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The mid-life transition for women

By Jeanne Mackey, ACSW

I told Joyce, a 74-year-old friend of mine, that I was leading a workshop for women about midlife. "Well, whatever you do," she said, "don't sugar-coat it! Some of us get wiser as we get older, but it's certainly not automatic!"

She talked about the hardships of aging—facing the deaths of friends and loved ones, health problems, loss of physical strength and energy. I listened carefully, feeling my own resistance to what she was saying.

She paused a moment and smiled. "But I have to admit—I feel a lot freer now than I did in my 20s and 30s. I'm just not as afraid of what others think of me. I'm more myself now—and I like who I am!"

I often hear Joyce's words as I work with women around their midlife challenges, and as I grapple with my own. We live in a culture that tends to polarize. You're either this or that. Young or old, right or wrong, bad or good.

Yet I find it freeing to acknowledge that contradictory truths can and do exist. Clearly, the aging process brings some physical and emotional suffering. And, it also offers greater

authenticity, freedom, and joy. For many of us, midlife seems to be when it all comes to a head.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung called midlife "the second puberty." In other words, our hormones are raging, our bodies are changing, and we're struggling to figure out who we really are!

As women, many of us have spent years seeking our reflection in the eyes of those around us. Our sense of worth may be closely tied to our roles as mothers, spouses, and daughters.

As children leave home, aging parents die, and marriages grow stale, the ground begins to shift under our feet. We are surrounded by images of youthful feminine beauty—on TV, in magazines, and movies. In midlife, we begin to see that we can't live up to those idealized images—if indeed we ever could.

My own midlife challenges began to hit in my early 40s. I had been pursuing a career as a performing musician for 15 years. While I had had some successes—and some great times along the way—I had to face the fact that it was time for a change.

For one thing, I was getting too old to drive around the country in a van with my bandmates, wedged between the sound equipment and the luggage! Within five years of this realization, I had returned to school and earned a Masters in Social Work, lost a good friend to cancer, and moved back to the Midwest after 20 years in Washington, DC.

These external changes were mirrored by huge internal shifts. After so many years surrounded by loving friends who respected and appreciated me, I was shocked to discover the level of insecurity that hit me as I struggled to establish myself in my new career in my new Michigan home.

It was as if I didn't know who I was when no one was looking. Perhaps that had always been true. And in the midst of it all, I seemed to be losing my memory. Sleeping through the night had become an elusive dream. My moods were like the weather in Michigan: if you don't like this one, just wait five minutes! In short, I was perimenopausal.

As I searched for ways to make sense of what I was going through, I found comfort in the stories of other middle-aged women and men. They offered a road-map that I could follow through the maze.

I found help for my physical symptoms, drawing on both conventional and alternative resources. I learned about conscious aging, post-menopausal zest, and about the deep respect for female elders in many indigenous cultures.

And I found a framework for the midlife transition that took it beyond the realm of a "crisis" or illness.

The framework is borrowed from traditional rites of passage conducted by native peoples around the world. These ceremonies mark a person's transition from one stage of life to the next: childhood to puberty, youth to adulthood, single to married. They typically involve three classic stages: severance, threshold, and incorporation. I have found these stages to be most helpful in viewing the mid-life transition.

In the severance phase, we leave behind who we once were. This includes inevitable losses such as youthful appearance and physical stamina as well as what we may choose to leave behind, such as our own self-judgments and fear of others' opinions.

In the threshold phase, we stand at the crossroads. We are no longer who we were. We are not yet who we will be. This can be both scary and disorienting. It's a time when the temptation is strong to jump headfirst into a new relationship, new job, anything that makes us feel in control, that puts an end to the uncertainty.

If we can find a way to tolerate the discomfort, we will find ourselves in the phase of incorporation. In this phase, we integrate our new insights and experience into all of who we have ever been. We become more truly ourselves, warts and all! We feel more comfortable in our own skin, living more gracefully with contradictions—our own and others’.

Six years after encountering my own personal identity crisis, I can honestly say that I like my life. My career doesn’t look the way I thought it would, and yet I find my work to be both stimulating and satisfying.

I have found loving community in my new home, and have strengthened ties with my family, most of whom live in the Midwest. I’m standing on solid ground once again, moving from the threshold phase to incorporation.

The landscape looks different from this vantage point. I’m intensely aware—especially after the tragic events of 9/11—of how quickly things can change. I know what it’s like to feel alive and joyful, and I know what it’s like to be brought to my knees by fear and self-doubt.

As I look at myself and the women who come to my workshops, I’m see how it’s all “grist for the mill”—the letting

go, the not-knowing, the answers that pave the way for new questions. So I’m grateful for the lessons and grateful that we can learn from each other in this time of both danger and opportunity.

[*Jeanne Mackey, ACSW, is a workshop leader, trainer, and performing musician in Ann Arbor, MI. She will lead a workshop, “Coming Into Our Years: Women at Midlife,” April 19-21 at The Manor Conference and Retreat Center in Parkersburg, WV.*]