U.S. Army War College

Maximizing Senior Leader Health and Wellbeing

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MAXIMIZING SENIOR LEADER HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

MIDLIFE AND THE MILITARY: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

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> "Thirty years wearing the fabric of our nation. How in the world did I blink for 30 years? I'd become that which I had so much disdain for earlier in my career, the old man. How did this happen? One look in the mirror provided the cold, hard, truth. I stopped treating myself like a Soldier. I wasn't eating, sleeping, or exercising smartly. I had a skewed focus putting mission over wellbeing. Then COVID hit the world. I decided there are two ways to exit the pandemic; fitter or fatter. It began with 100 burpees a day and transitioned to healthy eating, weight training, increased sleep, and brutal honesty. It is easy to work non-stop. It is hard to work and treat yourself as a pacing item. My work is far from over. I've now begun working on flexibility and mindfulness, which are both harder than anticipated. We get one life and one career with Soldiers. I'm striving to make each day count."
>
> – Brigadier General Richard R. Coffman

> "You know you are in midlife when you start counting down."
> – Anonymous

Military senior leaders cannot take their health and wellbeing for granted. At the peak of their professional careers, senior leaders must simultaneously negotiate multiple roles, life transitions, and increased responsibilities while perhaps encountering the first signs of physical and cognitive decline. The period of midlife should be a rewarding period of development wherein leaders expand the positive impact of their knowledge and experience in the workplace, renegotiate relationships with friends and families, and increasingly contribute to the wellbeing of successive generations. Yet, the effects of biological aging, the accumulation of stress, and

challenging life events can derail even the most promising life course. We aim for this chapter and book to be a clarion call for senior leaders entering midlife to increase self-awareness and embark on a journey of health and wellbeing.

What is Midlife?

Midlife is roughly defined as the period between 40 and 65 years old and captures the transition from young adulthood to old age.[1] Biologically, this period reflects the change from youthful vitality to age-related decline. More importantly, it is the period when individuals encounter significant changes in professional, social, and familial roles with implications for personal wellbeing and interpersonal impact. Professionally, midlifers often transition from direct and organizational leadership roles to ones focused on long-term, institutional strategic challenges. In terms of social roles, many in midlife transition from self and childcare to include grandchildren and elder care (sandwich care[2]). This complex combination of changes brought on by biological aging, emerging and evolving roles, and the accumulation of a lifetime of stress suggests that senior leaders should deliberately approach this pivotal period to maximize its remarkable potential.

The changes associated with midlife are not exclusive to those in the military. Although not researched as comprehensively as other developmental periods across the lifespan, midlife has been increasingly explored and recognized as a dynamic and impactful period.[3] On one hand, midlife generally brings about autonomy, financial stability, authority, and deep relationships. On the other hand, many midlife professionals experience chronic stress, mental health struggles, increased caretaking responsibilities, physiological changes such as menopause and decreasing testosterone and strength, and declining fluid intelligence.[4] All of these changes have the potential to affect health and wellbeing negatively in older adulthood.

1. Frank J. Infurna, Denis Gerstorf, and Margie E. Lachman, "Midlife in the 2020s: Opportunities and Challenges.," *American Psychologist* 75, no. 4 (2020): 470-485, https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000591.

2. Emily Grundy and John C. Henretta, "Between Elderly Parents and Adult Children: A New Look at the Intergenerational Care Provided by the 'Sandwich Generation,'" *Ageing and Society* 26, no. 5 (January 2006): 707-722, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0144686x06004934.

3. Infurna, Gerstorf, and Lachman, "Midlife in the 2020s: Opportunities and Challenges", 470-485; Margie E. Lachman, "Mind the Gap in the Middle: A Call to Study Midlife," *Research in Human Development* 12, no. 3-4 (2015): 327-334, https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2015.1068048.

4. David M. Almeida et al., "The Speedometer of Life," *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, (2011), 191-206, https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-380882-0.00012-7.

Midlife military members also experience these midlife opportunities and challenges, yet the context of military service likely influences the transition period in particular ways. For example, military members benefit from years of physical fitness training and have improved cardiovascular health but may suffer from increased musculoskeletal deterioration and injuries due to wear and tear. Exposure to chronic and acute stress due to repeated combat deployments and family separations may also serve as another influential contextual factor related to midlife transitions in the military. Furthermore, retirement often occurs in midlife for military members and has its own, unique implications for health and wellbeing.

Midlife Development Perspectives

Exploring human development is truly a multi-disciplinary endeavor. The medical field focuses on physiological changes associated with health and aging. Psychologists examine individual cognitive, affective, and social aspects of development. Sociologists explore broader trends of development across groups and demographics. These and other fields provide valuable insights on development, with combined efforts becoming increasingly prevalent. One example of this multi-disciplinary approach to midlife development is the Midlife in the United States Study (MIDUS) that continues to demonstrate the importance of research in this pivotal period of human development.[5] Another example is found in *The U.S. Army War College Guide to Executive Health and Fitness* published in 2000.[6]

Two primary approaches to studying and describing development across the life cycle have emerged: "Life Span" and "Life Course" perspectives.[7] It is useful for leaders to understand and take both theories into consideration when addressing the midlife time period.

David L. Featherman, a leading developmental scientist, when describing the life span perspective, suggests that "developmental changes in human behavior occur from conception to death, and arise from a matrix of biological, psychological, social, historical, and evolutionary influences and from their timing across the lives of individuals."[8] The life span theory

5. Orville Gilbert Brim, Carol D. Ryff, and Ronald C. Kessler, "The MIDUS National Survey: An Overview," in *How Healthy Army We Are?: A National Study of Well-being at Midlife*, eds. O. G. Brim, C. D. Ryff, & R. C. Kessler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-34.

6. William F. Barko and Mark A. Vaitkus, eds., *The US Army War College Guide to Executive Health and Fitness*, (Carlisle: Army War College Press, 2000).

7. Karl Ulrich Mayer, "The Sociology of the Life Course and Lifespan Psychology: Diverging or Converging Pathways?" In *Understanding Human Development*, eds. U. M. Staudinger & U. Lindenberger (Boston: Springer, 2003), 463-481.

8. David L. Featherman, "The Life-span Perspective in Social Science Research," in *Life-span Behavior and Development*, vol. 5 (New York: Academic, 1983), 8.

recognizes development is an individual process varying by person across domains and occasions and is fundamentally multi-disciplinary.[9] The life span theory is flexible and takes events, physiology, and individual experiences into consideration when evaluating development.[10] This approach "takes note of the diversity of development" while simultaneously exploring similarities as well.[11]

The life span approach is useful to military midlifers for anticipating developmental challenges associated with aging such as menopause, decreased testosterone, and sarcopenia, among others. While there are individual differences in the timing of these changes, most individuals experience them in the midlife period.[12] Knowledge gained through life span studies about these physical changes and associated compensatory strategies can help military midlifers negotiate them successfully. Aspects of health behaviors including nutrition, exercise, and sleep feature prominently in most strategies proven conducive to increased health and wellbeing in midlife.

The "life course" theory, on the other hand, takes a slightly different approach and applies a more "orderly fashion" to aging. Life course reflects a "sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time."[13] Like the life span perspective, the life course approach examines human development across all ages, but it examines human lives through assumed roles, social structures, and broader historical context. The social roles might include child, student, spouse, employee, caregiver, widow, and retiree. These stages are largely associated with certain age cohorts. Importantly, by examining these roles as shared developmental events in the associated cohort, researchers can compare experiences that may change based on other events (e.g., conflict, economic changes, geographic separation, etc.).

The life course perspective is also useful for military members navigating through midlife. Role transitions in midlife might include marriage, divorce, empty-nesting, and elderly care. Each of those transitions can have a substantial impact on wellbeing. Yet the military cohort might encounter other transitions unique to the military context. For example, transitions

9. Avron Spiro III, "The Relevance of a Lifespan Developmental Approach to Health," in *Handbook of Health Psychology and Aging*, eds. C. M. Aldwin, C. L. Park, & A. Spiro III, (New York: Guilford, 2007), 75-96.

10. Spiro III, 76.

11. Spiro III, 78.

12. Julie A. Winterich and Debra Umberson, "How Women Experience Menopause: The Importance of Social Context," *Journal of Women & Aging* 11, no. 4 (1999): 57-73, https://doi.org/10.1300/j074v11n04_05.

13. Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder Jr., "Life Course Research: Development of a Field," in Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, eds. Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder Jr., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998) 22.

associated with deployments, consistent changes of station, promotions, and midlife retirements also provide important considerations for military members attempting to negotiate midlife successfully.

This book addresses both approaches. Chapters on physiology, nutrition, sleep, and fitness emphasize aspects of health and wellbeing generally approached through the life span perspective. However, much of this chapter and aspects of others regarding resilience and work-family interaction better align with the life course approach in identifying midlife challenges, opportunities, and best practices.

Stress, Health, and Wellbeing

As mentioned previously, the first indications of age-related physical and cognitive decline often appear during midlife. Yet the timing and severity of decline varies considerably across individuals with numerous factors contributing to the differences. Similarly, perceptions of wellbeing vary widely across individuals and cohorts—differences driven by countless factors. Research suggests that stress plays a significant role in health, aging, and wellbeing and deserves mention in this chapter on midlife development.[14] It deserves particular attention because individuals can modulate their exposure, reactivity, and resistance to stress with implications for their midlife health and wellbeing.

Despite decades of research, a common definition of stress remains elusive.[15] In this chapter, we focus on psychological stress and use the definition by Lazarus and Folkman: "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being."[16] This appraisal mobilizes physiological systems to deal with the stressor. For example, the body will respond to stressors by releasing adrenaline and cortisol and increasing the availability of glucose for

14. M. Martin, M. Grunendahl, and P. Martin, "Age Differences in Stress, Social Resources, and Well-Being in Middle and Older Age," *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 56, no. 4 (January 2001), 214-222, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/56.4.p214.; J. R. Piazza et al., "Frontiers in the Use of Biomarkers of Health in Research on Stress and Aging," *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 65B, no. 5 (2010): 513-525, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbq049.

15. J.M. Koolhaas et al., "Stress Revisited: A Critical Evaluation of the Stress Concept," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 35, no. 5 (2011): 1291-1301, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2011.02.003.

16. R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (New York: Springer, 1984), 19.

quick action.[17] This process is largely adaptive, providing ready resources for individuals to deal with threats in the short term. However, chronic activation of stress response systems can also have negative effects over time with implications for psychological and physical health.[18] Research suggests that chronic exposure to stress increases the likelihood of cardiovascular disease, autoimmune diseases, and mental health challenges, among others.[19] Indeed, stress has been called the "speedometer of life," suggesting that it influences the rate of aging and quality of life.[20]

Environmental conditions, events, or daily hassles may be perceived as stressors that strain individuals through a process of resource marshaling, effort, and recovery (see Chapter 7). Significant life events (e.g., combat exposure, death of significant other, retirement) are closely associated with stress. However, research suggests that chronic stress (consistent difficulty with life challenges; e.g., caring for an aging parent) and even daily hassles (minor challenges experienced in daily life e.g., household repair, interpersonal disagreement) significantly impact health and wellbeing as well. [21]

Individuals in midlife encounter all these forms of stressors, yet frequency, severity, and consequences vary considerably. Researchers suggest that exposure and reactivity play considerable roles in determining the effects of stress. Exposure captures the likelihood an individual experiences a stressor and is often driven by life circumstances.[22] Due to increased control and autonomy, military members in midlife often have agency to reduce exposure to stressors like role ambiguity, financial instability, and daily hassles. However, this cohort will likely face other stressors associated with midlife (e.g., role overload, caring for ailing others, occupational transitions) and military service (e.g., combat deployments, retirement) that instigate the stress process and affect health and wellbeing. The second factor, reactivity, regards the emotional or physical reaction to the stressor.[23] Individuals react to stressors differently, and those more reactive are at greater risk

17. Margaret E. Kemeny, "The Psychobiology of Stress," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 4 (2003): 124-129, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.01246.

18. Bruce S. McEwen, "Stress, Adaptation, and Disease: Allostasis and Allostatic Load," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 840, no. 1 (1998): 33-44, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1998.tb09546.x.

19. Kemeny, "The Psychobiology of Stress:" 124-129.

20. Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 274.

21. B. Wheaton, "The Nature of Chronic Stress," in *Coping with Chronic Stress*, ed. B. H. Gottlieb (New York: Plenum Press, 1997) 43–73; David M. Almeida, "Resilience and Vulnerability to Daily Stressors Assessed via Diary Methods," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, no. 2 (2005): 64-68, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00336.x.

22. Wheaton, "The Nature of Chronic Stress."

23. Almeida, "Resilience and Vulnerability to Daily Stressors Assessed via Diary Methods."

to incur negative health and wellbeing outcomes.[24] Fortunately, successful military midlifers likely learned and practice strategies to effectively deal with disparate stressful situations. Unfortunately, however, chronic exposure to stressors and age-related declines in physiological resilience to stressors reduce the effectiveness of reactive strategies. Taken together, military leaders in midlife likely have the autonomy and experience to mitigate the effects of certain stressors yet face increasing vulnerability to them due to reducing physiological defenses.

Negotiating the stress process is closely related to health and wellbeing in midlife. It is interdependent with aging, physical and mental health, nutrition, and sleep. Focusing on these aspects of health combined with implementing strategies building resilience, work-family balance, and mindfulness, among others will improve the likelihood of a productive and rewarding midlife period.

Role Transitions

Beyond physiological changes (e.g., menopause, sarcopenia), midlife development is often characterized by role transitions associated with the period. Raising and launching children, caring for elderly parents, and assuming professional positions of increased responsibility represent a sample of commonly experienced role transitions in midlife. The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of role transitions in understanding the complex relationship among life events, physical health, and wellbeing and the implications for development and identity. We suggest that individuals have agency in influencing the trajectories of their health and wellbeing by thoughtfully and deliberately preparing for and navigating midlife role and identity transitions.

Roles can be appreciated as "the shared expectations attached to social positions in society" such as parent, child, or leader.[25] The role of a senior leader, for example, has expectations such as long work hours, critical and systems thinking, risk management, and effective communication. As individuals assume these various roles, their identities often evolve as well. Identity reflects the meanings one attaches to their roles in society, groups to which they belong, and how they perceive themselves.[26] Identities can drive behavior, conflict with competing identities (e.g., work-family identities), and influence perceptions of wellbeing. Individuals assuming new

24. J. T. Cacioppo, (1998). "Somatic Responses to Psychological Stress: The Reactivity Hypothesis," in *Advances in Psychological Science, Vol. 2. Biological and Cognitive Aspects,* eds. M. Sabourin, F. Craik, & M. Robert (Montreal: Erlbaum, 1998), 87-112.

25. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe, "Identity Theory," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, eds. J. DeLamater and A. Ward (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 38.

26. Stets and Serpe, 31-60

roles either by choice (e.g., changing jobs) or by circumstance (e.g., caring for ailing parent) embark on a process of exploring expectations of the role and verifying their congruity with the role through external feedback and personal judgement. Perceptions of incongruity with a desired identity can motivate behavior. For example, Ibarra, Snook, and Ramo conceptualize leader development as identity change.[27] They suggest that individuals transitioning into new leadership roles compare their current identity regarding role-related competencies with those of the new position. This comparison can motivate behavior in a positive fashion. Incongruities are addressed through development, experimental behavior, feedback, and incorporation. Ultimately, a successful transition results in an evolved identity that aligns with the new role's demands. Yet incongruity with role expectations can also have negative implications. For example, Eagly and Karau explore how gender and work role expectations often conflict for women in leadership positions.[28] They suggest that socially shared beliefs of appropriate feminine characteristics conflict with the more agentic, masculine characteristics associated with the leadership role. This conflict results in prejudice toward female leaders that can lead to increased harassment and turnover. [29]

Eagly and Karau's treatment of role congruity explores one type of role stressor—role conflict. Role conflict describes situations where expectations of roles compete and conflict (e.g., work-family conflict). These challenging conditions are associated with decreased satisfaction, increased tension, and increased propensity to quit.[30] Role overload is a second type of role stressor and describes situations where expectations of the role exceed resources and capabilities. One can imagine any or all of the demands faced by midlifers to feel overwhelming and burdensome at times. Unfortunately, role overload can lead to negative outcomes such as burnout.[31] Finally, role ambiguity, uncertainty about role expectations, is a role stressor asso-

27. Herminia Ibarra, Scott Snook, and Laura Guillen Ramo, "Identity-based Leader Development," in *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, eds. N. Nohria and R. Khurana (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2010) 657-678.

28. Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders.," *Psychological Review* 109, no. 3 (2002): 573-598, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.109.3.573.

29. Jennifer Berdahl, "The Sexual Harassment of Uppity Women," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, no. 2 (2007): 425–437.; Carra S. Sims, Fritz Drasgow, and Louise F. Fitzgerald, "The Effects of Sexual Harassment on Turnover in the Military: Time-Dependent Modeling.," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 90, no. 6 (2005): 1141-1152, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1141.

30. Daniel Örtqvist and Joakim Wincent, "Prominent Consequences of Role Stress: A Meta-Analytic Review.," *International Journal of Stress Management* 13, no. 4 (2006): 399-422, https://doi.org/10.1037/1072-5245.13.4.399.

31. Gene M. Alarcon, "A Meta-Analysis of Burnout with Job Demands, Resources, and Attitudes," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 79, no. 2 (2011): 549-562, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2011.03.007.

ciated with lower satisfaction and increased tension.[32] As midlifers transition out of old roles and into new ones, threats to identity and exposure to stressors are likely inevitable. Preparing for these transitions improves the chances of effectively navigating midlife.

Exemplar Military Midlife Roles

The Senior Leader. Students arrive at the U.S. Army War College (AWC) at a professional inflection point, poised to enter the strategic environment where responsibilities increase, time horizons expand, and complexity is endemic. A shared belief at the AWC is that the demands associated with senior leader roles are substantively different from those at the direct and organizational levels. While the knowledge, skills, and behaviors learned at lower levels often remain relevant and useful, new and evolved competencies gain prominence at the highest levels of organizations and institutions.

Foundational to an effective transition to senior leadership is self-awareness.[33] Individuals who understand their capabilities, preferences, and limitations can better appreciate their developmental needs to succeed in a senior leader role. An accurate comparison between current and aspirational selves reveals gaps for developmental opportunities. The gaps serve as motivation for change—driving developmental efforts and feedback seeking behaviors. A deliberate developmental approach during the transition to senior leadership likely reduces role ambiguity and overload and increases the probability of success.

Not all leaders experience a successful transition to senior leader roles. Many senior positions are exceptionally demanding and pose a risk of role overload and burnout. The demands of the position may cause conflict with other roles—especially with family roles (see Chapter 8). Some leaders will not make the transition effectively and may not be selected for desired, senior positions. Professional disappointments such as these can have negative effects on identity and influence relationships with others. For example, researchers found that candidates rejected for promotion perceived those who were selected as less likable and experienced feelings of envy.[34] Experiencing envy is proven to negatively affect "attention and

32. Ortqvist and Wincent, "Prominent Consequences of Role Stress: A meta-analytic review," 399-422.

33. Michael P. Hosie, "Senior Leader Development," in *Strategic Leadership: Primer for senior leaders, 4th Ed.*, eds T. Galvin and D. Watson, (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2018): 83-92.

34. John Schaubroeck and Simon SK Lam, "Comparing Lots Before and After: Promotion Rejectees' Invidious Reactions to Promotees," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 94, no. 1 (2004): 33-47.

memory systems and deplete limited self-regulatory resources available for acts of volition."[35]

Making a productive transition to senior leadership positions likely requires an assessment and comparison of current and expected role competencies paired with an associated developmental strategy. Due to potential role overload and conflict at the senior levels, these leaders likely must renegotiate relationships and expectations with others, especially with their family, and determine their capacity to engage in their various roles. Despite challenges, this transition can also be extremely rewarding and offer opportunities for autonomy, institutional impact, and increased influence on successive generations.

The Care-Giver. While not universal, many in the military experience transitions in care-giving roles during midlife. Their children progress through adolescence and leave home for college or other opportunities. Their parents enter old age and potentially suffer illness and pass away. Relationships with partners evolve and responsibilities shift. While care-giving roles present opportunities for meaningful and rewarding impact on others, they can also create conditions for role conflict and overload and pose challenges for midlife development.

Research finds that 15% of middle-aged Americans care directly for their parents, and up to ten million Americans assist their parents from long distance.[36] Military midlifers are no different and often care for their aging parents while simultaneously caring for their own children. The phenomenon of caring for multiple generations was labeled as "sandwich care" by Dorothy Miller in 1981 as Baby Boomers were beginning to enter midlife. She asserted "adult children of the elderly, who are 'sandwiched' between their aging parents and their own maturing children, are subjected to a great deal of stress. As the major resource and support for the elderly, midlifers have a need for services that are only beginning to be met by the helping professions."[37] Making the care-giving role even more demanding, the American Association of Retired People (AARP) reported in 2020 that 24% of caregivers care for more than one adult (compound care).[38]

35. Sarah E. Hill, Danielle DelPriore, and Phillip W. Vaughan, "The Cognitive Consequences of Envy: Attention, Memory, and Self-regulatory Depletion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 101*, no. 4 (2011): 653–666, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21639650/.

36. Alana M. Boyczuk and Paula C. Fletcher, "The Ebbs and Flows: Stresses of Sandwich Generation Caregivers," *Journal of Adult Development* 23, no. 1 (June 2015): 51-61, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-015-9221-6.

37. Dorothy A. Miller, "The 'Sandwich' Generation: Adult Children of the Aging," *Social Work* 26, no. 5, (September 1981), 419-423.

38. Amanda Singleton, "Tips for Caregiving for Multiple People at the Same Time," AARP (AARP, August 29, 2022), https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/life-balance/info-2020/caring-for-multiple-people.html.

The impact of sandwich or compound care has been widely studied. Researchers warn of the negative impacts of compound care on sleep, relationship quality, work-family conflict and psychological distress.[39] Most military members are distanced from their extended families, further exacerbating those effects. Long distance monitoring increases the logistical complexity of caring for extended family and can add guilt and financial strain to the list of negative impacts of sandwich care. This added anguish of parental loss can be especially hard from a distance or when feelings of guilt are also present.[40] However, sandwich care is not inherently negative. The American Board of Family Practice noted sandwich care often improved family relationships, and the desire to care for elderly parents was frequently listed as a goal of many middle-aged people.[41]

Like many transitions in midlife, common changes in familial roles can be both rewarding and challenging. On one hand, parents of children successfully launching into young adulthood may experience feelings of accomplishment and pride. On the other hand, adjusting to an "empty-nest" may demand the adoption of new roles and even changes to one's identity. Those in midlife may develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with aging parents as the care-giving roles switch. Yet role overload and threats to identity are potential stumbling blocks. Developing a robust support network, preparing for health contingencies, and prioritizing self-care are each important elements of an effective strategy for midlifers negotiating care-giving transitions.

The Midlife Retiree. Research suggests that retirement is not universally experienced as a negative transition.[42] Indeed, retirement is often seen as an opportunity to explore new opportunities or focus more intently on others. In some cases, retirement can be a relief from job-related stressors. Yet, the military is a profession in which most of its personnel retire in midlife—necessitating career and identity changes at a life stage earlier than many other occupations. Fortunately, there are many resources available to retiring military members (and their spouses) that can help increase the likelihood of a successful transition.

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39. Infurna, Gerstorf and Lachman, "Midlife in the 2020s: Opportunities and Challenges," 476.

40. Margie E. Lachman, "Development in Midlife," *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, no. 1 (January 2004): 305-331, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141521.

41. American Board of Family Practice, *Perspectives on Middle Age: The Vintage Years* (Princeton, NJ: New World Decisions, 1990).

42. Raymond Bossé, Carolyn M. Aldwin, Michael R. Levenson, and Kathryn Workman-Daniels, "How Stressful Is Retirement? Findings From the Normative Aging Study," *Journal of Gerontology* 46, no. 1 (1991): P9–P14, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronj/46.1.P9.

The perception that military members struggle with successfully navigating retirement is largely a myth. Many believe that military members may be so attached to their work roles and their service that they would struggle with the identity change brought on by retirement. However, in a study by Mary Anne Taylor and colleagues, military retiree attachment to their military occupation did not predict a decline in life satisfaction.[43] This corresponds with other studies that show that the relationship between work-role attachment and retirement transitions are mixed.[44] Others may suspect that combat exposure might negatively influence wellbeing later in life, but this, too, seems unsupported. In one study, Lee and colleagues found that those exposed to combat were more likely to report positive wellbeing in later life than those who had not.[45] In another study of 2961 veterans, no relationship between combat exposure and subjective wellbeing was found.[46]

Yet challenges to successful transitions do exist.[47] Worrying about finances, future jobs, and health represent some of the concerns people have over retiring.[48] For example, researchers found that the extent to which military retirees met their financial, employment, and social goals in retirement affected perceptions of life satisfaction.[49] Specifically, those who had negative work experiences post-military retirement or were unhappy with their retirement location were particularly unsatisfied with life.

Fortunately, the nation invests heavily in retirement and transition programs for military members. Robust packages including retirement pay and medical care, among other benefits, provide a safety net and help make the transition less daunting for military retirees. To assist with the process, the Department of Defense (DoD) created Transition Assistance

43. Mary Anne Taylor and Lynn McFarlane Shore, "Predictors of Planned Retirement Age: An Application of Beehr's Model," *Psychology and Aging* 10, no. 1 (1995): 76.

44. Gary A. Adams, Julie Prescher, Terry A. Beehr, and Lawrence Lepisto, "Applying Work-role Attachment Theory to Retirement Decision-making." *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 54, no. 2 (2002): 125-137.

45. Hyunyup Lee et al., "Does Combat Exposure Affect Well-Being in Later Life? The VA Normative Aging Study," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 9, no. 6 (2017): 672-678, https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000282.

46. Mai See Yang and Jeffrey A. Burr, "Combat Exposure, Social Relationships, and Subjective Well-Being Among Middle-Aged and Older Veterans," *Aging & Mental Health* 20, no. 6 (2015): 637-646, https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2015.1033679.

47. Steven Pflanz and Scott Sonnek, "Work Stress in the Military: Prevalence, Causes, and Relationship to Emotional Health," *Military Medicine* 167, no. 11 (January 2002): 877-882, https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/167.11.877.

48. Melissa Knoll, "Behavioral and Psychological Aspects of the Retirement Decision," *Social Security Bulletin* 71, no. 4 (2011). https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v71n4/v71n4p15.html

49. Mary Anne Taylor et al., "Occupational Attachment and Met Expectations as Predictors of Retirement Adjustment of Naval Officers," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 8 (2007): 1697-1725, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2007.00234.x.

Programs (TAP) to help prepare military members for life beyond their service.[50] These programs explore benefits programs, build opportunities through education, training, and networking, and assist with bureaucratic challenges. An example of a DoD transition program is DoD Skillbridge. [51] This program provides opportunities for retiring military members to focus on gaining civilian employment while still on active duty. Within 180 days of retirement, transitioning service members can join participating civilian organizations on an internship/fellowship basis to gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities valued by certain companies and industries. This is just a small sample of the many programs available to military members transitioning out of service. Preparation, support networks, and positive attitudes will go a long way in making the transition successful.

Pivoting toward improved health and wellbeing

We contend that midlife, while challenging, can and should be a dynamic and rewarding period of life for military members and their families. It is a period full of impactful work roles where authority and wisdom gained through experience combine to increase autonomy and influence. It is a period of evolving familial and social roles, offering opportunities for highly meaningful relationships. It is also a period of increased focus on generativity where individuals can invest in subsequent generations in consequential and rewarding ways.

Yet health and wellbeing in midlife and beyond are threatened by the onset of age-related decline, the accumulation of stress, and difficulty in navigating midlife role transitions. This book offers insight into best practices for nurturing health and wellbeing and increasing the probability of positive and meaningful development in midlife.

Hughes, Sipos, and Duque explore midlife physiology in Chapter 2. They present a succinct overview of physiological changes experienced in midlife, providing a foundational understanding of physical processes and age-related challenges. Fortunately, they also offer sound advice for delaying secondary aging, giving insight into best practices for maintaining the health and vigor required for optimal performance in work and social roles.

Building off foundational understanding of midlife physiology, the next section of the book contains chapters on familiar pillars of holistic health:

50. Office of the Chief of Staff, US Army, *Army Regulation 600-81: Soldier for Life- Transition Assistance Program*. (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, May 17, 2016).

51. "DOD Skillbridge," DOD SkillBridge, accessed September 22, 2022, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/.

physical fitness, nutrition, sleep, and mindfulness. In Chapter 3, Krammer, Nindl, and Sipos begin with an approach to physical fitness that is firmly influenced by midlife physiological changes and offer proven strategies to both delay and compensate for age-related changes. This chapter should resonate with leaders accustomed to the military's emphasis on physical fitness by offering a promising vision for health and vigor in midlife and beyond.

Emphasizing the centrality of nutrition for health and wellbeing, Olsen, Hosie, and Volpe offer informed, actionable recommendations to improve consumption habits in Chapter 4. The authors leveraged surprisingly negative health data from a cohort of military leaders to highlight the urgency associated with changing nutrition patterns. Readers will especially value their direct treatment of micro-nutrients, vitamins, and supplements—providing clarity to often misrepresented topics.

The next chapter by Hoffman, Sipos, and Capaldi ties health, aging, performance, and even intellectual overmatch to sleep, making a powerful case for leaders to improve their sleep patterns. The authors share data reflecting a sleep crisis in the military where only a small percentage reach appropriate daily thresholds. They follow this up with a rich description of sleep's role in health and wellbeing and complement it with practical, actionable advice to improve sleep hygiene.

The military has robust health services and its commitment to physical fitness is well known. However, the Army's efforts to optimize cognitive performance is less mature and widespread. In Chapter 6, Alessio, Hosie, and Jha offer mindfulness as a proven way to improve cognition, reduce emotional reactivity, and build wellness. The authors explicitly acknowledge the demands of senior leadership in building the case for mindfulness. They highlight the complexity, data saturation, and high stakes of leadership at the highest levels and describe the cognitive abilities needed to respond effectively to such demands. Then, they share mindfulness strategies, supported by empirical evidence, to build improved capacities. Overcoming skepticism to mindfulness is discussed and the chapter offers ways for leaders to both begin an individual practice and incorporate mindfulness into their organizations.

Following these chapters on healthful strategies, Adler, Britt, and Dwyer explore the concept of resilience in Chapter 7. Importantly, their well-grounded approach to the topic is focused on the unique environment of senior leaders and offers proven strategies to improve individual and team resilience. Best practices in recovery and coping are shared, providing useful tools for the military midlifer. However, their deft treatment of emotion regulation might best benefit individuals seeking to navigate chal-

lenging life events, daily hassles, and complex social roles simultaneously. Finally, the authors emphasize the importance of humility when grappling with inevitable challenges and disappoints in midlife. This refreshing approach acknowledges that even proven strategies associated with building and maintaining resilience require empathy and consistent adaptation for effectiveness.

Finally, the book concludes with a chapter by Steadman, Britt, and Hammer on work-life balance. At the Army War College, many students scoff at the idea of "balance," believing that the overwhelming demands of senior leadership roles deny an equal effort toward familial roles. The authors reframe this proposition through an occupational health lens and emphasize the active management of personal resources to meet multiple role expectations in ways that support health and wellbeing. Their access to a current cohort of emerging senior leaders makes this chapter especially timely and relevant.

Taken together, the chapters in this book serve multiple objectives. First, each of the chapters are set in the midlife context where aging and role transitions interact with the unique military context. Second, the chapters all emphasize the importance of action—leaders must attend to their health and wellbeing in midlife for themselves and those for whom they care. Third, each of the topics are firmly grounded in science, avoiding the unsupported fads and trends popular in the health and wellbeing space. Finally, the authors all worked to provide best practices in their domains to make a positive difference in this important and valued cohort. Collectively, the hope is that aspiring senior leaders focus more deliberately on their health and wellbeing and maximize the rich opportunities of midlife.

Key Takeaways

- Midlife is a dynamic developmental period requiring deliberate and informed action to maximize its amazing potential to enrich health and wellness.
- Midlife is characterized by emerging physical and cognitive effects of aging and social role transitions offering both opportunities and challenges.
- Negotiating the stress process is closely related to health and wellbeing in midlife.
- Role changes (e.g., elder-care, promotion, retirement) in midlife influence wellness trajectories. The interaction among life events, health, and subjective wellbeing can be positively negotiated through thoughtful and proactive identity transitions.

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