

Three Resources To Supercharge Your Midlife Transitions



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Just a few months ago, I was sitting on a plane next to a young woman. We talked the entire flight and had a deep, wide-ranging conversation about her life. She was very successful professionally but uncertain whether she had chosen a career that would make her happy long term. She shared her misgivings, and then she told me, "It's too late to change my career now. I'm 26 years old."

My heart sank. How could she feel this resigned and discouraged when she had her whole life ahead of her? It got me thinking. Transition takes place throughout our lives. What's special about transition in midlife?

Midlife is not simply an age. It is a stage. Often it's a time when one feels less bound by "supposed to" and the pull to make something more out of life is strong. The promise of something more replaces the fear of change and transition begins. Unlike my 26-year-old seatmate, at midlife one has a broader perspective on life's journey. Experiences have provided proof that it's possible to let go or start over successfully. For me, three factors, abundantly available at midlife, made transition more than possible; midlife transition became liberating:

- The Power of What's True
- The Courage to Choose
- The Embrace of Purpose

This article suggests ways you can draw from the bank of midlife experiences the resources you require to make this major transition successful.

The Power of What's True

"All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them."¹

If there's one thing that we have at mid-life, it's an abundance of life experience. Good things and bad things – we've been touched by both. Midlife is the time when we are really able to synthesize our experiences and understand them in a "big picture" way. We possess

- Wisdom: I know what I know and I know what I don't know
- Self-knowledge: I know who I am
- Confidence: I trust myself and my abilities
- Flexibility: I change course based on new information
- Resilience: I bounce back after adversity

¹ Galileo Galilei

Three Resources to Supercharge Your Midlife Transition

Life experience does have a dark side, though. From our life experiences we construct “stories” of who we are and how our world works. Our stories, based on lessons learned in childhood, keep us safe. Stories can also prevent us from reaching our full potential. Stories hold us back.

For example, imagine that when you were young your parents came home after a difficult day and yelled at you to pick up your toys. It was a big deal and you were very frightened. With the reasoning of a child, you created a story about the incident. The story read, “When things are messy I am not loved.” Result: you are the neatest person on the planet. There’s nothing inherently bad about keeping things tidy. Unless

- You experience terrible stress when things get messy;
- You get angry with family members when they make a mess causing friction and resentment;
- You get angry with yourself, or feel hopeless and depressed, because things aren’t picked up;
- You feel that others in your life don’t value you because they haven’t adopted your standards;
- Your tidiness standards are part of your work life, too, and reduce your productivity or create workplace friction
- You prioritize cleaning up over activities that could add pleasure and value to your life.

You get the idea. The Power of What’s True comes in looking at this childhood story and giving up the idea that everything has to be tidy for you to be loved. Give it up because it is untrue.

Are you held back by your stories? How would you know? Certain emotions offer big clues. Are you feeling angry? Resentful? Disrespected? Hopeless? Is there a judging voice in your head reminding you that “This always happens,” or “You’re not good enough?” That’s your storyteller feeding you an old tale.

While these untrue stories don’t go away, they can be debunked. Then you can respond in new ways. The ability to break out of old stories and the behavioral patterns they reinforce is important for an effective midlife transition.

Answer these questions to reconnect with what’s really true and free yourself from patterns triggered by old stories. You may want to write down your answers. If you do, don’t be overly concerned with the wording. Focus on the behaviors and emotions involved.

- What is an example of an old story you have about yourself?
Pick a story that starts with words like “I can’t,” or “I must,” or “No one ever.”

Three Resources to Supercharge Your Midlife Transition

- Where did that story originate?
Describe an incident from childhood that resulted in the creation of the story.
- How do you respond to the story?
Consider the emotions you experience as you tell the story. What behaviors are associated with the story: describe what you have to do to make things right.
- How is your response a problem for you or others in your life?
Describe some specific incidents. Are there decisions you've regretted but made because you "must?" Are there opportunities you've passed up because you "can't?"
- This is the big question: How true is your story, really?
Focus on the facts of the event that underlies your story. Remove any meaning or interpretation you have added on to the facts. In the example above, the facts would be
 - Mom and Dad yelled at me to pick up my toys
- Using the Power of What's True, how can you respond differently?
In our example, what becomes possible when being tidy is no longer associated with winning love and approval. What's possible for you when your story is reduced to unadorned facts?

The Courage to Choose

"A life lived of choice is a life of conscious action."²

Let's admit it: midlife is complicated. Gone are the days when all your possessions fit in the back of a hatchback. Transitions take circumstances into consideration. And at midlife, there are more considerations than ever before. Personal issues, such as health concerns, emerge. Life events that seemed far off, like children's tuition payments or funding your retirement, come to the forefront. There might be a long list of people who depend on you as a caregiver. There are bills to pay and commitments to keep. Does it ever feel as if you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders? How can that weight be lighter?

First, accept that the burden you carry is your own creation. You add to and subtract from it daily. Even if you don't really experience it as your creation, pretend for a minute that this is true. If you created it, then it is completely within your control. You lighten the burden of circumstance with The Courage to Choose. The freedom to choose is extraordinarily powerful. Your burden is your own

² Neale Donald Walsch

Three Resources to Supercharge Your Midlife Transition

creation and it is your choice to carry it. Looking at it this way places the power in your hands. You get to choose how to exercise your power. Here's how:

- Make a list of the people, things and circumstances that comprise your burden. Don't judge yourself in the process; just get it all written down.
- Next, choose to simplify your circumstances. Do the things in your life burden you? What can you get rid of? Small things count.³ Hold a garage sale, sell the things that you don't want on eBay, donate them to a thrift shop or use Freecycle⁴.

Similarly, are you burdened by activities and commitments? What are you doing that you can choose to stop doing? Watch less television; say "no" to that next request for your time, put down your smartphone, get off Facebook, become less busy.

- Cross items off your list

You will be amazed at how much lighter you feel when you increase the time you have for yourself and reduce the stuff cluttering your mind and your physical surroundings.

- Look at what's left. This is no longer the list of things you have to do. It is the list of things you are choosing to do. Rewrite the list of items you've chosen using this format:

I choose _____ because _____.

For example,

I choose to drive mom to chemotherapy on Wednesdays because I love her and want to be there for her during her treatment.

The Courage to Choose is a choice to feel free. Instead of feeling burdened you feel powerful and in control.

Finally, some circumstances in your life are absolutely wonderful. Make a list of those and be grateful for them. For extra credit, explore how grateful you are for all the people, things and circumstances you chose in the previous exercise. Every aspect of life improves when viewed through the lens of gratitude.

The Embrace of Purpose

³ Big things count even more, like getting rid of the 30-something child living in your basement.

⁴ Freecycle is a grassroots non-profit organization dedicated to reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills. Check it out at www.freecycle.org



Three Resources to Supercharge Your Midlife Transition

“To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.”⁵

We feel differently about life, work and family in midlife than we do in our 20’s and 30’s. That’s perfectly normal. Psychological research identifies midlife as a time when we focus on doing things that matter for others and making our lives count.⁶ Little wonder that this viewpoint comes to the forefront during midlife transitions.

It shows up in career decisions in a variety of ways. Work-Life balance may become a higher priority than opportunities for promotion. Alignment of work with personal values might become an important consideration. Opportunities to mentor and advise others may outweigh opportunities to exercise power. Opportunities to exercise power may be seen in the context of how others benefit rather than solely in light of personal rewards.

If you’re looking at work and life differently than you used to, congratulations. You’re a normal middle-aged grown up! Are you unhappy at the job you used to love? Is the “same old, same old” discouraging? Do alternatives look exciting but scary? Are you unsure where to begin? Try these exercises.

- Get clear about your character strengths and express them. These are the personality characteristics that are fundamental to which you are. Character strengths come out in everything you do, personally and professionally. Unlike many learned skills, your strengths are inherent, natural and effortless. In fact, if you weren't able to express these strengths in your life and work you would probably be unhappy. The VIA (Values in Action) Institute on Character offers a free, online, scientifically validated survey of character strengths.⁷ Devoting 20 minutes to taking a strength assessment or survey is a great way to gain clarity or validate what you believe.
 - Take the VIA Survey and review your results, especially your top ranked “signature strengths.”
 - Look at how you get to use your signature strengths on a day-to-day basis.
 - Ask yourself: Is something missing?
 - Brainstorm ways that you can express missing signature strengths in your work or personal life.
- Chart *success* for yourself.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 3

⁶ Erik Erikson and stages of psychosocial development:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s_stages_of_psychosocial_development

⁷ The VIA Institute on Character Strengths Survey can be found at <http://www.viacharacter.org>



Three Resources to Supercharge Your Midlife Transition

Now that you know your character strengths, come up with what life outcomes really matters to you. Consider your life as a whole – without the artificial divider between career goals and personal goals. This is the perfect time to stop defining your success in terms of what others will think. You may be surprised to discover that you have put a lot of energy into things you don't value at the expense of what you really want⁸. This is the opportunity to make a midlife course adjustment.

- Take a moment to reflect on what you have in your life today.
 - Describe in writing what makes you successful
 - Take note of whether your evaluation is outside-in: based on how you believe your life looks to others

- Take a moment to reflect on what you really want
 - Imagine it's 5 years in the future and you are looking back at your life. Quickly, without taking time to think and without worrying about the specific words you use, describe your success.
 - Read what you've written. Note where your character strengths show up in your description of your successful life.
 - If your signature strengths are not expressed in your definition of success, try the exercise again.

Midlife is a time when fulfillment, life balance and personal achievement come together. Your transition is an opportunity to be your true self, choose courageously and embrace a life of purpose. The poets say that with age, the best is yet to come. So do researchers who study the effect of age on happiness.⁹ Launch yourself into this transition knowing who you are and what you want. Your success at this stage will see you through the coming decades.

⁸ For a shift in perspective, read Bronnie Ware's ezine article, "Top Five Regrets of the Dying."
<http://ezinearticles.com/?Top-Five-Regrets-of-the-Dying&id=3268063>

⁹ The U Bend of Life: <http://www.economist.com/node/17722567>

