

Coping With Midlife Crisis: A Cross-Sectional Study of Ondo City, Southwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Midlife crisis occurs when people begin to lose confidence and have feelings of anxiety or disappointment about life in middle age. It is a transition that takes place as people grow older while struggling with the passing of their youth. This study examines the psychological and emotional impacts of midlife crises and the coping strategies employed by participants. The study was conducted among 348 participants from a city in south western Nigeria. Primary data was retrieved through questionnaire administration, while the study was explained using the retrospective denial theory. Stress topped the psychological and emotional impacts of midlife crisis among the participants (61.2%), followed by anxiety (59.9%), and low self-esteem was the least (3.4%). In order to cope with a midlife crisis, the majority of study participants (86.1%) used prayer as the most effective coping strategy, followed by forgetting the past and moving on (79.2%), and accepting their fate (47.5%) as the least effective. The study concludes that almost all the participants in the study have experienced midlife crisis. The feeling that life has not turned out to be topped as the cause of midlife crisis, with excessive thoughts about childhood being the least. With regards to the psychological and emotional impacts of midlife crisis on participants, stress was the highest, followed by anxiety, and low self-esteem was the least, while prayer topped the list of coping strategies employed by participants in the study. We recommend that people who experience midlife crises seek the help of therapists who can help them sort out feelings about past events, manage current stress, and plan their future.

Keywords: Middle Aged, Humans, Anxiety, Emotions, Psychological, Ondo City, Southwestern Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Midlife crisis was first introduced by Elliot Jacques in 1965 in his article *Death and the midlife crisis* (Jacques, 1965). Ever since then its existence has generated various debates among many scholars. Coming to term with the term *middle age* has made it difficult to determine the bench mark period or time when midlife crisis actually occurs. For example, while Raypole (2021), define midlife as the years between ages 40 and 60 with a margin of ten years scholars like, Staudinger and Bluck (2001) conclude that middle age starts at the age of 40 and extend to age 60 with vague and fuzzy boundaries regarding beginning and end hence, finding a suitable definition for midlife crisis has become a herculean task for many.

Even though this wide definition allows one to see the whole body of research on the topic, however, it does not in actual fact help to solve the problem of definition meaning that chronological age might not be the best definitional criterion for middle age. But according to Staudinger and Bluck (2001), midlife crisis is best described in terms of main developmental events or tasks that occur in the life of an individual such as a time of increased financial responsibility, a time of decrease in physical stamina and health, a change in work responsibilities accompanied by boredom, dissatisfaction and frustration, a time of emotional loss as children grow older and leave home or loss of loved one, a stage of married life that lacks excitement and many more.

Midlife has widely been linked with stress and regarded as a stage marked by crisis (Lachman, 2004). For example, instances of stresses occasioned by role conflicts or financial pressures have been found to surface in midlife or take or occur in greater dimension in middle age (Almeida & Horn, 2004). Even though it can be said that losing one's job or going through divorce in marriage may occur during other age periods in life, there are possibilities that those in midlife may experience greater stress as a result of age discrimination by employers and limited opportunities for remarriage at that stage in life. Whatever the event or task may be that describe midlife crisis in the life course of a person, there is no doubt that midlife crisis is the most available concept that describe middle age.

But, in spite the fact that midlife is attributed to a negative and undesirable period in life, little attention is paid to the huge consequences of poor functioning in midlife (Lachman et al., 2015). According to Lang et al. (2010) depression and stress are at their peak in the middle years especially for those with financial strain while suicide rates are higher in the middle years when compared to other age periods (Brown, 2017). In Nigeria studies into midlife crisis is dearth and unresearched. Either it exists or not, it is evident that the effects of midlife crisis are felt among many.

For example, Nigeria is one of the epicenters of suicide in the world with a suicide estimate of 17.3 per 100 000, which is higher than the global (10.5 per 100 000) and Africa (12.0 per 100 000) estimates according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). According to global statistics, since 2012 there has been an increase in suicide Nigeria, WHO (2018) many of which are impulsive responses to psychological stressors (WHO, 2014). Some of these psychological stressors might however have resulted from personal risk factors such as financial constraints, loss of loved ones, mental illness, physical illness, substance abuse and so on Uwakwe and Gureje (2011) which are symptoms of midlife crisis as argued by (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). It is against this background that this study is being conducted.

II. METHODS

2.1 Study Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design in which a cross-sectional survey on midlife crisis was conducted among residents of Ondo city in Southwestern Nigeria.

2.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted in Ondo City in South-western Nigeria. It is home to a number of educational, health and financial institutions, and has ample commercial and trading activities. With an estimated population of about 445,442 (World Population Review, 2021), Ondo city is largely inhabited by the Yoruba' while cohabiting with other minority groups such as the Igbo', the Hausa' Edo, Ijaw, Uhrobo, Tiv among others. Majority of the inhabitants are traders and farmers while others are public servants, artisans, students among others.

2.3 Participants, Sample Size & Sampling Procedure

Participants of the study comprised of residents of Ondo city at least eighteen (18) years and above. The sample size for the study was calculated using Fischer's' formula for population greater than 10,000 (Jung, 2014).

$$N = \frac{Z^2Pq}{d^2}$$

Where: n=minimum sample size when the population is greater than 10,000; Z= the standard normal deviation set at 1.96 for 95% confidence interval; P= the proportion in the target population estimated to have a particular characteristic. q = 1-p; d= degree of accuracy desired (0.05).

However, in order to accommodate for a non-responsive rate of 10%, the sample size was rounded off to 348. These were recruited through two staged sampling methods of cluster and convenience sampling methods. Participants were recruited from clusters in the Centre Business District (CBD), motor garages and market places where they were conveniently selected.

2.4 Study Instrument

A constructed questionnaire was prepared and modified after a thorough review of the relevant literature. This questionnaire covers two parts: **Section one:** Socio- demographic characteristics including gender, age, marital Status, religion, educational and employment status of participants; **Section two:** Question on midlife crisis which included (13) items, psychological and emotional effects of midlife crisis (10) items on coping strategies (8) items

2.5 Validity and Reliability

The content validity of the instrument was established through a retest and retest method; the reliability of the items was based on the internal consistency by calculating Cronbach Alpha which was= 0.765

2.6 Data Collection and Data Analysis

A structured questionnaire used to collect data by direct interview. The approximate interview time of 25-30 minutes was provided for the questionnaire completion. Data collection is performed from July and September 2021.

2.7 Statistical Analysis

Data collected was analyzed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages and chart were used to present results.

2.8 Ethical Consideration

Informed consent was also given by the participants after they were duly briefed of the purpose and significance of the study.

III. RESULTS

Table 1 contained socio-demographic variables of the participants. Male participants in were a little above half (52.6%) while the age category with the highest number of participants is (35-39) years with (42.2%). A total of 309(88.8%) are married while 285(81.9%) are Christian and 48(13.8%). Yoruba ethnic group were the most represented with 186(70.7%) while 162(46.6%) had tertiary education. However, about 285 (81.9%) are gainfully employed.

Table 1

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	183	52.6
Female	165	47.4
Age		
35-39	147	42.2
40-44	123	35.3
45-49	24	6.9
50-54	54	15.5
55-60	21	6.0
Marital Status		
Unmarried	39	11.2
Married	309	88.8
Religion:		
Christianity	285	81.9
Islam	48	13.8
Traditional	15	4.3
Ethnicity		
Yoruba	186	70.7
Igbo	54	15.5
Hausa	6	1.7
Others	102	12.1
Educational status		
None	12	3.4
Primary	45	12.9
Secondary	129	37.1
Tertiary	162	46.6
Employment status		
Employed	285	81.9
Unemployed	63	18.1
n=348		

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork (2021)

Table 2 contained questions relating to midlife crisis. Most of the participants in the study 303(87.1%) have experienced midlife crisis. The feeling that life has not turned out the way it should be topped the list of perceived causes with 234 (67.4%) followed by regrets about past decisions and choices 198 (56.9%) while excessive thoughts about one's childhood 93(267%) was the least cause of midlife crisis among the participants.

Table 2*Questions on Midlife crisis*

Questions on Midlife crisis	Frequency	Percentage
Have you ever experienced midlife crisis before?		
Yes	303	87.1
No	45	12.9
What are the perceived causes		
The feeling that life hasn't turned out the way you wanted it	234	67.2
Regrets about past decisions and choices	198	56.9
Career problem	168	48.3
Work problem	159	45.7
Academic problems	153	44.0
Family problems	147	42.2
Business problems	141	40.5
Thoughts of aging	126	36.2
Relationship problems	114	32.8
Changes in the body, such as weight gain, or less energy	114	32.8
Thoughts of wasted years	120	34.5
Thoughts of death	111	31.9
Excessive thought of your childhood	93	26.7
n=348		

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork (2021)

Table 3 contained the psychological and emotional impact of midlife crisis on participants. The highest was stress with 213(61.2%) followed by, anxiety (59.5%), fear 192 (55.2%), unhappiness 171 (49.1%) anger 159 (45.7%), frustration 153(44.0%), restlessness 150 (43.1%) depression 138 (39.7%), suicidal thoughts 111 (31.9%), boredom 99(28.4%) and others including low self-esteem, metabolic disorder etc. 12 (3.4%).

Table 3*Psychological and Emotional Impact of Midlife Crisis*

Psychological and emotional effects	Frequency	Percentage
Stress	213	61.2
Anxiety	207	59.5
Fear	192	55.2
Unhappiness	171	49.1
Anger	159	45.7
Frustration	153	44.0
Restlessness	150	43.1
Depression	138	39.7
Suicidal thoughts	111	31.9
Boredom	99	28.4
Others (Low self-esteem, metabolic disorder)	12	3.4
n=348		

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork (2021)

Table 4 contained the coping strategies of participants to midlife crisis. A total of 261 (86.1%) said they pray about it, 240 (79.2%) said they try to forget the past and move on, while 144(47.5%) accept their fate

Table 4*Coping strategies among Participants*

Coping strategies	Frequency (n=)	Percentage
Prayer	261	86.1
forgetting the past and move on	240	79.2
I try to find meaning in life's changes	231	76.2
I try to regain a sense of control over my life	228	75.2
I try to identify new goals	219	72.3
I try to decide how I want the future to look like	207	68.3
I share my problems with someone	201	66.3
I accept my fate	144	47.5
(n=348)		

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork (2021)

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Almost four-fifth of the participants has experienced midlife crisis before. This result contradicts the study conducted by Wethington (2000) in the United States as well as a study by Robinson and Wright (2013) in the United Kingdom in which 26% and 40-60% of the participants in the study have experienced midlife crisis respectively.

On the perceived causes of midlife crisis among participants, the feeling that life hasn't turned out the way participants wanted it to be top the list with a little above two-thirds of the participants' opinion. This was followed by regrets in past decisions and choices with just a little above half and career problems with less than half of the participants. This result is not in tandem with the findings from a previous study conducted by Stumpf (2012) in which awareness for aging, life review or evaluation and changes in personal approach to life in that order topped the list of perceived causes of midlife crisis among participants.

This result also validates the theory of Retrospective Denial proposed in this study to explain how participants in the study might cope with midlife crisis. According to the authors, human mind is likened to a tape recorder which can either be forwarded or rewind. In other words the human mind can either be rewind to recall past events or fast forwarded to forget previous life events based on three basic assumptions: (i) Humans are driven by what goes on in their mind. (ii) They can either decide to put their past behind them by fast forwarding the mind or can decide to be hold onto the past by rewinding their mind. (iii) In forgetting the past, people tend to replace past events with an alternative future event which tend to erase the memories of past events which validates the relevance of the theory to the current study.

With regards to the psychological and emotional impact of midlife crisis among participants, stress topped the list with almost two-third of the participants followed closely by anxiety and fear in that order. This result however confirmed that which was conducted by Lachman (2004) in which midlife crisis is linked with stress. It also validates the result of the findings conducted by Aldwin and Levenson (2001) and Almeida and Horn (2004) which suggests that stresses involving multiple roles demands, or financial pressures may flock in midlife or even take a greater dimension in middle age. This may also have resulted from the fact that majority of the midlife crisis experienced by participants in the study centers on the feeling that life hasn't turned out the way they wanted it or hoped it would be hence, possibilities of many of participants running into crisis trying to meet their expected goals. On the coping strategies, prayer topped the list with more than four-fifth of the participants in the study followed closely by forgetting the past and moving on as well as trying to find meaning in life changes. This may not be far from the fact that the claim that Nigerians are generally a religious people (Adamo, 2018).

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study investigated the perceived causes of midlife crisis on participants, its psychological and emotional impacts as well as the coping strategies. The study concludes that, almost all the participants in the study have experienced midlife crisis in which the feeling that life has not turned out to be how participants wanted topped the list while, the least was excessive thoughts about childhood. Stress topped the psychological and emotional impacts of midlife crisis on participants followed by anxiety and low self-esteem being the least while prayer topped the coping strategies employed by participants in the study.



5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that people who experience midlife crises should seek the help of therapists who can help them to sort out feelings about past events, manage current stress and plan their future.

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