



The research data I'm collecting is showing that happiness is smile shaped. Meaning people generally begin and end life at their most content with a dip happiness levels in the middle years. In this article we look at the three main stages of life and the purpose of our middle years

Life's journey has three distinct stages to it. There's the first half of life and the second half of life, which is bridged by the middle years of midlife.

**Life's first stage** – the formation of our identity – who we think we are

At the start of life, the first stage, we come into this world with our smile firmly in tact. We start life whole and complete. We're divine, open and blissfully happy. As babies we're conscious but not yet self-conscious. We have no sense of self. We have awareness but not self-awareness. This is a divine place to be where we don't differentiate ourselves from others. We live in a reality of "oneness." This is our first "psychological address".

However, as we grow this wholeness gets lost as a result of the emergence of the ego. This is the first awareness of self, the realisation that there is Me and Not Me. This is our second "psychological address", the new one we move into. This ever-growing false self (the ego) quickly eclipses the real self. Like the sun being eclipsed by the moon we then spend a long part of our life in the darkness of a total or partial eclipse. Our sense of wholeness gets lost as a separation happens. Now there's, "Me", "My" and "Mine."

As we grow through the stages of newborn, infant and child up, the urge to avoid being hurt (at any cost) emotionally drives us to ignore the quiet voice of the real part of ourselves and listen instead to society's booming voice of judgement. During this process the real part of us gets suppressed, buried and forgotten. We enter our teens with a hormonal explosion, rebel, and get lost in fads and tribes. By the time we reach being a "grown up" the magical moments of early childhood have faded from our minds.

Arriving in adulthood, we have a personality and identity adequate enough to create a successful life in modern society that's pre-occupied with the accumulation of wealth, possessions, status, achievement, and physical looks. Because our personality has been shaped by society we're conditioned to look outside ourselves for success. We live an "outward-directed" life, meaning our self worth, self esteem and identity is linked to our achievements and possessions. We constantly compare ourselves to others and other people's opinions of us count.

**Life's second stage** – transition and transformation – giving up who we think we are.

By the time we enter midlife, our second stage, each of us has created families and a network of friends. Often we're at the peak of our careers, earning powers, social status but many midlifers find their life satisfaction flags are flying at half-mast. My own research shows women typically experience the all time lowest life satisfaction at the age of 37, whereas men experience this at 42.

It's a big wake up call to realise their smiles have left them when they have it all. Many of us arrive at this stage feeling emotionally drained, numbed, lost and dissatisfied. For some it can feel like life is literally falling apart. At this time we may ask a seemingly life-threatening question, "Is this all there is?"

Gravity and hormones take control of our faces, our hair lines, our figures, our frames of mind, leaving us confused, wrinkled and bulging in all the wrong places. Midlife is a time when we become aware of our own mortality.

A growing restlessness with the time we have left provokes the search for a deeper meaning and an awakening occurs. It's about this time that the suppressed parts of ourselves begin to roar into centre stage and vie for our attention and expression.

This is the transformation stage of life. It's a time to let go of our burdens, lighten our loads by slowing down and simplifying our lives and embark on an inward journey to reconnect with the real part of ourselves. Carl Jung observed, "That which youth found and had to find outside itself, in the second half of life must be found within."

**Life's third stage** – becoming who you were meant to be – releasing your greatness.

It's a time where we yearn to once again live from our first psychological address. Gradually the sun begins to show itself after years of being eclipsed. Our unconscious memory of what it was like to be whole begins to remind us of this magical state. We move forward to regain the wholeness we once knew by pulling all the disparate parts back together to experience the feeling of oneness again. We learn to look inward for the answers we seek. Our agenda and power base shifts. Our self worth, self esteem and identity is linked to an inner knowing that we are already whole and complete. We compare ourselves to our own inner potential. There's no need to compete and prove ourselves outwardly any more.

The drive to be successful which played such a big part in our first life is replaced with the desire to do something significant with the time we have left. We want to give ourselves to others, to meaningful contribution, to something greater than ourselves. How can I best serve is the mantra in the second half of life. This final stage of life is really a journey of remembrance; it's not so much about growing old but growing whole.

## **The purpose of the middle stage**

The purpose of midlife is to be transformed by it. I believe midlife has a positive intention for us. It's attempting to take us in a positive direction. To take us back to our original psychological address. This is the good news. The bad news is many people do not enjoy the transformation process and through lack of understanding resist it. To take the journey is to undertake a certain degree of suffering. The amount of suffering does vary from person to person. When we start to redefine ourselves, we suffer the loss of much of what we were taught by society of 'whom' and 'how' we should be, as we were growing up. We often have to let go of much of what we bring into midlife. We find ourselves having to adjust to new situations, let go of people, activities and things that have dominated our life up until that point. Letting go is hard and painful but as I said there is a good reason for all this suffering.

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