

# Dealing with Midlife Issues

In this article we would like to help you explore the challenges and opportunities that come at midlife. You will have an opportunity to take a look at issues that are specific to the Baby Boomer generation. You will also have a chance to begin the process of your own midlife assessment with a list of questions presented at the end of the newsletter. We call this assessment the Midlife Checkup.

## Benefits of the Midlife Checkup

Taking the time to assess how your life is going at this point can result in benefits such as these:

- It can help you identify and intensify your inner strengths.
- You can find your own voice and express it your own way.
- You can accept your changing physical self.
- It is an opportunity to forgive those with whom you've been angry.
- It can help you find ways to reduce stress.
- You can learn to simplify your life.
- You can reenergize yourself in preparation for the second half of your life.

## The Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomer generation is at midlife right now. This generation includes almost 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

The Boomers are the largest generation in U.S. history. They have had a major impact on American society as they have passed through every life stage. They are passing through midlife in their own unique way, differently from their parents and differently from Generation X, the group born in the years after 1964.

The first Boomer turned 50 at the beginning of 1996, and the remaining 78 million will observe this anniversary sometime between now and 2014.

## *Typical Feelings*

According to *Rocking the Ages* authors J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman (researchers at Yankelovich Partners) and authors like Gail Sheehy, people passing through middle age typically experience the following kinds of feelings.

**Great expectations:** Most Boomers are beginning to recognize their own limitations. Growing up in the comfortable 1950's, the Boomers learned to expect unlimited growth and endless possibilities. They believed their good luck would never end. Now that they are turning 50, many are shocked to discover that there are limits to life's possibilities.

**Regret:** As people reach midlife, they must face up to the loss of some of their dreams and regret the mistakes they have made. It is not easy for anyone to face the person one will never be.

**Loss:** At midlife, everyone has to face the loss of beauty and youth, valued by our society. In her book *New Passages*, author Gail Sheehy calls this experience "The Body Blues" or "The Vanity Crisis."

**Meaning:** According to Sheehy, the "universal preoccupation" of the middle years is "the search for meaning in whatever we do." As they face the fact that time is limited, the Baby Boomers typically become even more intent on this need to analyze and search for significance.

**Change:** The midlife years can be a time of radical change for many people. This is the result of endless questioning and evaluation of how one has lived life thus far. Many midlife *crises* become mid-life *meltdowns*, says Sheehy, because some people react to feelings of emptiness or disillusionment by destroying everything they have built.

The Boomers developed a value system that is based on a sense of entitlement and which values individuality. Because they hold these values, Boomers respond differently to each life stage than do other generations. You can see these values reflected in scenes like those from television shows from the 1950s and early 60s.

According to Smith and Clurman, four important characteristics of the Baby Boomer value system are:

**Self-absorption:** The Boomers (once called the "Me" Generation) have the reputation of being more narcissistic than other generations. Because of the times they grew up in, they have always been fascinated with themselves. The indulgence they experienced at home in the 1950s and the world's seemingly limitless possibilities created a fascination with self and a feeling of specialness.

**Sense of entitlement:** As a generation, the Boomers see themselves as superior to others. They have always assumed that they could have life their way and that the rules were meant for others, but not for them. They feel entitled to rewards and view themselves as winners. They expect success and cannot accept failure.

**Need for control:** The Boomers need to feel certain and to sense that they are in control of life. They have a difficult time dealing with uncertainty.

**Reflection:** Baby Boomers have always valued introspection and take pleasure in asking questions.

For most people, life at age 45 or 50 doesn't match the dreams they had at age 20 or 30. When people reach age 45 or 50 and are even slightly disappointed by their achievements and experiences, their feelings are likely to be compounded by these factors of self-absorption, sense of entitlement, and a need for control. But there is also a positive side to this. The tendency to reflect and explore can help one look for new possibilities instead of being stuck with feelings of disappointment.

Keep all of this in mind as you complete the Midlife Checkup. It is a list of 29 unfinished sentences that will help you assess your life to date. The items on this list provide a framework for conducting your own assessment. Please add your own ideas that you think will help you reflect on your life's direction.

### **The Midlife Checkup**

1. My most important accomplishments are...
2. I am disappointed about...
3. I would describe the person I turned out to be as...
4. I want to change the following things about my self and my life...
5. Things I want to do before I die...
6. If I knew I couldn't fail, I would...
7. Things I have mastered...
8. Things I want to keep...
9. I want to keep these relationships...
10. I want to let go of these relationships...
11. I want to keep these possessions...
12. I want to let go of these possessions...
13. I want to have these experiences...
14. I want to clean up these messes...
15. I want to celebrate...

16. I don't ever again want to...
17. My body is...
18. My children are...
19. My parents are...
20. My spouse is...
21. I want to remember...
22. I want to forget...
23. I must apologize to...
24. I must seek an apology from...
25. I am most proud of...
26. I wish I could forget about...
27. I wish I could do over...
28. I wish I had never...
29. I wish I had...
30. Add your own items