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REVIEW ARTICLE

Empty-Nest Syndrome: Pathway to “Construction or Destruction”

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Introduction

Many of my friends in between their early forties to late fifties seem to have a pessimistic view on their well being. They have the urge to make irrational and sudden changes in their lives, believing that such changes would result in an increase in their happiness. They don't recognize that they are presently in their midlife crisis phase, an empty-nest life cycle, a menopause or an andropause cycle. Although they have the power to make wiser, rational and more choices in a realistic and productive way, many end up with frivolous purchases instead, and others find a younger wife or decide to resign from their medical jobs and set up shop in a field, they aren't familiar with. However, you don't need to change everything in your life and definitely not in such a dramatic way. On the other hand, some to take this opportunity to have an organized reappraisal of their life; by way of have small rational changes: promoting their personal freedom, improving their marital relationships or simply solving some of their work obstacles [1].

When a parent reaches this middle age, they encounter various urges to make changes in their life. The definitions of midlife crisis; empty-nest syndrome; and andropause/menopause are as following:

Midlife crisis

It is a period of personal & emotional chaos and poor coping contests when middle age has been reached. It is accompanied by cravings to make changes brought on by doubts and concerns about growing older [2].

Empty-Nest syndrome

It is the time after the last offspring prepares to leave

their home. Parents will have mixed emotions and will have feelings of unhappiness and loss. Empty nest syndrome isn't a clinical diagnosis; it is normal human life cycle stage (Figure 1) [3].

It is a painful experience for parents to suddenly have no children at home who need constant care. It is difficult not being a part of their children's daily lives. It is a challenging transition for a parent to have the loss of a persistent companionship. The parent will have stressful times worrying about their children's safety [4].

Andropause/Menopause

It is the condition in which, both genders have a decrease in circulating sex hormone. The female sex hormone will be decrease abruptly while in men decrease is more gradual. Approximately, 30% of men in their 50s will experience some symptoms of andropause, which are triggered by low testosterone levels [5].

Signs of a Midlife Crisis

There are many signs, including:

The hair aging process, the period where most men or women have struggled with questioning their life in their 40s and early 50s. Then, it is a time of unease, dissatisfaction with their current career, marriage, or their health, and a period of urge/impulse to take irrational action to improve self- perception. Feelings of short pressing time to have changes due to a decrease in their stamina and deteriorated appearance; they become a grandfather/grandmother; and some of their friends or parents pass away. Feeling of a “teenage-like rebellion”; a sure sign of feeling stuck with desires to blow up their life (drinking more, having an affair, leav-



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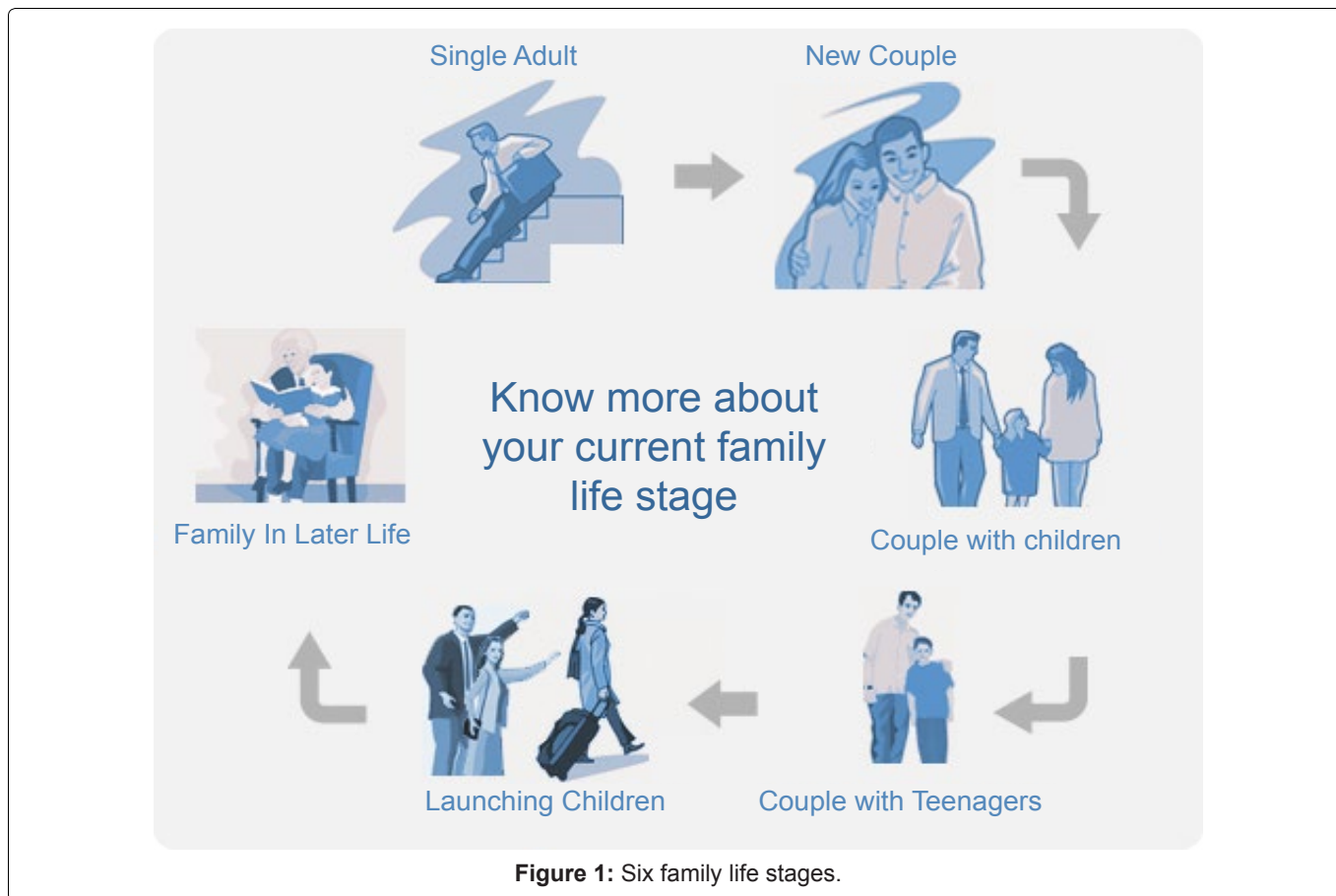


Figure 1: Six family life stages.

ing your family, feeling that your life no longer fits you, more concerned about your appearance, feel more lust for excitement and thrills) [1,4].

Navigating Midlife Crisis

The person should address the causes of their unhappy feelings and try to resolve them to avoid impulsive desires and irrational decision-making. The individual should remember that their negative feelings and emotions certainly point to the problems that need solving; they aren't order commands to follow it without considering the consequences. Be thankful for the good things in your life that make you truly happy, be proud of your achievements, be grateful that you are not losing them. Talk it over with a trustful friend, a pastor, or a mental health professional that can give a neutral opinion on whether you're making sensible choices. Make sure your new goals are practical and realistic. The individual should remember that you don't need to blow your life up to be happy [1,4].

Midlife crisis; it is either an age of regression, with self-rumination, negative emotions and outrageously impulsive action, [1,4,6,7] or it is a time of creative transition; as a period of tremendous growth. The midlife crisis is a normal part of life, it is a midlife transition to compel change in family matters and/or work, but it can also include religious and economic status transitions. They reevaluate their priorities and goals, reasoning changes and wishes, follow up their innovative dreams. However, the empty nest period might be a

time of freedom; a time to have a new opportunity to reconstruct a relationship, improve marital quality and rekindle earlier interests [4,8].

Many men may get in touch more with their feminine side, which could mean taking up cooking, art or volunteering with children depending on the supporting systems around them.

Middle age crisis is normal adult development and a transitional age. The crisis or transition tends to occur around significant life events. The crisis may happen to both genders, and although the mechanism is similar, it manifests differently. Men do seem more intent on wanting to prove something, while women often get validity to reevaluate their performance through their roles as a mother, wife or both. They are both searching for a new image and/or identity [6,9,10].

When Midlife Crisis Turns into Depression

During a midlife crisis and the changes it accompanies, people might have symptoms of serious depression if they fail to follow or achieve their goals and dreams. This might lead to a change in eating habits, sleeping habits, stamina, pessimism or hopelessness feelings, restlessness, anxiety or irritability, guilty feelings, helplessness or worthlessness, loss of personal interest in sex activities and hobbies, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and physical aches or pains.

Many depressed patients will either respond to behavioral therapy or to "talk" therapy, as well as anti-depressant medication [6,11-13].

When Midlife Crisis Turns into Divorce

Midlife crisis may lead to divorce or is experiencing unhappiness/boredom with their relationship, leading to questioning the validity of previous marriage decisions. The partner has many anger spells and blames the other for their down feelings, this will definitely cause doubts about their previous love with resentment over the marriage. The partner will have a confessional stressful stage, unable to make decisions, and then search for new intimacy [7,8,13].

There are many external factors which can create midlife crisis [14-17].

Debt

It is easier to escape from their family rather than to seek help from a debt administration company or split up your loans. Debt can add more pressure to this stressful time in life.

Significant loss

The death of a parent or family member can cause grief, which accompanies poor coping mechanism, added to a midlife bewildering, overwhelming, and difficult transition.

External pressure

From work, family and social factors.

There are many internal factors which can create midlife crisis [14,15,18,19].

Individuals with a lack of understanding of the midlife crisis process or an avoidant personality with poor conflict management will suffer from feelings of low self-esteem, feeling of shame and rejection due to emotional inadequacy, and thus will have a harder midlife transition to navigate.

There is irrationality in people with unreasonable decisions to change behaviour.

Also, "Gender Expansion", stated that the men/women who perceived their parents as strong and domineering or as weak and ineffectual suffer when they undergo this shift. The gender expansion will be hidden "unconscious and fanciful" projections that they will end up like their fathers and mothers or the end-result is psychological distress.

Positive job changes in their early life have beneficial sequel in work productivity. In contrast, divorce in early life has a detrimental effect on midlife mental health.

While, the intellectual ability during midlife excels on almost every measure of cognitive functioning (Verbal ability, numerical ability, reasoning and verbal memory), except perceptual speed which will be declining in middle age group.

Some evidence shows there is a hormonal decline in both genders which leads to either menopause or andropause.

Coping Strategies of Empty Nest Syndrome

Usually, people will have experienced a loss and/or despair due to the empty nest syndrome and thus, will need to take action rather than a reaction (responding instead of reacting) [4,20-27].

The individual should be prepared for the departure; by making sure that both the children and the parents are ready for that step. Also, the parent should understand the empty nest syndrome and recognize the early symptoms. Empty nest syndrome is a psychological condition that affects both parents, results in a feeling of grief (feeling of loss, redundancy, unworthiness, and uncertainty about the future) due to their children's departure [2]. It mostly coincides with other major events in life (e.g. Menopause, illness, or retirement). The transitional period takes time to have a normal life of seeing friends, getting out and about, or resuming some activities that get them back into the swing of things. Consequently, instead of grumbles and frustration, the parent should accept the new situation and try to help their offspring to succeed in new challenges when he or she does leave home. You should keep in touch with your children. The parent can continue to be close to their offspring environment; even when they live apart. The parent can utilize regular calls, emails, texts or even video chats. Shift aside the terrifying thoughts; the parents and their departing children should take more fun adventures. Try to reassure their frightened children that it will be an exciting, familiar and much needed experience. To continue providing secure, home sense of belonging and safety. Let offspring make mistakes and to learn from them. Seek support; internal and external supports are vitally important in difficult times when parents are dealing with an empty nest. Stay positive; the parent should think and work positively in their extra time and use the energy they have to reconstruct their marriage or to have more time for their personal interests. Start looking at your own needs; by building new friendships or reviving lapsed ones and by engaging in a new hobby or interest or by returning to school or university, by restarting a career or considering new volunteering opportunities. Reignite the spark of love in your life, by trying to improve your spousal relationship to rediscover each other by spending more time together or by having an exciting vacation.

Can I Prevent the Empty Nest Syndrome?

Parents should prepare themselves before their last adult is about to leave the house, don't worry about empty nest syndrome, have a forward strategy. The parent should look positively to new opportunities in their personal and professional life. The parent should keep them full of activity or take on new tasks at work or at home to help alleviate the sense of loss [4]. The parent shouldn't make big decisions until they come to terms with the new phase of life.

Although the parent may experience separation anxiety, the offsprings should be given space to grow up and flourish.

Conclusion

The most susceptible parents are those who find it tough to have an empty nest or, those with an unhappy or unstable partnership, those with high self-identity struggles a lot, and those with no external work.

The parent experiences an insecure grief reaction and thus should plan and prepare for an empty nest and be aware of the actions that need to be taken to prevent its potential destructive results.

Potential Conflicts of Interest

None.

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