

Women at Midlife

By Tori DeAngelis

Women at midlife remain an oddly invisible group. Despite the strides they have made in living lives of meaning and power, youth still reigns supreme, as most popular TV shows and magazine covers attest.

A new book published by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), *Women at Midlife: Life Experiences and Implications for the Helping Professions* gives needed attention to women in this age range, generally considered to be between ages 40 and 60. Drawing on 232 studies, the book shows the positive aspects and challenges of all aspects of midlife women's lives, from family relationships to work, health, psychological well-being, developmental issues, identity, menopause and sexuality.

The book is unique in two ways, notes Dennis Saleebey, DSW, a professor at the University of Kansas' School of Social Welfare. It comprehensively integrates what is known about all women in this age range, and it concludes that women at midlife possess numerous strengths to help them cope and thrive.

"The authors focus as much on the resources and strengths that come from this life transition as on its challenges and stresses, carefully demonstrating the unique significance of ethnicity, class, race and sexual orientation in the process," Saleebey says. "This book is sophisticated and relevant, and just plain interesting."

Research highlights the diversity of women at midlife, emphasize the authors, Ski Hunter, MS, MSW, PhD, LMSW-ACP, of the University of Texas at Arlington's School of Social Work, Sandra S. Sundel, MSSW, PhD, LCSW, Executive Director of Jewish Family Service of Broward County, Florida, and Martin Sundel, MSW, PhD, president of Sundel Consulting Group. A 45-year-old woman can be lesbian, black, poor and have three children, they comment, or she may be divorced, white and childless, among numerous other possibilities.

"Midlife women are far from a homogeneous group," the authors write. "The reality of women's lives is variation, a phenomenon that has increased due to the historical trend of greater fluidity in life events." This diversity can be seen in all of life's major arenas, including childbearing, parenting and work, they note.

Relatedly, nothing about midlife—psychologically, anyway—is set in stone, the authors add. The term "middle-aged" is a relatively new construct of white, middle-class Americans, for example, the result of recent dramatic increases in life expectancy. Women at midlife experience their age in many ways, depending on their experiences and backgrounds. If a woman has a chronic, serious health problem, for instance, she may feel older than someone who is healthy. Likewise, a woman who is poor and lacks social support may feel tired and "old" compared to one who has enjoyed relative wealth and connection. The adage "you are only as old as you feel" distinguishes accurately between chronological age and feeling older, the authors note.

Given these factors, a range of themes emerge for women in this age group, the authors say. These include that:

Midlife is a time when many women come into their own, feeling grounded, independent and satisfied with what they have. In one study cited by the authors, nearly half of women age 51 reported that their lives were "first rate," and they experienced high levels of personal achievement and a new sense of adventure as parenting roles and other duties subsided. In addition, midlife women with greater ego

resiliency—the ability to flexibly and resourcefully cope with stressors—were more likely to report life satisfaction, another study found.

Because midlife women are so diverse, significant in-group differences exist, the authors write. While many midlife women are doing well, certain groups fare worse than others. Midlife is the most tumultuous time of life for low-income African-American women, for example, and midlife women in ill health may have a particularly tough time.

The so-called “empty nest syndrome,” which describes the depression that supposedly arises when one’s children leave home, is far from inevitable. “More often than not, the positives of this period of life outweigh the negatives,” the authors write. Studies show that women in their early 50s often feel satisfaction that they’ve successfully raised and launched their children, a new sense of freedom and well-being, and a desire to tap latent talents and abilities.

Menopause is not a major trauma for many midlife women. In fact, “given some exceptions, most women report neutral or positive attitudes about menopause,” the authors write. This is not to minimize the physical changes that accompany menopause; however, research shows that the psychological impact of these signs is culture-bound, the authors note. Educational interventions, for example, can lessen women’s negative feelings about menopause and help them cope better with the transition.

Work is a psychological balm for most midlife women. Midlife women who are employed report better health, lower anxiety, less depression and greater subjective well-being than women who stay at home, studies find.

That said, women’s work histories are often erratic because of parenting and caretaking duties. Many women leave work for periods of time, work part-time or take low-paying jobs, for instance.

As a consequence, midlife women often lack sufficient money, and later, sufficient retirement funds. “Women who leave paid employment even temporarily to assume caregiving roles often get locked into a lower socioeconomic status for the rest of their lives,” the authors write. Indeed, women represent about 75 percent of the elderly poor, statistics show.

The authors highlight where research findings diverge, and let the chips fall where they may. As one example, some studies show that sexual desire diminishes after menopause, while others find women enjoy sex more after menopause. And even if desire does decrease, other studies show, many women say they don’t mind that fact, the authors write.

Indeed, researchers of midlife women have their work cut out for them, the authors say. Most of the data on people at midlife is on white men, and most research on women at midlife is on white, middle-class women. In addition, research is hobbled by the fact that it is often cross-sectional and uses convenience samples. The authors suggest several strategies for improving research so it better represents all midlife women and looks at changes over time. They also provide a comprehensive appendix of all the studies they cite.

For practitioners, “Women at Midlife” includes case vignettes and questions to help practicing social workers hone their thinking when working with different women in this age group. And as research improves, they add, so will treatment.

“As findings become more firmly established, professionals can apply them with greater confidence,” the authors write. “The ultimate beneficiaries are women from all walks of life.”