

# Midlife as a Couple: Supporting Each Other Through Life's Transitions

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## Introduction

Life is full of change, so it shouldn't be surprising when midlife brings another season of transitions. This stage of life can be especially demanding because physical, emotional, relational, and life changes often occur at the same time. That can be a lot to navigate! Fortunately, challenges can also become opportunities for growth. One of the benefits of being in a committed relationship is having someone beside you to navigate these changes and grow along the way.

## Understanding Midlife Changes

Midlife changes can take many forms, including physical changes such as menopause or erectile dysfunction. Hormonal changes during perimenopause and menopause can lead to symptoms such as hot flashes, trouble sleeping, brain fog, and changes in mood (National Institute on Aging, 2021). Erectile dysfunction also becomes more common with age (SingleCare, 2020). Other changes may involve shifts in priorities, identity, or life roles, such as children leaving home, increased caregiving responsibilities, or retirement. These experiences often require adjustments to familiar routines and roles, adding to the demands of midlife.

### How Midlife Can Affect Relationships

With so many changes occurring at once, it is understandable that stress can spill over into relationships, making couples more likely to experience impatience or misunderstandings. Physical changes may also affect

intimacy and sexual relationships, requiring conversations about changing needs, comfort levels, and desires. Partners may experience midlife differently, and differing expectations can create tension if they are not discussed openly.

Some couples may also realize their relationship received less attention during busy years of raising a family, building careers, or managing other responsibilities. But it doesn't have to stay that way. By communicating, adapting, and supporting one another, couples can strengthen their relationship through this stage of life.

## Strengthening Connection During Midlife

Consider the following ways to support each other and grow closer to your partner in this, sometimes stressful, period of life.

1. **Communicate and learn together.** As you navigate changes and stressors, taking time to explain what each of you is experiencing can help your partner better understand and support you. One way to do this is by talking regularly with your partner. This could include setting aside time for a couple meeting to discuss concerns, needs, plans, and other aspects of your relationship, or having more informal conversations when distractions are minimal (Brigham Young University, 2020). During these conversations, using I-statements (e.g. I feel overwhelmed with overwhelmed when our evenings are so busy because I miss spending time together) can help each person express feelings and concerns without placing blame on their partner, while active listening can help each partner feel heard and understood. These conversations also provide opportunities to learn more about what your partner is experiencing, including challenges you may not be experiencing yourself. Greater understanding can help couples respond to one another with increased empathy and support.
1. **Be intentional.** Another way to strengthen your relationship is by continuing to nurture your friendship with each other. Regularly spending time together and engaging in activities that allow you to interact, connect, and share meaningful experiences can help you continue to grow together. Trying new or engaging activities beyond everyday routines, such as watching television, can create additional opportunities

for connection (Harvard Health, 2020). These activities might include biking, hiking, learning something new together, or building physical and sexual intimacy.

When it comes to sexual intimacy, physical changes during midlife may create new challenges or require new conversations between partners. Take time to listen with empathy and seek to understand your partner's experiences and perspective. Open communication can help couples adapt together as needs, abilities, and preferences change.

1. **Focus on teamwork.** Anytime we go through something hard, having someone alongside us can make an obstacle feel more bearable and manageable. As we focus on communication, support, and cooperation we are also building teamwork in relationships (Guerra, 2022). While you are both individuals working through potentially different stressors and changes, approaching midlife as a team can help each partner receive the support they need.

There will be some days when your partner will need more support than you do, and some days when you may need more support from them. It's not about being completely equal at every moment in roles and responsibilities but rather recognizing that you are each going to have hard days and maintaining a commitment to show up for each other when those days come.

## Conclusion

No matter whether the changes are physical, emotional, relational, or related to family dynamics, it is important to remember that transitions are a natural part of life. Yes, there may be bumps along the road that you and your partner did not anticipate but consider what you have already accomplished together. Challenges can either drive couples apart or provide opportunities to grow closer. Rather than turning away from each other, use this season as an opportunity to turn toward one another and provide understanding, communication, and support each partner needs. Change can be hard, but when partners are intentional about being there for one another through it, these transitions can become opportunities to strengthen their relationship and move into the next stage of life together.

## References

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