Hello. Now we’re going to take a look at middle adulthood. This is a rather long period of the lifespan between the ages of 40 to perhaps 65.  
  
  
Midlife adults are engaging in many developmental tasks. For example, they may experience the loss of their parents and subsequent grief. They may be launching their children into lives of their own and adjusting to life after their children have left. Interestingly enough, many children may return temporarily to go to school or after having broken up in a marriage so midlife adults may have to deal with adult children who have returned. They may be becoming grandparents and preparing for late adulthood and caring for family members in need.  
  
Most midlife adults experience good health. Their risk of chronic disability is relatively low. However, changes in vision, becoming far-sighted or near-sighted or both, are very common. This can be easily corrected for with glasses or contacts. Some midlife adults may experience hearing loss, especially those who live noisy lives. Joint pain and weight gain are also more common in midlife.  
  
It is important to remember the use it or lose it principle. Our lifestyle has an enormous impact on our health and well-being. Some risks to health include poor diet, stress, smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol excessively, physical inactivity and perhaps chronic disease. Some preventative measures include engaging in challenging physical and mental activity, incorporating weight bearing exercise into any physical routine, practicing good nutrition, and having access to social resources to keep life vibrant.  
  
During midlife, women go through a climacteric or menopause. This is triggered by a loss of estrogen. It usually starts by the mid-forties and most complete this by the mid-fifties. All complete this by age 58. One of the first noticeable changes a woman may experience is a change in her menstrual cycle; either her periods are heavier and more frequent or perhaps lighter and less frequent. Other changes a woman may or may not experience are hot flashes, night sweats, dryness in the skin and hair, and less vaginal lubrication during sexual arousal. After menopause has been completed, which clinically is defined as going for a year without a menstrual cycle, a woman is no longer capable of reproduction. Be sure to read about the cultural variation in attitudes toward and experiences of women going through menopause.  
  
Do through men go through a comparable event? Is there such a thing as andropause? Well, they do not lose their reproductive ability although their sperm count can be lower with age and testosterone levels may diminish due to stress and a sexual inactivity.  
  
How does the climacteric effect sexual expression? It does effect reproduction in females, but physical intimacy is still very important and it’s important for midlife adults to remember to practice safe sex.  
  
Let’s look further at lifestyle changes. Exercise may be one of the best things that a midlife adult can do with regularity. Exercise keeps muscles strong, helps to reduce stress levels, increases energy, and weight training can increase bone density.  
  
When you have a chance, look at the food pyramid published by the U. S. Government. The food pyramid is a wonderful tool to incorporate exercise, focus on nutrition, and tailor-make a physical fitness program to suit one’s own needs.   
  
  
The ideal diet is low in cholesterol, sodium, high in fiber, low in sugar and starch and perhaps includes alcohol in moderation.  
  
Now let’s turn our attention to cognitive development. Here we are going to revisit formal and postformal thought during midlife and focus on some cognitive abilities that are enhanced in midlife.  
  
Remember formal operational thought? Formal operational thought is the ability to think abstractly about an area. Although many adults have formal operational thought chances are they don’t have this ability when thinking about all topics. This ability is going to be found in areas in which they have a lot of experience and education. For example, I can think very abstractly about social science, but when I take chemistry, I just want to know how to get through the problems.   
  
There are increases and decreases in cognitive abilities in midlife. Some of the abilities that increase include tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the kind of understanding that really can’t be taught. It’s acquired through experience. Verbal memory increases with age. Spatial skills and inductive reasoning also seem to be enhanced with age. What about wisdom? As you grow older, will you become wiser? Not necessarily. It may depend on your life circumstances and how much wisdom you had at a younger age. It can also be tied to occupation and whether or not it requires those kinds of skills in making decisions; working memory and the speed of processing decrease with age.   
  
Older adult students seem to approach learning in a way very different from younger students. In fact there is a particular type of teaching that addresses adult students called andragogy. What’s the difference? As you can imagine, through time and experience, the adult is more interested in the relevance of material being learned rather than relying on rote memorization. They’re probably going to focus on being accurate rather than quick when working on a task. Older students are going to work best when distractions are at a minimum. And it may be harder for them to learn when they’re very tired. Focusing on accuracy and relevance requires a slower pace for learning.  
  
Midlife is sometimes considered to be a time of gaining expertise. It’s been said that you need about 10 years of exposure to something to become an expert at it. The expert and the novice work differently. Keep in mind that expertise comes from experience. The expert seems to automatically know how to handle a situation, almost as if they know because of intuition. Keep in mind that they were once novices as well. The expert is less conscious of their activities. I’m thinking of two people I know; an experienced musician and a novice guitarist. The novice keeps asking, “How’d you do that?” when he plays a certain passage on the guitar and the expert replies, “Well, you just do it.” He’s less conscious now of the components and mechanisms for playing a certain passage. And experts are much better at handling unusual situations. They seem to have much more knowledge than that found in a procedural manual.   
  
Now let’s look at psychosocial development in midlife. This involves a couple of theories of midlife, the ways that people have relationships, and the world of work.   
  
Remember Daniel Levinson? Levinson provided one of the first investigations of transitions that adults may experience. You may have heard of a midlife crisis. It’s a term that has been popularized for some years in the U. S. It refers to the idea of having a great transition or dramatic change or maybe trying to become younger than one is at around 40 or 50. Does everyone have a midlife crisis? Well, a midlife crisis involves changing things in order to get back on course with the way one wanted life to be. If a person is not off track, there’s no reason for revision. It seems that people who have dramatic emotional crises, have emotional crises at other times in life as well. What does it look like? It may look like a lot of impatience and frustration; perhaps a real focus on the self. And it can last more than a few months; perhaps several years in making this change. The kinds of changes may be more extreme than they make at age thirty, particularly because now they’re thinking about their lives in terms of how many years they have left and this brings a new sense of urgency for bringing on change.   
  
Erikson characterized adulthood as a time of generativity versus stagnation. Generativity means feeling productive and more than this it involves trying to give back to the next generation. If a midlife adult looks at their life and doesn’t think they’ve done anything worthwhile, they may feel stagnated or stuck. This productivity can occur in work life, in a hobby or avocation, and in family life.   
  
Let’s focus our attention on family relationships. As long as your parents are living, you’re an adult child. I’m thinking of a neighbor I had who was in her 90s. And from time to time she’d tell me that her boys were visiting her. In fact, on the weekend her boys, ages 70 and 75, would show up wearing a bill cap and a dog on a leash and she’d proceed to order them around quite a lot. Most adult children seem to have more tolerance of their parent’s imperfections through time. Midlife families can be very busy to the point of experiencing overload stress: there’s too much to do and too little time. There are a number of launching concerns. Some parents who have a difficult time with their children leaving, maybe they need their children for emotional support, may even precipitate a crisis to keep them from leaving. Kinkeeping is a kind of relationship midlife adults, often midlife daughters in particular may find they are responsible for. Kinkeeping involves trying to organize the family to maintain family contact and ties. Some midlife adults provide caregiving either for needy children, spouses, or dependent parents. Read about whether this experience is rewarding or difficult. There is a lot of variation in how this is experienced.   
  
If you looked in all the households in the United States, you’d find about 25 percent containing a single adult. This percentage has been fairly consistent varying by less than 5 percent. But today we see that more young people are staying single longer and those who divorce are more likely to remain unmarried. Widows also make up a large and growing number of singles. Are singles happier than marrieds? It depends. Are they single by choice or are they unable to find a mate?   
  
Stein offers a typology of singles based on whether the person is single by choice and whether the status is temporary or permanent. The voluntary temporary single is typically satisfied with that status. The person wants to be single, maybe to feel free of obligations or to be able to focus on work or school, and views the status as temporary. The plan is to marry someday, just not yet. The voluntary permanent single has decided to remain single and is happy with that decision. The person might be dedicated to work or may have an occupation that does not allow marriage (clergy). Or the person just might not believe in marriage as an institution. Voluntary temporary singles are actively looking for a mate and may not be happy with being single. The involuntary single may have wanted to marry, but never found a partner. This person may be bitter about it or just resigned to the fact. Many women in late adulthood may be in this category as there are far more women than men in this age bracket.  
  
Now let’s look at types of marriages. Some marriages are considered intrinsic meaning the focus of the relationship is that of being together. These partners are drawn to one another out of desire for and attraction toward one another. Others are utilitarian. The marriage serves a purpose other than attraction. Marriage brings financial security, children, respect, status, or labor. Most marriages throughout history and throughout the world have been utilitarian rather than purely intrinsic. But being “in love” has become an important reason for marriage in recent decades.   
  
Cuber and Harroff studied members of long-term marriages and found that marriages vary. Their typology of marriage includes the conflict-habituated marriage, in which partners constantly nagged and nitpicked one another. Their conflict had become a habit and neither partner tried to resolve issues. “Of course we don’t solve a problem. It’s a matter of principle not to . . . then someone would lose face for the next encounter. . .’ explained one woman in a 25 year long conflict habituated relationship. Devitalized partners could remember when their marriage was happy and they felt in love. But now their time together is mundane. Passive-congenial partners married for status and placed a lot of emphasis on property, children, and status. Their frustrations with one another were not openly expressed, but were shown in more subtle, passive ways, such as doing something to irritate the partner. Partners of vital marriages spend a lot of time together, are attracted to one another, and find ways to organize their lives in order to spend time together. Total marriages are those in which partners also share career interests and are perhaps colleagues.   
  
Gottman studies marital communication. You’ll be listening to an audio story about his work in your lessons.   
  
Gottman describes several marriage killers or types of communication that signal that a relationship is vulnerable to divorce. These include criticism that is harmful and insulting. Another is contempt. Contempt takes it one step further and involves berating a partner’s character through blaming and name-calling. Defensiveness occurs when partners are no longer listening to one another. Instead they are making excuses for their actions or meeting complaints with complaints known as “cross-complaining.” Stonewalling involves shutting down and no longer speaking or attending to a partner. Males are more likely to do this and Gottman attributes this to a male’s stronger physiological response when feeling attacked. Blood pressure and respiration increase under those conditions and the male shuts down. Read more about this in your lesson.  
  
Stations of divorce are areas in life impacted by divorce. When couples divorce, they break up in many ways. The emotional divorce is a psychological breakup in which partners insult, nag, and nitpick one another. They are no longer psychologically close. Some couples have divorced emotionally even though they are still married. The legal divorce is the court proceeding that changes marital status. The economic divorce involves determining how property, debt, and income will be distributed. The coparental divorce continues as long as children are dependent. Parents establish visitation and reevaluate and adjust to their new roles with children following divorce. The community divorce involves changes in relationships with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members following divorce. The psychic divorce is a period of adjustment that may take up to 10 years. The divorced person grieves and readjusts to life as a single person. As this model shows, divorce is more than a legal procedure.   
  
About half of all marriage in the U. S. is a remarriage for at least one of the partners. Partners considering remarriage tend to have less traditional courtships of dating. They become sexual partners sooner and include children into the relationship more quickly. If they break up, it happens sooner than in first marriages. And they are more vulnerable to breaking up if children are involved in the relationship. We’ve already discussed some of the difficulties facing stepfamilies.  
  
There is a lot of variation in the work life of people between 40 and 65. Some are enjoying the peak of their careers, earning more money than ever before and using their expertise. Others find that they are back in school and retooling to reenter the changing and challenging job market. Midlife is a time of seeking encore careers for many Baby Boomers. These are second careers that combine purpose, meaning, and income. Listen to the audio story about encore careers. Many colleges have programs for their “encore” students to help them with this transition. Flexibility is very important to compete in the world of work. Successful workers can adapt to new demands and skills required for employment.  
  
What happens to personality in midlife? Studies of the Big Five personality traits indicate that midlife adults become more agreeable and less open and neurotic. This means that midlife adults become more flexible and less rigid in decision-making. They may be less interested in novel or new situations and may not worry as much as about smaller issues. Jung suggests that personality becomes more balanced in midlife. For example, a person is freer to express both their masculine and feminine side or to be both assertive in situations and passive depending on the situation. Again, flexibility is key.