

Midlife Adult Health and Well-being: Signs of Despair or Rays of Hope?

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Presentation Agenda

- Midlife: definition and qualities
- Deaths of despair study
- Relationships: strengths and challenges
- Midlife health in romantic relationships
- Implications
- Discussion



Defining Midlife

- Generally, between 50 and 64 years of age
- Qualitatively different
 - Health variability
 - Daily challenges, competing demands
 - Multiple, dynamic roles
 - Potential for productivity and success
- A “pivotal period” (Lachman et al., 2015)

Midlife development as a priority

- Growing importance
 - By 2030, 1 in 5 Americans will be of retirement age
 - Increasing numbers will engage in longer working lives
 - Determines quality of aging
- Pressing needs
 - Identify characteristics that set the stage for optimal health in mid-life adults
 - Develop strategies that promote health and well-being and prevent illness in this population

“Deaths of despair” study

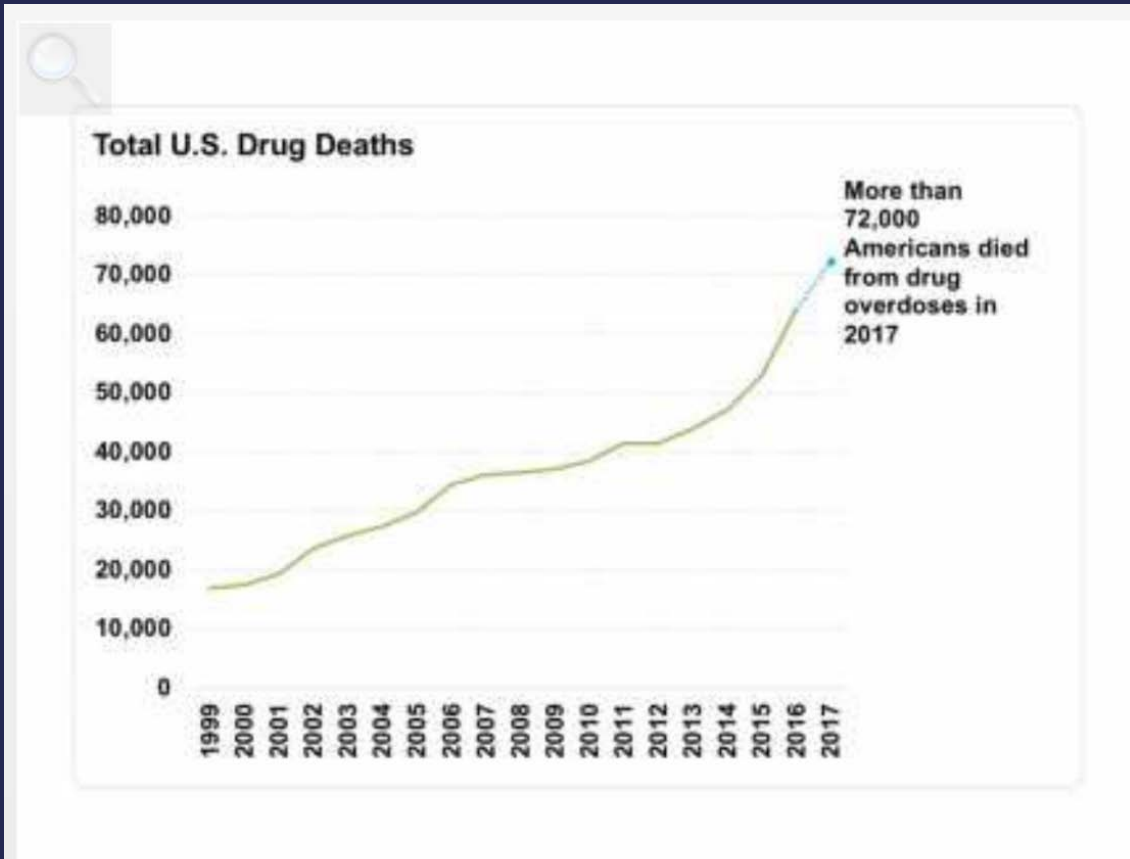
- Case and Deaton (2015, 2017) using stats from the U.S. CDC, 1999 - 2015
- Identified death rates for white non-Hispanics at midlife (45-54 years) were rising, not falling as they had in the past
 - Largely accounted for by increasing death rates from drugs, alcohol, and suicide
- Used data from multiple countries to show that other nations have made progress while U.S. fell behind

Signs of despair – ongoing research

- Nationally representative study examined 4 indicators of despair: depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, marijuana use, heavy drinking
 - Each indicator increased as the cohort aged
 - Consistent patterns across education, geography, race/ethnicity

Gaydosch et al. (2019)

Opioid epidemic



Total U.S. Drug Deaths* - More than 72,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2017, including illicit drugs and prescription opioids—a 2-fold increase in a decade. Source: CDC WONDER

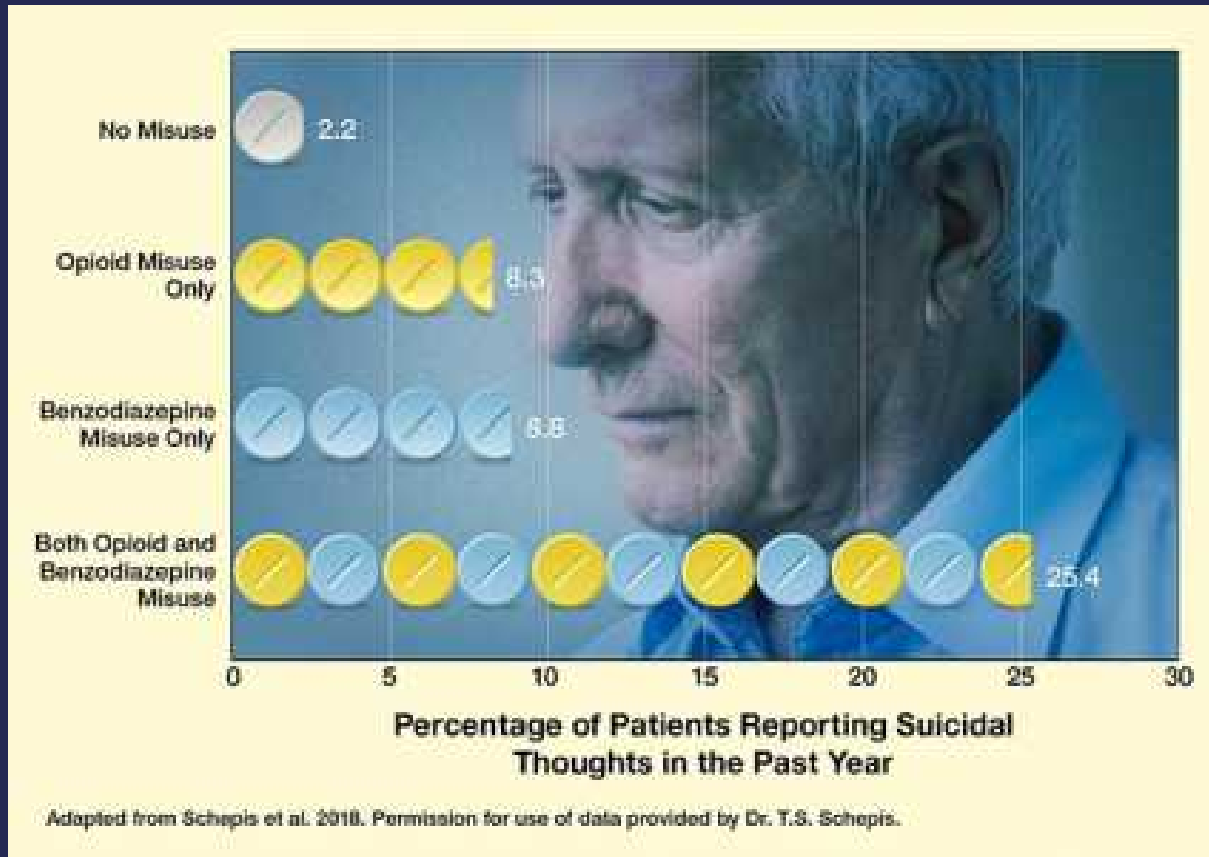
Seth et al. (2018)

- Midlife period presents unique risks
 - High rates of prescribed medications
 - Variability in health symptoms and conditions
 - Adverse effects and interactions

Han et al. (2019)

Prescription drug misuse & consequences

Example: suicidal thoughts



This is complex: Longer-term processes and dynamics need continued attention
(Jalal et al., 2018; *Science*)

Rising divorce

- Romantic relationships also pose challenges
- Between 1990 and 2010, the overall trend in US divorce rate was flat
- Middle-aged (50-64) and older (65+) adults had increasing divorce rates
 - Not predicted by empty nest, retirement, or onset of chronic illness
 - More connected to marital quality and economic resources

Close relationships

- Older adults report more positive feelings and fewer relationship problems
- Older adults behave in ways that reduce tensions
- Positivity bias
- Not just individual factors: Input from social partners -- who are similarly aged -- contributes to more positive social and emotional experiences

Fingerman & Charles (2010); Luong et al. (2011)

Problem solving and emotion regulation

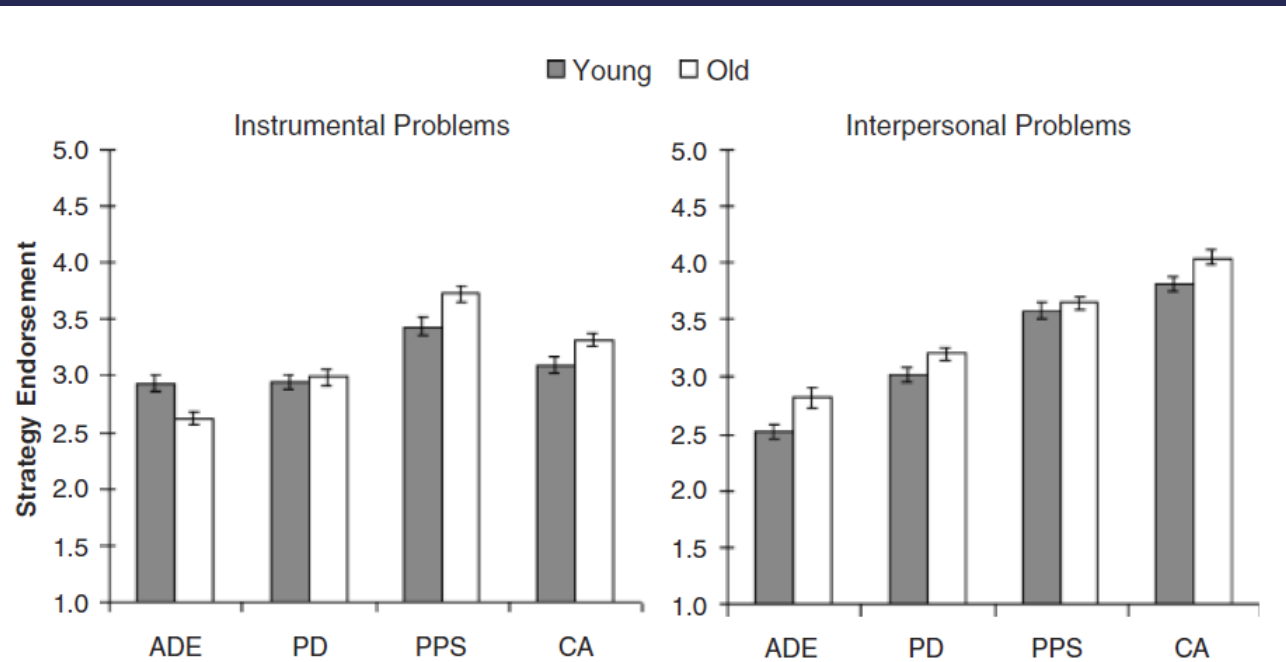
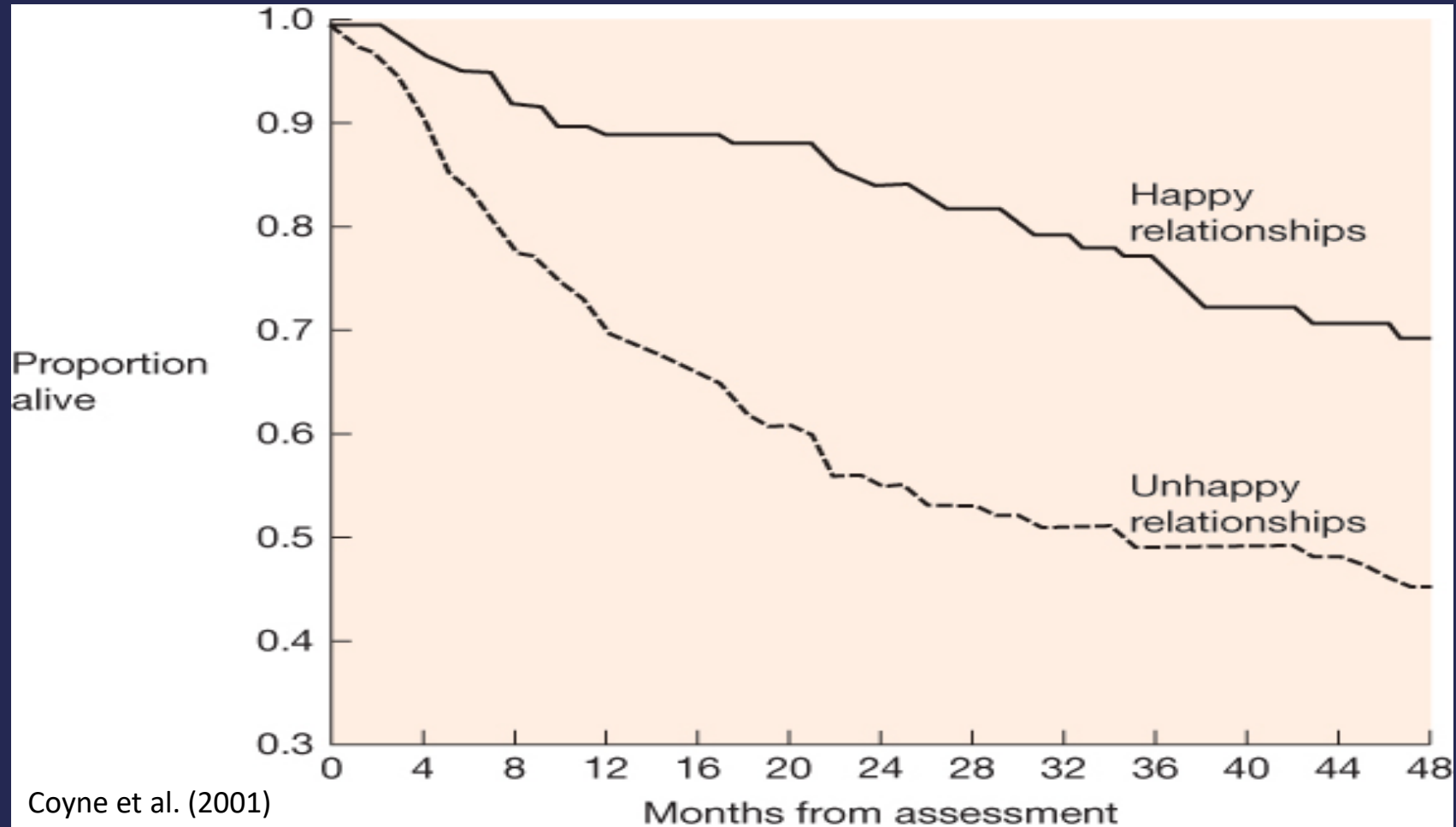


Fig. 1. Age-related differences in mean problem-solving-strategy endorsement for instrumental and interpersonal problems. The sample included young ($n = 53$; ages 18–27) and older adults ($n = 53$; ages 60–80). Passive strategies included avoidance-denial (ADE) and passive dependence (PD); instrumental strategies included planful problem solving (PPS) and cognitive analysis (CA).

- Emotional processing, social behavior, and emotion regulation are skills that improve over time or with development
- Midlife individuals are able to draw on experience to solve problems and handle social situations effectively

The Heart Failure Study



Positive relationships have a robust impact on recovery outcomes

Focus on couples' conflict

Relationship conflict is closely connected to:

- individuals' adjustment and development
- relationship outcomes
- health and well-being of people close to the relationship (especially children)

Research program on capturing relationship differences, broadly defined

Midlife couples' conflict in daily life

- 55 mixed-sex couples from the community
- Most frequent topics of disagreement included **communication, habits, and chores**
(For comparison, couples living with school-aged children reported **children, chores, and communication**; Papp et al., 2009)
- Conflict discussions about **money, children, leisure, and personality** lasted longer



Midlife couples' conflict in daily life

- Males reported their partners initiated conflicts concerning **habits** and **relatives**
- Females reported their partners initiated conflicts about **communication**
- Recurrent conflict topics: **money**, **habits**
- New: **leisure**
- Conflicts concerning **communication** and **habits** were handled in relatively *angry* ways
- Conflicts about **children** were relatively *depressive*
- Conflicts about **leisure** and **friends** were relatively *constructive*

Romantic partners and health

- Demonstrate similarity along many health-related factors
- Ranging from taste and smell preferences to common lifestyle behaviors, including diet, exercise and substance use
 - Particularly strong in middle and later life

Groyecka et al. (2018); Meyler (2007); Polenick et al. (2018)

Romantic partners and health

- Spousal behavior and attitudes predict individual health behavior, at times more so than the individual's own motivation
- Partner's chronic stress predicted (more than individual's own) increased waist circumference over time for men and women
- Midlife partner drinking at one point in time predicted (more than a person's own) the other person's drinking at later time point

Birditt et al. (2019); Dishman et al. (1985); Windle & Windle (2014)

Improving relationships across the lifespan

- Make an effort
- Be creative and novel
- Keep moving forward
- Create a sense of security
- Spend time together
- Communicate clearly
- Expect to be tested
- Practice good mental hygiene
- Learn to handle difficult issues
- Be a good listener and responder
- Work on accepting your partner
- Look out for yourself
- Seek support when needed

Implications for healthy aging

- What determines “healthy” or “successful” aging?
- Behavioral determinants identified: smoking status, physical activity level, body mass index, diet, and health practices
- Policies should enhance opportunities across the lifespan to modify lifestyle factors
- Additional screening for drug use and its consequences
- Incorporating partner/dyadic efforts in health promotion interventions may increase the effectiveness

Bradbury & Karney (2014); Franks et al. (2004); Owen & Corfe (2017); Peele et al. (2005)

Thank you!

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