications for approved role behavior.

Whether Kalish would have taken this or another tack, it is likely he would have found some way to make us smile now and then as we examined the challenges of middle age. The aim would have been more than entertainment: He recognized, more clearly than most, that the decentering/recentering/level-shifting effects of humor are invaluable in helping to keep things in perspective.

And so, as readers of *Midlife Loss: Coping Strategies*, we will have to do without some of the distinctive insights, humor, and perspective that Kalish would probably have brought to this book. Fortunately, however, one of Kalish’s other skills is very well represented here. He never mistook the best-advertised concerns of white middle-class Americans for the total human condition. Kalish himself explored many varieties of the human condition throughout the world and discerned both problems and potentialities that had eluded many other social scientists.

This book follows Kalish’s intentions by describing and analyzing a broad spectrum of people who confront a broad spectrum of losses and challenges. Consider, for example, Barbara Yee’s “Loss of Homeland and Culture.” How seldom is this topic even mentioned in most texts and courses on adulthood and aging! And yet, what impact this type of loss can make on a person’s life, and how crucial it is to include this phenomenon in our overall conceptual frameworks! Yee herself makes an excellent start to interweaving the loss of “the old country” with major strands of developmental theory. I suspect this chapter would have been especially treasured by Kalish with his respect and empathy for the displaced persons of the world.

All the topics encompassed by this book were entrusted to schol-

ars who have not only proven themselves as significant contributors to the social and behavioral sciences but who have also demonstrated the commitment to sharing their work in a clear and forthright manner. A gifted writer himself, Kalish would have seen to it that the writing met high standards (as, for example, this sentence does not). The total project was entrusted to a person who has made distinguished original contributions of her own to the understanding of the adult years. Always somewhat skeptical of theory, Kalish would have admired Margaret Hellie Huyck's elegant and instructive "Models of Midlife," and both the parent and the scholar in him would have found much to discuss in her "Midlife Parental Imperatives." Huyck deserves the gratitude of those who knew Kalish and were eager to see this work come to fruition, but also of all those who will come away from this book with an enriched view of the losses of middle age and, yes, even some respect for the Developmental Patrol's insistence on coping . . . coping . . . coping!

—Robert Kastenbaum, Ph.D.

# 1

## *MODELS OF MIDLIFE*

MARGARET HELLIE HUYCK

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,  
I woke to find myself alone in a dark wood,  
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

—Dante

This book presents some guides to discerning the shapes in the medieval poet Dante's "dark wood" of the middle years of adult life. Artists and common folk have long characterized the varying phases of the human life course. We also now have scientific information and systematic models about the middle years. In this chapter, models for understanding midlife are summarized and used as a framework for previewing the remaining chapters.

### LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT: IS MIDLIFE UNIVERSAL OR IDIOSYNCRATIC?

Models, or theories, about middle age are useful guides to understanding the kinds of specific experiences reported in this book and encountered personally by each reader. Models of human behavior are helpful insofar as they (1) describe and help us predict patterns of behavior and (2) provide a rationale for the patterns observed; the second of these functions is the more challenging of the two. Some models include relatively few behaviors, but are useful for understanding a limited range of phenomena. Other models include a wide range of ages and behaviors. Often such models are not as pre-

cise as narrower theories, but they help us think about complex patterns. At this stage, there is no single "grand theory" of the middle years which encompasses a broad range of behaviors and which has widespread support. We have, rather, a number of interesting models of the middle years, each of which is provocative and useful in understanding some kinds of behaviors.

Models of behavior should guide our thinking and observations and help us interpret what we observe. Perhaps the most persistent question we have about any behavior is whether it is "normal" or not. We want to know if we can anticipate our own middle age by noting closely what our parents have experienced by talking intensively with a friend at work, or by traveling to Tahiti to check out the folks in the middle. If we don't like what we see others doing, we wonder if we can do middle age differently and how we should proceed to do so.

These questions also occur to researchers. Behavioral scientists disagree about how much predictability and pattern to expect in the course of human lives. The ambiguity about the ways in which middle age involves common and individual experiences will be revealed throughout this book. In part, the ambiguity reflects what can be seen as different levels of development (Gutmann, 1987).

Levels of development refer to the ways in which each person is (1) like all other persons, (2) like some other persons, and (3) like no other persons (Kardiner & Linton, 1945). The first level refers to the human species as a distinct entity and to the generic human characteristics that contribute to its survival. The first level thus refers to the familiar hungers, excitements, and fears that define our human nature and that are shared by all normally endowed women and men. The second level refers to the collective and cultural frameworks of human existence and the ways in which the social experiences shape the human potentials of the first level. Thus, individuals who share certain experiences may be very similar to each other, but different from persons in other historical or cultural settings. Finally, the third level recognizes individual differences in the ways in which our genetic heritage combines with distinctive sets of experiences to create unique experiences and behaviors.

Development along the life course proceeds simultaneously on all three levels. Thus, it can be expected that in some ways the experiences of middle age will be universal and embedded in the

phrasing of our human experience. Other experiences may reflect the special ways our culture or our historical time has structured the options open to persons during the middle years. Some experiences of the middle years may be common for men but not for women, or for persons of color but not dominant-group Caucasians, or for middle-aged persons in dual-career marriages but not for other patterns of marriage and employment. Finally, individuals may have unusual characteristics, such as a physical birth defect, a motor-coordination disease emerging at age 42, or an idiosyncratic interpretation of events—any of which give the middle years a distinctive tone.

Models of midlife experiences generally focus on one of these three levels. The level addressed, of course, profoundly affects the view of the developmental process. In this chapter, the models of midlife development are organized in terms of the level of development considered.

### ***Level-One Models***

Theories that describe the first (species) level of development focus on the common themes of experiences, even if they seem to be different. Many of the theories at this level are psychodynamic, emphasizing the internal psychic issues that emerge in distinctive ways during the middle years. They propose midlife issues and themes believed to be universal.

For example, Erik Erikson (1982) proposed that the compelling issue for the ego (or self-governing processes) during the middle years is to recognize fully that personal life will not last forever—without sinking into self-absorption or premature stagnation because one is not immortal. The meta-issue is described as the challenge to develop a sense of generativity, actively and effectively caring to preserve whatever will be needed for future generations to thrive. Confrontation with this issue is regarded as universal and grounded in essential realities of the human life span. By middle age, one has the cognitive maturity to understand finitude; the personal experience of deaths of significant others, particularly parents; children who begin to seem self-sufficient; a body that is no longer infallible—and the temptation to ease into self-protective indulgence. Other theorists with level-one emphases include Jung (1933),

Levinson (1978), Vaillant (1977), Colarusso and Nemiroff (1981), Gutmann (1987), and some of Neugarten's formulations.

### *Level-Two Models*

Level-two theorists focus on the ways in which persons are like some others. Experiences during the middle years are typically examined in terms of status characteristics—ways in which individuals are like some and unlike others in terms of sex, ethnicity, social class, parental or marital status, cohort, or culture. Often such theorists are sociologists or anthropologists, and they emphasize the ways in which social roles and accidental circumstances shape experiences during the middle years (as in other phases of the life course). Models of this range to be summarized below include those of Baltes and Reese (1984), Baruch and Brooks-Gunn (1984), and Neugarten (1968, 1977).

Most of the theorists mentioned as emphasizing level-one aspects also recognize some level-two aspects of development. For example, Colarusso and Nemiroff (1981) point out that the ability to develop the psychologically desirable quality of generativity during the middle years is partly dependent upon a cultural context. This context includes children and young people who need to be protected, provided for, and inspired and lauds those mature adults who take on this challenge outside their own small family. Thus, if one looked only at a culture or historical time where such opportunities were minimal, one might conclude that Erikson's description of generativity as a universal challenge for midlife is erroneous. However, if one looked more widely, one could see the ways in which the behaviors exhibited reflected the same kinds of essential struggles that Erikson described—with varying outcomes that were linked to the larger social setting. Middle-aged adults who have chosen to move into a leisure-oriented residential community where no children are allowed may, for example, refuse to consider state-wide needs for child care and elementary schools or long-term waste management programs, on the grounds that such expenditures will do them no good. Erikson, however, would argue that their response can be understood as making the nongenerative, or self-absorbed response to the universal dilemma of recognizing personal finitude.

*Level-Three Models*

Theorists focusing on the third level, human uniqueness, examine the ways in which even common experiences of midlife may be given distinctive features. At one extreme is a view of life as a "random walk," in which chance occurrences, idiosyncratic biology, and one's experiential history combine to make it virtually impossible to predict patterned behavior during this phase of life. Theorists who emphasize this view strongly, however, do not develop models of midlife, because such models imply some orderly patterning. The German psychologist Hans Thoma, for example, warns against trying to summarize individual biographies into patterns of normal aging (1981).

One theorist, David Gutmann, has developed models of midlife development that are distinctive in (a) addressing all three levels of development and (b) hypothesizing a rationale for the regular patterns of change observed cross-culturally. In this chapter is a summary of Gutmann's Parental Imperative model, which taps levels one and two (Gutmann, 1987) and his specificity theory of midlife crises as an example of a psychodynamic model of distinctive responses to common midlife themes (Gutmann, 1988).

## MODELS OF UNIVERSAL THEMES OF MIDLIFE

Models proposing that in the middle portion of the human life course there is a phase with distinctive, universal qualities also model the entire life course. There is no way to specify the ways in which middle age is different from periods of life that precede and follow unless one has some model of what those other periods involve.

Most such models are organismic; they view the human organism as unfolding and developing under laws similar to those that guide other (nonhuman) organisms. It is assumed that the most enduring patterns have evolved because they serve some basic species survival needs or because they are a consequence of basic survival patterns (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1981; Gutmann, 1987). The kinds of universal themes identified with the midlife exist because of certain universal aspects of the human experience. We are born helpless, de-

pendent, and enormously vulnerable, but we are capable of learning vast amounts of complex matter. We will die, after a short or long period of disability and disintegration. In between, we are challenged to overcome the feelings of infantile helplessness, to remain productive in ways that provide us with pleasure and sustenance, and to endure the assaults of dying without destroying those we love. Within this common understanding, theorists who posit universal themes of middle age focus on different aspects.

#### HYPOTHESES ABOUT UNIVERSAL DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

Calvin Colarusso and Robert Nemiroff (1981) are working within the psychodynamic tradition to explore the nature of adult life experiences. In this tradition, human behavior is assumed to be psychically determined. That is, we initiate behavior that serves our needs; we do not passively respond to situations. Many of our "needs" and the meanings we attribute to experiences remain unconscious but still influence behavior. Development is often described in terms of changes in psychic structure. Psychic structure includes three kinds of emotional structures or processes: id processes, reflecting the earliest, most basic wishes for total pleasure and self-indulgence; ego processes, reflecting the capacities for self-governance and appreciation of reality; and superego processes, including idealized versions of the self and the social rules presented in the family and culture.

While traditional Freudian theorists focus largely on id processes, other dynamic theorists emphasize the ego processes, exploring the ways in which the potentials for self-governance are challenged with advancing biological maturity (the soma), understanding and sense of self (psyche), and social expectations (culture). Contemporary dynamic models are more psychosocial in stressing the ways in which developmental challenges arise because of the shared needs of the individual and the social system. They are also psychosocial in emphasizing that adaptive individual development is also adaptive for the larger social system—i.e., species survival.

Colarusso and Nemiroff have built upon the work of pioneering adult developmental theorists (such as Erik Erikson and Carl Jung) to propose a set of seven hypotheses that describe the general nature



of adult development. These hypotheses specify general rules of development during the middle years and, thus, constitute a kind of level-one, or universal, description. Other contemporary theorists of midlife provide examples of themes specific to this phase of life.

First, Colarusso and Nemiroff propose that *the nature of the developmental process is basically the same in the adult as in the child*. That is, there are always interactions between the individual and the social environment in the achievement of any new and phase-specific developmental task. The example cited above about the importance of children and young people in facilitating the full development of potentials for generativity is one illustration.

Second, *development in adulthood is an ongoing, dynamic process*. We are always in a state of becoming, even during the middle years.

The inherent, universal nature of such a process is the focus of the model of adult development proposed by Daniel Levinson and his colleagues (1978). Levinson describes a lifelong process of alternating periods of stability and transition. His initial work was based upon intensive interviews with 40 American men aged 35–45; he has since interviewed similar groups of women. The content or descriptions of the ways in which the individuals studied experienced their lives can hardly be taken as the basis of a universal theory of midlife, given the restricted nature of the samples. Levinson's primary point, however, was that adult life (like childhood) is characterized by a predictable dialectic process of change. Individuals develop what he called a *life structure*, which meets their needs and feels comfortable—but usually only for five to seven years. Life circumstances change, the inner sense of self changes, and the former life structure is no longer adequate. Periods of dismantling former life structures and establishing replacement ones typically last three to five years. Levinson's model thus assumes a certain universality in the process of continued “becoming.”

Third, *whereas childhood development is focused primarily on the formation of psychic structure, adult development is concerned with the continuing evolution of existing psychic structure and with its use*. Thus, Colarusso and Nemiroff suggest that development during the middle years consists of rearrangements and refinements of ego processes, in particular. Several contemporary theorists deal specifically with the kinds of psychic structural developments evident during the middle years.