

**COMING INTO HER OWN: THE  
SUCCESSFUL MID-LIFE TRANSITION FOR  
WOMEN**

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## ABSTRACT

Six women between the ages of 49 and 68 participated in a study investigating the meaning of mid-life changes for women now satisfied with their lives. The research question was: *How do Women Make a Successful Mid-life Transition?* The purpose was to learn more about how women come through the process of mid-life changes feeling good about themselves. Participants were chosen who were articulate and who identified themselves as having gone through significant changes in mid-life and who now felt satisfied with their lives.

The methodology involved phenomenological interviews that generated narrative accounts. A narrative methodology was chosen in order to investigate a process that evolved over time, because the flow of change and temporal patterns lent themselves to storied accounts. Phenomenological interviews allowed participants to articulate their experience and meaning of the mid-life transition in their own voices.

The study produced six unique and detailed accounts of what mid-life change was like and what factors were helpful in making the transition meaningful for these women. A comparison of individual accounts produced a common pattern of transition that indicated a progression from an initial triggering event that launches a woman into a state of confusion reflecting a growing dissatisfaction with the course of her life. Within this pattern five themes emerged: *Sense of Chaos, Profound Sense of Loss, Letting Go, Making Sense of the Past* and *The Reorganisation of the Self*.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

"The significant fact about women, in fiction as in life, is that after youth and childbearing are past, they have no plot, there is no story to be told about them."

(Carol Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*)

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The notion of a mid-life transition is a fairly recent one. Indeed, one of the legacies of Freud was a view of adulthood as a predictable outcome of the first six years of life, from which a pattern of instincts, libidinal drives and repressions were to determine the entire experience of adult life. It has only been in the last thirty years or so that researchers have begun to pay attention to the adult life cycle as if it had a life of its own, quite different than childhood or adolescence. Hence the emergence of adult stage theories, by such authors as Vaillant, Levinson, Gould, and Erikson (Gallos, 1989). As the baby boomers age, and the average life expectancy continues to increase, there is also a new research interest in the middle years of life and the mid-life transition, which Levinson (1978) described as the transition from youth to adulthood. Based on his research with men, according to Levinson, at mid-life, a person is faced with his mortality and reaches a turning point in which he begins to ask what he has done with his life.

In order to begin a discussion about the idea of mid-life as perhaps a particular kind of transition, it's important to set the context by saying something about the nature of transitions. Many theorists interested in adult development believe that mid-life represents one transition in a life cycle characterised by

several such periods of change and stability (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bridges, 1980; 1991; Schlossberg, 1984, 1981). The assumption is that psychic growth does not end with adolescence. As people move through their lives, they are continually experiencing changes, some of them expected, such as marriage, or the birth of children, and some of them not, such as a sudden job loss, or unexpected death of a spouse (Schlossberg, 1981).

Transitions have been defined by various researchers. Brammer and Abrego (1981) say transitions are events in which a person experiences discontinuity and must develop new assumptions and behavioural responses. They involve new personal awareness, and may have positive as well as negative effects. Bridges (1980) defines transition as a natural process marked by disorientation and reorientation that denotes a turning point on the path of growth. He is explicit in his theoretical assumptions about transitions being part of our lifelong adult development. Age/stage theorists such as Levinson, describe transitions as turning points between two periods of greater stability, that are tied to chronological age. Schlossberg(1981), who has written extensively about transitions, attempts to move away from the rigid boundaries linking transitions to particular ages. According to Schlossberg (1981, 1984), transitions must be seen in a broad context. They include events (e.g. birth of a child) as well as non-events (e.g. the inability to have children) which result in a change in a person's assumptions about self and the world. These may (but do not always) precipitate changes in behaviour, relationships, roles, and routines within settings such as work, family and self. She suggests that transitions ought to be understood within a broad environmental context that includes biological, social, psychological,



sociological and even historical influences. Schlossberg emphasises that a transition is not so much a matter of change, but a person's perception of change, and so, for her, a transition is only a transition if the person experiencing it defines it as such.

Although researchers vary in their descriptions of the process involved in making a transition, there seem to be common themes, such as the experience of loss, or the need to grieve or let go of hopes, dreams or expectations at the beginning of the transition. They may lead to deterioration. Successful resolution may lead to integration or even a sense of renewal (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1984; 1981). Bridges asserts that all transitions begin with an ending, which involves loss and letting go of 'old things' both internally and externally. One of his assumptions is that transitions have three phases—endings, a neutral zone, and a beginning, or what he calls a sense of renewal. This sense of transformation cannot be achieved without experiencing a period of loss and confusion, in what Bridges calls the neutral zone. Bridges believes that some people resist grieving and attempt to fast forward to the renewal stage, which results in a back and forward cycling through stages. Other theorists emphasise a more predictable and identifiable process during which a person moves through discrete stages. For instance, Brammer and Abrego's (1981) 7-stage model adapted from Hopson and Adams, describe a particular movement from the initial shock, to denial, depression, and grieving. As a person works through each phase of loss or letting go, they begin to reach a stage of exploration, meaning-making and finally, integration. Schlossberg (1981), who draws on the work of Hopson, emphasises the process of how a person adapts (or copes) *over time*. She

acknowledges that there are phases of assimilation. A person begins by being totally preoccupied by the transition (the *pervasive* view of herself as being a widow, for example) and moves to a state where she or he is less defined by it, having integrated it into the self as one dimension of their life and identity (e.g. sees herself as *having been* a widow).

Despite attempts to define and organise a predictable sequence of transitional phases, the researchers cited above also emphasise that people cope differently with transitions and that transitions are, in the end, both individual and complex. These researchers also suggest that we need more research to understand the transition process, and how people are able to move through these changes. This may be particularly true for mid-life transitions for women, about which little is known.

There are lots of data to suggest that mid-life is a time of biological, social and psychological changes, such as menopause (Greed, 1992; Neugarten, 1968; O'Leary Cobb, 1993; Sheehy, 1992), the so-called empty nest syndrome (Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975; Neugarten, 1968; Rubin, 1979) and apparent changes around self-concept and identity (Apter, 1995; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Livson, 1976; Rubin, 1979). Levinson (1978) and Gould (1972) suggest that mid-life is a distinct phase during which a person begins to face his or her mortality, reviews the meaning of life, and attempts to form a new life structure. Based on biographical interviews with forty middle-aged men, Levinson (1978) found that, at about forty years of age, a man reaches a turning point, in which he begins to face his mortality and ask what he has done with his life. Gould's cross-sectional survey of 16 to 60-year-olds, involving both 14

outpatients and 500 people not in therapy, suggests the mid-life period can be just as tumultuous and exciting as adolescence. According to Gould, time makes existentialists of us all, and we must decide which things really have meaning for us. Schlossberg (1978), in a synthesis of research by Erikson (1968), Neugarten (1968), and Lowenthal, Thurhner and Chiriboga (1975), describes mid-life as a time when one is compelled to take stock of one's life due to changes in life structure (e.g. children leaving home). Life goals and dreams are reassessed, and there is a realisation that some or all of them will not come to fruition. There is a shift in time perspective, whereby we become aware of the time left to live, versus the time from birth.

Initially, little attention was paid to women's experience of the mid-life transition, and male theorists in particular tended to generalise their findings to women (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978). According to Gallos (1989), this tendency to generalise is a reflection of a male model of adult development based on beliefs that maturity requires separation from others. In this model, paid employment is central to identity formation. Such an androcentric focus can distort our views of women and their lives, implying that women's development can be understood as a logical derivative from explorations of the male experience. For instance, Levinson concluded that a preoccupation with death results in a mid-life crisis for the majority (in the case of his study, 80%) of men. However, some of the studies on women find that while there does appear to be a period of turmoil and confusion for women during mid-life, they are not preoccupied with death or a crisis, as studies of male subjects have suggested (Rubin, 1979; Lowenthal, Thurhner & Chiriboga, 1975).

Similarly, while studies of men point to triggers such as changes in work, signs of physical ageing, and/or generational gaps in ageing (Erikson, 1968; Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1978), some earlier studies that focus on women's experience tend to tie the mid-life transition to the family life cycle. For instance, in her study of 160 women between the ages of 35 and 54 who gave up careers in order to raise a family, Rubin (1979) describes mid-life as a stage when certain social tasks are complete such as childbearing. This makes way for time for women to give meaning to the rest of their lives. Changes such as menopause, the so-called "empty-nest" syndrome, divorce, or the death or illness of an ageing parent, may force a woman to begin to ask who she is, and what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

Although the notion of a mid-life transition has been widely studied, there is a range of opinions as to the nature of that change, especially as it relates to women. Specific research conducted by and with women indicates some gender differences related to the mid-life transition in terms of chronological age (Neugarten, 1968; Rubin, 1979; Schlossberg, 1984; 1978; Sheehy, 1995), what triggers this shift (Apter, 1995; Rubin, 1979), and what issues are salient to this process (Apter, 1995; Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Dowling, 1996; Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975; Rubin, 1979). A recent wave of feminist theorists also suggest that women's lives are multi-faceted and involve a range of choices, roles and relationships which could make for a more diverse, perhaps less predictable journey in the mid-life passage (Apter, 1995; Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Bateson, 1989; Gallos, 1989; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Jordan, 1993; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1985).

These data suggest it is important to look at the biological, social and psychological changes that may shape a woman's life and have implications for how a woman experiences herself. For instance, we know that women go through a biological change in mid-life approximately between age 45 and 55 that signals an end to fertility; namely, menopause. The literature suggests that menopause may or may not be significant in any woman's experience of mid-life (Neugarten, 1968; Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975). For some, it may be distressing (Apter, 1995; Sheehy, 1992; Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975), or a signal that underscores the loss of youth (Dowling, 1996). Others have declared a renewed energy and zest for life after menopause (Sheehy, 1992; Greer, 1992).

Some feminist authors have taken issue with what they describe as a traditional view that menopause is a time of major turmoil and distress for women, because this perspective is based on the assumption that women's psychological health and sense of self is defined by their ability to reproduce (Greer, 1992; Rostosky & Brown Travis, 1990; Sheehy, 1992). Indeed, a lot of research about women in mid-life tends to talk about this period of life within a context of loss, whether it is loss of identity (Josselson, 1987; Livson, 1976; Rubin, 1979), loss of children and the parenting role (Gilbert, 1993; Neugarten, 1968; Lowenthal, 1975; Rubin, 1979), loss of physical beauty (Dowling, 1996); loss of fertility (Neugarten, 1968, O'Leary Cobb, 1993; Sheehy, 1992), loss of status through divorce (Anderson & Stewart, 1994), and the illness or death of a spouse or parents which appear to create extra burdens for mid-life women (Gee & Kimball, 1987). Some of the newer research, however, suggests that losses notwithstanding, mid-life may in fact be a time of renewed hope or promise for

women (Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996; Fodor & Franks, 1990; Helson & McCabe, 1994).

While there is considerable literature on the mid-life transition for men (Erikson, 1968; Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1978), we still don't know a lot about the mid-life transition for women, and whether it is a different experience. What we know about the experience of mid-life for contemporary women seems to be based on a small number of qualitative studies that hint at some of the complexities of meaning-making some women seem to experience during this period of their lives (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996; Helson & Wink, 1994; Levinson, 1996; Sheehy, 1992). We know little about the process and meaning of mid-life transition for women now *satisfied* with their lives. Indeed, some contemporary feminist authors have called for more qualitative research to move away from defining the process of change in terms of losses tied to women's reproductive roles (Gergen, 1990). Gergen's call is for more qualitative research that reflects the diversity and complexity of women's lives, a call for "new narratives that are multiple and non-linear" (p. 471): "new narratives for telling life stories that do not foretell decline and desperation for middle and old age" (p. 487). Feminist writer Noble (1994) is concerned with creating new role models for women in order to help them define themselves in more positive and meaningful ways. Bateson (1989), who wrote in depth about five women's lives, suggests that one reason biographies of women are so popular is a current hunger for information about women's lives. What is needed is more research that reflects the depth and therefore the diversity of women's experiences of mid-life transition. What is missing in the quantitative literature is a sense of

how women experience and negotiate this transition, or how they make sense of the changes they experience.

There are several implications that have a bearing on this current research proposal. Although we don't know for sure whether a transition occurs, that it happens for all women and that it is significant, it is likely that for some women at least, the bio/psycho/social changes in mid-life may be fertile ground for a developmental transition. Although some studies suggest women do go through a transition in mid-life (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996; Gilbert, 1993; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1992; Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975; Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989; Roberts & Newton, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Sheehy, 1995; Wink, 1996), we don't know much about the nature of it, or how the process unfolds.

What is needed is more research that can shed some light on the mid-life period for women who do experience a change or transition. In particular, it is important to learn more about how women come through this process feeling good about themselves and their lives. What I looked at is the experience of mid-life transition for women who have successfully negotiated this process and are satisfied with themselves and their lives. This seems particularly salient at this time, given that women today are living longer, are better educated, and have, on average, 20 years of living after menopause (McGoldrick, 1989).

One purpose of this study, then, is to add to the limited available literature on transitions for women, through a qualitative study. This approach to research about the mid-life transition for women highlights meaning-making and

individual experience, which seems to be missing in much of the literature about women in mid-life.

In the proposed study, the research question is: *How do women make a successful mid-life transition?* What I examined is the experience of mid-life transition with particular emphasis on how a women comes to feel satisfied with herself and her life. I listened to stories of women who identify themselves as having gone through a significant mid-life change, and now feel satisfied with their lives. I am interested in finding out how they were able to negotiate the ups and downs of their experience in a meaningful way, in order to help other women do the same.

One purpose of this study is to begin to articulate what the experience of transition is like, which may serve as a guide for other women at mid-life who lack role models of women who are constructing satisfying lives. As a counsellor working with female clients, one thing I hope will be gained from this study is a better understanding of the process of successful mid-life transition, in order to help women who experience such a transition move through it successfully. Although qualitative research does not claim to be generalisable to the population (Osborne, 1990), one of its values is that it often resonates with our own experience. For women who are searching for guidance and/or role models, this research could provide them with learning that is personally meaningful.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the limited literature on this subject reveals a recent shift away from quantitative studies that appear to view mid-life change in terms of menopause and the 'empty nest syndrome' (Lowenthal, Thurhnere & Chiriboga, 1975; Neugarten, 1968) to a recognition that women's lives are diverse and multi-faceted. Earlier research tended to either compare women's experiences at mid-life to men's (Gould, 1978; Lowenthal, Thurhner & Chiriboga, 1975), or generalise men's experience to others (Erikson, 1968; Jung, 1933; Levinson, 1978), rather than acknowledging that the developmental pattern for women may be different and therefore worthy of study in and of itself (Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1983; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1986). As such, what little newer research there is appears to begin with the assumption that women's experiences of mid-life changes ought to be studied from a less confining stance than the traditional view that seems to define women in terms of their reproductive roles.

Levinson (1978) in his landmark study of 40 men, defines mid-life as a transition from youth to adulthood. He and other stage theorists believe mid-life, like other eras in the adult life cycle, is a distinct phase that begins and ends at a well-defined average age, characterised by biological, social and psychological changes. In his more recent study of 45 women (1996), Levinson set out to learn about the life course and development of women from the late teens to the mid-forties. Although his stated purpose was not to do a comparative study of men

and women, one of his conclusions is that women's life cycles, like men's lives, evolve through an age-linked sequence of eras. In order to do an in-depth exploration of women's lives, Levinson used a method that involved intensive biographical interviews with 45 women between the ages of 35 to 45 divided into 3 equal samples: 1) *Homemakers* 2) *Women with Corporate-Financial Careers*, and 3) *Women With Academic Careers*.

Levinson's (1996) framework of life cycle development focuses on changes in important relationships that form the components of the life structure, a viewpoint that is reflected in his study findings. For instance, all the women in the *Homemakers* sample experienced significant changes in their relationships with their husbands, parents and offspring. A key event that seemed to trigger these changes was the 'empty nest syndrome' of children leaving home. All but one in the *Homemakers* sample experienced a sense of loss due to children leaving home. Many of the women in this sample experienced feelings of disappointment and disillusionment, a feeling of being cheated because of an unfulfilled bargain that their sacrifice of youth and care-giving, which came at great personal cost, would be rewarded by care and love. Faced with the empty nest, many women began to scrutinise their primary relationships with spouses, only to find their marriages were dry and devoid of connection. Many of the women in this sample expressed a desire to be more care-free, showing less interest in doing domestic duties, and wanting the right to make their own choices and pursue their own interests. However, there was also a realisation of feeling trapped economically, because their earlier choice of a traditional lifestyle meant

these women had not developed a career or source of income outside the marriage.

Most of the *Homemakers*, more so than others in the total sample, went through a rock bottom period in their marriage, finding the relationship intolerable, yet divorce seemed an option that was not economically viable. What these women desired was a more genuinely mutual relationship, and a more individuated self. There was a struggle to be more true to themselves rather than to continue to give themselves up to external authority. Finally, many of the *Homemakers* experienced multiple, often conflicting feelings around motherhood during the mid-life transition. There was a sense of relief due to being freed from maternal functions, combined with grief, rage, a sense of abandonment, and guilt. Consistent with his view that change is played out through important relationships, Levinson's (1996) interviews with the *Homemakers* reflect a desire to re-negotiate the marriage relationship. For instance, most of the women wanted more intimacy and decision-making and a desire to be freed from domestic activities. Three of the *Homemakers* did divorce and entered the workforce.

As homemaking placed a less central role in these women's lives, work became more primary, as well as achieving a sense of recognition based on a desire to become a more legitimate, valued member of the senior generation. There are strong themes around the process of individuation, whereby women in mid-life are less ready to accept the constraints they had previously tolerated. As they began to shed old illusions about themselves and their relationships, they began to explore new possibilities. What is not clear in Levinson's (1996) study is how these women were able to work through the pain of this process toward

new possibilities, perhaps because most of them were still in the process of change. In summing up the themes of mid-life change in the *Homemakers* sample, Levinson suggests that these women entered adulthood with the expectation that they would continue to live as “unemployed homemakers within the traditional marriage enterprise” (p. 197). Levinson spent some time describing the sense of frustration and disillusionment for this particular sample of women, because many found that, while work had become a more central component of their lives, their prospects for becoming senior members in the workplace were limited due to lack of experience or education. It seems to me that Levinson may be making an assumption here, which is that work is a defining aspect of identity for women in mid-life. What seems to be missing (apart from a list of questions used in the research interviews) is an indication of other possibilities women seek in mid-life that could be just as meaningful as paid work, such as spirituality or volunteer work. What is not clear in his study is who is defining what is central and meaningful in a woman’s life during mid-life—is it the women in the sample, or is it Levinson, through his assumptions and questions.

While all of the women in Levinson’s (1996) study apparently went through the same sequence of periods in life structure development, they were divided into *Homemakers* and *Career* samples because it was felt that the women with corporate or academic careers have much in common that differentiates them from those who work in the home. For instance, on the issue of what Levinson calls *gender splitting* in society and self, *Homemakers* tend to try to maintain an internalised feminine *Traditional Homemaker Figure*, while *Career* women work harder to overcome the feminine/masculine split by forming a more developed

internal *Anti-Traditional Figure* who plays an increasingly important part in their lives. One result, according to Levinson, is that *Career Women* live with more internal conflicts around *gender splitting*, which begins in early adulthood, with attempts to modify the traditional pattern. At mid-life, he observed, "A recurrent theme in their lives was the intense conflict between the internal Traditional Homemaker Figure and the internal Anti-Traditional Figure"(p.415). However, *Career Women* also seem to be able to develop more alternatives to what Levinson calls the *Traditional Marriage Enterprise*, perhaps because their lives do involve more choices outside a traditional marriage.

While the *Homemakers* appear to be struggling with the myth of "living happily ever after", the *Career* women seem to feel disillusionment and disappointment upon realising the myth of "having it all" was just that, a myth. These women held the hope that if they worked hard enough they could have career, family and leisure by age 40. The unspoken promise also held that as the children got older, the *Career Women's* lives would become more stable and satisfying. What seemed to happen instead was that, at age 40, the disparity between myth and reality became apparent as a woman entered the developmental changes of the mid-life transition—reappraisal and modification of the life structure. There was a realisation that she was not, as she had thought, a Superwoman, but only a juggler who was not getting satisfaction from these three areas of her life- motherhood, marriage and career. A central question of these women, most of whom went through a severe developmental crisis, was 'What do I want for myself?' The changes seemed to be played out in one arena of her life, not necessarily all. For instance, faced with marital problems, a woman would

ask 'What do I truly want with this man or anyone else? What place do I give marriage and love in my life?' Many in the sample felt that much of their lives, as they presently existed, were coming to a drastic end, yet they didn't see the basis for making a new start. Whatever the event was that was changing—love, marriage, motherhood or career—it seemed to raise deeper and broader questions about themselves and their lives, according to Levinson (1996). There was the added frustration of wanting to embrace the idea of taking their place as a senior member of society, but not knowing what that is or looks like, because there doesn't seem to be such a place of respect for ageing women in our culture.

For *Career Women* in Levinson's study (1996), the nature of change was played out in a variety of areas in their lives, reflecting the diversity of lifestyles. For instance, some of the women sought changes in the workplace, not so much in what they did, but in their relationships to their work, which seemed to indicate a shift from seeking external recognition to wanting more satisfaction from work. Levinson stated that a full half of the Career sample found their work demeaning, empty and damaging to the self. In their early 40's, nearly every woman went through a major reappraisal of their career, questioning the myth of the *Successful Woman*. One factor seemed to be a recognition that the glass ceiling was only one barrier that would stop them from doing what they really wanted. In fact, most of the women in the *Career* sample felt they hadn't achieved the senior ranks of their profession by age 40. For instance, 4 out of 13 had achieved positions of senior rank, 2 were tenured professors but had not yet done scholarly work, 5 were at the junior or middle levels but working hard to advance further, and 2 had left their corporate careers, in order to give first priority to their families while they

reconsider their career plans. Of the 6 women in business, only 1 had reached a high level, 2 were at the middle level and unlikely to go higher. The general feeling seemed to be that sexist obstacles were generally stronger in the senior ranks than below, either from male colleagues who resented them, or from the plague of destructive stereotypical images such as the female tyrant, or the uncaring mother.

Of the women who felt they achieved success in the workplace, there was a sense that they were trapped by their success. For example, 45 year old Megan, who, at 39, became director of an academic science lab, felt she was at a turning point. Although she felt a sense of accomplishment, she felt she had no time or sense of balance in her life. She longed for more leisure time, and more intimacy in her relationships.

There also appeared to be a tendency to modify relationships with offspring during mid-life for the *Career Women*, for whom the emptying of the nest was beginning in mid-life (Levinson, 1996). Unlike the *Homemakers*, whose children were leaving, most of the *Career Women* still had at least one child in high school or college. It appears the changes in relationships as offspring moved into adulthood was easier for *Career Woman* than for *Homemakers*, possibly because motherhood did not represent their life's investment, and also because many of the women were able to participate actively in their children's career development. For these women, there was less of a sense of feeling resentment because of sacrificing themselves to motherhood, only to be abandoned by ungrateful children. For *Career Women* with children, the central question they

asked themselves at mid-life was “What do I want to give and receive from my children?” as well as “What kind of new relationships will I seek with them?”

The themes of feeling trapped, lack of intimacy and wanting to live more for themselves that were apparent in the *Homemakers* sample, were also played out in the *Career Women's* experience of changing expectations of their marriages (Levinson, 1996). As the mid-life transition began, 6 of the 13 women were married. Most wanted more love and especially a more equal partnership in terms of household management and decisions. At the time of interviewing, none of the women had attained what they considered an ideal marriage; 5 experienced moderate to severe marital problems. As for the 7 single women in the sample, there was an appreciation of what they had sacrificed for their independence, yet were still guarded about marriage. For instance, Michele's anger was stirred up by a job promotion she felt she deserved, yet was about to be given to her lover. This anger over perceived discrimination was aggravated by a sense that she had also given up the idea of having a family in order to have a career, sacrifices men don't have to make. Like the *Homemakers*, what these women sought was more intimacy in personal relationships, yet for them it meant being less driven by work.

One of the limitations of Levinson's (1996) study is that his “primary focus has been on the era of early adulthood, which begins with the Early Adult Transition, occurring between the ages of 17 and 22” (p.413). Another limitation is that the women in this study were between the ages of 40 and 45 and were thus being interviewed at the time they were actually experiencing mid-life changes. As such, they do not have the perspective of someone who has enough distance



from the transition to begin to make sense of it as a whole process, or even to come to some sense of resolution around the issues that seem to be burning for them, such as wanting more intimacy, more time for self, etc.

Mercer, Nichols and Doyle (1989) identified an age-40 transition that was a striking departure from men's developmental patterns in their qualitative study of 80 Caucasian women over the age of 60. Fifty-eight percent of the women in this sample of urban and rural women did identify a transition at mid-life. Whereas Levinson (1978) reported a transitional phase from age 36 to 40 in which men focused on becoming more senior and expert in their positions, Mercer et al. found that, for many women, the mid-life transition "reflected their *first* opportunity to reformulate their life's goals and dreams to begin a new career or other focus." (p.71) The authors suggest this may be because women made (or were pushed into) early choices during their launching into adulthood, such as marriage and/or motherhood, that reflected societal pressures and family needs. Relationships with husbands and children had priority, so that these women ended up working at some of the early adult tasks during their 30s that men had worked on during their early 20s (e.g. establishing a life dream, finding a mentor to support the life dream, establishing an occupation, and finding a life mate and establishing a family). Although the theme of this *Age-40 Liberating Transition* was similar to the task identified by Levinson in his study of men, namely of *Becoming One's Own Person*, for many of the women in Mercer et al.'s study, it was a matter of becoming one's own woman at a *novice level* in roles other than wife and mother. A case in point is Sarah Sanger, who graduated from college at age 21, married at age 23, and had two daughters by age 26. Noting that

everything she did during that period centred around what her husband did, such as his job transfers, or taking up part-time employment, Sarah, at age 36 decided to go back to college in order to do something for herself and her own personal development. Thus, while Sarah's mid-life internal motivation paralleled that of Levinson's male subjects, for her, the period of full-time employment after college signified an initial thrust toward becoming a person apart from wife or mother.

One noteworthy finding was that mothers appeared to experience more change during mid-life than non-mothers. Although originally the sample was comprised entirely of mothers, because the authors (falsely, it turned out) felt that motherhood was a defining experience in terms of female identity, Mercer et al. (1989) subsequently added non-mothers to the sample, such that the total sample was evenly divided between mothers and non-mothers, with a further subgroup of women who never married. Among their findings were that although both non-mothers and mothers reported major transitions during the age-40 transition such as moves, career changes, marriages, graduate education, widowhood, divorce, illnesses and parental deaths, the age-40 period was more perceived as being more viable and liberating for mothers (64% vs. 47%), who had married earlier and begun childbearing at an earlier age. The authors suggest one reason is that mothers may simply experience more changes because there are child-related transitions in addition to other events. However, there is also a strong suggestion that, at mid-life, non-mothers "perhaps did not feel the internal motivation to change their life structures as strongly as the mothers, who had married much earlier and given their own personal development little priority before this time."

(p. 185) Non-mothers, for whom marriage, graduate education and career change were predominant transitions during the ages of 36 to 40 years, were also becoming more expert and senior in their career roles, which is more analogous to Levinson's (1978) developmental trajectory of men.

The results of Mercer et al.'s (1989) study reflect two of their assumptions. One is their view that transitions, which involve feelings of loss and discontinuity, have developmental potential. The other is that women experience different developmental outcomes than men, partly because of environmental/social and cultural influences, and because of the increased variability of life choices open to women. A general observation in this study was that most of the women did experience increasing individuation (defined as a clearer boundary between self and environment) and autonomy (defined as the ability to function independently as well as interdependently) as they moved through adulthood. Indeed, it appears that some women in Mercer et al.'s study only achieved a separate identity from parents (especially mothers) and/or husbands, in their 50's, 60s and even their 70s, which suggests that for some women, mid-life can be a significant period. For these women the loss of a husband or a mother, while devastating, was also a freeing experience, that allowed them to finally connect with a deeper sense of themselves. This finding is also a reflection of the authors' belief that a women's path toward identity achievement differs from Erikson's (1968) view that identity requires separation from parents at adolescence. Women's lifelong attachment to their mothers and to other significant people appears to contribute to a less predictable and more varied and complex path of development in adulthood, which, for some women, results in identity achievement during mid-life.

There are a number of limitations of Mercer et al.'s (1989) study, from the perspective of the focus of the present study. For one, the purpose of Mercer et al.'s (1989) research was to begin to define transitions throughout a woman's life, with a particular emphasis on launching into early adulthood. As well, Mercer et al. did not focus on how women made transitions *successfully*, because they were more interested in knowing whether or not women made any developmental transitions in their lives at all, similar to those documented by studies of men's lives. What is lacking is a richness of detail in terms of how these women negotiated transitions, and in particular, the mid-life transition.

The theme of identity struggle at mid-life that Mercer et al.'s (1989) research touches on, is explored in more detail in other literature. For instance, some studies about women in mid-life suggest that the excitement, turmoil or confusion they are experiencing relates to a struggle for identity, a sense of finding out 'who I am' and 'how I can come into my own power', or how to finally connect with a deeper sense of purpose or authenticity (Gould, 1972; Helson & Wink, 1992; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Livson, 1976; Rubin, 1979).

In her study of 160 Caucasian women between the ages of 35 to 54, Rubin (1979) described midlife as a stage when certain tasks tied to the family life cycle are finished (for example, child-rearing), which makes way for time to give meaning to the rest of their lives. Biological, social and psychological changes such as menopause, the so-called "empty nest" syndrome, or the death or illness of an ageing parent, may force a woman to begin to ask who she is, and what she wants to do with the rest of her life. Based on her findings, Rubin indicated this sometimes appears to involve anger and disillusionment at having dutifully played

out a social script of what it is to be female in our culture, which may have meant sacrificing certain dreams or aspirations in order to take care of others as a mother or wife or daughter. At mid-life, changes and losses around these social roles (e.g. empty nest, divorce) or physical changes of ageing or menopause that remind a woman she is losing a part of herself that society values in women (i.e. ability to reproduce and physical attraction), can force a woman to feel depressed or angry. Many of the women in Rubin's study, all of whom had been married and had given up at least 10 years of paid work in order to raise children, felt angry and disillusioned at being sold a myth that they'd be rescued by marriage. Rubin reported that some women, in particular middle-class women who had denied the assertive, masterful side of themselves and who had not gone out in the world to test themselves, experienced rage. Rubin notes that, for some women, this rage, which is socially unacceptable for women to express, was internalised to reappear as depression.

Despite feelings of relief that the responsibilities of children were gone, there were deeper feelings of loss and dissatisfaction due to loss of purpose and identity. Some women in Rubin's (1979) study who put their careers on hold to have children felt disillusioned at having bought into the myth of being taken care of, yet they also felt depressed and bored because they had gone from having too much to do in child-rearing, to not enough to do. However, this seemed to have been tempered by a compelling need to find out who they are and what they would like to do with the rest of their life. This apparent need to explore all aspects of the self at mid-life led to a lot of emotional conflict for participants of Rubin's study:

--the conflict around identity, around the need suddenly to develop new and unknown parts of self; the conflict around their changing role, around the difficulty of seeing the road ahead, of not knowing how much will change, how much will remain the same. There's anger, too—anger at the violation of the expectations of a lifetime (p.150).

The experience of an identity struggle appeared to be worse for middle-class women than lower class women in Rubin's (1979) research, because the former did not have to work, and so defined themselves entirely through the parenting role, while mothers who were forced to work out of economic necessity seemed to have acquired skills and confidence. In other words, a middle-class woman who does not have to work outside the home has never tested herself or confronted inner doubts, which means she "never gets to push the boundaries of who she is, never gets to experience herself as an autonomous, independent, competent adult capable of making her way in the world outside the home" (p. 167).

Rubin (1979) points out that, for the women in her study, the midlife period was characterised more by role losses than gains. While this process of shedding roles created turmoil and self-doubt, these women were not necessarily debilitated by it. According to Rubin:

Indeed, they cope quite well with whatever feelings of failure, disappointment, and loss they may suffer, for alongside these feelings there exists another powerful set of needs and emotions that helps to neutralise the pain—the longing for freedom, the wish to find and claim

a well-defined and differentiated self, and the relief that, finally, this may be possible (p.23).

According to Rubin (1979), only one of her research participants suffered so-called traditional symptoms of complete debilitation due to the emptying nest. Instead, Rubin documented feelings of “sad joyfulness” watching the children leave; sadness because the end of the parenting role signalled the end of one aspect of life meaning, combined with the enthusiasm of looking forward to being free to pursue one’s own growth. Based on her findings, Rubin suggests that the mediating issues for traditional women around the “empty nest” may be taking stock of how they feel they did as a parent, how they feel about their adult kids, how they prepared for the transition, and how they feel about their marriages.

One of the refreshing insights we get from Rubin’s (1979) study, which seemed to be one of the earliest qualitative studies that focused on women’s *experience* of the mid-life transition, was an indication of social and cultural influences that may shape women’s self-concepts. For instance, Rubin noted that many of the women in her study who were entering mid-life were doing so in the context of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970’s. Such a cohort found themselves caught between a traditional upbringing and a world that was beginning to open up to more non-traditional choices and opportunities for women, at a time when the ageing population was experiencing unprecedented good health and longevity. This can create confusion and anxiety for a woman whose husband expects her to take care of his ailing mother at home, at a time when she is encouraged to break free of the “empty nest” and find her life’s work.

This also points to one limitation of Rubin's study, because it is cohort specific to traditional Caucasian women entering mid-life during the 1970's. For instance, many of the women who experienced a sense of conflict between an outdated past and an uncertain future said that, if they had it to do over again, they would have taken more time to establish a career, or furthered their education. Would these be the same concerns of mid-life women today? What we get from this research is a thematic tendency toward despair and hope during the mid-life transition for these women. However, Rubin's study was limited to the immediate experience of change while the women were in the middle of transition. We do not have a sense of how these women were able to make sense of these experiences retrospectively, which the proposed study intends to do.

While Rubin's (1979) study suggests that some women, in particular those who chose full-time mothering over career, may experience anger or depression because they feel "ripped off" from having to suppress assertive and masterful parts of themselves, this does not necessarily mean that all traditional women will feel depressed at mid-life. For instance, Livson's (1976) longitudinal study of 24 women she categorised in the study as either *traditional* or *independent*, indicates that those whose personalities fit their expected roles continue to lead a stable, nurturing and sociable life, with no evidence of a mid-life crisis. Livson examined two groups of women studied since adolescence who were judged psychologically healthy at age fifty. The focus of her study was on the challenges of social and biological change in the years between forty and fifty, as they relate to housewives and mothers experiencing the departure of children and menopause. *Independents*, described as ambitious, unconventional and



intellectual, felt constricted at age forty but recovered by fifty. *Traditionals*, whose personalities fit conventional feminine roles, showed steady and smooth movement into middle age. Livson indicates that the *traditional* group, who are feminine and more comfortable in the conventional female roles,

...are able to live out valued aspects of themselves. They continue to find satisfaction in relationships with others, even as their children grow older and leave home. They are not motivated to change themselves or their situations at middle age (p. 112).

However, the *independent* women, who are ambitious, sceptical and do not fit conventional definitions of femininity, find that age forty period difficult. They are, says Livson (1976) low in psychological health, depressed and irritable:

By age forty, when children are moving into adolescence, they seem to be confronted with an identity crisis. Having suppressed their intellectual competence and grown away from child-care skills, they seem unable for a time to connect with a workable identity (p.113).

By age fifty, both groups achieve psychological health, a self "consistent with earlier characterological positions, but more differentiated and complex" (p. 112). Livson (1976) suggests that one reason the *independents* are able to do this after their identity crisis is that disengaging from motherhood stimulates them to revive their more goal-oriented, assertive skills. She concludes that a key factor in whether or not the mid-life passage is smooth or not is the fit between a woman's life style and personality. In other words, women who are less conventionally feminine pay a price when they internalise traditional role expectations. However, a mediating factor, according to Livson is an apparent tendency toward less

distinctive sex roles in the second half of life. She concludes that "Middle age can loosen the boundaries of one's life style and call forth suppressed parts of the self" (p.114).

One caution about some of this earlier research that focuses on changes in mothering and reproduction is that it may be cohort-specific. For instance, many of the women in Rubin's (1979) and Livson's (1976) studies identified themselves as growing up with traditional expectations of being a wife and mother, yet also having been influenced by the women's movement in their adult years, such that it was acceptable to work. What Rubin's study does suggest, however, is that, even in the face of diminishing returns (loss of health, physical beauty, fertility, children leaving, loss of parents or spouse) all this change or transition is experienced by some as opportunity.

More recent research about women in mid-life reflects a more heterogeneous cohort based on a broader range of lifestyles that contain a multiplicity of choices (Apter, 1995; Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Helson & McCabe, 1994 ). Such diversity in social roles and relationships indicates a less predictable and perhaps different experience for women during mid-life than that described by stage theorists or in earlier cohorts of mid-life women. For instance, Helson and McCabe's (1994) social clock study of Mills College women at age 43 and 50 acknowledges the influence of the Women's Movement on their subjects' choices and lifestyles such that they included three samples. At one extreme were the *traditional* group, at the other, *women who divorced at mid-life*, and a third, called *neo-traditional*, or women with careers and family. Some women who felt their social clock projects (i.e. developmental tasks such as a career, or starting a

family) were 'off-time', experienced more stress during mid-life, due to a sense of urgency over missing lost opportunities. The authors also found that although all their subjects said they went through some kind of reformulation of identity during their 40's, there were differences of intensity of experience between women who had chosen more or less traditional lifestyles than those deemed *neo-traditional*. According to the authors, this sense of confusion does not appear to fit into Erikson's theory that identity formation occurs during adolescence, because, in their study, "women appear to be able to change important aspects of identity in mid-life" (p.75). This sense of turmoil, identity questioning and anxiety about not living up to opportunities that signified the age-40 group, was also heightened by a need for more introspection and a need to be one's own person. The authors contend this differs from Levinson's (1978) male subjects, for whom "becoming one's own man" was a central task during their 30's. By age 50, many of the women in Helson and McCabe's study felt more connected and in tune with themselves. Such research is helpful in understanding that there appear to be differences in how, or if, women experience a mid-life transition, yet we still don't get a sense of the process these women went through that may have helped or hindered a successful passage. What is missing is an understanding of what the whole experience looked like for them.

Authors of more recent studies suggest that some women connect to a deeper sense of identity during mid-life, in part because they have had no path or role model to follow, and have had to create their lives as they go ( Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996). What little contemporary literature there is on the mid-life transition for women highlights this apparently common

experience of not knowing how to act, or what to do at this time of life, due to the lack of role models around what it is to be an older woman today (Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Sheehy, 1996). Apter, who interviewed 80 women between age 39 and 55, found that, in the absence of having any sense of plot or story to follow, women felt free to create their own story. Indeed, they felt compelled to take charge of their lives. This, in tandem with powerful feelings of confusion, anxiety, disillusionment, and anger which are interpreted by the author as being of crisis proportions, may make this passage more difficult for women than for men. The focal point of mid-life crisis for women, according to Apter, is around compromise. Unlike men, women are socialised in our society to give up their own needs and desires to look after others, whether it be husbands, children or parents. Apter found that many women had lived with the *illusion* that things would somehow get better in mid-life, that if they worked hard and raised their children, devoted time to their husband's ambitions while in some cases also juggling an aspiring career, they would find meaning and fulfilment. At mid-life, they bump into the *reality* of what their life actually is, based on choices made and played out. They cannot hide from compromises which took them away from themselves for so many years. Disillusionment and dissatisfaction set in, setting the path for upheaval and developmental growth.

Apter's (1995) sample included two groups, one of women in their 40's, who she tracked diligently for four years, and a separate group in their 50's. Her purpose was to trace "the pivotal step where women come into their own" (p.24), because, in Apter's opinion, many tend to forget the process by the time they are 50. All of the women in Apter's study experienced what she called a

'developmental crisis' between the ages of 40 and 50. The process involved a shift from being defined externally, or by others' perceptions, which Apter said was typical of a woman's experience of herself, to connecting to a deeper internal self. Comparing this process to adolescent development, Apter described a transition in which women went through an initial hectic phase of confusion, disillusionment, and doubt coupled with alternate feelings of energy and strength that eventually gave way to an emerging identity. This 'reconstruction' of self involved the development of new skills. For instance, 52 year old Linda Gerson, like most of the women interviewed, had a particular struggle with signs of physical ageing, because for women in our culture, loss of beauty often equates to loss of power. The fear of ageing and loss of power is what Apter described as the first stage of mid-life women's disengagement with others' expectations, and their own ideals of attaining a perfect life in a world that does not value feminine attributes. As Linda began to trust her own inner vision more, she went through a process of tracking, and then deconstructing the 'false' perceptions of beauty she had projected onto many friends, by tracing her initial perceptions of them right back to her teenage years. What Linda realised was how much she had viewed attraction through outside perceptions of what constitutes beauty, denying her own real responses. As a result, her criteria of what constitutes beauty began to broaden. There were all sorts of people she now considered attractive, because she was looking beyond so-called perfectly shaped eyes or small noses, to trusting her own perception of seeing what's inside a person. She had systematically come up with her own definition of how she sees beauty in a person's face. In freeing

herself from the internalisation of others' views, Linda felt she could see through her own eyes, which resulted in redefining beauty and reclaiming her own power.

According to Apter (1995), each woman in her study experienced a crisis, and emerged through the crisis with new skills. The process of learning to trust herself, or her own inner vision, seemed to evolve out of a resistance to external, often negative, perceptions of her as nothing more than an ageing woman. It takes effort to work through the resistance successfully. Apter also suggests the crisis may be propelled out of an initial fear of regressing to the 'cage' of self-consciousness she remembers feeling as a young woman, yet the author believes this very fear is a healthy sign, indicating the desire to move beyond the imprisonment of being viewed through others' eyes. Unlike the experience of adolescence, the mid-life woman goes beyond simply feeling self-conscious. Growth comes from resisting the incongruity of being seen as a 'ridiculous', or invisible older woman, because she knows that it doesn't capture all the complexities of her as a woman in her 40's. During her 40s she begins to move through the fears and doubts, based on connecting to her own self-knowledge. According to Apter,

She knows herself to be layered, with a dazzling multiplicity of thought and feeling. Since this complexity cannot be captured by the mirror, she does not view herself as the thing seen by others (p.73).

In order to exemplify the various diverse paths of contemporary women in mid-life, Apter's (1995) sample included both American (65%) and British (35%) women, 14 of whom were non-Caucasian (17%). Within this sample, 65% of whom were in their 40's and 35% between the ages of 50 and 55, there were

women in the process of divorce, single women, some women with young children and some whose children were grown. The general theme of constructing a new path in mid-life was shaped by 4 types of women based on the roles and lifestyles they chose. For instance, the *Traditionals* (18) were mostly defined by feminine roles of mother and wife, *Innovators* (24) pioneered in a man's world, *Expansives* (18) made a break from the past, such as divorce or return to school, and the *Protestors* (13), protested mid-life due to an earlier curtailment of enthusiasm and impulses by a premature adulthood.

The crisis experienced by the *Traditional* group in Apter's (1995) study is situated within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement that offered new freedom to choose paths other than traditional motherhood. With freedom came a greater anxiety about whether they had made the right decision. Women entering mid-life today who chose a traditional life had a more contemporary awareness of what they gave up and may think: "Why didn't I do what *she* did?" (p.81). Many women experienced a "mingling of dread and liberation" (p.83) of having to face their suppressed regrets of what they could have achieved and by so confronting themselves were able to be freed of re-suppressing their dissatisfaction. By resisting the temptation to further deny the many compromises they had made, they were able to free themselves from internal inhibitors (i.e. denial and regret) to gain a more powerful and confident perspective. For instance, 47 year old Mai who had given up her own promising career as a singer to support her husband's musical career, had always held on to the belief that he had a significance that she did not. Apter tracked subtle changes from the initial interview, where Mai attempted to suppress dissatisfaction and

keep regret under control by rationalising her choice to curtail her career in order to help her husband. Six months later, she faced the idea that she no longer could claim his success as hers, facing, for the first time, the consequences of *her* choices. The shock of realising what she had given to her family, and what her choice had not given to her, threatened to “cancel the meaning her behaviour once had” (p.89) and perhaps destroy the life she has established. Over the following months, Mai was tempted to deny her new awareness, attempting to bury it in her old busy life, yet she felt this ‘background noise’ could no longer suppress the bigger questions she wanted to ask about wanting something more and something she could locate in herself. By age 51, Mai was able to approach her conflict directly: she felt anger and regret at what she thought was a ‘cop-out’ of sacrificing her own career for her husband’s. Yet, by finally confronting and reviewing her feelings around the choice, she realised she was not so much afraid of success in a singing career, as afraid of entering into the world of cut-throat competition that she found appalling. She also became aware that, at the time of choice, she hadn’t seen other career possibilities besides performing. She was then able to reconnect with an initial passion of wanting to show people what the voice is capable of. Freed from the idealisation of what she might have been, Mai had now found her own voice. She began to hold sessions at her home for musicians and others, teaching them to hear and appreciate how music can be transformed by voice. According to Apter, for *Traditional* women like Mai, mid-life is the first time in adult life when they confront their suppressed visions and voices by directly accessing emotions and thoughts:



the task of mid-life is to uncover regrets that have been controlled or denied, and gain sight of the impediments that took difficult choices out of our control. As the closing chapter of youth leads to a future that must be reinvented, traditional women engage in new battles against the voices and visions that had edged out their own (p.109).

Once these were identified, many, like Mai, asked why did it take me so long? For *Innovative* women in Apter's (1995) study, crisis came when events in mid-life forced them to confront long-held assumptions that to succeed they had to follow established standards of career success. These are the women who, in striving to have it all, minimised traditional feminine roles and characteristics in order to attain success in a man's world. Half of the 24 *Innovative* women in Apter's study made drastic career changes in their 40s. At mid-life, crisis was set off by one of the following interconnected things: the stress of overwork; the pain of prejudice in the workplace; frustration with ambitions that had been muted or disguised; a new awareness of an imbalance between professional and personal needs; or the increasingly tense conditions at work. For instance, when stress about time triggered a woman's crisis, even a small incident such as being forced to cancel dinner due to work demands could unleash questions about how her previous ambitions, goals and assumptions had led her to a life without the fun and flexibility she had been anticipating. Many, such as 45 year old Ilsa, had held up an image of the ideal career in which hard work and sacrifice would result in reward, only to find out that, as a middle-aged supervisor, her new ideas and expected promotion were being passed down to a younger woman who apparently had put more energy into flattering her male boss. Such contradictions in the

workplace brought Ilsa to confront anger and despair, knowing that she could no longer buffer the illusion of success based on equality in the workplace. Previously her youthful appeal would have glossed over seeing the contradiction. For the first time, she also confronted the prejudice of her workplace where women were not judged on their merit so much as how well they competed with their male bosses. While in the past she may have been able to cover up the 'pattern of prejudices' by deluding herself that if she worked harder and competed more she would be the exception or the lucky one next time, she now realised there is no next time, and the mask began to peel off. This new perspective of what Apter called 'looking back time' forced Ilsa and other *Innovative* women to redefine their goals and be aware of inner changes that made them feel more confident. As these women began to confront the realities of not having it all, their inner vision broadened. For some, this meant leaving the workplace in order to gain more autonomy, more flexibility to enjoy other aspects of life outside of career, or to find a working atmosphere in which they felt less wary. In Ilsa's case, she stayed at her workplace, yet became more 'edgy' and 'not so nice'. Yet she was able to enjoy a new sense of control in her resistance, based on embracing apparently contradictory aims of succeeding in what was once a man's domain without becoming prisoner's of men's dreams. This joy of resistance was a common theme among *Innovators*, according to Apter, because...

the innovative woman in mid-life can change more than she dreamed of in her youth. As she redefines her own goals, she leaves behind both the male ideal of the career person and the image of the superwoman who finds that magical spot, in which everything can be achieved and nothing

sacrificed. As she confronts, in her mid-life crisis, the discomfort of the male preserve and the impossibility of a life without any compromises whatsoever, she gains new control over the compromises she makes (p.147).

While Apter (1995) highlighted four particular paths of mid-life change in her subgroups, she described an overall process of change for women in their 40's as moving through the need for expansion (of self) and the need for attachment (to others). These often conflicting needs made the journey complex and risky. For the group named *Expansive Women*, who felt they had lived the early years of adulthood in a narrow corridor, the need for radical change in mid-life often resulted in divorce, re-education, or both. Growing up in an environment that discouraged women from education, many women in this subgroup felt shackled at mid-life, and thus felt compelled to correct their pasts. For instance, 41 year old Trina, a mother and wife who used to feel competent about her knowledge of people and children, began to feel dissatisfied about other people's level of knowledge compared to her own. She became aware of how, when others seemed to express themselves more clearly than her, or when they appeared to diminish her knowledge, she used to pretend to deny her anxiety by hiding behind a girlish smile. She realised that 'feeling young' was no longer appropriate, and noticed how hurt and insulted she felt for not being heard in ways she deserved. Apter's description of Trina's course was typical of many in the *Expansive* group. Dissatisfaction with the status quo led to anxiety over the need to change. For some, the anxiety was so hard to endure that they foreclosed on the crisis and retreated to the pre-critical stage. Anxiety came not only out of self-doubt, but of

fears of abandonment or rejection from partners or families who resisted the changes, and/or fears that the change would not be effective. However, as in the case of Trina, the fear of 'What happens if I act on change?' was countered by a greater fear of 'What happens if I don't?' As Trina began to take definite steps toward change, for example, she decided to go back to college, she experienced excitement, relief and confidence. Such specific steps, such as re-education, often resulted in many more changes that come from being a novice, from interacting with people in new ways and from learning new facts and gaining new perspectives. Anxiety, caution and self-doubt seemed to be constant companions as the *Expansive* women moved through each point of change, new experiences and as they dealt with resistant partners. Working through the need to attach had various forms: some solicited the direct support of family, others attempted to lead an alternate life, while others made a radical change through divorce, in order to continue to expand. Self-doubt lifted once she began to see the positive results of change, such as good marks, new skills, new friendships, support and/or respect from family members.

One interesting finding documented in the *Expansive* group had to do with resistance from partners, which Apter (1995) said was typical. Many of the women were shocked at this resistance to their desire to "heal an abscess of self-doubt"(p. 162). because they hoped their new confidence and knowledge would make them more worthy of love and respect. Women who sought radical change were most likely to experience resistant partners for the simple reason that it was so new. Some women compromised by hiding their new horizons from partners, while others divorced. Another interesting finding is that, despite constraints of

finances and lack of skills, the 22 divorcing women in Apter's study recovered from divorce quicker than men, in about 18 months. What helped them fight regret and low self-esteem after their divorces was not only the will to survive, but also the sense of liberation and agency that came from being the head of a household and free to make choices. For some, the awareness of loneliness and the need to connect was sought in friendships with other women. Apter concluded that an *Expansive* woman resolved her mid-life crisis by resisting the pressures of others' views of what she is or should be, by taking steps to expand skills and knowledge, and by being excited by the long-neglected experiences of development and change.

Women who felt cheated of their adolescence due to early maturing or possibly traumatic experiences such as early pregnancy or death of a parent, found that, at mid-life, they had a strong urge to break out and express their individuality. According to Apter (1995) these *Protestors*, protested against the onset of mid-life because, having had to suppress desires, ambitions and spontaneity in early adulthood, they now wanted to reach back and seize the youth they never had. The anxiety and panic of mid-life came as a realisation that the youth they craved to experience may pass forever. Protestors were therefore more prone to depression because the desires they had held in cold storage seemed to have nowhere to go, and the distance between who they are and where they want to be seemed too great. Apter described these women as having a lot of vitality, yet although they had achieved a lot, they felt they had not done enough. Throughout their lives, they held on to a 'parallel self', that youthful and adventurous person who was waiting to express herself. In order to function as an

adult, they had to control the adventurous side of themselves they saw as so much a part of their identities. As such, they lived with a potential story that lived alongside their actual story. Mid-life crisis began with the panic and anxiety that the qualities of that more eccentric self they left behind may stay hidden forever.

The awareness of a potentially glorious world seemed, at the onset of mid-life crisis, a far distance away and perhaps untouchable. For this group of women, it was the awareness of their potential, and hope, that created anxiety. The process of change involved reaching out to that parallel self, often in a hectic and diffuse way because they felt so pressured to “do it now—or possibly never” (p.185). For instance, Monica, who got pregnant at age 15, felt trapped by living out the script of a black, pregnant teenager whose choices become predictably narrowed. Although Monica’s achievements of successfully raising a daughter on her own and putting herself through nursing school had made her feel like a person rather than a disappointment to her parents, she still felt a need to harness her energies. She felt further disappointment on watching some women her age rise up to changing social expectations of women, knowing that she, too, wanted to go to college. At age 42, she confronted both the hope and hopelessness of acting on some chance to change her script, and felt dragged down by the finality of becoming “that old woman” that nothing happens to. Panic set in with a sudden need to change now, but not knowing how to make it happen. As they confronted their anxiety, the *Protestors* feared being reckless, because they had spent so many years being responsible and maintaining a level of safety, that when the external impediments of child-rearing lifted, they suddenly felt giddy with release. What seemed to be transforming for *Protestors* was not so much a drastic

change in life structure, but a new release of spontaneity. They became louder and less inhibited. For Monica, who said she worked so hard to make things safe, pleasure in mid-life came from not being safe. She described her extreme moods and her uncertain future as her pleasures. What seemed to move her through crisis was a realisation that things were not static, that she was, indeed, moving toward a more adventurous self. It is this linking of her desires and actions, the link up with that woman they thought they could be but could not due to early setbacks, that promoted resolution of mid-life crisis for *Protestors*. Having spent many years sacrificing desires for others and being overly responsible in order to survive, these women at mid-life found a way to overcome past fears and explore their futures.

Of note in her study of 80 women was Apter's (1995) segment devoted to menopause, which appeared to put to rest a more traditional notion that this biological change for women is the central feature of women's mid-life change. Although menopause *accompanied* women's mid-life changes in Apter's research, she concluded that it did not *cause* the crises and growth she observed:

My study of mid-life women, however, strongly suggests that menopause is not the cause of mid-life development. The changes that have been noticed over the years in mid-life women—that they become more assertive, more self-confident, and very often more energetic—result from a psychological, not a hormonal story. (p. 201)

However, Apter (1995) also noted that, for some women, menopause did stimulate questions or heightened conflicts. For instance, menopause, because of its association with endings and loss of fertility, did trigger some concerns about

ageing for some women. Others were impacted by menopause because it brought them in contact with medical experts who held authority on a subject that often they were ignorant about. This resulted in tension, which became the focus of a woman's mid-life crisis about self-doubt and control. As Apter put it, the "discrepancy between dependence and distrust brought into question her own power and authority, and her control over her own health (p.203)".

For the most part, Apter (1995) found a common pattern of development among the different paths of her research participants. However, she described a small number of her sample (7 out of 80) who exhibited strong signs of stalled growth, in the form of envy and/or despair. Such women, who often displayed outward signs of a fear of ageing, were apt to seek repeated plastic surgery or become obsessed with their appearance. These were seen as symptoms of a deeper psychological stall of mid-life growth—disappointments or regrets or failures that cannot be overcome, and ideals that retain their rule—which resulted in feeling regret and envy. For these women, the focus of envy was not just those who were younger, but even more so those they identified with who they perceived as having succeeded where they had failed. Depression was a threat to such women who focused on negative feelings. In some cases, this resulted in a conviction they had suffered from bad luck, which led to feelings of powerlessness. Such women in Apter's sample were not able to see the connection between their efforts and accomplishments. Others who felt envious in mid-life were not able to free themselves from an outdated self image formed in adolescence, experiencing the despair of the huge gap between current reality and former expectation. There was a sense of feeling imprisoned by an internalised



set of goals or expectations that will not be realised. Such women also tended to idealise others, thus diminishing the validity of their own experience, which included accepting their own disappointments and failures as potential parts of a meaningful life. Unlike most of the women in Apter's study, these women were unable to free themselves of external judgements; being enthralled by some past ideal (from which they got a lot of social reinforcement), they saw mid-life as a "dead end-- rather than a crossroads to various futures" (p.239). While most in her study were pushed in mid-life to reclaim the buried voice and vision from adolescence—a time when women seem most vulnerable to external ideas of femininity—a small number were not able to resist or distance themselves from ideals. The author expressed her surprise at how few women there were who suffered despair, especially since her cohort represented a first generation of "new women" in mid-life who did not have a path already laid out for them. Unlike their mothers, these women's lives were shaped by both traditional views of femininity and by new opportunities and challenges offered by the Women's Movement.

While Apter's (1995) research is very comprehensive and helpful in understanding the depths of conflict and turbulence some women experience during their 40s, as well as what the common themes appear to be that shape those feelings, we do not get a sense of what the entire experience of this transition was, because that wasn't Apter's focus. Apter maintains that in order to grasp the process of developmental transition from crisis to reconstruction, it was important to interview women in their 40s and a separate group again in their early 50s in order to track the transition in process. Also, her intention was not to look at

*successful* mid-life transition, in a way that might lay down a path. I believe that, as counsellors, we can also help women negotiate what may be a challenging yet potentially rich period in their lives, by understanding retrospective narratives of persons who have lived through such a mid-life transition and are willing to share the richness and detail of their experience as it unfolded over time.

The theme of 'coming into your own' at mid-life that is so apparent in Apter's (1995) research also prevails in Anderson and Stewart's (1994) study of 90 single mid-life women who felt satisfied with their lives. The authors wanted to know how, despite the lack of role models, and in the face of what appears to be diminishing returns, single women at mid-life could feel happy about their lives. The sample they interviewed between 1990 and 1992 were all heterosexual women between the ages of 40 and 55, predominately white, and from various U.S. locations, representing a variety of education and income levels, occupations, life styles and family situations. Although all of the participants had lived on their own at least a few years, the sample included divorced, widowed, and never married women. The research criteria of being satisfied with your life was based on a subjective definition rather than an external one; for example, participants were asked to rate their lives on a scale of 1 to 10. This was a departure from an earlier assumption that in order to be "successful" at mid-life, women needed to "have high salaries, impressive offices, and fine homes, as well as advanced degrees, prestigious positions, and busy schedules" (p.17). This revised criteria of feeling good about yourself came about because the authors found that although many in their sample did not meet the earlier criteria, they nonetheless described themselves as leading content and 'successful' lives.

Anderson and Stewart (1994) found that many of the women in their study experienced an unexpected joy in mid-life, based on a sense of renewal. Although most had not planned to be single at mid-life, they became aware that what had contributed to a sense of transformation during this time was giving up the assumption that to be happy a woman has to live within a traditional idea of being married and having children. Mid-life changes actually seemed to help this process, because it was a time when they were encouraged to “evaluate the assumptions, expectations and attitudes that have guided their lives thus far” (p.37). This, coupled with another driving force for women during mid-life-- to begin to trust their own authority about what constitutes a meaningful life—seemed to open up the opportunity for single women in this study to write their own stories of success based on a new and unconventional plot that it was possible to be single and have rich, rewarding lives. This shift away from external authority to trusting one’s own inner voice and judgement was also described in Apter’s (1995) research. According to Anderson and Stewart (1994) it is a shift which drives a woman to confront compromises that have been so much a part of past choices and lifestyles.

Women experience mid-life not as the beginning of the end, but as the advent of a time of great potential, a time of coming into their own. For them, it is an era dominated by the delicious task of figuring out what they have always wanted and going after it with a vigour and a certainty of purpose they did not have when they were younger. They describe feeling an intriguing mixture of inner contentment and a new willingness to “stretch” themselves by taking more risks (p. 131).

The women who found themselves single at mid-life in Anderson and Stewart's (1994) study felt a new sense of control and mastery over their lives based on the realisation they did not have to compromise because they were free to pick and choose what they did with their time without having to check in with a partner. It seems that all of the women in this study were able to get past the shackles of societal prescriptions of how their lives should be lived, which freed them to write their own stories. The majority of participants experienced renewal in mid-life that came from giving up leftover dreams and finding new ones. Transformation happened when women began the process of choosing how *they* will feel about their own lives, rather than continuing to be dictated by external views of what their lives should be.

Similar to the process described by Apter (1995) as a 'developmental crisis' experienced in mid-life, Anderson and Stewart (1994) said that most women experienced various degrees of turmoil, loss, depression, and anger, yet did not seem debilitated by these feelings. For instance, although Heidi was initially devastated by the sudden death of her husband who she so depended on in her traditional marriage, she did not succumb to her family's pressure to take care of her and her children. Step by step, Heidi took new chances to find a job and a new home, realising that with each choice she was taking her own power and affirming her own life.

According to Anderson and Stewart (1995), mid-life offered the women they interviewed a 'context', or 'looking back time', in order to take stock and review past choices and relationships embedded in a particular historical and cultural landscape which allowed them to make sense of their lives and even

redefine them. For instance, this was a cohort who grew up with traditional expectations of femininity which were interrupted, challenged, and/or even denied by the Women's movement. Many in Anderson and Stewart's study, it seems, felt a sense of giving up some choices or some part of themselves to pursue what the authors called 'the Dream' of a happy marriage with children, only to find that at mid-life, 'the Dream' was an illusion. For those who ended up divorcing in mid-life, coming to terms with the loss of the Dream was devastating, but many were surprised, as in Apter's study (1995), at how quickly they recovered and took charge of their lives. Being single at mid-life was an opportunity for these women to embrace a sense of power based on the freedom to choose their own paths without compromise. Mid-life gave them that existential 'wake-up call' to examine the meaning of their lives, a call that signalled *now is the time to do something for yourself*. The changes varied. For many who had divorced at mid-life, whether by choice or not, it meant discovering new qualities and strengths based on having to make decisions as the head of the household. Others reported life-altering shifts in identity, and/or spiritual regeneration. The idea of *choice* came up in important contexts. For instance, 50 year old Terry who recently divorced saw her life ahead as having possibilities and choices, based on the realisation that she had at least 20 healthy years ahead, without a prescribed script to define them.

A major developmental step for single women at mid-life appeared to be giving up what Anderson and Stewart (1994) called 'The Dream' of living happily ever after in a marriage. The particular steps of this process varied from woman to woman, and depending on whether they chose to leave their marriage, were

divorced against their will, or had never married. The passage from shedding the fantasy of acquiring 'The Dream' to feeling content to be in charge of your life was rarely a smooth one for those who were interviewed. For instance, many of the never-married women had not "consciously struggled to give up 'The Dream' until they approached forty and saw their chances to have children begin to disappear"(p.93). Others, like 42-year-old Megan, felt they were able to come to peace with a satisfying, single life based on a new realisation that they had been making choices all their adult lives that signalled they had been choosing a single life all along. For instance, Megan had acquired a vision of independent thought from role models who taught her at an all girls' boarding school, which prompted Megan to develop a career as an artist and return to school to teach in order to financially support herself on her own. Although she hoped for a long-term relationship, they inevitably ended before marriage because Megan sensed they eroded her identity and pressured her to move away from her work. At mid-life, when Megan ended a relationship that seemed like the final chance to marry, she developed a new clarity and respect for the choices and lifestyle that was best for her. For 38-year-old Lydia, the process of giving up 'The Dream' was a gradual noticing that each anniversary date of her divorce had less of a negative impact on her because she had matured and had a quiet realisation of her capacity to create what she needs to find satisfaction in her life. "Instead of marking a moment when The Dream died, women tended to talk about how unexpectedly content they began to feel" (p.88).

For some women in Anderson and Stewart's (1994) study who chose to leave a marriage, the journey to renewal at mid-life involved mourning losses and

overcoming criticism for unconventional choices. For Glenda, it took some time before she was able to view her decision to leave her husband as a positive move toward a preferable life for herself. Although she had had unusual opportunities as a child to establish her individuality – her father took her to union meetings, and she was encouraged to take ballet as well as play football and Judo—her sense of being special was halted when she decided to marry her high school sweetheart and raise a family. Years later, having gone back to work, and eventually to school, as a matter of survival, she left her marriage in anger on discovering that her unemployed husband had been dishonest about his efforts to go back to work. On looking back, Glenda was able to see how she had actually been in charge of everything in her marriage, despite an external conformity to dependency in a traditional model of marriage. Glenda described her process of mid-life change as having to rediscover those buried parts of herself that had initially been encouraged and cultivated by her father when she was a child. At the time of the interview, her children had left home for college, which freed Glenda up to write a book about her family, and take up a previous hobby of fly fishing. Like many women in this study, she felt she was just hitting her stride in mid-life.

One limitation of Anderson and Stewart's (1994) study is that, while the authors tell us that many of the participants experienced a lot of turmoil, they do not shed a lot of light on the *process* of how these women were able to come to terms with their single status in a positive way. It also became somewhat obvious to me that there tended to be a bias toward the joys of single life, with less emphasis on how women struggle through the losses and often negative cultural

messages that others have documented in their research. Perhaps this is a limitation of the authors' bias, who, in a very transparent way declared their own excitement at being single in mid-life.

For some women, the sense of not having a plot or story to follow is highlighted by issues around physical age and beauty. Dowling (1996) talks about the complexities of coming to terms with an older body image, which for women involves dealing with cultural pressures and mixed messages of having to appear young and sexy in order to be acceptable in a culture that doesn't tolerate the idea of sexuality in older women, combined with feelings of confusion because there are no images of what 50 looks like in our culture. Dowling's 65 participants in their 50's experienced feelings of loss and disillusionment that seemed to emerge over a realisation that they have allowed others to define themselves through physical appearance—realising they have lived an illusion of finding happiness outside themselves. This is complicated by a powerful urge for women at mid-life to connect with becoming more serious about their lives, and accepting themselves for who they are. For some women in Dowling's study, the image in the mirror was a new reality of seeing themselves for the first time. Although one limitation of Dowling's research is that she is a journalist who did not prepare a purely scientific sample, what is striking about her study is that, in the face of such negative cultural messages about ageing, many of the women she talked to felt freer at age 50 than ever before. The question this raises for me in this current study is 'How were they able to do that'? We need to hear more in-depth narratives of women in order to understand these experiences.



A summary of this literature review suggests that for many women there appears to be biological, social and/or psychological changes which could be fertile ground for a developmental transition at mid-life. There is a sense of moving toward individuation and autonomy (Mercer, Nichols & Doyle, 1989), and of connecting to a more inner locus of control at mid-life, which may be particularly significant for women, since many women may feel they have lived most of their adult lives making compromises for others (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Levinson, 1996; Livson, 1976; Rubin, 1979). This research indicates that for many women, this experience did not come without turmoil, loss, grief, anger, depression and/or even rage. What emerged for many research participants out of what was described as 'chaos', or in some cases, 'crisis', was a sense of new identity (Apter, 1995; Helson & McCabe, 1994; Mercer, Nichols & Doyle, 1989). Several of the researchers describe the lack of role models for women at mid-life. While this can create confusion and/or disillusionment for those who are seeking a more senior place in society (Levinson, 1996), it also appears to open up a place to write a new story of liberation, renewal (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Dowling, 1996), or 'coming into their own' (Dowling, 1996; Mercer, Nichols & Doyle, 1989). Other themes apparent in a summary of this literature include the idea of disillusionment: at mid-life, many women who had held on to the myth that 'things will get better' feel compelled to see and face the truth of their lives for the first time. This involves reviewing past choices from the perspective of an apparently new mid-life confidence based on a desire to finally trust oneself and live a more authentic life. The process of transition for women at mid-life appears to be highlighted by such things as:

resistance to a negative image of physical ageing in our culture, acknowledgement of prejudice in the workforce, disillusionment about being rescued by marriage, and a need to expand the self while also staying attached to others. A review of these studies about women in mid-life indicate we are just beginning to learn about the nature of the developmental transitions experience by women at this time of life.

### CHAPTER III

## METHODOLOGY

What I wanted to explore in this study were stories of women who experienced a mid-life transition and are satisfied with their lives. Through in-depth phenomenological interviews which generated narrative accounts, I investigated the meaning of mid-life changes by some women who said they experienced them, and are now satisfied with their lives. One intent was to glean a better understanding of the transition process for women in mid-life. The research question is: *How do women make a successful mid-life transition?*

The methodology is intended to give participants as much latitude as possible to tell their story. It is based on Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach, the purpose of which is to obtain a detailed description of the experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of the person who has lived and experienced it.

In choosing an appropriate method of study, two aspects of this research need to be addressed, namely, how to investigate a process, which involves experiences, reflections, and deeds that happen *over time*, and how to illuminate an experience that is subjective in nature. Narrative, in the form of storied accounts, was used in an attempt to capture the temporal patterns and flow of changes. Such accounts lent themselves to a full story that included several experiences, actions, reflections, and whatever else is relevant to understanding what is salient during the beginning, middle and end phases of this transition.

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on description, meaning, and capturing the richness of lived experience adequately addressed the second issue.

### Narrative

“All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story.”

( Isak Dinesen, 1954)

What I am hoping to understand in this research is a process of change that may involve actions, events, experiences and reflections, all of which may shed light on how a woman successfully negotiates a mid-life transition. According to Cochran (1986; and by personal interview, June 1997), while pure phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning of an experience, it may be limited to capturing *one lived experience*, rather than illuminating a process that occurs *over time*. While “existential-phenomenologists seek to understand the meaning of experience rather than explain it”, according to Cochran (1986, p.31), narrative is both a description and an explanation because what we get is a description over time, through the flow of a story. Pure phenomenology may be concerned with one particular experience, such as the experience of reading a good novel. Yet the purpose of this study is to understand the experience within the context of an entire structure of transition. The use of story, or narrative, is appropriate in that it is concerned with not just one experience, but such things as reflection, pre-reflective experience, deeds, (Cochran, personal interview, June 1997) as they unfolded and as the co-researcher makes sense of them through a full storied account. Such an account provides a context that allows the researcher to understand and clarify connections and points, because the researcher is able to perceive, not only the event, but what led up to it, and what followed it.

For the purposes of this study, a narrative approach was used to guide and enhance the phenomenological interview. Psychologists and other social scientists who study narrative accounts recognise how natural it is to apply storytelling to the research of subjective experience. That is because people in our culture tend to think in stories. Stories help us make sense of our lives. Events, facts, circumstances and situations are there for everyone to experience, but it is the individual who decides how to connect them through narrative accounts (Cochran, 1986; Gergen, 1992; Howard, 1989; McAdams, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Riessman says that, unlike traditional methods that take bits and pieces out of context, narratives are sequential and structured features. Because this study is interested in understanding a meaning-making process around the mid-life transition, incorporating a narrative approach seems appropriate.

Through narrative case studies, the phenomenon under investigation appears in an accessible and individual way. Narrative also provides a format that lends itself to elucidating general patterns or commonalities (Cochran, 1986; Riessman, 1993). According to Riessman (1993), a primary way people make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form. "This is especially true of difficult life transitions and traumas" (p.4), because through story we create plots, unity, and meaning out of disordered experience. Stories naturally develop and progress over time, revealing the storyteller's feelings and interpretations. The story metaphor emphasises that we create order in a particular context. By paying attention to the story researchers can see how co-researchers impose order on the flow of experience, to make sense of events and actions in their lives. Because stories develop over time, with a beginning, middle and end, what is contained

within a storied account is a latent explanation of how change happened, or how one came to become this kind of person (Cochran, 1986). Cochran suggests one reason for this is that an individual story is framed in concrete events and particulars of time and space that move a person from disorder to order. In attempting to understand the process of how women are able to make sense of a significant transition at mid-life, I suggest that narrative description provides an appropriate vehicle for casting events, actions, reflections and experiences into a story form (i.e. a coherent structure) which allows the researcher to make connections between phenomenological components. What becomes important to the researcher is not just highlighting one individual experience, but a search for continuity contained perhaps in several kinds of characteristic experiences as well as actions, the salience of which emerge through understanding the full narrative context in which they are told (Cochran, personal interview, June, 1997).

Retrospective narratives were sought of women who perceived that they experienced transition during mid-life, and were able to articulate what the whole process was like. Why retrospective? According to Dr. Larry Cochran (personal interview, 1997), a person who is in the middle of a meaningful experience often is too caught up in it to realise its salience to them. Looking back, they can begin to articulate a richness of detail through a narrative account that gives purpose and meaning to the events as they unfolded over time.

### **Existential Phenomenological Research**

Existential-phenomenology, as a research method, starts with the assumption that reality is construed from the inside out, because there is no

separation from what we experience subjectively and what we understand to be objective. According to Osborne (1990):

We cannot consider the environment independent of the ways in which people construe their environments, nor can we consider persons' experiences of their environments without considering the ways in which those environments have influenced persons' experiences of them. (p.80)

Because of the nature of this inquiry, it was important to employ a method that allowed participants to articulate their own experience and understanding of this phenomenon of mid-life transition. Colaizzi (1978) states that the phenomenological approach does not infringe itself upon the phenomenon, but rather lets the phenomenon speak for itself. This research methodology is based upon different meta-theoretical assumptions than those used in the natural sciences (Wertz, cited in Osborne, 1990). These differences influence the nature of individual research goals and the methods used to obtain them. Natural science research, for example, aims at objectivity through explanation, control and prediction, whereas the aim of phenomenological research is the elucidation of meaning and the understanding of human existence from an individual's point of view. In other words, experimental methods used in natural science focus on what is measurable about human experience (e.g. behaviours). Critics of this method suggest that by limiting research to only that which is objectively observable or measurable, scientists have neglected an important other half of human experience, namely, that which is experienced within the person (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgio, 1985;1983; Osborne, 1990). In a phenomenological approach, the meaning attached to experience is revealed through an intensive focus on the

individual's subjective experience, feelings, personal views of the world and self, and the participant's private concepts. Phenomenology is, as Colaizzi suggests "a method that remains with human experience as it is experienced, one which tries to sustain contact with experience as it is given" (p.53).

Attention to subjective experience is important to this research for a number of reasons. First, in order to gain a genuine understanding of what appears to be a complex and perhaps conflicting process of meaning-making during this time, it's necessary to 'get inside' the experience. It is not enough to illuminate manifest behaviours---there may be important reflections, actions, and/or experiences that lead to other experiences. How does one move toward acting or feeling empowered in this process? Given what the literature says is a diversity or range of experience for women, it's important to give each woman the latitude to tell her story to its fullest, in order to understand what the process of mid-life transition was like for her.

The research question: *How do women make a successful mid-life transition*, calls for the researcher to be able to elucidate what it was like to live the process and determine how these women made sense of it themselves. Also, women have traditionally been used to having others define their experience for them (Gallos, 1989; Gergen, 1990; Heilburn, 1988). One result is a lack of language, tone and meanings in language that speak the truth of women's lives. For instance, Heilburn (1988), in writing of how women's lives have been contrived through traditional biographies and autobiographies, notes that, for contemporary women, there are few, if any, models or narratives on which to form their lives. She says "How are they to imagine forms and language they have



never heard?" (p.39). Heilburn argues that women have not had the opportunity that men have had to shape their language around power, anger, accomplishment and control, yet these are all part of a woman's experience as well. During her study of the lives of accomplished women, Heilburn found that, unlike men, women weren't able to link their private and public lives—while their private letters and journals expressed anger, or a wish for power, none of this was for public view in their biographies because it wasn't considered womanly.

What is salient about this to me as a researcher of women's experiences is the importance of using a method that encourages the respondents to express the full range of their experience, a method that allows all of the data to speak for itself, in order to understand the complexity of the experience for women. Gergen notes (1990) that the dominant narratives about mid-life for women are stories of loss and tragedy, based on a traditional definition of women's well-being tied to reproduction. Yet this traditional context may not be the actual experience of how a contemporary woman sees herself. In understanding the process of meaning-making that allows a woman to construct a satisfying life, it is necessary to permit her to articulate her experience in a way that frees her to tell it completely and in her own voice. Existential-phenomenological research considers subjective human experience a legitimate focus of inquiry. It therefore allows for a broader understanding of a process of change for women in mid-life, while providing a basis to give voice to their experience.

### **Bracketing**

The study of human experience from a phenomenological perspective requires a redefinition of what is called *objectivity* in natural science. Colaizzi

(1978) offers the idea that “objectivity is fidelity to phenomena”(p.52). The researcher’s commitment is “a refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself.” This requires the researcher to observe and describe the phenomena as accurately as possible, in order to maintain the meaning of the experience to the person experiencing it. Objectivity in this sense also requires the researcher to refrain from controlling or interpreting the experience according to her own assumptions.

Researchers who use this method recognise that phenomenological objectivity does not mean a state of absolute disinterest (Colaizzi, 1978). It is important, therefore, for the researcher to affirm, rather than deny, her own interest in the subject, based on the assumption that it is impossible to deny one’s experience. By naming and examining her own assumptions about the phenomenon, the researcher is hopefully in a better position to be aware of possible biases.

This topic area interests me for a number of reasons. First, I came to realise the impact of the mid-life transition when I began to experience it myself. What I remember are external triggers such as the death of my father, the end of a marriage and menopause, accompanied by tumultuous internal shifts in my perspective of myself and what I valued in life, which have caused a purposeful career change. As a result, I have become interested in researching the literature as to the nature of this experience. I believe that mid-life can be an unusually rich time, when people go through a process of meaning-making that may be highly individualistic in its form and detail, yet have commonalities of overall patterns,

such as: are there characteristic people or supports that aid the transition, or characteristic deeds or patterns of reflection?

Secondly, I realised that a lot of literature about the adult life cycle appears to have a bias, either in terms of an andocentric focus, or simply because it is cohort specific. Either way, the focus has tended to be on losses, and in particular, for women, losses around their ability to reproduce or take care of others. Because this has not been my own experience (I do not have children, am in a second marriage, have had a career all my life, and am feeling satisfied with the changes), I was interested in exploring how, given all that seems to be against this being a satisfying time, some women are able to construct a satisfying life. I am not assuming that everyone goes through a significant change, or that it is all positive. In particular, I am not assuming there are no losses, but that from loss it is possible to have gain. One of my biases is that I regard myself a feminist who is interested in research that does not limit women's experiences and sense of identity as it is traditionally defined in terms of their abilities to reproduce, be physically attractive, or to act in the role as sole nurturer. I believe we need more research that incorporates the full domain of contemporary women's experiences, and that allows women to define their experience in their own terms.

What I expect to find in this study is that women who believe they have experienced a mid-life transition struggled with a sense of identity as they moved into the uncharted territory of becoming an older female in our society. I expect the transition will involve losses. I also believe, based on the literature, that one aspect of a successful mid-life transition for women will be their ability to connect more deeply with themselves and feel less need to be validated by others

### **Participants**

In existential-phenomenological research, the subjects of research are often called participants or co-researchers, because they are seen to be experts of their own experience, and to reflect the interactive nature of the interview. Participants selected for a phenomenological study such as this must have experience with the topic and be sufficiently articulate to illuminate the phenomenon of interest (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985). This study, being phenomenological in nature, is not concerned with the generalisability of its findings to a larger population (Giorgio, 1985, 1983; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher is freed from the necessity of recruiting a sample of representative size and number because the emphasis of phenomenological research is on the individual subjective experience. As such, it requires as many participants as are sufficient and necessary to illuminate the subject of interest.

The selection criteria for the proposed study was to interview three to five women who identified themselves as having experienced a transition in mid-life, and who regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives. This represented a number estimated as sufficient and necessary to elicit and satiate themes, and to reveal the diversity and commonality of the women's experiences (Cochran, personal interview, June, 1997). Due to an enthusiasm of response to media ads, and in case one participant decided to withdraw from the study, I interviewed and have included analysis of 6 participants.

According to Colaizzi (1978) an "exhausting of themes" can never be accomplished, any more than human beings can be exhaustively researched.

Therefore, the phenomenological researcher is always faced with acknowledging that his or her study is never really complete or final. Although an "exhausting of themes" may not be possible, there is reasonable assurance that inclusion of 6 participants in the study is sufficient to ensure that any common themes arising between participants have not occurred by chance.

Although the literature defines the chronological age of the mid-life transition variously from age 35 to 55 (Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1978; Rubin, 1979; Sheehy, 1995), the criteria for this study is not based on definitions of age or even of a specific triggering event. Rather, the criteria for participants is that they themselves identify that they have experienced a significant mid-life transition. According to Cochran (personal interview, June, 1997) it is important that participants are close enough to the experience to give it a lot of details yet not so far that it's a vague memory. For the purposes of this study, a minimum age of 35 is suggested, with a maximum of 65. This includes the broadest definition of chronological age found in the literature, while providing the extra time in terms of distance away from the transition necessary in order to reflect on the experience. Another criteria is that participants are able and willing to reflect and articulate their experience in detail and with richness. As such, to be included in this study, women must have perceived themselves as having come through the transition a minimum of two years, in order to reflect on the experience with a combination of perspective and understanding, and a maximum of five years, to ensure that the experience is still memorable enough to talk about in some detail. To this end, it's important that participants articulate that they have reached a stage in the process where they feel they have come through the transition, and

that they now feel satisfied with their lives. In order to articulate their experience, a further requirement is that participants are able to speak clearly in English. In sum, participants of this study need to fulfil the following criteria: 1) experience with the phenomenon under investigation, 2) the ability to articulate the experience, and, 3) sufficient temporal proximity to, as well as distance from the experience.

### **Procedure**

Participants for the study were recruited primarily through “word of mouth” and by ads placed in two local newspapers and at various women’s centres, libraries, community centres and recreation centres (See Appendix A). About a dozen women responded to the ads. I also sought participants through my personal network, telephoning a few women who I had worked with at a local drop-in centre for women. Women who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researcher by phone. At that time, the potential participants received additional information regarding the study, including the goals of the research. This casual telephone interview introduced the women to the research topic and determined whether they met the necessary criteria for participation in the study. Participants were told that this was not intended to be therapy and that they would have a chance to ask questions (see Screening Interview, Appendix B). The first three to five individuals who met the selection criteria outlined were accepted for participation in the study. A sixth participant was interviewed in order to ensure a saturation of themes, and in case one participant withdrew from the study for any reason. The sixth participant was told in advance that her interview may or may not be published. A mutually agreeable

time and location was then established for an in-depth, tape-recorded interview with each participant.

Mishler (1986) describes the phenomenological interview as a method that is useful for understanding what participants mean by what they say in response to our questions. To this end, Mishler argues that it is important to empower the respondent. One way to do that is through qualitative methods that invite the participant to speak in her own voice, allowing her to control the introduction and flow of topics. Some key ideas here involve the avoidance of leading questions, and the acceptance that it is not imperative that each respondent is asked the question in exactly the same way. What is more important is that each respondent understands the meaning of the question.

Here are the ways I attempted to empower participants. The interviews took place in a comfortable and private setting suitable to both the researcher and participant. The initial goal at the onset of the first interview was to establish a trusting rapport (Colaizzi, 1978). The parameters of the participant's involvement were reviewed and each participant was asked to read and sign two copies of an ethical consent form (see Appendix C) and to retain a copy for their own records. An opportunity was provided for the participant to ask any questions she may have of the researcher prior to commencement of the tape-recorded interview. Participants were also told that their written consent to having their interview tape-recorded included the assurance that only the researcher and the Thesis committee members will have access to the transcripts, and that the tapes would be erased once the study is complete.

The first interview was minimally structured in order to allow the participants to speak for themselves, without the researcher impinging her preconceived ideas onto the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). To begin the interview, an orientating statement was presented to help focus the participant upon the phenomenon in a general way (See Appendix D). In order to facilitate this process, I invited each participant to talk about her transition experience by telling it like a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I also invited her to think about a metaphor, a photograph, a piece of jewellery or anything meaningful that might help her to remember and tell her story of transition. Active listening (Gordon cited in Osborne, 1990) was used throughout the encounter, and open questions hopefully encouraged further elaboration and discussion. Probes were used to elicit greater explanation or clarification. Silence was also used to provide participants time to fully express all of their thoughts. The role of the researcher was to facilitate the telling of the story of each woman's experiences through active listening, empathy, and reflection. The goal was to elicit in the interview the story of how they made this transition successfully, drawing out the richness of the experiences in detail. The researcher tracked topics which needed further elaboration, after the participant had completed expressing her thoughts, and asked open questions to further the exploration of these issues, if pertinent to the participant's mid-life transition experience. A further list of questions was at times used to assist in the further exploration of the issues (See Appendix E). Process notes were also maintained by the researcher in order to help capture the full range of the participants' experiences.



Each interview was tape-recorded (audio) and lasted for a maximum of two-and-a-half hours. Participants were invited to offer an appropriate pseudonym for ensuring confidentiality of their experiences in any oral or written accounts of the material.

Following each interview the recorded tapes were transcribed and reviewed by a trained reviewer to ensure that the researcher has not led the women's discussions or imposed her own personal perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

A narrative analysis procedure devised by Riessman (1993) was used in this study, borrowing from Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method of developing a composite story based on themes taken from the narrative text.

#### **Narrative Accounts**

According to Riessman (1993), there are five levels of representation, or interpretation, in the research process which investigators must confront and pay attention to. They are: 1) Attending to experience 2) Telling experience 3) Transcribing experience 4) Analysing experience and 5) Reading experience. It may be argued that data analysis really begins at the Attending stage, during the interview, as the researcher pays attention to certain phrases, or a particular story or theme related by the participant as she tells her story. However, for the purposes of this study, formal data analysis began with a transcript that was derived from a taped interview. Narrative analysts tend to dwell on the importance of capturing the nuances, tone and pauses of language and meaning in conversations, and therefore encourage researchers to give as full an account as possible when transcribing oral narratives into a written text (Riessman, 1993).

Borrowing from Colaizzi (1978), each transcript was read and re-read, in order to acquire a general feeling for the material. During this process, I made notes in the margins relating to significant events or themes and highlighted quotes that seemed to capture significant thematic movements. The next step was to generate a narrative account, whereby the researcher “straightens out the story” (Cochran, personal interview, June, 1997). Because people don’t often capture their experiences and stories in a linear fashion or chronological order, the researcher’s job is to synthesise the information in the tapes into a comprehensive and coherent written account, which was done. Recognising that this is yet another point of interpretation, this researcher attempted to stay true to the tone, language and meaning of each participant’s story, using their words as much as possible.

First, I encountered and dwelled on the narrative accounts, reading, re-reading and reflecting on the experiences and words of each participant. I tried to uncover salient features or major elements that characterised the experience of transition during mid-life. One way I facilitated this process was to make comprehensive notes, referring back to the text and to the quotes that were highlighted. It was important to stay in touch with the feeling tone and language of the participant in order to try to capture the meaning of experiences and changes. As Riessman notes (1993), there is no one way to do a narrative analysis of experience. Here is what she offers, as a way to think about generating individual narrative accounts from transcripts:

The challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation. An investigator sits with pages of tape-recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of

a book, and tries to create sense and dramatic tension. There are decisions about form, ordering, style of presentation, and how the fragments of lives that have been given in interviews will be housed (p.13).

Following Reissman's suggestions, what I created was a metastory about what happened by conveying what was significant about the interview narratives. One goal at this stage was to identify significant changes from the beginning to the end of the narratives, as I searched for a series of significant events and experiences that characterised the women's process of transition in mid-life. This was facilitated by the use of a Lifeline, where I was able to write down and track important turning points and dates in chronological order. I also followed Cochran's method of narrative analysis. According to Cochran (personal interview, June, 1997), this process of 'writing the story' involves attempting to make "a little more explicit connections that were implicit in the original account", as well as attempting to "underscore the significance of things more than they were tacitly assumed in the interview". Unlike pure phenomenology, the researcher is looking for something broader than themes, or a core experience as she combs through each narrative accounts. There may be a series of events or a series of experiences, for example, or characteristic actions or reflections that were turning points, all of which may compose a thematic movement in the narrative. Having followed Cochran's suggestions, I was able to identify and describe such series of events or experiences or actions in more concrete terms. In the process, some individual details of experience were then eliminated in order to look for commonalities among all of the participants' narratives.

Individual movement or characteristic events or actions were then compared across all of the narratives. This involved some experimentation of grouping, checking back with individual narratives and making revisions until general patterns or structures that characterised the process of successful mid-life change emerged. This process also involved ongoing discussions between the researcher and the Thesis supervisor. Finally, a composite story was developed out of these comparisons whose intent was to capture the meaning and pattern of transformation during mid-life for women.

#### Validation Interviews

It is important that these narrative accounts accurately represent the women's experiences. In qualitative research, the issue is one of soundness and trustworthiness of accounts (Cochran, personal interview, June, 1997). Therefore, I asked participants to review and validate their individual narrative accounts and the common themes during a second interview. Following the initial interviews, I presented participants with a written copy of their individual bio-synopsis as well as the common themes, in advance of setting up a validation interview time. I asked them to read the account to check for accuracy and to make any necessary corrections or desired changes. In particular they were asked if the text they reviewed accurately portrayed their individual experience and the common themes. I also asked them for their reactions to reading their own stories. Any changes were incorporated into the narrative accounts. I negotiated the location and time of the second interview with the co-researcher; in other words, preference was given to the participant's convenience and comfort.

Christine said that she really enjoyed reading her account and appreciated the opportunity to tell her story. She said the narrative “captured the essence of my self-awareness journey so very well and there I nothing that I would change.”

In a response that was both verbal and written, Soleil said she felt a sense of kinship with the other women even though she hadn’t met them. She felt “a sense of caring that they too had faced ‘demons’ and had arrived at a place not unlike mine, a sense of pride in becoming who I am today.” In her written commentary, she noted that she thought the themes were “right on” and would not change them. One theme that particularly resonated was a profound sense of loss and letting go. Reading her account brought up more feelings around these changes. In particular, she talked about the significance of how the surgical removal of a female body part had impacted on her sense of womanly identity.

Caroline found her written account “an interesting read” and had no significant changes to make. She liked the themes and could relate to them. She remembered feeling emotionally exhausted from the process of telling her story. Her initial response when reading the narrative account was that it sounded worse than it was, but on reflection she conceded that in fact “it was truly awful” at times. She had a similar reaction to the theme of a sense of loss, because she disagreed with the traditional view of women she had so often read about who were depicted as losing rather than gaining in mid-life. As she read on, however, Caroline said she could relate to the sense of loss and in particular of needing to let go before something positive could come into her life. Caroline said that reading about the other women’s experiences made her want to explore more about how it is that women who are so different all come by similar assumptions

that they are responsible for others and are sensitive to the expectation of others. For Caroline, 'doing it all' and feeling responsible for others was a stronger theme than 'having it all'. Reading about other women's similar experiences in this regard moved her to comment that women ought to be more pleased with their abilities.

Sabrina found the experience of reading her story pleasant and felt I had captured the themes. She added that she now feels that change is an ongoing process for her. Anne agreed that the themes were accurate, saying that she was personally more interested in reading the themes than individual stories. Anne had an initial reaction to reading her own story. She described a sense of feeling 'flushed', a reaction to seeing her story no longer conveyed within the privacy of her own experience but externalised in the form of a written story. One interesting point made by Anne was how much more she had reflected on her experience after our first meeting, so that our second one became quite meaningful in terms of her own process of clarifying some of the changes she had experienced. This made me wonder whether it would have been more meaningful to have broken up the initial interview into two parts, in order to give participants a greater chance to reflect on their experiences.

Some participants noted minor changes to their accounts such as factual errors or a better clarification of an event or action, which I corrected. None of the participants had any disagreement with the common themes of meaning.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study was intent on understanding the meaning and process of mid-life transition for women. As such, it required that many of the accounts were

retrospective in nature. As it is the tendency of most individuals to desire to create a consistency between the life they are living currently and the past experiences they remember, past accounts are recognised as subject to unintended or perhaps even deliberate distortion. However, the focus of this research was on individual meaning-making, such that distortions of experience were not felt to be of particular concern.

Questions of reliability and validity come up in qualitative research. In quantitative research, reliability has to do with consistency, replicability and stability of measurement, while in qualitative research, according to Osborne (1990), reliability is contextual and related to the perception of construct. Sameness (reliability) can arise out of inconsistency and variability of human perception by what Osborne calls “intersubjective agreement”, or a unified description of a shared phenomenon. Cochran (personal interview, June, 1997) suggests that it is not appropriate to talk about reliability and validity in qualitative research, because these terms imply test reliability and validity. Researchers of subjective experience are concerned with the “trustworthiness” of an account, or are concerned with whether it is a “well-founded narrative”. One way to facilitate this is to have the thesis supervisor revise and come to an agreement with this researcher on the thematic movements, which was done in this study. Reliability is improved where a chain of evidence is maintained (Yin, 1984). This has been attended to in this research by providing written details that allow other researchers to follow and replicate results, such as: research questions, data base that is taped and transcribed, plus a stated procedure of analysis.

Addressing construct validity, or trustworthiness, is also achieved when respondents check for 'goodness of fit' (Osborne, 1990), by having them check the narrative account produced from the original transcript, and providing an opportunity to make any necessary changes or omissions in a second interview, which I have done in this study.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

In this study I interviewed six participants who identified themselves as having gone through some important changes in mid-life and who now felt satisfied with their lives. The intent was to learn more about how women come through this process feeling good about themselves and their lives. One product of this study was that it generated six accounts of what the experience of mid-life transition is like. Another outcome was an identification of factors that were helpful in making the transition meaningful for these six women. From the perspective of each individual's life, the significance of landmark events and the meaning of mid-life changes could be more fully understood. This offered a fuller understanding of how some women were able to construct experiences of denial or loss into something meaningful and satisfying. The narrative accounts also highlighted the diversity of women's lives, because although there were commonalities in the themes of meaning, each woman had a particular process and vehicle through which the course of change was driven.

This chapter contains individual biographies and a synopsis of five common themes. The participants talked about their experience of change as if it were a story, with a beginning a middle and an end. In the telling, events were often told out of chronological order. In writing the biographies, I have attempted to 'straighten out the story' of each participant by condensing their initial transcribed interviews into individual narrative accounts. The idea was to highlight the process of change for each woman, attempting to capture the

significant events, movements and experiences that moved the process forward. Narrative accounts allow for a sense of flow to the process. Following these individual biographical synopsis, common themes were elicited, the objective being to evoke common aspects of the process of mid-life transition.

### **Narrative Accounts**

#### **Sabrina: A Crisis of Discontent**

Sabrina is a 55 year old therapist and mother of one daughter. Her mid-life journey began at age 46 with a number of peri-menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, mood changes, and feelings of depression that were “overwhelming and disconcerting.” What Sabrina also remembers about this period was how dissatisfied she felt about her life and her relationships. “While things were going on in my body, I guess things were going on in my psyche as well,” she notes. During this time, Sabrina urged her husband to sell their home and move, yet whenever they looked at places she couldn’t seem to find one that satisfied her. Sabrina also felt unhappy with her work, even though “it was fine and I was successful at it.” The feelings of overwhelming discontent spilled over to her relationship with her husband. She felt they were “dying of comfort.” They went into intense couples’ therapy.

Up until this time, Sabrina says she was projecting her discontent outwardly and in retrospect needed to look inside. That introspective process began in therapy, and continued when Sabrina was forced to stop and reflect on her life after an accident that kept her immobile for a time. She describes the accident as a pivotal experience, because it forced her to slow down and reflect. As she lay in pain, she had a strong sense that time was running out. She

remembers asking herself : “Is there anything in my life that if I didn’t try or didn’t do when I came to the end of the road that I would regret?” It was a place of taking more responsibility for herself. She had always dreamed of being a therapist, but didn’t pursue it due to time and money constraints. She began to seriously consider quitting her job to go back to school to pursue a Master’s degree in Counselling.

Turning 50 was also pivotal for Sabrina in terms of her mid-life changes. Considering it a rite of passage, she decided to let her hair go naturally grey. She began to apply to a Master’s program. She and her husband found a new apartment, moved in, and shortly after, split up. Sabrina says it was a very intense, stressful time; she developed arthritis in her hands, and a lot of her hair fell out:

A lot of loss. A loss of my home, a loss of my relationship as I knew it. Loss of my hair. I’d always thought ‘oh, I’ve got curly hair.’ My hand, I thought ‘Oh, I’ve got nice hands.’ Just a lot of losses. And I can just remember Sunday morning laying in bed—I was by myself—and thinking ‘I can’t get up today’.

The feelings of overwhelming loss and sense of powerlessness were mitigated by a commitment to finding her own truth, of being honest with herself and others. That sense of trusting that she would find her way led to creating some space and distance to reflect which was aided by a recent decision to leave her job. She went on hormone replacement therapy, which eased some of the physical symptoms she had suffered with for three years.

Sabrina and her husband decided to separate, agreeing not to see each other for 3 months. She continued with therapy on an individual basis. Looking back, it was a period of “profound learning” during which Sabrina realised that she created her own upsets and her own suffering, not others. “I confronted my vulnerabilities, my faults, my egocentricities”. During couples therapy she and her husband had unleashed a lot of anger, confronting mutual disappointments. In particular she realised how rigidly she held on to certain roles. She recalls how, in response to her husband, she was either the controlling mother or the victim child. She needed to confront her withholding. A major shift was discovering that when she was unhappy with herself she would take it out on her husband. She realised that it was time to take responsibility for her own life. While it was painful to do this self-confrontation, it was also liberating. In retrospect, Sabrina sees the transition as putting herself in a blender in order to get her body and heart in sync.

From this intense period she describes as the ‘grinding up of the self’, Sabrina was aware of seeking quiet time, withdrawing from friends to a certain extent, and practising a new skill, meditation. In retrospect, she was seeking an opportunity to integrate the parts of herself she had finally confronted with a self that now felt quite vulnerable. She remembers it being a time of waiting, or allowing something else to emerge in her personality, other than the two or three roles she had played out. She started school. She began to date her husband. Looking back, she identifies a theme of this middle period of her transition as “*opening up my heart,*” which for Sabrina evolved through claiming her sexuality as hers, rather than just something to please her husband - a sense of finding her own passion and reclaiming and discovering her desire, combined with softening

and opening up with another, being authentic. She described it as a desire to want to bring something new to the relationship combined with a new awareness that she was responsible for her own sexual satisfaction - an awakening. For Sabrina, owning and embracing her sexuality was the vehicle that allowed her to open up her heart and her responses as an adult woman.

Sabrina was also aware at this time, that while she was getting more honest with herself, she was also coming to terms with her physical limitations and limited energy. She became more selective about friendships and social contacts. When she and her husband got back together, she confronted the expectation that she would have to cook and clean, as she had done for years. For Sabrina, it was a struggle to come to terms with years of social conditioning that equated the importance of being a good girl to the need to accommodate others' wants and demands. Coming to terms with saying 'No' to 'wifely expectations' was a huge issue. Now she says 'No' without guilt, because she feels she has 'paid her dues.' She is able to claim that her needs are more important than everyone else's. For Sabrina, letting go of the 'shoulds' has allowed her to be more of herself because she can state her needs without apology.

When asked how this transition turned out for her, Sabrina said it turned out well. She feels wiser, more mature and glad to be the age she is. "I don't like the aches and pains, but I like the internal changes. I like that I softened and that my edges are not so sharp and pointy." In reflecting on what was helpful in making the transition, she identified Counselling, the support of friends, space for reflection and time.

### **Caroline's Story: Learning to Live on the Road**

Caroline is a 48 year old business consultant, married with two children at home. Changes at mid-life came with a jolt when Caroline contracted pneumonia at age 40 while in the midst of managing a major corporate restructuring project. Weeks later, when she got out of hospital and returned to work, she felt very stressed at the myriad of changes put into place in her absence. Although she also sensed that she had changed and that her work was no longer a good fit for her, she was determined to try to make it work. She remembers feeling frustrated because she felt responsible for her team yet she did not agree with upper management directives over which she had little control. She wanted more authority to make the decisions she thought were right for the company. Meanwhile, Caroline was experiencing peri-menopausal symptoms for two years that made her feel like she was "going out of her mind." She recalled that a good day was getting out to the parking lot before she collapsed into tears.

Then came a number of losses. During the corporate restructuring Caroline was involved in, her own job was eliminated, and when she applied for a newly created position she didn't get it, yet she continued to work for the person who did. During that time, a fire destroyed part of her home, which caused the family to move into a neighbour's for several weeks while they renovated. Finances were tight. Caroline also remembers the additional stress of her teenage daughter entering a new school she didn't enjoy, and her husband going through a mid-life depression. She felt helpless to do anything about these struggles and issues. The same year, Caroline's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. There was a sense of extreme dissatisfaction, yet she did not have the time to

think about it or sort it out. As Caroline said “the bag was getting bigger and bigger and heavier and heavier” with losses that weren’t dealt with. Caroline calls this “The Black Period”, a time of confusion and denial of seeing the truth—knowing that things weren’t working in her job, yet not able to change because she felt responsible for everything. For instance, she said there were signs she could have seen, such as her illness, and the fact that nobody wanted her old job. A strong theme for Caroline was the idea that she was hanging on to the need to feel that she was the only person who could get the job done. In addition, she felt a responsibility toward other women who also aspired to become managers in a male-dominated industry, hanging on to the image of being a pioneering woman in a man’s world.

The bag finally burst when Caroline was fired. Alongside feelings of rage and grief was a tremendous sense of relief, a sign which Caroline seemed to listen to. There was now time to reflect, albeit forced time. Although there was still financial pressure, Caroline actually felt confident turning down some work because she was determined to find work that was right for her. In previous years, she had always fallen back on her technical skills to give her employment. This time, she decided to enter into a journey of self-awareness through career counselling that was offered as part of her severance package. Somehow she was able to sustain the discomfort of not knowing exactly what it was she did want to do. This determination seemed to symbolise a kind of liking and accepting of herself, which was buoyed by the career exploration process of discovering what she liked and didn’t like. It seemed like a time of broadening. Sensing that she had stagnated, Caroline took advantage of some of her free time to explore

different challenges and new relationships. She volunteered at a women's centre, which was a new experience for Caroline, who had always worked with men. This had come out of seeking a diagnosis for her menopausal symptoms, which had led to some relief as well as connecting with other menopausal women. Volunteer work with a business group also helped her to learn new skills and gain confidence in areas that had been "scary" for her in business, such as making telephone calls to prospective clients. Another area of volunteer work put her in touch with a different business network, while yet another gave her the satisfaction of helping disabled people gain some skills to become employed. This seemed to symbolise a new kind of balance in her life and a wholeness within herself because she was able to integrate problem-solving business skills with a desire to help people reach their potential.

During this time, Caroline felt pressured by her husband to sell their house due to financial concerns. While she resented this 'forced loss' she realised it enabled her to seriously consider going into business for herself. During the career exploration process, Caroline realised that she had always been more interested in relationships at work and in facilitating communication and change among different factions within a corporation, rather than being a technical expert, which was what she was originally trained to do. Having broadened some skills and gained some confidence in other areas, Caroline felt ready to go into business on her own, and in fact was facilitated by getting a major contract through her volunteer work. She also felt a certain faith in herself because she had achieved a level of competence already in her career. Her desire to open up to new experiences included different relationships. Previously they seemed to all be



work-oriented, whereas now she felt they were more genuine, because they were ones she chose out of her own personal interest. These small choices and new directions along the way allowed Carolyn to feel more connected to herself now. She says she began to like herself more. Having tried new behaviours and having adapted to a changing workplace, she began to see her potential. She describes herself now as “more honest” and “less diplomatic.” She began to welcome change rather than resist it, such that today she sees many of her mid-life losses as gains.

In retrospect, the mid-life transition for Caroline was a process of letting go of the need for external validation, whether it was having the label “Manager” in front of her name, or trying to convince her daughter that she was a perfect mom who should be able to cope in any situation. She also remembers letting go of social expectations of “having it all”—that it was possible to be a mother, wife and career woman. The satisfaction Caroline was getting from connecting with what was important to her—whether it was new skills, different relationships, or meaningful volunteer work, seemed to replace the need for external validation that had driven her for most of her adult life. She feels she has learned to live in the moment more, rather than rushing from one thing to the next. Perhaps the sense of enjoying the journey has helped her to connect to the idea of liking herself more, in a way that has released her from having to say ‘Yes’ to the demands and expectations of others. What Caroline now enjoys about her work is that she doesn’t have to be what others want her to be. She feels she has integrated pieces of herself that previously had been divided. For instance, she is now able to bring forward her business and technical skills with her love of relationships and

helping people reach their potential. She also likes the idea that change is a part of her work and her life, and feels more self-sufficient because she is able to be more flexible. She says she still finds it hard to give up the idea of 'doing it all' but now will take a little longer and enjoy it more. She sees her life as a work in progress and has a deeper appreciation of living in the 'now'.

Caroline's mid-life transition was also about learning to connect to others. For instance, a big part of her healing process was knowing she wasn't alone as she met other women who were going through mid-life changes. She sees mid-life as being a time of personal change, being an "entity unto yourself" and not feeling guilty about that. At mid-life, she adds, "you have the confidence to poke around in your own psyche and know you won't fall apart". A very recent experience, the death of a friend who had the same name and was about the same age as Caroline, ended up being an affirmation of the importance of connection. Several people, both friends and acquaintances, went through great effort to find out whether it was Caroline who had died, which for her was an affirmation that people did care about her, for who she was as a person. It also gave her some perspective about her own death because she could honestly say that if she was to die now, at least she was doing what she wanted to do.

Upon reflection Caroline feels that what was most helpful for her was to finally have some time to reflect. Time gave her the motivation to take on volunteer work, which broadened her horizons and opened up space for new learning and different relationships. During the initial period of turmoil and confusion, especially after her illness, regular exercise helped her feel better about herself and gave Caroline time away from the stresses at work. Connecting to

other women going through menopause and other mid-life changes really seemed to break the sense of isolation, and for Caroline was a very different experience, because she had always been more comfortable with men. In particular, she remembers appreciating the humour and safety of being able to gripe about her partner among other women who were empathic without taking her complaints too seriously.

### **Ruth: The Struggle for Intimacy and Power**

Ruth is a 51 year old married women involved in fitness instruction and peer Counselling. Having described herself as someone who in the past entered relationships with men who valued her for her physical looks and sexuality, Ruth sees her mid-life transition as being about finding her own power within a committed and supportive relationship. The beginning of mid-life changes for her began when she met her partner at age 37. Unlike previous relationships in her life, this man seemed to love and value Ruth for herself, not her looks. As she headed into her 40s, Ruth had a sense that it was time to stop running – “to stay still long enough to allow intimacy in.” This was as good as it would get, she thought, and you ought to stop and make the best of it. This occurred at a time when she had finally reached a point of some stability and confidence in her job as a sales woman, and had a sense of peace about being a single woman.

Having always seen herself as a survivor and someone who takes more than she gives, Ruth felt an emotional shift that came about because, for the first time, she felt loved and valued for herself. As a result, she wanted to nurture others. The financial security of this relationship allowed Ruth to quit her full-

time job, for the first time in her life. She saw it as an opportunity to move in a different direction and seek her passion. Being concerned about losing her physical looks, Ruth began to work out 5 or 6 times a week, something she hadn't had time to do when working full-time. This led to an opportunity to train as a fitness instructor. The experience gave Ruth a confidence in herself as a leader and motivator of other women. Although she knew she was losing her sense of herself as a young, physically attractive female, she also felt she was gaining, in the sense of being valued for herself. She stopped dressing in sexy clothes, and began to focus more on maintaining her physical health rather than a youthful, sexy body. She remembers a friend at about that time saying how much she feared ageing because she did not want to become invisible by losing her physical looks. That comment did not seem to resonate for Ruth, who was conscious about replacing that fear with discovering her ability to empower and influence other people. She was also becoming aware of wanting to connect with people in a way she hadn't before.

During this time, Ruth had moved to a small town with her partner, and as such had a different identity with people, that of a woman kept by her financially successful husband. When he was transferred back to the city, Ruth resisted following him. She felt she was entering into a struggle for her own power and individuality within a committed relationship. She remembers her partner laying down some ground rules about how she would have to get a job and give up smoking when they returned. Although she made the move, Ruth went back to the small town within months, realising she didn't feel confident enough to teach in the city. For four years, the relationship continued at a distance. During this

time, Ruth feels she was discovering her own power and creating her own life. As she began to teach fitness, she began to let go of an old self-image of being stupid. "The physical side lost its importance when I realised I had more going for me." There was a sense of moving toward a whole, which included spiritual work and emotional connection. She did a lot of reading about psychology and spirituality, and took up meditation. She wanted to bring in something more than the physical into her life, so at age 46, Ruth took a peer counselling course, which seemed to complete an image of finding her passion, which was to motivate and help others.

Ruth had come to an awareness that she was responsible for her life, and no one else. Now that she felt successful standing on her own two feet, another struggle during this time was whether or not to continue to stay in her long-distance relationship with her partner. Part of the struggle involved giving up an affair that she had been involved in for a time. The decision to end the affair seemed to be a pivotal experience, a final liberation from an old image of a woman who always needed excitement and defined herself through others' eyes and desires. Reflecting back on her decision, Ruth describes herself as feeling like an alcoholic who gives up the bottle at last—it was a final gesture that freed her to carry on the life she had created. Now, she has moved back with her partner yet maintains the other small town home as her own.

What Ruth found most helpful in getting through these mid-life changes was being in a supportive relationship, which gave her the time and space to explore "my passion and my power." She also found self-help books and reading about spirituality helpful. Her own sense of optimism and determination

sustained her and provided a sense of trusting that she could fight for a good life. One thing that Ruth continues to value is a commitment to try different adventures with other women. For instance, she has gone on a retreat in the desert, a horseback riding adventure, and a hiking expedition with other women. She sees this as part of maintaining a sense of individuality, connection and taking responsibility for her life. Because some of these adventures involve doing things that scare her, she feels a sense of accomplishment and continued growth by taking on new challenges.

### **Christine: A Long Day's Journey Into Self-Awareness**

Christine is a 68 year old retired nurse who is involved in volunteer work at a women's centre. For Christine, the mid-life transition was signalled by a feeling that something was wrong with her life. The first time she sensed it was at a farewell party for Christine and her husband eighteen years ago. Surrounded by a group of glamorous and articulate younger women, she suddenly felt out of place and unconfident. She had been married for 8 years, and was about to move with her husband and three children to a city where she did not know anyone. She remembers a day soon after the move when she was alone in the house making beds, tears streaming down her cheeks, asking herself "Is this all there is?" In retrospect part of her frustration at the time was being in a marriage with a partner who she felt was critical and uncommunicative. Her way of responding was "to do anything to make him comfortable". As she moved into her 40s Christine was slowly losing that sense of herself as the assertive, independent career woman

who she had learned to be in her 20s and early 30s: In marriage, her confidence was also eroding.

At age 41, when Christine read about a special program for mothers who were returning to the workforce, she immediately enrolled. She seemed to be hungry for knowledge and input, signing up as a volunteer at the Centre that offered the programs, and participating in just about every other workshop offered. She said it was like a door opening up, and was the beginning of a journey towards self-awareness. As her awareness grew, she invited her husband to join her in classes in order to improve their communication, which he declined to do. Meanwhile, at about age 45, she suspected her husband was having an affair, after his return from a long business trip. Although the signs seemed obvious, such as her husband's sudden interest in the way he dressed, 'like a schoolboy in love,' Christine was afraid to "face the fact that my family structure was going to fall apart". At a conscious level, Christine stayed in denial about the implosion of her marriage for the next 10 years or so, because to her it meant the destruction of the only real family and home she had known. Meanwhile, her gut instinct seemed to propel her into action. She began to construct a new life structure of her own while the other slowly deteriorated into divorce fourteen years later. A year after sensing the affair, Christine got a clerical job, at age 46. She calls the next four years a combination of "the horror" and "the exaltation". There was tension at home, pretending things were normal with her partner.

It was crazy at home because home was real turmoil. I was trying to keep everything—you know—for the kids. Never let them see me cry. In fact, I couldn't cry in those days, so I stuffed everything down.

Added to this was the stress of re-entering the job market after 18 years -- a feeling of being inadequate and slow. Eventually, Christine decided to take a nursing refresher course, which led to part-time work at a hospital when she was 48. She remembers feeling terrified because hospital procedures had changed a lot since she had last worked as a nurse. She had been trained to do everything for the patient. Now, her supervisor was telling her to stop trying to be all things to a patient, and to limit her work to specific jobs, such as giving out medications.

Meanwhile, Christine's husband decided to finally move out of the family home to their boat, still maintaining some sort of facade about a normal family life by coming back for Sunday dinners. During this period Christine participated in couples' counselling, which was often interrupted by business trips which would take her husband out of town for up to a year at a time. Christine seemed to hold out for the tiny breakthroughs in therapy, which would sustain her through the status quo of her marriage. However, in retrospect, she found great comfort in being told by one therapist, at an individual meeting, that she had never worked with anyone as intransigent as her husband.

By this time Christine had also procured part-time work as a Homecare nurse, as well as hospital work, so she was working full-time. She felt a lot of satisfaction doing Homecare nursing, because she had the autonomy to 'run my own show'. Work was giving Christine her confidence back. She remembers once that a younger nurse remarked, after watching Christine sit with a dying man, how much she had learned from Christine about how to care for a patient. In her personal life, Christine began to 'experiment' with doing things on her own, such as taking a holiday to Europe. She continued on her path of consciousness-raising



and self improvement, taking courses in psychology, sociology and women's studies, all the while keeping her feelings of anger and grief to herself and away from her husband and children.

It was during eight years of therapy composed of a number of different workshops at a Psychological Retreat Centre that Christine finally began to confront her denial, rage and losses. She began to look at her alcoholic family of origin, and eventually her marriage. During one workshop, for instance, a man accused her of laughing at him. He reminded her of her husband, and they got into a shouting match. It was a pivotal experience for Christine because she was able to release her own anger and stand up for herself, claiming that she had a right to her own feelings. She remembers feeling a huge emotional relief from dispelling so much anger and grief.

It was her husband who finally came to ask for a divorce, when Christine was in her late 50's. As soon as the veil of denial was lifted, everything changed for her. She immediately sold the house, even though legally she had a couple of years to do so. And the day she moved into her own place, she said she finally let go of her husband emotionally and dramatically. In a burst of emotion she unleashed years of anger at him as he drove her back to her new apartment after helping her to move in. For Christine, the event heralded the realisation that she did not want him in her new life.

The fears Christine had denied about losing her family came to rest once she moved into a place of her own.

It took me two years to settle in, to feel that this was my place. At first I can remember waking up in the middle of the night crying, thinking, I

want to go home, because it wasn't home, you know.

She felt the loss of her family, and of a family home that her children could always come back to. She realised that the home she shared with her ex-husband had been the only home she had known, because in her childhood, the family had been kicked out of their house several times due to her father's drinking. The sense of overwhelming loss and emptiness led to some more therapy around her family of origin, which she said was really liberating. Having come from an alcoholic family in which denial was a family code, Christine came to realise how overly responsible she had been. She had been the peacekeeper, the one who would do anything to make things comfortable, not only in her family of origin, but in her marriage as well. She was finally able to let go of the dream of a so-called normal family that she had held on to so tightly.

Today, Christine says she is thankful that her husband divorced her. "He's given me my life." For Christine, the mid-life transition has been about learning to live with herself, learning to know herself and to understand her past. Unlike other transitions, she feels she has become aware of herself. She sees that she has choices, something she did not feel she was able to exercise within a traditional marriage structure. Counselling helped. In retrospect, she feels it was self-destructive to have harboured so much anger, and that it helped to be able to finally release it. Writing in her journal was also helpful, as was the support of various women's groups. Having been an immigrant without a large support system, Christine continues to value her connections and friendships she has sought since the dissolution of her marriage. In particular she has recently found a

spiritual community within a church group, which has provided new and deeper relationships with both men and women.

### **Soleil: Being Content With What I Have**

Soleil is a nurse who feels, at age 51, that she is at the best place she has been in her life, which is not what she expected. That's because Soleil's previous perceptions of what it was to be an older professional woman-- menopausal, empty, non-sexual, rigid in her workplace, resistant to change -- did not come true for her. However, getting to this satisfying place involved a journey through a "dark tunnel" of illness, surgeries, and loss throughout her 40s.

Having survived cancer of the uterus in her 20s which resulted in a complete hysterectomy at age 28, Soleil remembers being on a high in her late 30s when she took up running and, to her surprise, was winning races, even against women a lot younger than her. By age 37, she had come in 2<sup>nd</sup> in her class nationally. She had never pushed her body so hard, and had never felt so fit. "My sense of pride and power and strength was just amazing." So when the first attack of undiagnosed endometriosis hit her at age 40, it was truly a shock. Over the course of the next 6 years, Soleil would undergo 16 medical and surgical interventions that began with surgery to remove a cyst and her left ovary and ended, at age 46, with the removal of her remaining ovary resulting in a surgical menopause. A particular frustration was not knowing why abdominal cysts kept forming resulting in severe pain. Each time, Soleil met her health challenge with a pledge to get her body back in shape through running. In retrospect she concedes she may have overdone it. After the surgery to remove a cyst and ovary, for instance, Soleil was told by her doctor to take it easy. But she believed the

remedy lay in getting her body fit as soon as possible. Overdoing her activity so soon after surgery meant that the post operation discomfort continued for several months longer than expected. An undercurrent of denial about the loss of physical health seemed to flow as Soleil endured terrible pain that would keep her off work for months at a time, the result of abdominal bleeding and cyst formation. While her push to keep running may have interrupted her physical healing, it paradoxically seemed to give her a powerful mental stimulus as well that she credits for promoting her healing. She remembers asking friends who drove her home from the hospital to stop at the beach first, so she could watch other runners and imagine her self running as well—an image of wellness she could hold on to as she recovered, confident that in the months ahead she would also be running along the beach.

After the first surgery, Soleil decided to move to the U.S. to work. In retrospect, having also experienced illness there, she views the move as “running away” from her pain. She came back to be closer to her friends and support system. One issue for Soleil was to try to ‘weather out’ the pain in order to avoid the surgical removal of her remaining ovaries which would result in menopause. She did not want the menopausal symptoms, because it would close the door to having children by invitro-fertilization with surrogacy, a long held dream. Due to health problems, she had to give up a job she loved working in an Open Heart Unit, because she no longer had the stamina to keep up to the long hours. After one surgery, at age 43, the pain was so severe that Soleil thought she might die. She didn’t want to see friends, other friends had seemingly abandoned her due to

her illnesses, and she began to realise how depressed she was. That's when Soleil began a 5 year course of therapy with a counsellor who specialised in grief issues.

Although her world had become various shades of grey, she had not hit bottom yet. At age 45, feeling the support and encouragement of therapy, Soleil went back to school. She also began an intimate relationship, which was significant in that she had purposely chosen celibacy during this period of gynaecological interventions. At first, her partner seemed very attentive and understanding of times when she was physically hurting. About a year later, Soleil went in for her right oophorectomy, the surgery she had been trying to avoid and dreaded. While recovering in hospital, her partner came in and announced he had found someone younger, richer and fertile. As devastating as this was, Soleil felt she still needed him to be around, to help her in her recovery. He promised to stay with her until she was well. For four months, she struggled with trying to get stronger, yet not being able to, feeling emotionally devastated. "I felt hollow inside, I felt neutered and it was the most horrible time." For the first time, she remembers not having the energy to go out or do anything.

She began to imagine dying, "turning to dust in the corner of the room." What seemed to shift things was a phone call from her companion's other girlfriend, which prompted Soleil and the other girlfriend to confront him about how much he had misrepresented himself to both of them. There was a sense of kinship of two women. The confrontation gave her back the sense of control she had lost.

In the meantime, therapy was helping Soleil name and grieve her losses, and in our conversation a big loss she was able to talk about was her decision to 'remove' her mother from her life. Describing her mother as cold, controlling and

demanding, Soleil had always traditionally responded to her critical parent by trying to be a better and nicer daughter. When her mother sent her a used sweater for her birthday, during the year of her menopausal surgery, Soleil sent it back with a letter asking for an explanation. She hasn't heard from her mother since, and says it was one of the healthiest things she has done in her life. The sense of standing up for herself and creating new boundaries seems to have been carried forward in other relationships as well. Soleil describes herself as being more selective in her friendships, letting go of those she doesn't consider healthy.

Once her critical parent was out of her life, it seems she was able to bring more of herself forward as an adult woman, and in particular the vulnerable side that had endured so many losses. She now talks about trusting herself more – her body, her emotions and her instincts. For example, she remembers trusting her instinct to buy her dying friend a huge, expensive box of flowers three days before she died, which her friend's husband thanked her for, saying that when his wife died at home, it was those flowers she had by her side. In her work, Soleil feels confident, not only in her skills as a nurse, but in being able to empathise with those in pain and bring forward her own experience in her healing of others, which she believes is lacking amongst some medical staff. In terms of learning to like her body more, after her final surgery, Soleil asked the hospital staff if she could change her own dressings. Not only did this give her a sense of control, but, as she told the nurse attending to her, she wanted to learn to like her belly again by nurturing it. It symbolised a way to grieve her loss.

More recently, Soleil trusted her instincts again when she made a decision to get involved in a relationship where she feels she can be more sensitive,

compassionate, sensual, and in particular, more honest. When asked how this differed from relationships in her 30s, her response was that she was more realistic in her expectations. She says she doesn't expect him to be perfect, nor does she expect him to sweep her off her feet in a silly romance. Being more realistic in her relationships seems to have freed her up to be more of herself.

Today, Soleil says she feels very centred. She bought a condominium, finished a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and has a part-time job she gets a lot of satisfaction from. She feels optimistic about her life, and enjoys being the age she is. Looking back, she seems to have re-framed some of her losses as gains. For instance, the 'loss' of her mother is balanced by having a couple of older mother figures in her life who provide motherly love. As for not having children of her own, she says if she had had children she would not have met a number of other children in her life, two of who are her goddaughters. It is as if, once she was able to let go of old hurts tied to relationships, she had the space to create new important family-like relationships. She has come to realise that "children don't have to come out of your body to love you."

Soleil feels there were many things that helped this journey, some of them already mentioned. The role of running has been complex for Soleil, for although with her post operative recoveries and illness it may have caused her pain when she was overdoing it, it also continues to give her what she calls a "space in my head" where she feels healthy and safe. Looking back she says she has made a lot of meaning of her losses. She says she needed to learn to be content with the scope of her life. She was helped by role models—in particular, an older women who runs in road races, and a male friend who inspired her with the way he was

able to work through his alcoholic demons that threatened to ruin his career and relationships. Having a place of her own continues to be helpful. Soleil has strong feelings that in her home she has created her own sanctuary, a place of privacy and safety that only a select few are invited to share with her. Watching dance and listening to music have helped her deepen her relationships with herself—“music soothes a part of me that has been traumatised”. Beginning a dance class at age 50 also allows Soleil to explore her previously repressed feminine side, which was discouraged by strict parents and a history of gynaecological interventions. Completing her own directed studies in Women’s Health during university helped her to understand and make sense of her own illness. Counselling and supporting other women with endometriosis not only mitigates a sense of isolation but seems to empower Soleil in that she is able to use her own experience to help others who have been suffering alone as she did.

### **Anne: Learning to Live with Love**

Anne is a 49 year old married college instructor with two step-children. Two triggering events launched her into mid-life changes: marriage, at the age of 40, and the death of her closest friend, six months after her wedding. To Anne, these events were symbolic of a shift in lifestyle and values that, in retrospect, she had been seeking since her mid-30s. Having sought an exciting and high-profile career as a nurse working in war-torn countries, Anne began to realise that her work would inevitably get in the way of a stronger dream, to find a committed relationship. Although she valued the challenge and freedom of her work, she was also aware of moving toward deeper and more honest relationships with



others, something that wasn't apparent in her overseas job. At age 36, Anne made the difficult decision to take one last international assignment, which in retrospect she saw as a turning point:

It was very hard to give that up. But I knew that the lifestyle was deadening from a values point of view. And I was really in a real values clash a lot of time. I could see that there were only a few relationships that were real, not situational.

During her final assignment, Anne began to test some of her need to be more honest, and was disheartened to find that her sense of integrity was not rewarded in that environment. On her return home, she was also becoming more aware that she no longer fit as snugly into her tight circle of single female friends. For Anne, it was becoming more important to be able to speak her mind. She was less willing to accept these friends' support without having an opinion about their lifestyle of partying. Yet attempts to articulate her concerns within her group of friends weren't heard or appreciated. The exception was one friend who had been recently diagnosed with cancer. She and Anne began to talk about how they had a different lifestyle than the others and how they disapproved of their activities. Both were becoming more uncomfortable with adhering to the unspoken rule within the group that you had to go along with the status quo. An attempt to confront one of the friends about her depression was met with denial and resistance. During this time, Anne had met her future husband. As her friend's cancer progressed, Anne made a decision to help support her by sharing an apartment, which also allowed for her friend to be able to live with her son before

her death. For Anne, who was so used to having her own space, this felt like a big move toward deeper connections.

So many layers of values starting to shift. And I started to see what emerged for me was traditional family values. These really were – I didn't have a family—but these made sense to me, were more in line with who I wanted to be, not so much who I was, but that sort of shift to a life that has a little more integrity to it.

Until her 40s, Anne had held onto an image of herself as a strong and independent person. Having grown up in an alcoholic family, she had learned to survive in a “a system of chaos” by being organised, competent and unrebelling. In her life as a single career woman, she had achieved a sense of mastery over chaos. Now, by marrying a man who had two children from a previous relationship, Anne was about to move back into a family again. Initially, she remembers resenting all the normal demands of others, such as which brand of toothpaste to buy, or cleaning up after sick children. After all, Anne was looking forward to more intimacy and privacy, not the messiness of having to deal with others' demands and emotional needs:

What stands out for me is how much change there was and how much I struggled and how much I felt in chaos because of it. I was so used to being able to control everything that not to control everything, not to have order or not to have a system was so chaotic for me that it just blew me away. I was constantly trying to organise cupboards so I could find things and was struggling because in my order I knew I was creating chaos for them and they were very chaotic in my mind. And so the

whole thing to me seemed like a great pushing and pulling.

Part of the turmoil for Anne came from a feeling that as soon as she was in a family she would sink into chaos, like reliving the experience of being in her own family of origin. Unlike her childhood experience, though, Anne was encouraged to talk about her feelings and sort out what was important to her in relationships, which was uncomfortable to do. It was as if by maintaining some semblance of external order in the house, Anne could contain her underlying fears related to being in a family again:

For me tremendous fear of the love and interdependence that's created by that. Struggling against being alone but at the same time kind of knowing that, well, that's very comfortable and that the other is quite scary and more chaotic, so it's not something that's comfortable and familiar. And this incredible sense that people are dependent on me, which I found really overwhelming and really scary. The dependence of the kids—feeling this tremendous responsibility that I have got to get it right because this person is depending on me. This totally over sense of responsibility.

Anne remembers feeling that everything in her previously controlled world had become “messy.” She had been raised not to discuss feelings in the family. Now, it seemed everyone in her new family wanted to discuss them. There were the daily differences of which soap to use in the bathroom, and the bigger demands and concerns about how to work out issues with the children's biological mother. In retrospect, for Anne it was a time of confronting herself in many ways: confronting her old responses developed out of childhood, confronting what she

now sees as a kind of selfishness or self-centredness, and confronting fears about being vulnerable and being loveable. Underneath this sense of confrontation lay the fear that the self-image she had worked so hard to create was crumbling, a self-image that she was a strong, independent person in control of herself and her life. "In a way it was a loss of a lot of illusions about myself and just trying to sort through the things that are really important."

Anne calls the initial period of her mid-life transition "The Dark Period" and "Chaos" because she felt out of control. Part of the confusion seemed to be that she was experiencing both joy and loss at the same time. There was the excitement of entering into a new relationship and of being with a family. Yet initially she also felt resentful of the demands of children who were shattering her dream of entering into a more intimate relationship. And there were multiple losses that came with the decision to let go of a single life.

I had a sense of losing myself in a way. I had this sense that I can only be myself when I'm on my own because that's when I get to do what I want. A very self-centred, selfish way of looking at things. I had a sense of losing my place in my friendship circle even though I knew the values were shifting and I didn't want to be part of it in the form that it was in – so tremendous sense of loss there. I had a sense that I was missing my freedom.

The biggest loss was the death of her friend, because it marked such a huge hole in the place that female friendships had held in her life. At the time, this sudden loss of contact became symbolic that there seemed to no longer be a place in Anne's life for one-to-one friendships outside the marriage.

During this time, Anne went into therapy and began to understand how her previous responses in her family of origin had an impact on her reactions within her current family. Ironically, although in one way she felt overwhelmed by the demands and concerns of others, she also recalled that it seemed “all I was worried about was myself during that period. There just seemed to be more things impacting on me and more reasons to have to confront myself.” For instance, confronting the idea that in her family of origin, she did not feel loved and so had learned to seek validation in a demanding career with lots of public recognition. In a way, she felt as if she had been so ruled by the need to achieve, that she really didn’t accept or value other aspects of herself. Now, in her current family, she was experiencing being loved for “all my lumps and bumps”. Initially she felt she wasn’t able to let the love in, but as she did, she began to accept herself more. Within this container of support, she was able to loosen her need to control and adhere to the external standards she had lived by. Instead of reacting, or feeling that she had to respond and be responsible for everything, Anne was aware of how she began to simply listen more. She was learning to live more in the moment. She began to speak her mind, and speak more from the heart. Rather than moving in automatically to ‘fix things’, Anne began to let go of the idea that she had to ‘act’, and so what emerged was a more authentic response when it did come.

During this period Anne and her husband began to explore their spirituality together, which gave Anne a sense of something special they shared together, outside of the kids. She began to set limits and boundaries of her responsibility to others. For instance, she got a cleaning lady. She began to make more space for female friendships, and even took a trip away with friends.

One event stands out for Anne at this time because it seemed to shift her perspective about the level of turmoil in her current life. During a visit to her sister's home, Anne was confronted with her sister's "out of control" alcoholism, which promoted her to intervene in order to help her sister get treatment. The experience left Anne with a sense of perspective and appreciation about her own life. It added more to her understanding of just how her personality and past choices had been shaped by her family of origin. She could also see that the "chaos" she had chosen as an adult wasn't so bad after all. It was liveable, and was actually healthy for her because she was being forced to be less rigid and more human.

As Anne told me her story of mid-life changes, she could clearly see some dominant themes; confronting herself, accepting herself, and changing values. Having felt this confrontation initially by entering a new family, Anne played them out again when she successfully sought a promotion at work, at the age of 43. The same year she was promoted, her mother died. Over the next four years, juggling a demanding career and home life began to take its toll. Anne began to notice she didn't have the physical energy to "do it all." Again, she began to confront values around devoting most of her energy toward people at work, which resulted in having little energy left over for the people who she really cared about. Again, she looked at her need to achieve and be recognised. Now, however, the limits of her physical energy were pushing her to make new choices about what was important to her. She decided to take a sabbatical for several months. She recalls that it was only after she left her job that she realised just how exhausted she had become. She sees that period as one of hibernation: "doing nothing",

reading, reflecting, after which she decided to take a job with less responsibility and hard work.

Meanwhile, Anne reconnected with a couple of friends from her past. This has been a significant event that allowed Anne to practice a more genuine way of being with women friends. It was also part of Anne's process of reviewing past events and choices. In the case of one friend, for instance, Anne had had a falling out over an incident in which Anne, who had always seen herself as too compliant, had stood up for her values. What was important about the way the friendship re-connected was that Anne's friend acknowledged Anne's sense of integrity, and took some responsibility for her own behaviour. What the new friendship symbolises is Anne's successful shift of values, and a way perhaps of integrating the sense of loss felt previously about close female friends.

I think because of the changes in me I'm more willing to accept her as my old, old friend, with all her lumps and bumps. And also because she did take some responsibility, she's been very honest with me. It's more authentic. And, yes, she's completely narcissistic but I still really like her and I really care about happens to her.

Anne says she feels the relationship is more honest because she herself is being more authentic and more direct with her friend than previously. It's as if, by learning to accept herself, she is able to be more of herself with others. Anne notices that self-acceptance in her current view toward her mother, whose death felt more like a "release" than a loss, because "we didn't have a good relationship." The death of her mother seems to have released Anne from having to be the kind of daughter she was in her original family. Now she feels freer to

be herself, and to take her place in the world as a mature woman. She feels she has a more balanced and realistic view of herself, no longer holding on to an image of success, control, perfection and over-responsibility. She no longer needs the validation of others because she has come to know and like herself more. For instance, she remarked that recently she has begun to accept how much she looks like her mother in photographs, which before she resisted doing. It's as if the qualities she rejected in her mother were qualities she also did not like in herself. Now, she is more accepting of that.

I like myself better. Now, I think I just have a more balanced view of myself. I see myself more as somebody who has really a lot of strengths and also some weaknesses and some foibles and some hang-ups. There is more balance because I used to think of myself as a really strong person, and I think that maybe I over-exaggerated that. Because I don't want to think of myself as being vulnerable, and so I wouldn't use that word to describe myself anymore.

For Anne, being in her 40s has been about internal change, shifting values and confronting her past. The vehicle of change came to her in the form of family relationships, which motivated her to know and accept herself more. She feels she has learned to grow up and mature within her new family, because she has learned to take more responsibility for herself, which often means taking less responsibility for others.

I just feel freer now. Freer to be myself. I am much happier now to be a 49 year old woman than I ever was to be a 30 year old woman. That's not to say that I don't have regrets. But I don't have a sense that I missed



something that I have to go back and get anymore.

Anne says she now feels a sense of fortune about her life because she is healthy, remained safe in risk-taking and believes her looks have improved. She also noted that she presently feels a sense of connectedness to the world because she feels more in touch with a broader universal perspective. She has recently been developing a strong and personal relationship with God and has been enjoying work because she has a “broader view of my purpose and role”.

What helped Anne move through her mid-life transition was counselling and having time for herself. Time for reflection was significant after she left her job, and at that time she said she needed to have fewer people in her life. However, at other times she also appreciated being around different women of different ages; in particular, she recalls going to a retreat with a female friend and talking to a woman and her mother about mid-life changes. Friendships were helpful, but in particular for Anne, restoring continuity by reconnecting with old friends was very significant in helping her feel her life was whole again.

### **Common Themes of Meaning**

From comparing accounts emphasising each woman's unique perspective and experience, a common pattern of transition was identified. The progression from initial chaos, cycling through denial, loss, letting go, making sense of the past and reorganisation of the self played out in two streams. The internal stream mirrored a struggle within the person that involved confusion, dissatisfaction, grieving, time alone to reflect, and regaining a sense of agency and identity. The external stream reflected actions and reactions to the world around and involved trying to cope with loss, drawing limits and boundaries, regaining a sense of

control, and beginning to actualise possibilities. The two streams are interconnected throughout the transition process.

The common pattern that emerged indicated that a triggering event launches a woman into an initial state of confusion and chaos reflecting a growing discontent with the course of her life. Sensing that what is required is a 'growing oneself up' which involves confronting and letting go of expectations and illusions of her younger self, the initial reaction is one of denial. For some, denial is a kind of survival technique, because the person is not ready to make changes because they may involve too many external demands. A sense of loss accumulates to the point where it can no longer be avoided. Some losses are tangible, such as the loss of physical energy, while others are deeper and more internal, such as the loss of self as a young woman. Experiencing loss was a necessary aspect of a sense of letting go. In particular, letting go of others' expectations of them, long-held dreams or ideals, letting go of the idea of being responsible for others' well-being, letting go of destructive or inauthentic relationships. Sensing that old ways of being in the world, such as the sexy young woman, victim, or nice girl, were no longer appropriate, the participants felt a need to begin to respond from a more honest and authentic place. There was a sense that letting go of external validation was actually a relief, because it allowed them to connect to and broaden their own inner visions. They were aware of a shift away from feeling responsible toward others, and taking more personal responsibility for themselves and their lives. They began to move toward more self-exploration. An awareness of time left to live prompted a need to take stock of themselves and their past in order to move forward as adult women. As the

participants made choices and continued to take action, whether it was writing a letter of dismissal to an abusive parent, or deciding to re-kindle an old friendship, they were aware of acting from the stance of being a less rigid, more authentic and likeable adult.

### **Theme One: A Sense of Chaos and Discontent**

When asked to look back to how the mid-life transition began, each participant recalled a particular triggering event, such as menopausal mood swings, illness, death, a husband's affair or a new relationship. In retrospect, these women viewed such events as the initial point of a trajectory that pulled them along an exhausting yet liberating path of internal and external change. As the story of transition unfolded for each, I was beginning to see common threads within a patchwork. For instance, similar themes emerged as each participant gave a title to the initial chapter of their dramas: "The Snake Pit", "Chaos Reigns", "The Black Period", "The Horror and The Exaltation" ; "The Dark Period". As one participant recalled; "I think I would just call it *Chaos*. I mean, there were some wonderful times in there as well. But it was just – I felt just totally out of control. Completely out of control." What these headlines seem to capture is a common and overwhelming feeling of confusion and discontent. This is what one woman remembers:

...a lot of dissatisfaction was arising, which I really didn't understand. I externalised it and thought 'oh this relationship isn't very good', 'I don't like my job'. Now when I look back I can see that my body and my psyche kind of were working together and it was time to let go of some things, but I didn't quite know how to figure that out at the time.

The sense that something was wrong was not welcomed by women who had reached a certain point in their lives of feeling competent and in control, as one participant conveyed.

...oh, I think a great deal of confusion, and, and a great deal of, um...very much that feeling that Gail Sheehy talks about as 'The Turbulent Forties', but also that feeling that I should be able to cope. I'm supposed to be an adult. I'm supposed to know what to do.

For three of the women, the feeling of dis-ease was complicated by menopausal symptoms which had not been diagnosed. This only added to their feelings of being isolated. In the words of one participant: "I thought I was just losing my mind. And I started forgetting words, and forgetting people's names. Just real anxiety, poor responses." Looking back, these women wondered how much of their stress was due to hormones and how much to life situations that just didn't seem to be working for them.

There was very much an *internal* flavour permeating the experience of change for these women at this time. Discontent and confusion seemed to converge underneath, moving as if toward some terrifying underground vortex, while on the surface the status quo was maintained with a vengeance. Fear of where this unruly flow of discontent might take these women seemed to add to the tension and dis-equilibrium as they invested extra energy to resist any signs that things weren't going well. For some, being busy gave the illusion of being in control. Despite a sense of overwhelming fatigue or even illness, most maintained a busy schedule of work, family, volunteer work, and more exercise, angrily wiping away tears while going to the next meeting or facing the children when

they came home from school. Any signs that things might be going wrong seemed to be ignored, at least initially, whether it was a crippling illness or accident, dramatic changes at work, or menopausal symptoms that seemed debilitating. In retrospect, one woman saw herself as being so busy running away from the darkness of the tunnel that it distracted her from seeing that there had actually been light at the end of it all along. It was as if the thought of standing still long enough to feel the discontent seemed too uncomfortable to bear.

Yet as time progressed, the participants began to feel dragged down by the weight of it all. It was hard to contend with the sustained incongruity between their external behaviour and internal experience. External life was supposed to be the same, yet more and more it seemed to be a deception, a veneer that was striving to contain an internal life that was swirling around and moving into uncharted territory. Yet they felt powerless to change -- in part it seemed because change implied more external demands, more financial pressure, or more responsibility. Most were already stretched to keep up to present demands. The more they felt dissatisfied with the status quo, the more overwhelmed and helpless they felt about changing it.

Fear of confronting external changes seemed to be the tip of the iceberg. Most of the women expressed a kind of 'knowing' that something deeper and more internal was summoning them to shift the course of their lives. That knowing seemed to heighten the fear of allowing it to surface. One participant said she felt powerless to change because she needed to "protect this vulnerable place" inside. "It took me a long time to move out of that, to reclaim my own power and my own ability to make a difference in my own life." Another

participant who felt she was particularly good at erecting defences said that in retrospect part of her resistance to change was against the need to confront herself:

...to go inward, and to really face some, you know, not even horrible places in myself, just places we don't want to look at, you know. We don't want to look at our vulnerabilities and our powerlessness and our weakness and our faults. I mean, it's human not to do that.

Many of the women remembered feeling very stretched and exhausted during this time but rather than acknowledge their fatigue, they continued to try to keep up to demands. Some seemed to push for more challenges, as a kind of reaction to a sense that things were getting out of control. During this initial phase, taking on more seemed to be easier than drawing limits and choosing less. One participant remembered feeling "like I was dancing as fast as I can, pretending I was in my 20s, not my 40s." For some, the exhaustion was compounded by physical symptoms such as menopausal hot flashes, or by limited physical energy due to illness or ageing. There was a sense of feeling disconnected from the self, as if one part was observing the other going about doing the daily tasks. A couple of participants talked about living in their heads, disconnected from their psyches and their true feelings. And although they knew they were not experiencing themselves as whole people, acting out of the head at least appeared to give them a sense of control, like some kind of survival instinct. This was reflected in the words of one of the participants in relation to her 40s:

...and some of the things, through that kind of turbulence, you know you don't like yourself very much. You know, you don't like what you're doing, you don't like what you feel you're becoming, but you don't see

how to get out of it, and that creates more stress.

For most at this point in the transition process, relationships only seemed to add to the stress. Many felt dragged down by the demands of others, such as children or spouses. Although some still felt the need to continue to do for others, they didn't feel they had the resources anymore. This seemed to contribute to feelings of irritability; not liking the isolation yet not finding comfort in present relationships.

Eventually, or so their stories went, something had to give. One woman claimed it was she who created a crisis in order to push herself into something other than dissatisfaction. Others saw themselves as having to finally respond to some external change being forced on them, such as a debilitating illness, depression, a husband's affair, moving house, or being fired at work. These external changes would continue to move in tandem with internal stirrings in a kind of symbiotic dance, such that it was hard to tell who was leading at any given time.

### **Theme Two: The Profound Sense of Loss**

Adding to the vortex of confusion and turbulence for the participants was a strong sense of loss, and in retrospect most could see multiple losses. These losses included the loss of physical health and beauty due to ageing or sickness; the loss of physical energy to do everything they or others expected them to be doing; the loss of important relationships through death or divorce; the loss of fertility; the loss of youth; the loss of an ideal of a life that one had strived for and would not be attained or could not be maintained. Early in the transition process these losses seemed to be piling up and adding to the confusion and stress, yet

initially they were hard to acknowledge. Participants seemed to find different ways of coping. Feelings of powerlessness or denial, for some, appeared to be a defence against allowing themselves to succumb to feelings of grief or rage relating to these losses. One participant recalled being so busy she didn't have time to deal with the losses piling up: "When you are busy you are not able to let these things go." Eventually the sense of loss became too burdensome and could no longer be avoided. There seemed to be a need to acknowledge and experience the pain rather than block it in order to move forward and allow for something new and satisfying to come in to their lives.

One thing that resonated for me as I began to look for common themes in individual stories was that there seemed to be a continuum of losses, many of which were not acknowledged or grieved at the time, but in retrospect were seen as such. In many cases there was one particular event or change that brought things to a head. For instance, Soleil, who had undergone many gynaecological interventions and who had worked hard to avoid menopausal surgery, did not talk about loss or grieving until she had the final, menopausal surgery that she had been fighting hard to avoid. It was after this surgery that she recalled a process of active grieving. She asked for permission to change her own dressings in the hospital, which was her way of nurturing the body she had come to view as her enemy.

Some of the women remembered having delayed feelings, such as being sad and missing their mother on Mother's Day. Or in some cases, delayed feelings of previous losses were felt with one event in a chain that could no longer be ignored, as if the dam finally burst. For example, when Caroline was fired,



she recalled finally feeling the intensity of emotions that had been accumulating around such events as her debilitating illness, a house fire, and her mother's terminal cancer. Awareness of feelings of rage or grief seemed to seep through as something happened that finally couldn't be ignored, whether it was being fired, as in the case of Caroline, or not being as physically strong or well as expected, being forced to confront certain feelings, or being in a situation where they were finally alone enough to not be able to escape their feelings. Christine remembered finally confronting the loss of her dream of having a 'normal family' once she had actually sold her family home and was living alone. Having the time and space to cry and feel sad, as well as writing about her experience and about her family history seemed to help her move through this loss.

What pervaded their stories was a theme of losing a dream. Some of the women, like Caroline and Anne, had held up the illusion that it was possible to "have it all" as a career woman, wife and mother. Christine's dream was to have a happy family life and to be the perfect mom to her children. Eventually the reality of their lives forced them to confront the illusions they had held for years. Caroline, for instance, recalls she became disillusioned after being fired by another woman, especially since she had held on to the ideal of being the 'successful female corporate manager' and felt a responsibility to be an example to other women. Once it hit her that others didn't share the same sense of loyalty, it seemed possible to move away from false ideals and eventually begin to explore options that were more authentic and realistic. For Christine, the idea of confronting her husband's affair not only meant the loss of her marriage, but the end of her lifelong goal of attaining the ideal family that had alluded her in her

own childhood.

Most of the women talked about the loss of the illusion of eternal youth and good health. One thing that could not be ignored was how the limits of their physical energy were breaking down their present life structure. The women found it hard to keep up the illusion of 'dancing' as fast as they did in their 20s. For instance, Anne had successfully sought a promotion at work, shortly after entering a relationship in her personal life that involved children. She became aware of "having only so much energy" to dispense to everyone in her life. While on the surface it appeared that she was "having it all", inside she knew she had little energy left at the end of the day for the relationships that mattered the most to her. She made a choice finally to let go of her high status job, knowing that the choice would mean the loss of something meaningful in her life.

In reflecting on their experiences, the women recalled how they initially coped with this sense of loss. For instance, several participants remembered pushing themselves to include more physical exercise in their lives during their 40s as a way of coping with bodily changes. While at the time it seemed that working at fitness was one way they could gain some control and feel better about themselves, in retrospect they could see it may have been a way to fight back the loss of youth and physical vigour. Caroline remembers specifically beginning to exercise for the first time in her 40s because she was "fighting back the body change" which she resented then and still resents now. Another participant, Ruth, began to exercise rigorously in her early 40s as future protection against looking older and gaining weight. She feared "letting go." She lamented "all you have going for you is physical. Letting go of this concept that if people thought you

were attractive you were worthwhile.” The threat of an older body seemed to hang like a shadow over their shoulders, silently driving them on to exercise more, quit smoking, or change their diets. Ruth, who said that so much of her identity had been defined by her physical beauty, remembered feeling uncomfortable when a friend remarked how much she did not want to become invisible as an older woman with an unattractive body.

There must have been a struggle because I was working out several times a week. And so, holding on to the physical, to as much of the beauty as I could. There was a lot of turmoil in the 40s. I knew I was losing physically. I knew I was losing the way I looked which I had always put a lot of value on, but I was gaining so much more.

Like many of the women, in retrospect Ruth did not frame her experience as a loss, because she was working to replace it with something more meaningful for her, a new identity based on her social skills, not her physical prowess. It was as if her psyche or their psyches were working internally by subconsciously acknowledging the changes in physical stamina and youthfulness, which then prompted external action in the form of new directions and choices. Another participant, Soleil, who had suffered debilitating illness, had to give up her area of work due to heavy physical demands. Yet she did not frame it as a loss because she sought less stressful work that was still very meaningful and used her skills.

Withdrawing seemed to be an instinctive coping strategy when it came to responding to many losses for the women in this study. Some began to view their home as their sanctuary; others found a quiet place in their heads to retreat to. Initially, it may have been possible for these women to push aside feelings of loss

because they were too busy coping with increasing demands associated with these losses. For instance, Soleil remembers feeling stressed and busy just trying to go about the demands of daily life, given she was in pain or had to arrange for others to do things for her she wasn't able to due to illness. Similarly, although Christine sensed that her current family structure was being threatened, she continued to make herself very busy rebuilding a new life structure as a way to cope with the impending loss of her role as wife and the loss of the financial provider of the family. Eventually, when the reality of the losses began to be felt, many of the women remembered having the need to withdraw and seek time alone because they felt numb and couldn't perform in the outside world in the same way. Some became depressed, felt empty, and found it hard to get out of bed. Looking back, though, they all appreciated having time to themselves to reflect and experience the feelings around the loss. Withdrawing allowed them to be less preoccupied with the busy-ness of others' demands. It also eventually allowed the weight of feelings to be felt and processed, which some did by writing poetry, writing in a journal, doing art therapy, reading and/or reflecting. Learning to live in the moment was another way these women coped with a sense of loss. There was a feeling that they had entered new territory without a map. Living from moment to moment allowed them not to be overwhelmed by what was gone or about to go.

Such alone time also allowed for the necessary task of grieving. They were able to finally sob, rage, or write angry words in a journal. Christine recalled living with anger and grief for years before allowing herself to feel it. When asked what advice she would give to others experiencing such a sense of loss she said:

Allow yourself to feel the pain. Because until you do you can't work your way through it. 'Cause I blocked for years, and until I could actually get in there and feel it.... It's hard. It's not something that is easy to do, but it really, I think really it's the only way to feel it and come out of it. Because any time I felt it come on, because it's scary, because it's so rotten and painful, I would block it. And until I learned to allow myself to cry and cry and then write--- for me, that was my way of working through it. And physically, I felt the pain.

Feeling the pain was necessary in order to come to terms with losing dreams, ideals, youth, or important relationships. Working through loss was a complex process for these women. At a subconscious level, they seemed aware of losing something or things that were very important, hence the initial reaction to cope by avoiding, denying or being busy. It was only once they worked through the losses by having the time and space to feel them and grieve could they move forward in the transition process.

### **Theme Three: A Sense of Needing to Let Go**

A significant aspect in the women's journeys through their mid-life transition involved the sense of needing to let go of past hopes, dreams, expectations and self-perceptions so they could be free to reconstruct more authentic and satisfying lives. Experiencing loss seemed to be a necessary aspect of "letting go"; letting go of destructive or inauthentic relationships; letting go of past ways of responding; and letting go of the idea of trying to be all things to all people, of perfectionism and of 'shoulds'. For the women in this study this appeared to be a particularly salient struggle given the importance of relationships

to them and considering their socialisation to take care of and feel responsible for others. The women described their struggles to let go of the image of being nice girls, sexy youthful women, or victims. Their stories were filled with language that rang of a prescription that to be a woman was to please others before they pleased themselves and to be responsible for others, trying to be all things to everyone. As one participant put it: "I always tried to be whoever they wanted me to be. And I guess I found out who I was. And that was difficult, to fight for my own individuality." One of the deeper aspects of this theme for these women was that the need to let go implied reaching for a deeper level of honesty about themselves in a way they had not experienced before. For the women in this study, this deeper connection to themselves, which came about as they experienced internal and external changes, became a very meaningful surprise.

As these women became aware that old ways of responding were not working, either because they didn't feel authentic, or because it was no longer appropriate to act like younger women, they began to make choices. The reality of getting older meant that there wasn't time or energy to do everything and be everything. Questions about who and what was important in their lives, and questions about which relationships were good for them seemed to fuel this movement to let go. For instance, relationships that lacked authenticity, honesty or depth were scrutinised and in many cases let go. Here's how one participant talked about her struggle to give up a destructive relationship:

It's like having a great lifestyle but maybe being an alcoholic and then all of a sudden giving up the alcohol and it's a big shift in your life, and you're free. Free to carry on with your life.

The sense that it was no longer appropriate to respond as they did seemed to indicate a need to respond from a more authentic place rather than from the usual, prescribed place. As well, the cost of trying to be the perfect woman or trying to please everyone else was one these women were no longer willing or able to make. In retrospect, they could see this as making a stand for themselves, trusting that things would work out. Interestingly, one fear that kept some of them from letting go of the image of a younger woman seemed to be the fear of not knowing what place to take in our culture as an older woman. There was an underlying feeling that to be considered visible or worthwhile they had to be physically attractive and youthful, and that to step away from that was to disappear into a vacuum. Facing these fears, for many participants, meant coming to terms with others' expectations of who they really were and what they should be able to do. In the words of one participant:

It was a time, I guess, of getting a lot more honest with myself. Coming to terms with my physical capabilities, this is what I think is really important. I didn't have the energy. I couldn't run around. I had always moved quickly and done a lot. Couldn't do it any more, and it was very difficult for me to adjust to that. So, letting go of that.

Letting go, under these circumstances, was a big step that often meant acting in a different way, taking on a different image. For instance, a couple of women talked about dressing for comfort rather than sexual appeal. Another decided to stop dyeing her hair.

Some were letting go of old images that they were stupid, incompetent, or "too nice." Taking action, such as speaking out, quitting a job, or taking on a new

challenge at work or in relationships, seemed to give them confidence to move away from old roles or old images. The fear of moving into nothingness as an ageing female was mitigated by experiencing themselves as valuable in other dimensions. The sense that continuing to look 'out there' for validation was no longer workable, combined with a growing sense of inner confidence, seemed to lay the groundwork for a shift toward something more internal and authentic.

Letting go also meant expressing feelings—of anger, bitchiness, vulnerability. In other words, the process of letting go seemed to entail letting go of their usual ways of responding. Several women talked about how relieved they felt to finally get rid of the 'shoulds' and the internalised expectations of others. Letting go meant giving up a sense of control, allowing some of the chaos in, which was not comfortable. Yet having lived under a cloak of responsibility for so long, the notion of not having to respond freed them to sit back and watch more. Here's how one participant summed up her forties:

You're getting older. What are you going to do—you're going to have to make some changes and, you think 'let's stay healthy' so you work out. Let's feel the pain of letting go, but let's feel the relief of what's coming into your life and the happiness of what's coming into your life. I knew I was losing physically but what I was gaining was so much more.

As painful as the process of letting go of old images and self-perceptions was, it left these women feeling lighter. One woman said she felt freer to explore and "look inside myself to see what I need to feed my soul." In their 40s, the loss of youthful energy or deaths of parents or friends added another dimension to the process of letting go. A new awareness of time left to live was emerging in their



psyches, a reminder that they did not have forever to connect with what was truly meaningful to them. Deaths and / or losses were also seen by these women as a release from a way of being in the world that was no longer working for them. Letting go of the need for external validation seemed to be a relief as it created more space for these women to expand their inner visions and explore themselves in a new way.

#### **Theme Four: Making Sense of The Past**

All of the participants had entered what they called a process of self-discovery that involved revisiting old wounds, friendships, patterns learned in childhood, and coming to terms with their families of origin. Having experienced a sense of relief over losses and having begun to shed old expectations or illusions of themselves, they felt compelled to take stock of the past in order to move into the future as a mature person. The women talked about needing to understand how their past choices, individual personalities or coping styles had evolved in early adulthood so that they could put some aspects of those things to rest. This involved some sorting out of which values and parts of themselves they wanted to bring forward and which to disregard or let go of. Taking time to reflect and being in counselling or seeking out some other form of support was helpful. Looking back, their stories held a tone of curiosity, a willingness to discover how or why that young woman had become a victim, a controller, a peacekeeper, a seductress—whatever rigid patterns or roles they felt they had developed from their families of origin and beyond. Oftentimes this involved letting go of the image of the *Ideal Parents* or the *Ideal Family*. Or for those who had already

distanced themselves from what they viewed as dysfunctional parents, there was a sense of wanting to understand and in some cases forgive parents who they now realised had their own issues and problems.

Changes in long-held images and ideas of parents oftentimes mirrored changes in their own self-perceptions. They could begin to forgive their own imperfections, responses and choices, because they could understand where they came from. Or they could let go of the hold a parent had on them because they could make the link of how their parents' issues and expectations had helped to shape their own personalities. This understanding opened up new choices and possibilities around the ability to respond differently or develop new aspects of their personalities. Coming to terms with old hurts and unresolved issues from the past helped these women to accept themselves in a different way. Having made sense of past choices, they were able to be more honest and realistic in their expectations of themselves in the future, as women entering their 50s and beyond.

One aspect of making sense of the past was to revisit old friendships and old wounds from past relationships. For those who were able to revisit such relationships, because these people were still alive or nearby, the opportunity to challenge and make sense of past choices was sought out. There was a new awareness in these experiences of being more selective, of going deeper and of choosing what was worth holding on to. They became aware of being able to be more honest and accepting of others' and their own weaknesses. These new initiatives seemed to come from a more adult, authentic place, perhaps because the 'child' was growing up. There was a sorting out of which values and messages from past relationships would be held on to, and which were no longer

valid. For instance, Christine realised that she had held on to a fear of being on her own because of internalised messages from her parents that people who lived alone lived desperate lives. Anne got back in touch with an old friend with whom she had had a falling out, and has resumed what she described as a “more honest” relationship with her. Others began to see that their sense of perfectionism had developed out of someone else’s expectations of what it was to be a good girl or successful woman. It was time for them to begin to live by their own values. This exploration seemed to emanate from a more grown-up place, as if the maturing woman was now wanting to come to terms with her younger self.

The concept of responsibility loomed large at this time. Several women talked about taking more responsibility for their lives, and this seemed like a new experience. Taking an active interest in who they really are—what their values and interests are, apart from those dictated by past scripts or expectations. Responsibility had different connotations. For women who had known all too well how to be responsible to others because they held the experience of being socialised to look outward, responsibility was a new experience. In fact, the shift appeared to be taking less responsibility for others—not taking on everything and everyone—saying “No” and setting limits about how much to do for others. It had to do with taking charge of your own self-awareness, finding out what you want to do, and moving toward claiming your own power, as a person at the centre of your life. This involved a movement toward not blaming others for how your life was going, whether it was parents, children or partners. Taking responsibility for knowing yourself also implied stretching and broadening how the self would be in the world. Here’s how one participant described her move toward taking more

responsibility in mid-life:

I see it as not taking care of things because I am good at that. It's, well...response ability. When I look at the word it's ability to respond. It's not about taking care of stuff which I knew how to do. It was about how I had to face how limited my responses were. I would react in a habitual way. Seeing that there are other ways to respond, to react.

Coming to terms with past choices or perceived weaknesses and disappointments allowed these women to see their choices as having some meaning, which released them from continuing to blame or degrade themselves for unmet dreams or so-called bad decisions. For instance, Christine was able to view divorce as a gift of a new life, and Soleil was able to see how her struggle with health problems had made her more empathic and human, and better in her job. Changes, as painful as they had been, had born gifts, in the form of skills and strengths that now seemed to make life richer. They were re-framing so-called past failures or disappointment as strengths or things that had given purpose to their lives. For instance, one woman who felt sad about not being able to have children due to menopausal surgery, talked about the 'paradox' of her situation, of giving up having children but gaining her health and her life. Having invested love and energy into other friends' children, she now believes that had she had her own children, she might have missed these relationships that have become dear to her. As painful as this looking back process could be, it held promise. As one participant recalled, this review process was like "a lingering sense of Hell, but there was also a good side, that I was getting back into my own life."

There seemed to be new energy to learn new skills and behaviours, and

confidence to try things out. The experience of surviving an emotional storm seemed to reassure them that it was possible to make a move in another direction, even though it was uncharted territory. There was a kind of trusting in themselves that things would turn out well. As one participant, Caroline, put it: “Sometimes you have to have a certain degree of confidence to start poking around in your own psyche. And maybe that’s part of mid-life, too. You feel like you can explore some of your feelings without falling to pieces.” Most talked about reading, learning to mediate, joining support groups, taking courses—all congruent with this journey of self-discovery. Participants at this point had a sense that, for instance, if they weren’t taught to nurture as a child in their families of origin, it was still possible to learn it now, as an adult. One participant framed her learning as walking through her fears:

Well I have learned that once you – if you recognise fear. It’s like a doorway. If you put your foot through it, you’re having so much fun having done that, that the other foot goes through the door, and it’s over. Then you’re not scared.

Another participant remembers a process of deep reflection. Being aware of what was not working in her life and letting go of some old traits. Then becoming very focused in the present because the future still seemed unbearable:

It was a matter of waiting. I spent a lot of time being quiet, alone, and just going into myself and seeing what would emerge, and being scared to death. And trusting that I could do it, having some kind of faith in myself that I can’t have gone through this for naught.

This inner journey of coming to accept their lumps and bumps seemed to

broaden their responses and their sense of potential. A new view was opening up, the view of someone who sees herself at the helm of her future life course.

### **Theme Five: Reorganisation of the Self**

The last theme, Re-organisation of the Self, held a sense of resolution of the conflicts and struggles the participants had experienced in mid-life. Having let go of old expectations which seemed to provide the space for allowing other parts of themselves to come forward, they felt more balanced and integrated. The women who participated in this study had identified themselves as having gone through some significant changes in mid-life and were now satisfied with their lives. When asked how it turned out for them, the theme of their responses was feeling more connected to themselves. They liked themselves more not only because they had come to connect with who they really were inside, but because they had found a voice that would convey that person out to the world. As one participant put it:

My relationship with myself has changed. I am much more mellow, not quite so reactive. I speak up right away if things are bothering me, and let go of things more quickly. I am more philosophical.

Another participant said she felt free to be herself. Having let go of the idea that she has to be responsible for everything she now has the space to try out her own voice:

So I've just sort of let go and I just sit back and watch more and listen a little bit more and try to be a little slower to respond and then when I respond just say what's on my mind. I just feel freer now. Freer to be myself.

Having let go of previous expectations and ideals of their younger years, these women began to speak from a deeper, more authentic place. Letting go of trying to please others or do for others freed them up to be themselves, to speak their minds, to laugh as well as cry. They seemed to accept themselves more and had a more realistic view of themselves, as one participant explains:

I like myself better. I think I just have a more balanced view of myself. I see myself more as somebody who has really a lot of strengths and also some weaknesses and some foibles and some hang-ups. But um (pause) I think there is more balance because I used to think of myself as a really strong person and I think that maybe I over-exaggerated that, because I didn't want to think of myself as vulnerable. And so I wouldn't use that word to describe myself anymore.

There was a sense of integrating previously neglected parts of the self. Those who had defined themselves as strong and coping, could now see that they were actually not as strong as they thought, yet they liked the vulnerable, soft side of themselves. Others who viewed themselves as stupid, or "too nice", were able to connect to other parts of themselves and acted out of those parts, which brought forward skills and behaviours they hadn't appreciated in themselves before. This exploration of previously unknown or denied aspects of the self broadened these women's image of themselves as being more complete. Caroline, for example, felt fuller because she had begun to explore her feminine side through volunteer work with women. Christine, Anne and Ruth have begun to explore their spirituality. This is how one participant described the process of finding her voice:

Transition to me is really a time when you've gone through something and you need time to just let it sink in. It comes into the head, or it comes into the heart, so the head the heart and the body kind of need to go 'clunk'. It's the only way I can describe it. Like we figure things out in our head, most of us, some people feel thing strongly in the heart, and it was almost like my heart had closed down, had shut down, and I needed to find my own voice. Just finding another part of myself. It was to find the woman, the adult woman.

This new confidence seemed to convince them that they were actually more balanced and more complex than they had imagined. As one participant put it:

I see myself as a little wiser, little more mature, more grown up. I see myself—you know a lot of women say oh I still think I'm 25 or 30. I don't. It's like I'm glad to be the age I am because I like the benefits. I don't like the aches and pains, but I like the internal changes.

As these women moved into their 50s, there was a sense of a changed self-image, not accepting the cultural prescription of being an "old lady", but of taking on a new image of a mature and complex person who is looking forward to more growth. They embraced what role models there were of older, active women, women they would like to become. One woman, for instance, in viewing a recent photograph of herself after her mother died, could finally accept that she resembled her mother physically, something she resisted seeing for years, because of her personal issues with her family of origin. There was a new sense of being present in the world, of taking your place as a mature woman. The losses they had



endured in mid-life, whether it was the death of a parent, illness, loss of health or divorce, seemed to have opened up the space to take more personal responsibility and 'grow themselves up'.

They were able to see their lives on a continuum of change. They had endured the unsettling feeling of not being in control, and now it did not seem to have the same importance. The most painful changes seemed to be behind them, yet they embraced more subtle and internal changes ahead. Many, for instance, had begun to explore their spirituality in an active way, studying Buddhism, joining an organised religion, wanting to help others. They saw themselves as having more potential than ever, despite an awareness of their own mortality. As one participant put it:

It's staggering to think of myself in a few short years being 65. And, whereas when I was younger, I just had the endless sense of time in front of me and time moving very slowly and I just feel more present and part of the world now. When I was younger I experienced myself as much more in my own world. I mean, it's been a very internal process but it's got more to do with things flowing through me rather than me just taking things in and churning them around and saying 'oh, now I'm 30!'.

They felt strongly that they had created something new, which felt like an accomplishment. They felt in charge of their lives in a way they had not experienced before, which emanated a feeling that they had connected to their own power. There was a move toward more autonomy and individuality yet at the same time there seemed to be a deeper connection to relationships with others. A sense of achieving interdependence, that it was possible to have freedom and

independence and also be connected to others in an honest and authentic way. Release from old illusions and fantasies about romance or 'perfect' relationships allowed these women to enter into relationships with the authority and presence of an adult rather than a young girl. They were able to accept others for who they were rather than projecting their own ideals of how the relationship should fulfil a need. Being more centred in themselves allowed them to be more present in the relationship and more willing to set limits and demands that came from the heart. Several participants also talked about being more selective in their relationships, which has simplified their lives:

I say *No* more. I'm much more pernickety with who I spend time with. I need a lot of solitude. And having more realistic expectations about what is appropriate right now. I need periods of rest and I just take them without apology, without the guilt, and that's taken quite awhile to come to terms with that. I think for women that's a huge issue. Just giving ourselves permission to slow down a bit.

What these women had confronted was the idea that to be your own person as a woman in our culture is to be labelled 'selfish', yet their confidence seemed to come from moving through that and claiming their right to their autonomy. They felt more self-sufficient because they had taken personal responsibility and heard their own voices. As one participant put it:

You have a bigger place to stand. You feel you have a little bit more control of your own space and your own time and your own life, I guess. Talking to other mid-life women, I think it's more of a personal change. They are much more able to be an entity unto themselves. And not feel

so guilty.

What these women share, it seems, is a sense of personal integration and a feeling that this has been a significant achievement. This has been an unexpected and pleasant surprise because culturally women have been cast in darkness during mid-life. There was a sense of confronting cultural prescriptions of what it is to be a mature woman in our society. Although they were still aware of the external negatives about being older, they felt grounded in having achieved something significant within themselves. Here's how one woman described herself today:

That I feel capable, and I think, that I require less validation. I don't think we ever get away from requiring some, but if my husband forgets to say that I look okay, it doesn't matter. I still have, and I think for a lot of mid-life women, I resent the bodily change. I do. And I probably always will. I'll fight them but I'm not winning. But, I don't resent them deeply, personally. It's not going to do me in.

The sense that they had connected more to themselves and trusted themselves more had led these women to actively pursue meaningful work, to pursue their passion. Previously there were limitations about going back to school, taking courses, trying volunteer work, or taking a new career direction. Limitations that usually had to do with others' demands. Now they were just doing it, not knowing what the future would bring, but feeling positive about it nonetheless. As one participant explained:

I think I have more potential. I have the ability to do anything I want to do. And I don't think ten years ago I really felt that way. And I also feel, I don't have to be what anyone else wants me to be. And I think that's

the biggest change. You go through the daughter, the wife, the mother, the manager, you know, all those different roles.

Although those roles may still be there, she now feels that she can choose how much to respond to others' demands of her in her roles. This resonated with other participants who said they felt freed from the rigidity of acting out through various roles of mother, daughter, wife, and/or professional because they had learned to connect to a deeper sense of themselves which prompted them to bring more of themselves to all those roles.

This integration of parts of the self led to a feeling of lightness. Many described a sense of finding their true voice and their inner power. The delight of this was a feeling that they felt stronger in relationships because they had a sense of themselves as individuals but also enjoyed interdependence. While most participants felt they had made significant steps toward fulfilling their passion, one participant felt she was still exploring in the realm of her career. Like the others, though, she was aware that her life was many-faceted, and there was a satisfaction that she had come to a kind of watershed as she moved out of her forties:

So I feel at the helm of the next generation now, and I feel ready to take that on. And I feel a kind of confidence, and I feel quite good about that. I don't have any sense that I've missed something. So I can just understand it as a life trajectory, I guess and now I'm kind of here, past the mid-point. To me it looks like the best part is stretching out in front of me. Very nice feeling.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The research question posed in this study was: *How do women make a successful mid-life transition?* The focus of this chapter is to address the significance of the research findings, comparing them to the literature discussed in Chapter Two. Implications for future research and counselling practice will also be discussed; in particular how the findings of this research relate to mid-life women who experience a transition.

#### Theoretical Implications

The present research concerns the commonalities of meaning for women who experienced a mid-life transition. It potentially adds to the psychological literature on models of transition and in particular on the mid-life transition for women. The results are theoretically relevant to models of developmental transitions that describe a movement from an initial sense of denial, to a need to experience loss and let go of hopes or expectations in order to reach a sense of integration and renewal (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1984; 1981). For instance, the findings appear to be consistent with Bridges' (1980) assertion that a sense of integration cannot be achieved without experiencing a period of loss and confusion and a letting go of 'old things' both internally and externally. The findings are also similar to Schlossberg's (1991;1984) model of bio/psycho/social transition in which a sense of discontinuity and disruption of old expectations leads to new assumptions about the self and the world. Certainly, the women in this study felt that their mid-life

transition precipitated changes in roles, relationships and behaviours, which resonates with Schlossberg's theory of transition.

Having made a certain link of these results to models of transition, such models (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1991; 1984; 1981) tend to be general in their description of experiences across the adult life cycle, and as such are not concerned with the meanings and aspects relating to mid-life which was the focus of the current study. The results of this study provide support for Mercer's (1989) research that was specifically about transitions in a woman's life. She concluded that the developmental potential of transitions emerges from a process of meaning-making such that losses are re-framed as growth. The research findings resemble Mercer's findings that losses in mid-life can be liberating as women move toward more individuation and autonomy and begin to see themselves as less rigid and having more potential.

These findings also provide support for the notion that women appear to change important aspects of identity in mid-life (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Apter, 1995; Helson & McCabe, 1994). In particular, this research seems to support Apter's (1995) assertion that some women in mid-life go through a process of a shift from being defined externally to connecting more deeply to themselves. In the absence of any positive role models of a healthy confident mature woman in our society, women feel free to create their own, based on an inner vision. This was certainly apparent in the participant's stories. Although they articulated an initial fear about not having a place as a mature woman in North American society, this concern seemed to be mitigated by a kind of trusting themselves at a deeper level that they could create it.

Not surprisingly, this appears to be an extension of Levinson's (1996) assertion that women in their 40s feel frustrated and disillusioned because in the midst of questioning who they are and what they want for themselves, they discover there is not a senior place for them in our society. Levinson interviewed women while they were in the middle of change and as such were experiencing unresolved confusion. The women in the current study identified themselves as already having gone through the mid-life transition and in retrospect had found ways to work through the frustrations around their sense of identity and self-worth. As they shed old illusions of themselves, they were able to explore new possibilities. Their feelings of disappointment and loss were mitigated by an inner need to find a differentiated self.

What is also indicated in these findings is the importance of meaning-making and being able to reframe painful experiences as having future potential. All of the participants noted that what helped them to do that was having the support and validation of a counsellor and/or other women experiencing mid-life changes, as well as having time alone to reflect. Unlike a minority of the participants in Apter's (1995) study who did not make a successful mid-life passage, the women in this study indicated they were helped by the idea that they had options in the world. The small sample in Apter's study whose developmental growth was thwarted found the effort or consequences of making change too great to bear, burying their impulses to be guided by their own inner knowledge. These women ended up looking to their youth as the one time of significance in their lives, placing their hopes for continued happiness in the belief that "she will always seem young" (Apter, p.219). The process of change for

women in mid-life involves confronting suppressed wishes and needs, and facing past regrets, compromises and choices. It also involves letting go of past ideals of who or what they should be, in order to move forward and become more confident of their own vision. The majority of those in Apter's study who did feel they had connected to their own vision did so because they were able to manage the anxiety that arose with more self-awareness. They were able to tolerate the newly released knowledge and need to change because they tested the anxiety and discovered a sense of future in the process. Similarly, the six women in this study were making choices and taking action despite the chaos and confusion. This often involved developing something new, whether it was a new skill or new friendships. In some cases, taking action was a way to deal with the loss they appeared to be denying. For instance, Ruth began to exercise more, which led to taking a course to become an instructor. Her initial motivation to exercise more was a way of coping with her ageing body and the loss of physical prowess. There was a sense that she was acting to replace what was being lost.

Apter (1995) found that women emerged through mid-life changes with new skills. My findings are similar. However, I would add that there was a strong sense that the participants in the current study sought out or developed skills, rather than skills simply emerging. For instance, Christine's description of her initial despair and loneliness following the move to a foreign country was juxtaposed by an uplifting story of enthusiasm and determination to sign up for courses and volunteer work she had never done before. Her face lit up as she told the story of how hungry she felt to learn something new. Later, when Christine talked about how she 'lived in denial' of her husband's affair and the threatened



deterioration of family life, she actively sought out paid work. The role of action seemed significant in providing a new sense of confidence or momentum throughout a process that was often confusing or painful. Christine began to make decisions and act out in the world to build a new life structure. This resulted in a new sense of confidence and awareness about herself as she began to master skills in her newly acquired roles as paid employee and student. The same can be said of Sabrina, Soleil and Diane, who all sought to broaden their career skills and knowledge in active ways throughout their 40s.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the strong sense of 'growing yourself up' that is indicated in these findings. For the women in this study, this was a complex process that involved letting go of the idea of being responsible to others, which appears to be a common struggle for many women, in order to take full responsibility for themselves as adults. This resonates with Gould's (1978) findings that for women, the struggle in mid-life is to give up the assumption they need to live by some external authority, whether it is a parent's or a partner's, and learn to live by their own authority. For the women in this study, there was an undercurrent of knowing that they needed to confront themselves existentially in a way they had not been compelled to before. The results are also similar to Anderson and Stewart's (1994) and Apter's (1995) findings that the focal point of mid-life crisis for women appears to be around compromise, because women are socialised to give up their own needs and desires so that we can look after others. In mid-life, the added need to expand the self while staying attached to others can intensify a sense of confusion and frustration. This is similar to the findings in this study that indicate the women moved toward more individuation and

autonomy in mid-life. Apter found that in mid-life, the reality of a woman's life bumps up against the illusions she had held onto that if she compromised and devoted time to others, things would somehow get better. In mid-life, she can no longer hide from choices made and played out, which contributes to the sense of dissatisfaction that sets the track for developmental growth. Although participants in the current study did talk about the importance of making sense of the past, they did not name particular regrets or compromises, possibly because their stories were retrospective and told from the vantage point of living a satisfying life. Apter, on the other hand, interviewed women at various points along the continuum of change, and perhaps captured more readily the full intensity of feelings around disappointment or regret as they were experienced by the women in her study.

One factor that appeared in the current research findings that I did not come across in the literature was the interconnection of mind and body, and how physical changes during mid-life seemed to inform internal reflection and even prompt external change. The participants all talked about how in retrospect, their bodies were informing their inner world, whether it was menopausal irritations, arthritis or just a lack of energy to do everything they once did. The significance of this was that it forced these women to pause, reflect, make value choices and simplify their lives. For instance, most participants said that their ageing bodies and subsequent limits of physical energy began to symbolise a call to focus on what was important because they realised they could not do everything or be all things to all people, as they might have done in their 20s and 30s. Perhaps what is new about this finding is that it reflects a more contemporary departure away from

the traditional view that mid-life changes are tied to a woman's reproductive cycle. Women in this study did not identify menopause or loss of fertility as a key factor in their mid-life changes. Although for one participant the loss of fertility did play a role in how she worked through changes at mid-life, for most the issue was physical limitations due to the ageing process.

The women in this study described a process of internal and external changes in mid-life that took them to a place of contentment in their lives. Somehow they negotiated feelings of confusion, loss, anger, regret and even despair to reach a positive outcome. They indicated that one factor that helped them moved through this process in a satisfactory way was a feeling that they were not alone in their desire to make good use of the future. Buoyed by the support of other women and/or therapists, they were encouraged to move through the losses, feel the pain and continue to trust themselves as they explored and experimented toward the creation of a something new in their lives. Supportive relationships, whether it was a close friendship, a role model or a partner, were also important because when these women began to say 'No' or draw limits the world did not fall apart. Some relationships seemed to deepen and become more meaningful. Those that were let go, such as Soleil's mother or Christine's husband, did not cause the devastation they might have because it seemed these women had already been working to replace the loss with something more meaningful.

It is worth noting that all of the participants in my sample were middle-class, educated women who had the confidence to seek options, perhaps because they were in a financially privileged position and/or because they had all proven

their career competence in the world. Although some still felt 'selfish' for taking the time and space needed to process changes, they all did so nonetheless, displaying a certain level of commitment and determination that may or may not be shared by other women in their 40s. The women in this study were all in a position to afford counselling, the help of support groups and time for reflection, which were all key factors identified in helping to ultimately work through denial and losses and make a satisfying mid-life transition. These interventions helped them to connect to themselves in a meaningful way, to process feelings and to also feel less isolated in their journey.

The role of taking action and making choices seemed to be significant in helping these women move forward positively. The women in this study all expressed a desire to know themselves better and held a sense of trusting that things would work out, despite feelings of confusion or fear of change. They seemed to be able to maintain a sense of balance between feelings of anxiety and a sense of optimism, which was apparent in the way their stories moved forward toward a natural resolution. What is evident in the flow of their individual stories was a natural interplay between streams of internal struggle and turmoil and external actions and reactions. Similar to what Apter (1995) discovered in her study of mid-life women, it seemed that anxiety and self-doubt lifted as the participants of this study began to see the positive results of change such as new skills, good marks at school, validation at work, or new friends.

Perhaps the time and space to reflect helped these women to internalise a sense of trusting their own authority. It also seemed a key aspect in working through the pain of loss and denial, which was necessary to do within this process

of change. This also involved making choices. Caroline chose to refuse work that was not satisfying while continuing to explore and take time for herself. Sabrina made the choice to separate from her partner and had left her full-time job, which gave her space to reflect. It seemed that in making these choices to take time, they were engaging in an act of taking charge of their lives, and acting from a more honest place. The struggle seemed to be whether to continue to be all things to all people or to begin to act in ways that addressed questions they hadn't asked themselves before, such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want?" The process of making these choices seemed to resonate with a desire to be more connected to themselves. Such choices seemed to affirm them, leading to an unexpected gift of liking themselves for who they are, not who others want them to be. They certainly all expressed an enjoyment of discovering a sense of their own power, the success of which was reflected back in the results of various acts and behaviours they tried out in the external world. Perhaps they were able to reframe many of their losses as gains because the process they were engaged in to deal with losses ended up forcing them to think about their lives and themselves in a meaningful way. The process of loss, denial, confronting the self, and making new choices involved the growth of the self and a connection to the self in a way that hadn't been achieved before in their lives.

### **Implications for Counselling**

The potential value of this study for practice lies in part from its focus on an area of research that has hardly been addressed in the literature, namely the *successful* mid-life transition for women. It may be helpful for counsellors to know that the support of individual counselling or being able to share experiences

in groups with other women in mid-life can help make potentially frustrating experiences meaningful. This may serve to break the sense of isolation that, according to women in this study, initially intensified their feelings of confusion and frustration. For two of the participants, the sense of isolation was broken by having older women who served as role models. In one case, a woman in her 70s shared her experience of coping with mid-life changes to a group of younger women. For the younger women this seemed to provide a hopeful way of anchoring their own experience. Counsellors who work with women might find ways to encourage clients to seek out older role models, either through reading stories, seeking out stories of older family members or perhaps through forming intergenerational groups. The findings also indicated that for some individuals, specific interventions such as writing in a journal, meditation, art therapy and writing a family history may be therapeutic. Participants in this study were able to make sense of their experiences by being able to express them in a safe and creative way.

The individual narratives provided in Chapter Four may provide counsellors working with women in mid-life a more comprehensive understanding of the process of change and how for each woman it may be played out in different ways. Although there were common themes of meaning, the vehicle for change differed for the participants. For instance, one woman talked about her experience within the context of her career rather than family, whereas another woman felt her mid-life transition was defined mostly through her relationships with family members. This reflects the diversity of women's lives and experiences, highlighting Schlossberg's (1991; 1984) assertion that transitions

are individual and complex. This diversity of experience prompts a caution to counsellors who work with women that while their experiences may be similar, they are also different. Counsellors might therefore want to help their clients explore what is important to *them* as they negotiate this transition.

All of the women in this study noted the importance of having time and space to reflect and process feelings of loss during mid-life in order to move forward and allow something new and satisfying into their lives. The common themes of meaning highlighted a process of change that involved loss and the need to feel such feelings as anger or sadness. However, many talked about resisting those feelings initially and then experiencing a sense of delayed grief. Initial denial for some had to do with being busy attending to the demands of work and family. Others chose to make themselves busier by taking on exercise or signing up for classes, which at least seemed to give them back some sense of control. Often they were not in a position to confront themselves because it took time and energy to do the psychological work. However, denial did not seem to stop the women in this study from acting in ways that seemed to acknowledge the losses at least subconsciously. Eventually, choices were made to take time off or set limits as they began to confront themselves and their losses. Counsellors who work with women in mid-life may have a better understanding of the complexities of women's lives and help normalise their experiences. One issue to consider is how ready clients are to engage in the painful and important process of grieving and letting go in order to move on. Counsellors may help clients to explore the role of denial and coping strategies and to better understand the choices they may be making around their ability or willingness to do the necessary grief work.

Understanding the chain of events around denial, coping and the need to finally grieve losses might be useful for counsellors who could then help prepare clients for what they may expect to experience.

Many of the participants in this study indicated there was an issue of being assertive about their own needs, which was a struggle because they were used to devoting so much energy to others. Many came to label themselves as 'more bitchy' and 'not so nice' as the only way to stake a claim to their own needs. Counsellors working with women in mid-life may help them explore feelings of guilt they may feel as women around the seemingly conflicting needs to both broaden the self while valuing attachment to others. A particular aspect of being assertive for the women in this study had to do with the importance of exploring other aspects of the self which often resulted in mastering new skills. Counsellors who work with women may want to encourage them to engage in new experiences such as volunteer work or taking a course as one way to increase a sense of confidence and agency.

Finally, several participants mentioned the importance of making sense of the past. For instance, Caroline said that if she had understood more about how her family of origin and the images of ideal parents had shaped her, her mid-life transition might have been easier. Soleil mentioned that an important part of her counselling during mid-life focused on a need to understand how, as a young woman, certain patterns developed. Coming to terms with her past offered her a new sense of hope for the future. This provides support for the value of groups that focus on life review which encourages people to reflect on, and make sense of, past events and choices in order to move forward with a sense of potential.



### Implications for Future Research

The sample in this study was small and it may be useful to continue to refine the themes identified with a larger sample. This study employed the use of retrospective narratives in order to try to capture a process of transition over time. As mentioned, a limitation of this approach is that it may not capture the intensity of feelings or the highlights of certain phases of the transition process. A longitudinal study would address some of these issues, providing perhaps a more in-depth exploration of the process as it is being experienced over two to four years. Future research might also include triangulation, which would involve interviews with significant others whose observations might help to clarify and deepen our understanding of the process of change in mid-life for women. Triangulation might also be accomplished by including other aspects of the mid-life transition within the analysis, such as journal-writing.

The participants of this study were well-educated, heterosexual Caucasian women, all of whom had had a full-time career at some time in their lives. None of the women in this sample could be described as strictly *traditional* as other researchers have defined the term (Apter, 1995; Levinson, 1996); that is, women whose primary work has been raising children. With regard to future research it might be worthwhile to discover whether the accounts and common themes described in this study share similarities to a broader population. This could be accomplished by exploring the process of successful mid-life transition with women of other cultures, lesbian women, homemakers, or women from varying socio-economic classes. For instance, it would be interesting to see if women of colour experienced a similar process of change in mid-life. They may not have

the same struggles around the loss of physical beauty, or the sense of lacking a senior place in a culture that Caucasian women socialised in North American culture appear to have. The issue of letting go of external expectations or external validation may also be different for women of colour. Are there similar issues, for example, around the loss of a youthful and attractive body? Similarly, lesbian women going through mid-life changes may not share the same pressures or experiences as heterosexual women do. Many of the women in this study suggested that it was a struggle to draw limits around taking responsibility for others. It would be interesting to know more about whether these issues were salient to lesbian woman at mid-life, or what other issues they may contend with at this time.

Most participants in this study identified the aspect of support and connection to other women as key factors in negotiating a successful mid-life transition. It might be worthwhile to do some research with a group of women who identify themselves as experiencing mid-life changes. There are several possibilities for exploration. One involves the design of the group, which could simply be a support group approach whereby participants themselves identify key areas for discussion and then evaluate how sharing experiences within a group has helped them. Research might focus on what aspects of the transition process were important to share with others. Another approach might highlight interventions based on one or more of the themes, such as grieving losses or making sense of the past. Such a study would focus on the potential benefits of particular interventions from the participants' point of view. This might help counsellors who work with women to understand what strategies could be helpful in

negotiating mid-life changes.

### **Limitations**

The research on mid-life change for women presented here shares the limitations common to a narrative phenomenological method. The findings are not generaliseable to a population and are exploratory in nature. The narrative phenomenological methodology relies on replication of common results to form a pattern of mid-life transition for women. In this study six participants exhibited common themes in their transition. This does not infer that such a pattern is common to all mid-life women. The sample was small and limited to middle-class Caucasian women with careers. Results refer to the six participants of this study.

The research and findings may be limited by the inability of individual participants to articulate and remember their experience. This is due to the nature of retrospective narratives, because of the limits of trying to capture past experience. Although I argued for retrospective narratives because the method seemed appropriate for capturing process, I became aware during the interviews that for some participants it was hard to articulate strong feelings such as anger or grief from years past.

There may be limits in the researcher's own perspective, in particular because I have identified myself as going through a mid-life transition and may be interpreting others' experiences through my own biases. I know that in the process of transcription of interviews and analysis I often was aware of how certain experiences resonated with my own, which although this enriched the

research process, no doubt shaped my way of analysing others' experiences. I have attempted to minimise my influence of the results by having participants review accounts and confirm their accuracy. I have made an effort to articulate my own involvement in the results of the research so that others may judge the trustworthiness.

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## **APPENDIX B**

### **General Format for Screening Interview**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Sally Halliday and I'm a Masters' student in counselling psychology at U.B.C. I'm doing a study to find out how women successfully make a mid-life transition, in order to help other women do the same. Those who participate in this study will be asked to meet with me two times, for a total of 3 to 4 hours. The first meeting will be the longest, because I'd like to talk to you about your experience of going through a mid-life transition, and getting to a point where you are satisfied with your life. I will also need to audio tape these discussions in order to have an accurate account of what we talked about. The second interview is for me to be able to check and see if I have understood you correctly, and have accurately identified the major themes that characterise your story and the experiences of the other women in the study.

If you're interested in participating, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about your experience of mid-life change. A transition has been described as an event or non-event that results in changes in our perception of ourselves and the world. It has also been described as a process – change that occurs over time.

#### **Questions**

1. Can you tell me if you feel you have been through a mid-life transition and are now satisfied with your life? How did it turn out?

2/ I'm interested in "mid-life" transitions that people have lived to tell about. This usually requires some distance from the experience. Could you tell me approximately how long ago it was that you went through this transition? How old are you now? How did it end?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Sample List of Orienting Statement:**

It seems to be common knowledge, and there is a lot of literature that suggests that mid-life is a time of change for many women. Transitions have been defined in various ways. For instance, a transition can be seen as a period of change, growth and disequilibrium that serves as a kind of bridge between two relatively stable points in life. Transitions often start with an ending, followed by a period of confusion and distress, leading to a new beginning. Transitions are usually characterised by both internal and external changes. External changes in circumstances may affect an internal shift in the way a person perceives herself and her world. During mid-life, for instance, there may be a shift of focus based on an awareness that we only have so many years left to live, and that we may not realise some dreams, or that if we are going to realise them, we better get on with it. There may also be some changes around roles in our lives, such as parenting—our children may be leaving home, or we may lose a parent or have to take care of ageing parents. Also, there are biological changes for women, such as menopause, or physical signs of ageing, or changes in health. We know a little about that, but we'd like to know more about the process, what the experience of mid-life transition is like for women.

Tell me the story of your experience of mid-life change. Perhaps it will be helpful or easier for you to talk about this experience as a story with a beginning, a middle, or end. Perhaps there is something that symbolises or characterises this

experience, such as a piece of jewellery, or even a photograph that may contain the seeds of your story of mid-life change that you might like to share.

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Questions which may be used to guide the interview**

1/ Describe what the beginning was like—was there an event, a particular change you were aware of? Or, perhaps you can think of a place where the story began. (Perhaps a metaphor or image that describes it) How did it all start? What happened next?

2/ What were some of the issues you were struggling with when you were going through this? (Were there key events?)

3/ How did you get through it?

4/ What (or who) was significant in helping? (Or, I got the sense that \_\_\_\_\_ was helpful to you. Was that right?)

5/ What factors or obstacles challenged you in attempting to negotiate this transition? (Or, I got the sense that \_\_\_\_\_ was not helpful to you. Was that right?)

6/ Describe what it was like when you were in the middle of this transition. Does an image or picture come to mind?

7/ Describe the end---does an image or picture come to mind? How did it turn out for you?

8/ Looking back retrospectively, how do you understand the process now?

9/ Do you see yourself differently now as a result of having been through this change process. In what ways are you different, or is your life different? ? (Or, what matters? Is that different than what mattered before the transition?)



10/ As you reflect back on your journey of change and growth, what suggestions might you have to younger women who may be entering a mid-life transition?

11/ What made the transition different from other transitions you have experienced in your life?