Midlife is a time of increased generativity—giving to and guiding younger generations. This grandmother’s involved, contented expression illustrates the deep sense of satisfaction that middle-aged adults derive from engaging in generative activities.
One weekend when Devin, Trisha, and their 24-year-old son, Mark, were vacationing together, the two middle-aged parents knocked on Mark’s hotel room door. “Your dad and I are going off to see a crafts exhibit,” Trisha explained. “Feel free to stay behind,” she offered, recalling Mark’s antipathy toward attending such events as an adolescent. “We’ll be back around noon for lunch.”

“That exhibit sounds great!” Mark replied. “I’ll meet you in the lobby. We’ve got so little time together as it is.”

“Sometimes I forget he’s an adult!” exclaimed Trisha as she and Devin returned to their room to grab their coats. “It’s been great to have Mark with us these few days—like spending time with a good friend.”

In their forties and fifties, Trisha and Devin built on earlier strengths and intensified their commitment to leaving a legacy for those who would come after them. As Mark graduated from college, took his first job, fell in love, and married, they felt a sense of pride at having escorted a member of the next generation into responsible adult roles. Family activities, which had declined during Mark’s adolescent and college years, now increased as Trisha and Devin related to their son and daughter-in-law not just as kin but as enjoyable adult companions. Challenging work and more time for community involvement, leisure pursuits, and each other contributed to a richly diverse and gratifying time of life.

The midlife years were not as smooth for two of Trisha and Devin’s friends. Fearing that she might grow old alone, Jewel frantically pursued her quest for an intimate partner. She attended singles events, registered with dating services, and traveled in hopes of meeting a like-minded companion. “I can’t stand the thought of turning 50. I look like an old bag with big circles under my eyes,” she lamented in a letter to Trisha, though she also had compensating satisfactions—friendships that had grown more meaningful, a warm relationship with a nephew and niece, and a successful consulting business.

Erikson’s Theory: Generativity versus Stagnation

Erikson’s psychological conflict of midlife is called generativity versus stagnation. Generativity involves reaching out to others in ways that give to and guide the next generation. It is under way in early adulthood, typically through childbearing and child rearing and establishing a niche in the occupational world. But it expands greatly in midlife, when commitment extends beyond oneself and one’s life partner to a larger group—family, community, or society. The generative adult combines the need for self-expression with the need for communion, integrating personal goals with the welfare of the larger social world (McAdams & Logan, 2004). The result is the capacity to care for others in a broader way than in previous stages.

Erikson (1950) selected the term generativity to encompass everything generated that can outlive the self and ensure society’s continuity and improvement: children, ideas, products, works of art. Although parenting is a major means of realizing generativity, it is not the only means: Adults can also be generative in other family relationships (as Jewel was with her nephew and niece), as mentors in the workplace, in volunteer endeavors, and through many forms of productivity and creativity.

Notice, from what we have said so far, that generativity brings together personal desires and cultural demands. On the personal side, middle-aged adults feel a need to be needed—to attain symbolic immortality by making a contribution that will survive their death (Kotre, 1984, 1999; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998). This desire may stem from a deep-seated...
evolutionary urge to protect and advance the next generation. On the cultural side, society imposes a social clock for generativity in midlife, requiring adults to take responsibility for the next generation through their roles as parents, teachers, mentors, leaders, and coordinators (McAdams & Logan, 2004). And according to Erikson, a culture’s “belief in the species”—the conviction that life is good and worthwhile, even in the face of human destructiveness and deprivation—is a major motivator of generative action, which has as its goal improving humanity.

The negative outcome of this stage is stagnation. Erikson recognized that once people attain certain life goals, such as marriage, children, and career success, they may become self-centered and self-indulgent. Adults with a sense of stagnation cannot contribute to society’s welfare because they place their own comfort and security above challenge and sacrifice (Hamachek, 1990). Their self-absorption is expressed in many ways—through lack of interest in young people (including their own children), through a focus on what they can get from others rather than what they can give, and through taking little interest in being productive at work, developing their talents, or bettering the world in other ways.

Much research indicates that generativity increases in midlife (Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Rossi, 2001). For example, in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of college-educated women, and in an investigation of middle-aged adults diverse in SES, self-rated generativity rose from the thirties into the forties or fifties (see Figure 16.1). At the same time, participants expressed greater concern about aging, increased security with their identities, and a stronger sense of competence (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004; Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001; Zucker, Ostrove, & Stewart, 2002).

Just as Erikson’s theory suggests, highly generative people appear especially well-adjusted—low in anxiety and depression, high in self-acceptance and life satisfaction, and more likely to have successful marriages and close friends (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Westermeyer, 2004). They are also more open to differing viewpoints, possess leadership qualities, desire more from work than financial rewards, and care greatly about the welfare of their children, their partner, their aging parents, and the wider society (Peterson, 2002; Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997). Furthermore, generativity is associated with more effective child rearing—higher valuing of trust, open communication, transmission of values to children, and an authoritative style (Hart et al., 2001; Pratt et al., 2001).

Although these findings characterize adults of all backgrounds, individual differences in contexts for generativity exist. Having children seems to foster men’s generative development more than women’s. In several studies, fathers scored higher in generativity than childless men (Marks, Bumpass, & Jun, 2004; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). In contrast, motherhood is unrelated to women’s generativity scores. Perhaps parenting awakens in men a tender, caring attitude toward the next generation that women have opportunities to develop in other ways.

Finally, compared with Caucasians, African Americans more often engage in certain types of generativity. They are more involved in religious groups and activities, offer more social support, and are more likely to view themselves as role models and sources of wisdom for their children (Hart et al., 2001). A life history of strong support from church and extended family may strengthen these generative values and actions. In samples of Caucasian Americans, religiosity and spirituality are also linked to greater generative activity (Dillon & Wink, 2004; Wink & Dillon, 2003). Especially in highly individualistic societies, belonging to a religious community or believing in a higher being may help preserve generative commitments.
Other Theories of Psychosocial Development in Midlife

Erikson’s theory provides only a broad sketch of adult personality development. For a closer look at psychosocial change in midlife, let’s revisit Levinson’s and Vaillant’s theories, which were introduced in Chapter 14.

Levinson’s Seasons of Life

Return to page 367 to review Levinson’s eras (stages or seasons). You will see that like early adulthood, middle adulthood begins with a transitional period (age 40 to 45), followed by the building of an entry life structure (age 45 to 50). This structure is then evaluated and revised (age 50 to 55), resulting in a culminating life structure (age 55 to 60). Among the adults Levinson (1978, 1996) interviewed, the majority displayed these phases. But because of gender stereotypes and differences in opportunity, men and women had somewhat different experiences.

Midlife Transition. Around age 40, people evaluate their success in meeting early adulthood goals. Realizing that from now on, more time will lie behind than ahead, they regard the remaining years as increasingly precious. Consequently, some people make drastic revisions in family and occupational components of the life structure: divorcing, remarrying, changing careers, or displaying enhanced creativity. Others make smaller changes while staying in the same marriage, surroundings, occupation, and workplace.

Whether these years bring a gust of wind or a storm, most people turn inward for a time, focusing on personally meaningful living (Neugarten, 1968b). One reason is that for many middle-aged adults, only limited career advancement and personal growth remain possible. Some are disappointed in not having fully realized their early adulthood dream and want to find a more satisfying path before it is too late. Even people who have reached their goals ask, What good are these accomplishments to others, to society, and to myself?

According to Levinson, for middle-aged adults to reassess their relation to themselves and the external world, they must confront four developmental tasks, summarized in Table 16.1. Each requires the person to reconcile two opposing tendencies within the self, thereby attaining greater internal harmony. Let’s see how this happens.

Table 16.1 Levinson’s Four Developmental Tasks of Middle Adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young–Old</td>
<td>The middle-aged person must seek new ways of being both young and old. This means giving up certain youthful qualities, retaining and transforming others, and finding positive meaning in being older.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction–Creation</td>
<td>With greater awareness of mortality, the middle-aged person focuses on ways he or she has acted destructively and others have done the same. Past hurtful acts toward parents, intimate partners, children, friends, and rivals are countered by a strong desire to become more creative—by making products of value to the self and others and participating in activities that advance human welfare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity–Femininity</td>
<td>The middle-aged person must come to terms with masculine and feminine parts of the self, creating a better balance. For men, this means becoming more empathic and caring; for women, it often means becoming more autonomous, dominant, and assertive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement–Separateness</td>
<td>The middle-aged person must create a better balance between engagement with the external world and separateness. For men, this generally means pulling back from ambition and achievement and becoming more in touch with the self. Women who have devoted themselves to child rearing or who have unfulfilling jobs typically move in the other direction—toward greater involvement in the work world and wider community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

greater rise in sensitivity to physical aging over the midlife years than women, both college- and non-college-educated. Women, in turn, were more sensitive than college-educated men (see Figure 16.2) (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004). Because men who did not attend college often hold blue-collar jobs that require physical strength and stamina, they may worry that physical aging will affect their work capacity.

As middle-aged adults confront their own mortality and the actual or impending death of agemates, they become more aware of ways people can act destructively—to parents, intimate partners, children, friends, and co-workers. Countering this force is a desire to strengthen life-affirming aspects of the self by advancing human welfare and, as a result, leaving a legacy for future generations. The image of a legacy, which flourishes in midlife, can be satisfied in many ways—through charitable gifts, creative products, volunteer service, or mentoring young people.

Middle age is also a time when people must reconcile masculine and feminine parts of the self. For men, this means greater acceptance of “feminine” traits of nurturance and caring, which enhance close relationships and compassionate exercise of authority in the workplace. For women, it generally means being more open to “masculine” characteristics of autonomy, dominance, and assertiveness (Gilligan, 1982; Harris, Ellicott, & Holmes, 1986). Recall from Chapter 8 that people who combine masculine and feminine traits have an androgynous gender identity. Later we will see that androgyny is associated with many favorable personality traits.

Finally, midlife requires a middle ground between engagement with the external world and separateness. Many men must reduce their concern with ambition and achievement and attend more fully to the self. The same is true for women who have had active, successful careers. But women who devoted their early adulthood to child rearing or an unfulfilling job often feel compelled, after a period of self-reflection, to move in the other direction (Levinson, 1996). At age 48, Elena left her position as a reporter for a small-town newspaper, pursued an advanced degree in creative writing, eventually accepted a college teaching position, and began writing a novel. As Tim looked inward, he recognized his overwhelming desire for a gratifying romantic partnership. By scaling back his own career, he realized he could grant Elena the time and space she needed to build a rewarding work life—and that doing so might deepen their attachment to each other.

**The Life Structure in Social Context.** Rebuilding the life structure depends on supportive social contexts. When poverty, unemployment, and lack of a respected place in society dominate the life course, energies are directed toward survival rather than pursuit of a satisfying life structure. Even adults whose jobs are secure and who live in pleasant neighborhoods may find that employment conditions restrict possibilities for growth by placing too much emphasis on productivity and profit and too little on the meaning of work. In her early forties, Trisha left a large law firm, where she felt constant pressure to bring in high-fee clients and received little acknowledgment of her efforts, for a small practice.

Opportunities for advancement ease the transition to middle adulthood by permitting realization of the early adulthood dream. Yet these are far less available to women than to men. Individuals of both sexes in blue-collar jobs also have few possibilities for promotion (Levinson, 1978). Many find compensating rewards in mentoring younger workers and in moving to the senior generation of their families.

**Vaillant’s Adaptation to Life**

Because Levinson interviewed 35- to 45-year-olds, his findings cannot tell us about psychosocial change in the fifties. But Vaillant (1977, 2002), in his longitudinal research on well-educated men and women, followed participants past the half-century mark. Recall from Chapter 14 how adults in their late forties and fifties take on peak responsibility for the functioning of society, eventually becoming “keepers of meaning,” or guardians of their culture (see page 368). Vaillant reported that the most-successful and best-adjusted entered a calmer, quieter time of life. “Passing the torch”—concern that the positive aspects of their culture survive—became a major preoccupation.

In societies around the world, older people are guardians of traditions, laws, and cultural values. This stabilizing force holds in check too-rapid change sparked by the questioning...
and challenging of adolescents and young adults. As people approach the end of middle age, they focus on longer-term, less personal goals, such as the state of human relations in their society. And they become more philosophical, accepting the fact that not all problems can be solved in their lifetime.

Is There a Midlife Crisis?

Levinson (1978, 1996) reported that most men and women in his samples experienced substantial inner turmoil during the transition to middle adulthood. Yet Vaillant (1977) saw few examples of crisis. Instead, change was typically slow and steady. These contrasting findings raise the question of how much personal upheaval actually accompanies entry to midlife. Are self-doubt and stress especially great during the forties, and do they prompt major restructuring of the personality, as the term midlife crisis implies?

Think about the reactions of Trisha, Devin, Jewel, Tim, and Elena to middle adulthood. Trisha and Devin moved easily into this period, whereas Jewel, Tim, and Elena displayed greater questioning of their situations and sought alternative life paths. Overall, changes for men are more likely to occur in the early forties (in accord with Levinson’s timetable). Those for women may be postponed to the late forties and fifties, when a reduction in parenting responsibilities gives them time and freedom to confront personal issues (Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989).

But sharp disruption and agitation are the exception, not the rule. For example, Elena had considered both a divorce and a new career long before she initiated these changes. In her thirties, she separated from her husband; later, she reconciled with him and told him of her desire to return to school, which he firmly opposed. She put her own life on hold because of her daughter’s academic and emotional difficulties and her husband’s resistance.

In a survey of more than 700 adults, only one-fourth reported experiencing a midlife crisis. When asked what they meant by the term, the participants defined it much more loosely than researchers had done. Some reported a crisis well before age 40, others well after age 50. And most attributed it not to age but rather to challenging life events (Wethington, 2000).

Another way of exploring midlife questioning is to ask adults about life regrets—attractive opportunities for career or other life-changing activities they did not pursue or lifestyle changes they did not make. In two investigations of women in their early forties, those who acknowledged regret without making life changes, compared to those who modified their lives, reported less favorable psychological well-being and poorer physical health over time (Landman et al., 1995; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999).

By late midlife, with less time ahead to make life changes, people’s interpretation of regrets plays a major role in their well-being. Among a sample of several hundred 60- to 65-year-olds diverse in SES, about half expressed at least one regret. Compared to those who had not resolved their disappointments, those who had come to terms with them (accepted and identified some eventual benefits) or had “put the best face on things” (identified benefits but still had some lingering regret) reported better physical health and greater life satisfaction (Torges, Stewart, & Miner-Rubino, 2005).

In sum, life evaluation is common during middle age. Most people make changes that are best described as “turning points” rather than drastic alterations of their lives. Those who cannot modify their life paths often look for the “silver lining” in life’s difficulties (Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004). The few midlifers who are in crisis typically have had early adult-hoods in which gender roles, family pressures, or low income and poverty severely limited their ability to fulfill personal needs and goals, at home or in the wider world.
Stability and Change in Self-Concept and Personality

Midlife changes in self-concept and personality reflect growing awareness of a finite lifespan, longer life experience, and generative concerns. Yet certain aspects of personality remain stable, revealing the persistence of individual differences established during earlier periods.

Possible Selves

On a business trip, Jewel found a spare afternoon to visit Trisha. Sitting in a coffee shop, the two women reminisced about the past and thought aloud about the future. “It’s been tough living on my own and building the business,” Jewel said. “What I hope for is to become better at my work, to be more community-oriented, and to stay healthy and available to my friends. Of course, I would rather not grow old alone, but if I don’t find that special person, I suppose I can take comfort in the fact that I’ll never have to face divorce or widowhood.”

Jewel is discussing possible selves, future-oriented representations of what one hopes to become and what one is afraid of becoming. Possible selves are the temporal dimension of self-concept—what the individual is striving for and attempting to avoid. To lifespan researchers, these hopes and fears are just as vital in explaining behavior as people’s views of their current characteristics. Indeed, possible selves may be an especially strong motivator of action in midlife, as more meaning becomes attached to time. As we age, we may rely less on social comparisons in judging our self-worth and more on temporal comparisons—how well we are doing in relation to what we had planned.

Throughout adulthood, people’s descriptions of their current selves show considerable stability. A 30-year-old who says he is cooperative, competent, outgoing, or successful is likely to report a similar picture at a later age. But reports of possible selves change greatly. Adults in their early twenties mention many possible selves, and their visions are lofty and idealistic—being “perfectly happy,” “rich and famous,” “healthy throughout life,” and not being “a person who does nothing important.” With age, possible selves become fewer in number and more modest and concrete. They are largely concerned with performance of roles and responsibilities already begun—“being competent at work,” “being a good husband and father,” “putting my children through the colleges of their choice,” “staying healthy,” and not being “a burden to my family” or “without enough money to meet my daily needs” (Bybee & Wells, 2003; Cross & Markus, 1991; Ryff, 1991).

What explains these shifts in possible selves? Because the future no longer holds limitless opportunities, adults preserve mental health by adjusting their hopes and fears. To stay motivated, they must maintain a sense of unachieved possibility; yet they must still manage to feel good about themselves and their lives despite disappointments (Lachman & Bertrand, 2002). For example, although Jewel feared loneliness in old age, she reminded herself that marriage can lead to equally negative outcomes, such as divorce and widowhood—possibilities that made not having attained an important interpersonal goal easier to bear.

Self-Acceptance, Autonomy, and Environmental Mastery

An evolving mix of competencies and experiences leads to changes in certain personality traits during middle adulthood. Middle-aged adults tend to offer more complex, integrated descriptions of themselves than do younger and older individuals (Labouvie-Vief, 2003). And many have reshaped contexts to suit their personal needs and values.

These developments undoubtedly contribute to other gains in personal functioning. In research on well-educated adults ranging in age from the late teens into the seventies, three traits increased from early to middle adulthood and then leveled off:

- Self-acceptance: More than young adults, middle-aged people acknowledged and accepted both their good and bad qualities and felt positively about themselves and life.
- Autonomy: Middle-aged adults saw themselves as less concerned about others’ expectations and evaluations and more concerned with following self-chosen standards.
- Environmental mastery: Middle-aged people saw themselves as capable of managing a wide array of tasks easily and effectively (Ryff, 1991, 1995).

In Chapter 15, we noted that midlife brings gains in expertise and practical problem solving. These cognitive changes may support the confidence, initiative, and decisiveness of this period. Overall, midlife is a time of increased comfort with the self, independence, assertiveness, commitment to personal values, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction (Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Helson & Wink, 1992; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Mitchell & Helson, 1990). Perhaps because of these personal attributes, people sometimes refer to middle age as “the prime of life.” Although individual differences exist (see the Biology and Environment box on the following page), middle adulthood is a time when many people report feeling especially happy and functioning at their best.

Coping Strategies

Recall from Chapter 15 that midlife brings an increase in effective coping strategies. Compared to younger adults, middle-aged people are more likely to identify the positive side of difficult situations, postpone action to permit evaluation of alternatives, anticipate and plan ways to handle future discomforts, and use humor to express ideas and feelings without offending others (Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). Notice how these efforts flexibly draw on both problem-centered and emotion-centered strategies.

Why might effective coping increase in middle adulthood? Other personality changes seem to support it. In one study,
What Factors Promote Psychological Well-Being in Midlife?

For Trisha and Devin, midlife brought contentment and high life satisfaction. But the road to happiness was rockier for Jewel, Tim, and Elena. What factors contribute to variations in psychological well-being at midlife? Consistent with the lifespan perspective, biological, psychological, and social forces are involved, and their effects are intertwined.

Good Health and Exercise. Adults of any age who rate their health as good to excellent are more likely to feel positively about their life circumstances. But during middle and late adulthood, taking steps to improve health and prevent disability becomes a better predictor of psychological well-being. Middle-aged adults who maintain an exercise regimen are likely to perceive themselves as particularly active for their age and, therefore, to feel a special sense of accomplishment (Netz et al., 2003). And exercise may convey extra psychological benefits by reducing feelings of vulnerability to illness that increase with age. Fear of disease and disability is one of the strongest contributors to poor psychological well-being at midlife (Barsky, Cleary, & Klerman, 1992).

Sense of Control and Personal Life Investment. Middle-aged adults who report a high sense of control over events in various aspects of their lives—health, family, and work—also report more favorable psychological well-being. A sense of control fosters self-efficacy—a belief in one’s ability to surmount challenges—and, consequently, helps sustain a positive outlook in the face of health, family, and work difficulties (Lachman & Firth, 2004; Smith et al., 2000).

But beyond feeling in control, personal life investment—firm commitment to goals and involvement in pursuit of those goals—adds to mental health and life satisfaction (Staudinger, Fleeson, & Baltes, 1999). According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a vital wellspring of happiness is flow—the psychological state of being so engrossed in a demanding, meaningful activity that one loses all sense of time and self-awareness. People describe flow as the height of enjoyment, even as an ecstatic state. The more they experience it, the more they judge their lives to be gratifying (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow depends on perseverance and skill at complex endeavors that offer potential for growth. These qualities are well-developed in middle adulthood.

Positive Social Relationships. Developing gratifying social ties is closely linked to midlife psychological well-being. In a longitudinal study of 90 men selected for good physical and mental health as college students and followed over 32 years, most maintained their physical health status. A good mentor relationship in early adulthood (which fosters high career achievement) and favorable peer ties were among the best predictors of well-being in the late forties and early fifties (Westermeyer, 1998). In a survey of college alumni, those who preferred occupational prestige and high income to close friends were twice as likely as other respondents to describe themselves as “fairly” or “very” unhappy (Perkins, 1991, as cited by Myers, 2000).

A Good Marriage. Although friendships and positive relationships with co-workers are important, a good marriage boosts psychological well-being even more. In both cross-sectional and longitudinal research, the role of marriage as a marker of mental health increases with age, becoming a powerful predictor by late midlife (Marks, Bumpass, & Jun, 2004; Westermeyer, 1998).

Longitudinal studies tracking people as they move in and out of intimate relationships suggest that marriage actually brings about well-being. For example, when interviews with over 13,000 adults were repeated five years later, people who remained married reported greater happiness than those who remained single. Those who separated or divorced became less happy, reporting considerable depression. Men and women who married for the first time experienced a sharp increase in happiness, those who entered their second marriage a modest increase (Marks & Lambert, 1998).

The link between marriage and well-being is similar in many nations, suggesting that marriage changes people’s behavior in ways that make them better off (Diener et al., 2000; Lansford et al., 2005). Married partners monitor each other’s health and offer care in times of illness. They also earn and save more money than single people, and higher income is modestly linked to psychological well-being (Myers, 2000; Waite, 1999). Furthermore, sexual satisfaction predicts mental health, and married couples tend to have more satisfying sex lives than unmarried couples and singles (see Chapter 14).

Mastery of Multiple Roles. Finally, success in handling multiple roles is linked to psychological well-being. Women are generally happier today than in the past because they now reap satisfactions not just from family relationships but also from vocational achievements. In a study of nearly 300 middle-aged women, researchers asked about feelings of competence and control in four roles: wife, mother, caregiver of an impaired parent, and employee. Participants experienced higher levels of mastery in their work roles than in any other. But competence and control in all four roles predicted life satisfaction and reduced depression (Christensen, Stephens, & Townsend, 1998). Women who occupied several roles—in work and family arenas—seemed to benefit from added opportunities to enhance their sense of mastery.
cognitive-affective complexity—the ability to blend personal strengths and weaknesses into an organized self-description, which increases in middle age—predicted good coping strategies (Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, 2000). Greater confidence in handling life’s problems may also contribute. In a longitudinal investigation of well-educated women, taking initiative to overcome difficult times in early adulthood predicted advanced self-understanding, social and moral maturity, and high life satisfaction at age 43 (Helson & Roberts, 1994). Overall, these findings suggest that years of experience in managing stress promote enhanced self-knowledge, which joins with life experience to foster more sophisticated, flexible coping during middle age.

Gender Identity

In her forties and early fifties, Trisha appeared more assertive at work, speaking out more freely at meetings and taking a leadership role when a team of lawyers worked on a complex case. She had also become more dominant in family relationships, expressing her opinions to her husband and son more readily than she had 10 or 15 years earlier. In contrast, Devin’s sense of empathy and caring became more apparent, and he was less assertive and more accommodating to Trisha’s wishes than before.

Many studies report an increase in “masculine” traits in women and “feminine” traits in men across middle age (Huyck, 1990; James et al., 1995). Women become more confident, self-sufficient, and forceful, men more emotionally sensitive, caring, considerate, and dependent. These trends appear in not just Western industrialized nations but also village societies such as the Mayans of Guatemala, the Navajo of the United States, and the Druze of the Middle East (Fry, 1985; Gutmann, 1977; Turner, 1982). Consistent with Levinson’s theory, gender identity in midlife becomes more androgynous—a mixture of “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics.

Although Trisha and Jewel both became more self-assured and assertive in midlife, in other respects they differed. Trisha had always been more organized and purposeful, Jewel more gregarious and fun-loving. Once, the two women traveled together. At the end of each day, Trisha was disappointed if she had not talked with shopkeepers and residents. Jewel liked to “play it by ear”—wandering through streets, stopping to talk with shopkeepers and residents.

Individual Differences in Personality Traits

Although Trisha and Jewel both became more self-assured and assertive in midlife, in other respects they differed. Trisha had always been more organized and purposeful, Jewel more gregarious and fun-loving. Once, the two women traveled together. At the end of each day, Trisha was disappointed if she had not kept to a schedule and visited every tourist attraction. Jewel liked to “play it by ear”—wandering through streets, stopping to talk with shopkeepers and residents.

In previous sections, we considered personality changes common to many middle-aged adults, but stable individual differences also exist. The hundreds of personality traits on which people differ have been organized into five basic factors, called the “big five” personality traits: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.
Table 16.2 provides a description of each. Notice that Trisha is high in conscientiousness, whereas Jewel is high in extroversion (Costa & McCrae, 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1990).

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of men and women in many countries varying widely in cultural traditions reveal that agreeableness and conscientiousness increase from the teenage years through middle age, whereas neuroticism declines, and extroversion and openness to experience do not change or decrease slightly—changes that reflect “settling down” and greater maturity (Costa et al., 2000; McCrae et al., 2000; Roberts et al., 2003; Srivastava et al., 2003).

The consistency of these cross-cultural findings has led some researchers to conclude that adult personality change is genetically influenced. They note that individual differences in the “big five” traits are large and highly stable: An adult who scores high or low at one age is likely to do the same at another, over intervals ranging from 3 to 30 years (Costa & McCrae, 1994). In a reanalysis of more than 150 longitudinal studies including more than 50,000 participants, personality-trait stability increased during early and middle adulthood, reaching a peak in the decade of the fifties (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000).

How can there be high stability in personality traits, yet significant changes in aspects of personality discussed earlier? We can think of adults as changing in overall organization and integration of personality, but doing so on a foundation of basic, enduring dispositions that support a coherent sense of self as people adapt to changing life circumstances. When more than 2,000 individuals in their forties were asked to reflect on their personalities during the previous 6 years, 52 percent said they had “stayed the same,” 39 percent said they had “changed a little,” and 9 percent said they had “changed a lot” (Herbst et al., 2000).

These findings contradict a view of midlife as a period of great turmoil and change. But they also underscore that personality remains an “open system,” responsive to the pressures of life experiences. Indeed, certain midlife personality changes may strengthen trait consistency! Improved self-understanding, self-acceptance, and skill at handling challenging situations may result in less need to modify basic personality dispositions over time (Caspi & Roberts, 2001).
In midlife is one of expansion and new horizons. Because increased life expectancy has caused this period to lengthen, it is marked by the greatest number of exits and entries of family members. As adult children leave home and marry, middle-aged people must adapt to new roles of parent-in-law and grandparent. At the same time, they must establish a different type of relationship with their aging parents, who may become ill or infirm and die. Let’s see how ties within and beyond the family change during this time of life.

**Marriage and Divorce**

Although not all couples are financially comfortable, middle-aged households are well-off compared with other age groups. North Americans between 45 and 54 have the highest average annual income (Statistics Canada, 2002b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Partly because of increased financial security, and because the time between departure of the last child and retirement has lengthened, the contemporary social view of marriage in midlife is one of expansion and new horizons.

These forces strengthen the need to review and adjust the marital relationship. For Devin and Trisha, this shift was gradual. By middle age, their marriage had permitted satisfaction of family and individual needs, endured many changes, and culminated in deeper feelings of love. Elena’s marriage, in contrast, became more conflict-ridden as her teenage daughter’s problems introduced added strains and as departure of children made marital difficulties more obvious. Tim’s failed marriage revealed yet another pattern. With passing years, the number of problems declined, but so did the love expressed. As less happened in the relationship, good or bad, the couple had little to keep them together (Rokach, Cohen, & Dreman, 2004).

As the Biology and Environment box on page 423 revealed, marital satisfaction is a strong predictor of midlife psychological well-being. Many adults decide that the time for improving their marriages is now (Berman & Napier, 2000). As in early adulthood, divorce is one way of resolving an unsatisfactory marriage in midlife. Although most divorces occur within 5 to 10 years of marriage, about 10 percent take place after 20 years or more (Statistics Canada, 2002a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Divorce at any age takes a heavy psychological toll, but midlifers seem to adapt more easily than younger people. A survey of more than 13,000 Americans revealed that following divorce, middle-aged men and women reported less decline in psychological well-being than their younger counterparts (Marks & Lambert, 1998). Midlife gains in practical problem solving and effective coping strategies may reduce the stressful impact of divorce. Nevertheless, for many women, marital breakup—especially when it is repeated—severely reduces standard of living (see page 270 in Chapter 10). For this reason, in midlife and earlier, it is a strong contributor to the feminization of poverty—a trend in which women who support themselves or their families have become the majority of the adult population living in poverty, regardless of age and ethnic group. Because of weak public policies safeguarding families (see Chapter 2), the gender gap in poverty is higher in the United States and Canada than in other Western industrialized nations (Paquet, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b).

Longitudinal evidence reveals that middle-aged women who weather divorce successfully tend to become more tolerant, comfortable with uncertainty, nonconforming, and self-reliant in personality—factors believed to be fostered by divorce-forced independence. And both men and women reevaluate what they consider important in a healthy relationship, placing greater weight on equal friendship and less on passionate love than they had the first time. As in earlier periods, divorce represents both a time of trauma and a time of growth (Baum, Rahav, & Sharon, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004). Little is known about long-term adjustment following divorce among middle-aged men, perhaps because most enter new relationships and remarry within a short time.

**Changing Parent–Child Relationships**

Parents’ positive relationships with their grown children are the result of a gradual process of “letting go,” starting in childhood, gaining momentum in adolescence, and culminating in children’s
independent living. As mentioned earlier, most middle-aged parents adjust well to the launching phase of the family life cycle. Investment in nonparental relationships and roles, children's characteristics, parents' marital and economic circumstances, and cultural forces affect the extent to which this transition is expansive and rewarding or sad and distressing.

After moving their son Mark into his college dormitory at the start of his freshman year, Devin and Trisha felt a twinge of nostalgia. Driving home, they recalled his birth, first day of school, and high school graduation and commented on their suddenly tranquil household. Beyond this, they returned to rewarding careers and community participation and delighted in having more time for each other. Parents who have developed gratifying alternative activities typically welcome their children's adult status (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002). A strong work orientation, especially, predicts gains in life satisfaction after children depart from the home (Silverberg, 1996).

Whether or not they reside with parents, adolescent and young adult children who are “off-time” in development—not showing expected signs of independence and accomplishment—can prompt parental strain (Aquilino, 1996; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). Consider Elena, whose daughter was frequently truant from high school and in danger of not graduating. The need for greater parental oversight and guidance caused anxiety and unhappiness for Elena, who was ready to focus on her own personal and vocational development.

However, wide variations exist in the social clock for launching children. Recall from Chapter 13 that many young people from low-SES homes and with cultural traditions of extended-family living do not leave home early. In the southern European countries of Greece, Italy, and Spain, parents often actively delay their children's departure. In Italy, for example, parents believe that leaving without a “justified” reason signifies that something is wrong in the family. Hence, many more Italian young adults reside with their parents until marriage than in other Western nations. At the same time, Italian parent–adult-child relationships are usually positive, making shared living attractive (Rusconi, 2004).

With the end of parent–child coresidence, parental authority declines sharply. But continued communication is important to middle-aged adults. Departure of children is a relatively minor event when parent–child contact and affection are sustained. When it results in little or no communication, parents' life satisfaction declines (White, 1994). In a large longitudinal study of New Zealand families, parents who had been warm and supportive in middle childhood and adolescence were more likely to experience contact and closeness with their child in early adulthood (Belsky et al., 2001).

When children marry, parents face additional challenges in enlarging the family network to include in-laws. Difficulties occur when parents do not approve of their child's partner or when the young couple adopts a way of life inconsistent with the parents' values. But when warm, supportive relationships endure, intimacy between parents and children increases over the adult years, with great benefits for parents' life satisfaction (Ryff, Singer, & Seltzer, 2002). Once young adults strike out on their own, members of the middle generation, especially mothers, usually take on the role of kinkeeper, gathering the family for celebrations and making sure everyone stays in touch.

### Grandparenthood

Two years after Mark married, Devin and Trisha were thrilled to learn that a granddaughter was on the way. Although the stereotypical image of grandparents as elderly persists, on average American adults become grandparents in their mid- to late forties, Canadian adults in their late forties to early fifties (AARP, 2002; Rosenthal & Gladstone, 2000). A longer life expectancy means that adults will spend as much as one-third of their lifespan in the grandparent role.

#### Meanings of Grandparenthood

Why did Trisha and Devin, like many people their age, greet the announcement of a grandchild with such enthusiasm? Most people experience grandparenthood as a significant milestone, mentioning one or more of the following gratifications:

- **Valued elder**—being perceived as a wise, helpful person
- **Immortality through descendants**—leaving behind not just one but two generations after death
- **Reinvolvement with personal past**—being able to pass family history and values to a new generation
- **Indulgence**—having fun with children without major child-rearing responsibilities (AARP, 2002; Miller & Cavanaugh, 1990)

#### Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships

Grandparents’ styles of relating to grandchildren vary as widely as the meanings they derive from their new role. The grandparent’s and grandchild’s age and sex make a difference. When their granddaughter was young,
Trisha and Devin enjoyed an affectionate, playful relationship with her. As she got older, she looked to them for information and advice in addition to warmth and caring. By the time their granddaughter reached adolescence, Trisha and Devin had become role models, family historians, and conveyers of social, vocational, and religious values (Hurme, 1991).

Typically, relationships are closer between grandparents and grandchildren of the same sex and, especially, between maternal grandmothers and granddaughters (Brown & Rodin, 2004). Grandmothers also report higher satisfaction with the grandparent role than grandfathers, perhaps because grandmothers more often participate in recreational, religious, and family activities with grandchildren (Silverstein & Marenco, 2001; Somary & Stricker, 1998). The grandparent role may be a vital means through which middle-aged women satisfy their kinkeeping function.

Living nearby made Trisha and Devin’s pleasurable interaction with their granddaughter possible. Grandparents who live far from young grandchildren usually have more distant relationships, with little contact except on holidays, birthdays, and other formal occasions. Despite high family mobility in Western industrialized nations, most grandparents live close enough to at least one grandchild to make regular visits possible (AARP, 2002). As grandchildren get older, distance has less impact. Instead, the extent to which the adolescent or young adult grandchild believes the grandparent values contact is a good predictor of a close bond (Brussoni & Boon, 1998).

SES and ethnicity also influence grandparent–grandchild ties. In low-income families, grandparents are more likely to perform essential activities. For example, many single parents live with their families of origin and depend on grandparents’ financial and caregiving assistance to reduce the impact of poverty. Compared with grandchildren in intact families, grandchildren in single-parent and stepparent families report engaging in more diverse, higher-quality activities with their grandparents (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993). As children experience the stress of family transition, bonds with grandparents take on increasing importance.

In some cultures, grandparents are absorbed into an extended-family household and become actively involved in child rearing. When a Chinese, Korean, or Mexican–American maternal grandmother is a homemaker, she is the preferred caregiver while parents of young children are at work (Kamo, 1998; Williams & Torrez, 1998). Similarly, involvement in child care is high among Native–American and Canadian–Aboriginal grandparents. In the absence of a biological grandparent, an unrelated elder may be integrated into the family to serve as a mentor and disciplinarian for children (Werner, 1991).

Increasingly, grandparents have stepped in as primary caregivers in the face of serious family problems. As the Social Issues box on the following page reveals, a rising number of North American children live apart from their parents in grandparent-headed households. Despite their willingness to help and their competence at child rearing, grandparents who take full responsibility for young children experience considerable emotional and financial strain. They need much more assistance from community and government agencies than is currently available.

Because parents usually serve as gatekeepers of grandparents’ contact with grandchildren, relationships between grandparents and their daughter-in-law or son-in-law strongly affect the closeness of grandparent-grandchild ties. A positive bond with a daughter-in-law seems particularly important in the relationship between grandparents and their son’s children (Fingerman, 2004). And after a marital breakup, grandparents related to the custodial parent (typically the mother) have more frequent contact with grandchildren (Johnson, 1998).

When family relationships are positive, grandparenthood provides an important means of fulfilling personal and societal needs in midlife and beyond. Typically, grandparents are a frequent source of pleasure, support, and knowledge for grandchildren. They also provide the young with firsthand experience in how older people think and function. In return, grandchildren become deeply attached to grandparents and keep them abreast of social change.

Middle-Aged Children and Their Aging Parents

The percentage of North American middle-aged people with living parents has risen dramatically—from 10 percent in 1900 to 50 percent at the beginning of the twenty-first century (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004b). A longer life expectancy means that adult children and their parents are increasingly likely to grow old together. What are middle-aged children’s relationships with their aging parents like? And how does life change for adult children when an aging parent’s health declines?

**Frequency and Quality of Contact.** Approximately two-thirds of older adults in the United States and Canada live close...
Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren: The Skipped-Generation

Family

Nearly 2.4 million U.S. and 75,000 Canadian children—4 to 5 percent of the child population—live with grandparents but apart from parents, in skipped-generation families (Statistics Canada, 2003a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). The number of grandparents rearing grandchildren has increased over the past decade. The arrangement occurs in all ethnic groups, though more often in African-American, Hispanic, and Canadian-Aboriginal families than in Caucasian families (Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005). Although grandparent caregivers are more likely to be women than men, many grandfathers participate. Often families take in two or more children.

In about half of skipped-generation families, grandparents step in because of parents’ substance-abuse problems. In most other instances, parental emotional or physical illness is involved (Pruchno & McKenney, 2000; Weber & Waldrop, 2000). Child abuse or neglect is often a factor. Occasionally child welfare authorities, out of a preference for placing the child with relatives rather than in a foster home, approach the grandparent, who assumes temporary or permanent legal custody. More often, grandparents offer their assistance, sometimes with and sometimes without legal responsibility. Most say they took action to protect the child only when the parents’ situation became intolerable.

Because the skipped-generation family structure is not freely chosen, many custodial grandparents face highly stressful life circumstances. Absent parents’ adjustment difficulties strain family relationships (Hirshorn, Van Meter, & Brown, 2000). Unfavorable child-rearing experiences have left their mark on the children, who show high rates of learning difficulties, depression, and antisocial behavior. These youngsters also introduce financial burdens into households that often are already low-income (Mills, Gomez-Smith, & De Leon, 2005; Williamson, Softas-Nall, & Miller, 2003). All these factors heighten grandparents’ emotional distress.

Child-rearing tasks mean that grandparents have less time for spouses, friends, and leisure when they had expected to have more time. Many report feeling emotionally drained, depressed, and worried about what will happen to the children if their own health fails (Hayslip et al., 2002; Kolomer & McCallion, 2005). Some families are extremely burdened. Native-American and Canadian-Aboriginal caregiving grandparents are especially likely to be unemployed, to have a disability, to be caring for several grandchildren, and to be living in extreme poverty (Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005).

Skipped-generation families have a tremendous need for social and financial support and intervention services for troubled children. Despite great hardship, these grandparents often forge close emotional bonds with their grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000). A survey of a large, representative sample of U.S. families revealed that compared with children in divorced, single-parent families or in blended families, children reared by grandparents were better-behaved in school, less susceptible to physical illness, and doing just as well academically (Solomon & Marx, 1995).

Although their daily existence is often stressful, many grandparent caregivers report joy from sharing children’s lives and helping them grow. Positive outcomes foster feelings of accomplishment and pride, which help compensate for difficult circumstances. And some grandparents view the rearing of grandchildren as a “second chance”—an opportunity to make up for earlier, unfavorable parenting experiences and “do it right” (Minkler & Roe, 1993; Waldrop & Weber, 2001).
to at least one of their children, and frequency of contact is high
through both visits and telephone calls (Rosenthal & Gladstone,
2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Proximity increases with age:
Elders who move usually do so in the direction of kin, and younger
people tend to move in the direction of their aging par-
ents. Middle age is a time when adults reassess relationships
with their parents, just as they rethink other close ties (Helson &
Moane, 1987). Many adult children become more appreciative
of their parents’ strengths and generosity. Trisha, for example, mar-
veled at her parents’ fortitude in rearing three college-educated
children despite limited income. And she recalled her mother’s
sound advice just before her marriage to Devin nearly three
decades earlier: “Build a life together, but also forge your own
life. You’ll be happier.” At several turning points, that advice had
influenced Trisha’s decisions.

As Trisha’s rapport with her mother conveys, mother–
daughter relationships tend to be closer than other parent–
child ties (Fingerman, 2001b). As the tensions of the adolescent
years ease, many young-adult daughters and mothers build
rewarding, intimate bonds. As daughters move into middle age,
their descriptions of the mother–daughter bond become more
complex, reflecting both positive and negative aspects—a change
that may stem from daughters’ more mature perspective and
from growing relationship tensions (Fingerman, 2000). Although
middle-aged daughters love their aging mothers and desire their
approval, they face many competing demands on their time and
energy (Fingerman, 2001a).

In the non-Western world, older adults most often live
with their married children. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean elderly,
for example, generally move in with a son and his wife and
children. This pattern, however, is changing: More elders live with
a daughter’s family or on their own than in the past (Kamo, 1998;
Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Zhang, 2004). Whether or not
coreidence and daily contact are typical, relationship quality
usually reflects patterns established earlier: Positive parent–
child ties generally remain so, as do conflict-ridden interactions.

Help exchanged between adult children and their aging par-
ents is responsive to past and current family circumstances. The more positive the history of the parent–child tie, the more
help given and received (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Huck, 1994). Also,
parents give more to unmarried children and to children with
disabilities, whereas children give more to widowed parents and
parents in poor health. At the same time, a shift in helping occurs
over the adult years. Parent-to-child advice, household aid, gift
giving, and financial assistance decline, while child-to-parent
help of various kinds increases (Kunemund, Motel-Klingebiel, &
Kohli, 2005; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002). But even when parent–
child relationships have been emotionally distant, adult children
offer more support as their parents age, out of a sense of altruism
and family duty (Silverstein et al., 2002).

**Caring for Aging Parents.** In Chapter 2, we noted that as
birthrates have declined, the family structure has become more
“top-heavy,” with more generations alive but fewer younger
members. This means that more than one aging parent is likely
to need assistance, with fewer younger adults available to provide
it. About 20 percent of midlifers in the United States and Canada
are involved in caring for an aging parent with a chronic illness
or disability (Takamura & Williams, 2002; Vanier Institute of the
Family, 2004b).

The term **sandwich generation** is widely used to refer to
the idea that middle-aged adults must care for multiple genera-
tions above and below them at the same time (Riley & Bowen,
2005). Although middle-aged adults who care for elderly par-
ents rarely have young children of their own in their homes,
many are providing assistance to young-adult children and to
grandchildren—obligations that, when combined with work
and community responsibilities, can lead middle-aged care-
givers to feel “sandwiched,” or squeezed, between the pressures
of older and younger generations.

Midlifers living far from aging parents who are in poor
health often substitute financial help for direct care, if they have
the means. But when parents live nearby and have no spouse to
meet their needs, adult children usually engage in direct care.
Regardless of family income level, African-American and His-
panic adults give aging parents more financial help and direct
care than Caucasian-American adults do (Shuey & Hardy,
2003). And minority families typically build a strong support
network in their ethnic communities that helps ensure financial
or caregiving assistance.

In all ethnic groups, responsibility for providing care to aging
parents falls more on daughters than on sons (see Figure 16.3).
Why are women usually the principal caregivers? Families turn
to the person who seems most available—living nearby and with
fewer commitments regarded as interfering with the ability to
assist. These unstated rules, in addition to parents’ preference
for same-sex caregivers (aging mothers live longer), lead more
women to fill the role.
Although most adult children help willingly, caring for a chronically ill or disabled parent is highly stressful—and radically different from caring for a young child. The need for parental care typically arises suddenly, after a heart attack, fall, stroke, or diagnosis of cancer, leaving little time for preparation. Whereas children become increasingly independent, the parent usually gets worse, and the caregiving task and its cost escalate. “One of the most difficult aspects is the emotional strain of being such a close observer of my father’s physical and mental decline,” Tim explained to Devin and Trisha. Tim also felt a sense of grief over the loss of a cherished relationship, as his father no longer seemed to be his former self. Because duration of caregiving is uncertain, caregivers often feel they no longer have control over their lives (Gatz, Bengtson, & Blum, 1990).

Adults who share a household with ill parents—about 10 percent of North American caregivers—experience the most stress. A parent and child who have lived separately for years usually dislike moving in together, and conflicts are likely to arise over routines and lifestyles. But the greatest source of stress is problem behavior, especially for caregivers of parents who have deteriorated mentally (Marks, 1996). Tim’s sister reported that their father would wake during the night, ask repetitive questions, follow her around the house, and become agitated and combative.

Parental caregiving often has emotional and physical health consequences. It leads to role overload (conflict among employment, spouse, parent, and elder care roles), high job absenteeism, exhaustion, inability to concentrate, feelings of hostility, anxiety about aging, and rates of depression as high as 30 to 50 percent (Killian, Turner, & Cain, 2005; Stephens et al., 2001). In cultures and subcultures where adult children feel an especially strong sense of obligation to care for aging parents, the toll tends to be greater. In a study of Korean, Korean-American, and Caucasian-American caregivers of parents with mental disabilities, the Koreans and Korean Americans reported the highest levels of family obligation and care burden—and also the highest levels of anxiety and depression (Youn et al., 1999). And among African-American caregivers, women who strongly endorsed cultural reasons for providing care (“It’s what my people have always done”) fared less well in mental health two years later than women who moderately endorsed cultural reasons (Dilworth-Anderson, Goodwin, & Williams, 2004).

Social support is highly effective in reducing caregiver stress. In Denmark, Sweden, and Japan, a government-sponsored home helper system eases the burden of parental care by making specially trained nonfamily caregivers available, based on the elder’s needs (Blomberg, Edebalk, & Petersson, 2000; Yamanoi, 1993). In the United States and Canada, in-home care by a nonfamily caregiver is too costly for most families; only 10 to 20 percent arrange it (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2002). And unless they must, few people want to place their parents in nursing homes, which also are expensive. Applying What We Know on page 432 summarizes ways to relieve the stress of caring for an aging parent—at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.
We will address additional elder care options, along with interventions for caregivers, in Chapter 17.

**Siblings**

A survey of a large sample of ethnically diverse Americans revealed that sibling contact and support decline from early to middle adulthood, rebounding only after age 70 for siblings living near one another (White, 2001). Decreased midlife contact is probably due to the demands of middle-aged adults’ diverse roles. However, most adult siblings report getting together or talking on the phone at least monthly (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Merline, 2002).

Despite reduced contact, many siblings feel closer in midlife, often in response to major life events (Stewart et al., 2001). Launching and marriage of children seem to prompt siblings to think more about one another. When a parent becomes seriously ill, brothers and sisters who previously had little to do with one another may find themselves in touch about parental care. And when parents die, adult children realize they have become the oldest generation and must look to one another to sustain family ties (Gold, 1996). As in early adulthood, sister–sister relationships are closer than sister–brother and brother–brother ties, a difference apparent in many industrialized nations (Cicirelli, 1995).

Not all sibling bonds improve, of course. Recall Trisha’s negative encounters with her sister, Dottie (see Chapter 15, page 403). Dottie’s difficult temperament had made her hard to get along with since childhood, and her temper flared when their father died and problems arose over family finances. When siblings do not help with parental caregiving, the child shouldering the burden can unleash powerful negative feelings (Merrill, 1997). As one expert expressed it, “As siblings grow older, good relationships [often] become better and rotten relationships get worse” (Moyer, 1992, p. 57).

In industrialized nations, sibling relationships are voluntary. In village societies, they are generally involuntary and basic to family functioning. For example, among Asian Pacific Islanders, family social life is organized around strong brother–sister attachments. A brother–sister pair is often treated as a unit in exchange marriages with another family. After marriage, brothers are expected to protect sisters, and sisters serve as spiritual mentors to brothers (Cicirelli, 1995). In village societies, cultural norms reduce sibling conflict, thereby ensuring family cooperation (Weisner, 1993).

**Friendships**

As family responsibilities declined in middle age, Devin found he had more time to spend with friends. On Friday afternoons, he met several male friends at a coffee house, and they chatted for a couple of hours. But most of Devin’s friendships were couple-based—relationships he shared with Trisha. Compared with Devin, Trisha more often got together with friends on her own (Blieszner & Adams, 1992).

Middle-aged friendships reflect the same trends discussed in Chapter 14. At all ages, men are less expressive than women with friends. Men tend to talk about sports, politics, and business, whereas women focus on feelings and life problems. Women report a greater number of close friends and say they both receive and provide their friends with more emotional support (Antonucci, 1994).
Nevertheless, for both sexes, number of friends declines with age, probably because people become less willing to invest in nonfamily ties unless they are very rewarding (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). As selectivity of friendship increases, older adults try harder to get along with friends (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). Having chosen a friend, middle-aged people attach great value to the relationship and take extra steps to protect it.

By midlife, family relationships and friendships support different aspects of psychological well-being. Family ties protect against serious threats and losses, offering security within a long-term time frame. In contrast, friendships serve as current sources of pleasure and satisfaction (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Merline, 2002). As middle-aged couples renew their sense of companionship, they may combine the best of family and friendship. Indeed, research indicates that viewing a spouse as a best friend contributes greatly to marital happiness (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990).

**Ask Yourself**

**Review**

How do age, sex, proximity, and culture affect grandparent–grandchild ties?

**Apply**

Raylene and her brother Walter live in the same city as their aging mother, Elsie. When Elsie could no longer live independently, Raylene took primary responsibility for her care. What factors probably contributed to Raylene’s involvement in caregiving and Walter’s lesser role?

**Reflect**

Ask a middle-aged couple you know well to describe the number and quality of their friendships today compared to their friendships of early adulthood. Does their report match research findings? Explain.

**Vocational Life**

As we have seen, the midlife transition typically involves vocational adjustments. For Devin, it resulted in a move up the career ladder to a demanding administrative post as college dean. Trisha reoriented her career from a large to a small law firm, where she felt her efforts were appreciated. Recall from Chapter 15 that after her oldest child left home, Anya earned a college degree and entered the workforce for the first time. Jewel strengthened her commitment to an already successful business, while Elena changed careers. Finally, Tim reduced his career obligations as he prepared for retirement. Work continues to be a salient aspect of identity and self-esteem in middle adulthood. More so than in earlier or later years, people attempt to increase the personal meaning and self-direction of their vocational lives (Levinson, 1978, 1996).

The post–World War II baby boom, along with the elimination of mandatory retirement age in most industrialized nations, means that the number of older workers will rise dramatically over the next few decades. Yet a favorable transition from adult worker to older worker is hindered by negative stereotypes of aging—incorrect beliefs about limited learning capacity, slower decision making, and resistance to change and supervision (Sterns & Huyck, 2001). Furthermore, gender discrimination continues to restrict the career attainments of many women. Let’s take a close look at middle-aged work life.

**Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction increases in midlife at all occupational levels, from executives to hourly workers. The trend is weaker for women than for men, probably because women’s reduced chances for advancement result in a sense of unfairness. It is also weaker for blue-collar than for white-collar workers, perhaps because blue-collar workers have less control over their own work schedules and activities (Avolio & Sosik, 1999; Fotinos-Ventouratos & Cooper, 1998). When different aspects of jobs are considered, intrinsic satisfaction—happiness with the work itself—shows a strong age-related gain. Extrinsic satisfaction—contentment with supervision, pay, and promotions—changes very little (Hochwarter et al., 2001).

What explains the midlife rise in job satisfaction? A broader time perspective probably contributes. “When I first started teaching, I complained a lot,” remarked Devin. “Now I can tell a big problem from a trivial one.” Moving out of unrewarding work roles, as Trisha did, can also boost morale. And older people tend to have greater access to key job characteristics that predict well-being—involvement in decision making, reasonable workloads, and good physical working conditions. Furthermore, having fewer alternative positions into which they can move, middle-aged workers generally reduce their career aspirations. As the perceived gap between actual and possible achievements declines, work involvement increases (Warr, 1992).
Although emotional engagement with work is usually seen as psychologically healthy, it can also result in burnout—a condition in which long-term job stress leads to mental exhaustion, a sense of loss of personal control, and feelings of reduced accomplishment. Burnout occurs more often in the helping professions, including health care, human services, and teaching, which place high emotional demands on employees (Zapf et al., 2001). And it is especially likely to occur in unsupportive work environments, where work assignments exceed time available to complete them and encouragement and feedback from supervisors are scarce. Burnout is a greater problem in North America than in Western Europe, perhaps because of North Americans’ greater achievement orientation (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

**Career Development**

After several years as a parish nurse, Anya felt a need for additional training to do her job better. Trisha appreciated her firm’s generous support of workshop and course attendance, which helped her keep abreast of new legal developments. As these experiences reveal, career development is vital throughout work life.

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**Job Training.** When Anya asked her supervisor, Roy, for time off to upgrade her skills, he replied, “You’re in your fifties. What’re you going to do with so much new information at this point in your life?”

Roy’s insensitive, narrow-minded response, though usually unspoken, is all too common among managers—even some who are older themselves! Training and on-the-job career counseling are less available to older workers. And when career development activities are offered, older employees may be less likely to volunteer for them (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006). What influences willingness to engage in job training and updating?

Personal characteristics are important, starting with the degree to which an individual wants to change. With age, growth needs give way somewhat to security needs. Perhaps for this reason, older employees depend more on co-worker and supervisor encouragement for vocational development. Yet as we have seen, they are less likely to have supportive supervisors. Furthermore, negative stereotypes of aging reduce older workers’ self-efficacy, or confidence that they can renew and expand their skills (Maurer, 2001; Maurer, Wrenn, & Weiss, 2003).

Workplace characteristics matter, too. An employee given work that requires new learning must pursue that learning to complete the assignment. Unfortunately, older workers sometimes receive more routine tasks than younger workers. Interaction among co-workers can also have a profound impact. Within project teams, people similar in age communicate more often. Age-balanced work groups (with more than one person in each age range) foster on-the-job learning because communication is a source of support as well as a means of acquiring job-relevant information (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989).

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**Gender and Ethnicity: The Glass Ceiling.** In her thirties, Jewel became a company president by starting her own business. As a woman, she had decided that her chances of rising to a top executive position in a large corporation were so slim that she didn’t even try. In a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 U.S. adults, the probability of attaining a managerial position climbed substantially over 30 years of career experience for white men. By contrast, it rose modestly for white women and black men, and hardly at all for black women—findings that held after work skills and work productivity factors were controlled (Maume, 2004). When the most prestigious high-level management positions are considered, white men are even more advantaged: They account for 77 percent of chief executive officers at large corporations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b).

Women and ethnic minorities face a glass ceiling, or invisible barrier to advancement up the corporate ladder. Why is this so? Management is an art and skill that must be taught. Yet women and members of ethnic minorities have less access to mentors, role models, and informal networks that serve as training routes. And because of stereotyped doubts about women’s career commitment and managerial ability, large companies spend less money on formal training programs for their female employees (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, women who demonstrate qualities linked to leadership and advancement—assertiveness, confidence, forcefulness, and
ambition—encounter prejudice because they deviate from traditional gender roles (Carli & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Like Jewel, many women have dealt with the glass ceiling by going around it. Largely because of lack of advancement opportunities, nearly twice as many female as male middle managers quit their jobs in large corporations, with most going into business for themselves (Mergenhagen, 1996). Today, more than half of all start-up businesses in the United States are owned and successfully operated by women (Ahuja, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). But when women and ethnic minorities leave the corporate world, companies not only lose valuable talent but also fail to address the leadership needs of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Planning for Retirement

One evening, Devin and Trisha met George and Anya for dinner. Halfway through the meal, Devin inquired, “George, tell us what you and Anya are going to do about retirement. Are you planning to work part-time or stop entirely? Do you think you’ll stay here or move out of town?”

Three or four generations ago, the two couples would not have had this conversation. In 1900, about 70 percent of North American men age 65 and over were in the labor force. In the early twenty-first century, the figure had dropped to 9 percent in Canada and 18 percent in the United States (Statistics Canada, 2002c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Because of government-sponsored retirement benefits—which began in Canada in 1927 and in the United States in 1935—retirement is no longer a privilege reserved for the wealthy. In both countries, the federal governments pay social security to the majority of the aged, and others are covered by employer-based private pension plans (Chappell et al., 2003; Meyer & Bellas, 1995).

Most workers report looking forward to retirement, and an increasing number are leaving full-time work in midlife. The average age of retirement has declined during the past two decades. Currently, it is age 62 in Canada and the United States and hovers between 60 and 63 in other Western nations (Statistics Canada, 2002c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Today, many people spend up to one-fourth of their lives in retirement.

Retirement is a lengthy, complex process that begins as soon as the middle-aged person first thinks about it (Kim & Moen, 2002b). Because retirement leads to a loss of two important work-related rewards—income and status—and to change in many other aspects of life, planning is important, resulting in better retirement adjustment and satisfaction. Yet nearly half of middle-aged people engage in no concrete retirement planning (Jacobs-Lawson, Hershey, & Neukam, 2004; Quick & Moen, 1998).

Since income typically drops by 50 percent, more people engage in financial planning than in other forms of preparation. But even those who attend financial education programs often fail to look closely at their financial well-being and to make wise decisions (Hershey et al., 1998). Many could benefit from expert financial counsel.

Retirement leads to ways of spending time that are largely guided by one’s interests rather than one’s obligations. Planning for an active life has an even greater impact on happiness than financial planning. Participation in activities promotes many factors essential for psychological well-being, including a structured time schedule, social contact, and self-esteem (Schlossberg, 2004). Carefully considering whether or not to relocate at retirement is related to an active life, since it affects access to family, friends, recreation, entertainment, and part-time work.

Devin retired at age 62, George at age 66. Though several years younger, Trisha and Anya—like many married women—coordinated their retirements with those of their husbands (Ruhm, 1996). In contrast, Jewel—in good health but without an intimate partner to share her life—kept her consulting business going until age 75. Tim took early retirement and moved near Elena, where he devoted himself to public service—tutoring second graders in a public school and coaching after-school and weekend youth sports. For Tim, like many executives, retirement offered a new opportunity to pay attention to the world around him.

Unfortunately, less well-educated people with lower lifetime earnings are least likely to attend retirement preparation programs—yet they stand to benefit the most. And compared with men, women do less planning, often depending
on their husband’s preparations—a finding that may change as women increasingly become equal, rather than secondary, family earners (Han & Moen, 1999). Employers must take extra steps to encourage lower-paid workers and women to participate in planning activities (Jacobs-Lawson, Hershey, & Neukam, 2004). In addition, enhancing retirement adjustment among the economically disadvantaged depends on access to better health care, vocational training, and jobs at early ages. Clearly, a lifetime of opportunities and experiences affects the transition to retirement. In Chapter 18, we will consider the decision to retire and retirement adjustment in greater detail.

**Summary**

**Erikson’s Theory: Generativity versus Stagnation**

*According to Erikson, how does personality change in middle age?*

- Generativity begins in early adulthood but expands greatly as middle-aged adults face Erikson’s psychological conflict of **generativity versus stagnation**. Highly generative people find fulfillment as they make contributions to society through parenthood, other family relationships, the workplace, and volunteer activities.

- Personal desires and cultural demands jointly shape adults’ generative activities. Highly generative people appear especially well-adjusted. The negative outcome, **stagnation**, occurs when people become self-centered and self-indulgent in midlife.

**Other Theories of Psychosocial Development in Midlife**

*Describe Levinson’s and Vaillant’s views of psychosocial development in middle adulthood, and discuss similarities and differences between men and women.*

- According to Levinson, middle-aged adults reassess their relation to themselves and the external world. They confront four developmental tasks, each requiring them to reconcile two opposing tendencies within the self: young–old, destruction–creation, masculinity–femininity, and engagement–separateness.

- Perhaps because of the double standard of aging, middle-aged women express concern about appearing less attractive. But non-college-educated men, even more than women, show a rise in sensitivity to physical aging.

- Middle-aged men may adopt “feminine” traits of nurturance and caring, while women may take on “masculine” traits of autonomy, dominance, and assertiveness. Men and successful career-oriented women often reduce their focus on ambition and achievement. Women who have devoted themselves to child rearing or an unfulfilling job typically increase their involvement in work and the community.

- Vaillant found that adults in their late forties and fifties take on responsibility as guardians of their culture, seeking to “pass the torch” to later generations.

*Does the term midlife crisis fit most people’s experience of middle adulthood?*

- Most people respond to midlife with changes that are better described as “turning points” than as a crisis. Only a minority experience a **midlife crisis** characterized by intense self-doubt and inner turmoil and leading to drastic changes in their personal lives and careers.

**Stability and Change in Self-Concept and Personality**

*Describe changes in self-concept and personality in middle adulthood.*

- Middle-aged individuals maintain self-esteem and stay motivated by revising their **possible selves**, which become fewer in number as well as more modest and concrete as people adjust their hopes and fears to their life circumstances.

- Midlife typically leads to greater self-acceptance, autonomy, and environmental mastery—changes that promote psychological well-being and life satisfaction. As a result, some people consider middle age the “prime of life.”

- Coping strategies become more effective as middle-aged adults develop greater confidence in their ability to handle life’s problems.

*Describe changes in gender identity in midlife.*

- Both men and women become more androgynous in middle adulthood. Biological explanations, such as **parental imperative theory**, are controversial. A complex combination of social roles and life conditions is probably responsible for midlife changes in gender identity.

*Discuss stability and change in the “big five” personality traits in adulthood.*

- Among the “**big five**” personality traits, neuroticism, introversion, and openness to experience show stability or modest declines during adulthood, while agreeableness and conscientiousness increase. But individual differences in the “big five” traits are large and highly stable: Although adults change in overall organization and integration of personality, they do so on a foundation of basic, enduring dispositions.
Relationships at Midlife
Describe the middle adulthood phase of the family life cycle, including relationships with a marriage partner, adult children, grandchildren, and aging parents.

- The middle-aged phase of the family life cycle is often called “launching children and moving on.” Adults must adapt to many entries and exits of family members as their children leave, marry, and produce grandchildren, and as their own parents age and die.

- Midlife changes prompt many adults to focus on improving their marriages. When divorce occurs, middle-aged adults seem to adapt more easily than younger people. For women, marital breakup usually brings significant economic disadvantage, contributing to the feminization of poverty.

- Most middle-aged parents adjust well to the launching phase of the family life cycle, especially if they have developed gratifying alternative activities and if parent–child contact and affection are sustained. As children marry and bring in-laws into the family network, middle-aged parents, especially mothers, often become kinkeepers.

- Grandparenthood is an important means of fulfilling personal and societal needs. In-law relationships affect the closeness of grandparent–grandchild ties. In low-income families and in some subcultures, grandparents provide essential resources, including financial assistance and child care. When serious family problems exist, grandparents may become primary caregivers in skipped-generation families.

- Middle-aged adults reassess their relationships with aging parents, often becoming more appreciative. Mother-daughter relationships tend to be closer than other parent–child ties. The more positive the history of the relationship, the more help exchanged between parent and adult child.

- Middle-aged adults, often caught between caring for ill or frail parents, assisting young-adult children and grandchildren, and meeting work and community responsibilities, are called the sandwich generation. The burden of caring for aging parents falls most heavily on adult daughters, though in later middle age, the sex difference declines.

- Parental caregiving has emotional and health consequences. The toll is greatest in cultures and subcultures where adult children feel an especially strong obligation to provide care. Social support is highly effective in relieving caregiver stress.

Describe midlife sibling relationships and friendships.

- Sibling contact and support decline from early to middle adulthood. However, most middle-aged siblings tend to feel closer, often in response to major life events. Sister–sister ties are typically closest in industrialized nations. In nonindustrialized societies, where sibling relationships are basic to family functioning, other attachments (such as brother–sister) may be stronger.

- In midlife, friendships become fewer, more selective, and more deeply valued. Men continue to be less expressive with their friends than women, who have a greater number of close friendships. Viewing a spouse as a best friend can contribute greatly to marital happiness.

Vocational Life
Discuss job satisfaction and career development in middle adulthood, with special attention to sex differences and experiences of ethnic minorities.

- Vocational readjustments are common as middle-aged people seek to increase the personal meaning and self-direction of their work lives. Job satisfaction increases at all occupational levels, more so for men than for women. Still, burnout is a serious occupational hazard, especially for those in helping professions and in unsupportive work environments.

- Older workers less often pursue career development because of negative stereotypes of aging, which impair self-efficacy; lack of encouragement from supervisors; and less challenging work assignments.

- Women and ethnic minorities face a glass ceiling because of limited access to management training and prejudice against women who demonstrate qualities linked to leadership and advancement. Many women further their careers by leaving the corporate world, often to start their own businesses.

Discuss the importance of planning for retirement, noting various issues that middle-aged adults should address.

- An increasing number of North American workers are retiring from full-time work in midlife. Besides financial planning, planning for an active life is vital for happiness after retirement. Employers must take extra steps to encourage lower-paid workers and women to participate in retirement preparation programs.

Important Terms and Concepts

“big five” personality traits (p. 424)  
burnout (p. 434)  
feminization of poverty (p. 426)  
generativity versus stagnation (p. 417)  
glass ceiling (p. 434)  
kinkeeper (p. 427)  
midlife crisis (p. 421)  
parental imperative theory (p. 424)  
possible selves (p. 422)  
sandwich generation (p. 430)  
skipped-generation family (p. 429)