

## Silent Struggles: Midlife Crisis among Men in India

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### Abstract

Midlife crisis among men is an emerging yet largely overlooked psychosocial concern in the Indian context. Midlife represents a significant transition in the life course, during which men often experience the cumulative effects of ageing, changes in health, occupational uncertainty, evolving family responsibilities and reflections on personal aspirations. These overlapping transitions may generate heightened role strain and psychosocial vulnerability. However, distress during this phase frequently remains unarticulated and insufficiently recognised within families, workplaces, and support systems. From a life course perspective, midlife crisis among men cannot be understood as an isolated psychological episode. Rather, it reflects a dynamic process shaped by earlier life experiences, present role expectations and anticipated future transitions. Ecological frameworks further illuminate how men's midlife experiences are embedded within multiple interacting systems, including family relationships, work environments, community networks, and broader socio-economic conditions. In India, rapid social change, employment insecurity, shifting family structures and limited access to preventive mental health services intensify these interactions, increasing the likelihood of unaddressed distress during midlife. Despite its implications for individual well-being, family functioning, workplace engagement and community mental health, midlife crisis among men remains under represented in Indian social work research and practice. Existing responses tend to be clinical and individual centred, offering limited engagement with developmental, relational and contextual dimensions. Social work practice in India has traditionally prioritised women, children and marginalised groups, resulting in comparatively limited focus on men's psychosocial needs across the life course. This paper argues for repositioning midlife crisis among men as a legitimate and urgent area of social work practice. Drawing on life course and ecological perspectives, it advocates for interventions that situate men's experiences within their relational and social contexts. Practice responses may include supportive individual work, family-based interventions, workplace social work practice and community mental health initiatives that emphasise prevention, early identification and continuity of care.

**Keywords:** *Midlife Crisis, Men's Mental Health, Psycho Social Wellbeing, Social Work Practice with men*

### 1. Introduction

Midlife is often seen as a significant stage in adulthood, not simply because of age, but because of the range of changes that tend to occur during this period. Shifts in health, evolving work roles, changing family responsibilities, and a deeper awareness of the self all become more noticeable. Many individuals begin to reflect more seriously on earlier life choices while also thinking about what lies ahead. Questions around ageing, productivity, and one's sense of purpose become more prominent. These reflections are not necessarily negative, but they can create strain when there is a mismatch between expectations and actual life circumstances, or when roles that once felt secure begin to shift (Erikson, 1982; Levinson, 1978).

For men, these experiences are closely linked to social expectations about gender roles. In societies such as India, men are still largely expected to function as primary earners and decision-makers within the family. These expectations are reinforced by cultural ideas of masculinity that emphasise strength, independence, and emotional control. While these norms can provide a sense of identity, they can also limit how men respond to stress. Expressing vulnerability or seeking support may be seen as a sign of weakness, which often leads men to deal with distress on their own. Over time, this can result in the internalisation of stress and delays in accessing help, increasing the risk of psychosocial difficulties during periods of transition (Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000).

A life course perspective offers a more grounded way of understanding these experiences. Instead of viewing midlife distress as a sudden or isolated problem, it situates it within a broader life trajectory shaped by earlier experiences, social relationships, and structural conditions. The timing of life events, the influence of significant relationships, and the accumulation of opportunities and constraints all play a role in shaping how individuals experience midlife (Elder, 1998). What is often described as a crisis may reflect the coming together of multiple pressures such as work demands, family responsibilities, and health concerns within a particular social and historical context.

An ecological perspective further highlights that men's experiences during midlife are not shaped by individual factors alone. They are embedded within interconnected systems such as family, workplace, community, and wider socio-economic structures. Employment insecurity, changing family dynamics, and increasing caregiving responsibilities can contribute to role strain, especially when adequate support is not available. At the same time, social expectations around self-reliance may discourage men from seeking help even when support exists. As a result, distress may remain unspoken or unnoticed until it becomes more serious, affecting both psychological wellbeing and relationships (Courtenay, 2000).

Irrespective of growing global attention to men's mental health, this area has received limited focus within social work practice in India. The profession has historically prioritised groups facing visible structural disadvantages, including women, children, and marginalised communities. While this focus is essential, it has also contributed to the relative invisibility of men's psychosocial concerns across the life course. When men's distress is addressed, it is often approached through clinical or individual frameworks, with less attention to the broader developmental and social contexts in which it occurs. Approaches informed by life course and ecological perspectives offer a more comprehensive way of understanding these experiences, particularly by emphasising prevention, context, and continuity of care (Elder, 1998).

In this context, recognising men's midlife experiences as a valid area of social work concern becomes important. This requires moving beyond viewing distress purely as an individual problem and instead understanding how it is shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, and structural factors. Seeing men not only as providers or authority figures, but as individuals navigating ongoing life transitions, allows for more meaningful and responsive forms of engagement. Such a shift can contribute to developing more inclusive and contextually relevant approaches to mental health across adulthood.

## **2. Conceptualising Midlife Crisis among Men**

The idea of a midlife crisis has been widely discussed across disciplines, but there is no complete agreement on how it should be understood. Some scholars have viewed it as a distinct period of psychological upheaval, while others argue that it is neither universal nor necessarily a crisis in the strict sense. Jacques (1965), who first introduced the term, described midlife as a time when individuals become more aware of their mortality and the limited nature of life. This awareness can lead to emotional unease and a reconsideration of personal goals, drawing attention to the more existential dimensions of this stage.

Developmental perspectives place midlife within the broader life span, rather than treating it as an isolated phase. Erikson (1982), for instance, understood midlife in terms of the tension between generativity and stagnation. At this stage, individuals often feel a need to contribute meaningfully to others, whether through family, work, or society. At the same time, they may confront feelings of unfulfilled potential or missed opportunities. Although Erikson did not describe this period strictly as a crisis, it can involve a degree of evaluation and strain, especially when individuals feel they are not meeting expected roles. For men, this tension may become more pronounced in the face of pressures related to work, financial responsibility, and family expectations.

Levinson (1978) offered a more detailed account of midlife as a period of transition, characterised by a re-examination of earlier life structures. According to his work, individuals in midlife often revisit past aspirations and compare them with their present circumstances. When there is a noticeable gap between what was once imagined and what has been achieved, it can lead to questioning, dissatisfaction, or emotional discomfort. At the same time, Levinson acknowledged that these experiences are not uniform and are shaped by personal, relational, and social contexts.

Neugarten (1979) introduced a different way of thinking about midlife through the concept of the social clock. She argued that expectations about when certain life events should occur such as career stability, marriage, or parenthood are socially constructed rather than fixed. Difficulties may arise when individuals feel that they are out of step with these expectations. This perspective is particularly relevant in societies undergoing rapid change, where traditional timelines may no longer align with lived realities. For men, delays or disruptions in achieving socially valued milestones can contribute to feelings of inadequacy or pressure during midlife.

Later research has questioned the idea that midlife is inherently a period of crisis. Vaillant (2002), through longitudinal studies, found that many individuals experience midlife as a time of adjustment, growth, and emotional maturity rather than breakdown. Similarly, Lachman (2004) described midlife as a phase that includes both challenges and opportunities, where increased responsibilities coexist with greater competence and stability. These perspectives suggest that midlife is not a singular experience but varies depending on life history, available support, and broader social conditions.

These viewpoints indicate that midlife crisis among men is better understood as a context-dependent and developmentally shaped process. It is not simply a psychological breakdown, but a phase influenced by earlier life experiences, social expectations, and changing roles. This understanding allows for a more balanced view, one that recognises both the difficulties and the potential for adaptation during midlife.

### **3. Integrative Approaches for Understanding Midlife Crisis among Men**

The ways in which midlife crisis has been understood so far suggest that it cannot be explained through a single perspective. Experiences during this phase are shaped by a combination of personal history, social expectations, and changing life circumstances. To capture this complexity more clearly, it becomes useful to bring together multiple approaches rather than relying on any one framework alone. In this paper, four perspectives are considered together: developmental or psychosocial, life course, ecological, and gender-informed. Each of these offers a different lens, but they also complement one another in meaningful ways.

#### **3.1 Developmental and Psychosocial Perspective**

From a developmental standpoint, midlife is not seen as an abnormal or pathological phase, but as a part of the broader process of adult development. It is a period where individuals revisit their sense of identity, reassess their roles, and reflect on what they have achieved so far. This process can be unsettling at times, especially when there is a gap between earlier expectations and present realities, but it is also a natural part of growth.

Erikson's (1982) framework is particularly useful here, as it describes midlife in terms of the tension between generativity and stagnation. Generativity involves a concern for contributing to others, whether through family, work, or society, while stagnation reflects a sense of limited purpose or unfulfilled potential. For many men, whose identities are often closely tied to work and provision, difficulties in maintaining these roles can intensify this tension. The strain experienced during midlife, therefore, is not only about ageing, but also about how individuals evaluate their ability to meet socially valued expectations.

Earlier work by Jacques (1965) drew attention to the emotional impact of becoming more aware of mortality during midlife. This awareness can lead individuals to question their priorities and reassess the direction of their lives. Similarly, Levinson (1978) described midlife as a period of transition involving a reorganisation of life structures. These ideas highlight that midlife involves both reflection and change, rather than simply decline.

At the same time, later research has shown that these experiences do not always lead to crisis. Vaillant (2002) and Lachman (2004) both point out that many individuals navigate midlife with increasing emotional stability and adaptability. This suggests that while midlife can be challenging, it also offers opportunities for growth. From a social work perspective, this approach is helpful because it avoids labelling distress as failure and instead situates it within normal developmental processes. However, on its own, it does not fully account for the influence of social context, which makes it necessary to consider additional perspectives.

#### **3.2 Life Course Perspective**

The life course approach builds on developmental ideas by placing midlife within a longer trajectory. Rather than focusing only on what is happening in the present, it considers how earlier life experiences, relationships, and opportunities shape outcomes in midlife (Elder, 1998). This perspective highlights that what appears as a midlife crisis is often the result of accumulated experiences over time.

One important concept here is timing. Societies tend to have expectations about when certain life events should occur, such as establishing a career, getting married, or achieving financial stability. When individuals feel that they are out of sync with these expectations, it can lead to stress or a sense of falling behind. For men, especially in contexts where success is closely tied to economic achievement, this can be particularly significant.

The idea of linked lives is also central to this perspective. Men's experiences during midlife are closely connected to those of their family members. Responsibilities related to children, spouses, and ageing parents often increase during this period, creating multiple and sometimes competing demands. These interconnected roles can contribute to strain, especially when combined with work-related pressures.

The life course approach also draws attention to broader social changes. In contemporary India, factors such as job insecurity, changing family structures, and shifting gender roles influence how men experience midlife. These conditions shape not only the challenges men face, but also how they

interpret those challenges. From a practice perspective, this approach encourages looking beyond immediate symptoms and considering the longer trajectory of an individual's life.

### **3.3 Ecological Perspective**

The ecological or person-in-environment perspective shifts attention further outward by focusing on how individuals interact with their surroundings. It suggests that midlife distress cannot be understood in isolation from the contexts in which people live and work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

At the level of immediate relationships, family plays a central role. Midlife often brings increased responsibilities, including parenting and caring for ageing parents. At the same time, marital relationships may undergo changes, sometimes becoming sources of support and at other times of tension. These dynamics have a direct impact on well-being.

Work environments also play an important role. Job demands, lack of stability, and limited flexibility can create additional pressure, particularly when men are expected to manage both professional and family responsibilities. When these different areas of life place competing demands on individuals, the resulting strain is not simply personal, but reflects broader structural conditions.

At a wider level, access to resources and services also matters. Limited availability of mental health support, combined with social stigma, can prevent men from seeking help. Cultural expectations around self-reliance further reinforce this pattern. An ecological perspective therefore highlights that midlife distress is shaped by multiple, interacting systems, and that meaningful responses need to address these different levels.

### **3.4 Gender-Informed Perspective**

A gender-informed approach brings attention to how ideas about masculinity shape men's experiences of midlife. Social expectations often define men in terms of strength, control, and productivity, leaving little room for vulnerability. These expectations are not neutral; they influence how men understand themselves and how they respond to difficulties.

Research has shown that men are less likely to openly express emotional distress and more likely to delay seeking help (Courtenay, 2000; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Instead, distress may be expressed indirectly, through withdrawal, irritability, or over-engagement in work. During midlife, when challenges related to ageing, work, and family become more visible, these patterns can make it harder to recognise and address underlying concerns.

Midlife can also expose tensions within masculine identities. Expectations of continuous productivity and control may become difficult to maintain in the face of physical ageing, career stagnation, or changing family roles. These shifts can create a sense of uncertainty, particularly in contexts where masculinity is strongly linked to authority and provision.

From a social work perspective, recognising these dynamics is important. Approaches that do not take gender into account may fail to engage men effectively. A gender-informed perspective encourages creating spaces where men can reflect on their experiences without stigma, and where seeking support is not seen as a weakness but as part of responsible self-management.

## **4. Gaps in Social Work Literature and Practice on Men's Midlife Mental Health in India**

Although theoretical perspectives offer useful ways of understanding men's midlife experiences, their application within social work in India remains limited. This gap is not due to a lack of relevance, but rather reflects how priorities within the profession have been historically shaped.

Social work in India has largely developed in response to visible and structural forms of disadvantage. As a result, practice and research have focused primarily on women, children, and marginalised communities. This orientation is both necessary and ethically grounded. However, it has also meant that adult men are rarely viewed as a group with distinct psychosocial needs, particularly during normative life stages such as midlife. In many cases, men are implicitly positioned as providers or authority figures rather than as individuals who may themselves be navigating stress, uncertainty, or emotional strain. Baum (2016) describes this as the relative absence of men as recognised clients within social work discourse.

This limited attention is closely linked to dominant ideas of masculinity. Social expectations that emphasise self-reliance, control, and emotional restraint often discourage men from articulating distress or seeking help. While these norms have been widely discussed in theoretical terms, they have not been adequately translated into practice frameworks within social work. As a result, men's midlife struggles often remain unaddressed until they take more visible or severe forms.

Within the mental health field, service provision has tended to prioritise groups identified as vulnerable based on gender or age, particularly women and children. In contrast, adult men's mental health has not been systematically approached as a distinct area requiring preventive or developmental interventions. When men do engage with services, it is often in response to crisis situations, and interventions are typically framed in clinical or individual terms. This limits the scope for addressing the broader social and relational contexts that shape midlife experiences.

A similar pattern can be seen in social work practice methods. Approaches such as casework, group work, and community-based interventions have not been widely adapted to engage men around midlife concerns. For instance, the potential of group work to create shared spaces for reflection and reduce isolation remains underutilised in this context. Likewise, workplace-based interventions, which could play a significant role given the centrality of work in many men's lives, are not yet systematically integrated into practice.

At the level of research, there is a noticeable lack of studies that examine men's experiences of midlife from a social work perspective. Existing research on men's mental health in India often focuses on more visible concerns such as substance use or severe mental illness, while everyday forms of distress linked to life transitions receive less attention. In addition, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs and symptom-based approaches, offering limited insight into how experiences unfold over time. This creates a gap in understanding the cumulative and contextual nature of midlife challenges (Elder, 1998).

Another important limitation is the absence of gender-sensitive research frameworks. Studies that do not explicitly consider how masculinity shapes emotional expression and help-seeking may overlook key aspects of men's experiences. There is a need for more qualitative and mixed-method research that engages directly with men's lived realities, including how they interpret responsibility, success, ageing, and change within their specific social contexts.

These gaps suggest that men's midlife mental health has remained at the margins of social work not because it lacks significance, but because it does not fit easily within existing categories of vulnerability. Addressing this requires a shift in how both research and practice conceptualise need. Recognising midlife as a phase that can involve strain, uncertainty, and transition opens up space for more preventive, relational, and context-sensitive forms of engagement. Such a shift would not displace existing priorities, but would instead contribute to a more inclusive understanding of psychosocial well-being across the life course.

## **5. Implications for Social Work Practice with Men**

Responding to men's mental health during midlife requires moving beyond narrowly individual or crisis-based approaches. Practice in this area needs to recognise that men's experiences are shaped by a combination of personal, relational, and structural factors. This calls for forms of engagement that are flexible, context-sensitive, and attentive to how men themselves understand their roles and responsibilities.

At the level of direct practice, working with men in midlife involves creating spaces where concerns can be explored without immediately framing them as pathology. Many men may not readily describe their experiences in emotional terms, but may instead speak through concerns related to work, responsibility, or family roles. Social workers need to be attentive to these forms of expression and engage in ways that gradually open up discussion around stress, uncertainty, and changing expectations. This requires a style of practice that is patient, non-judgmental, and responsive to how men make sense of their situations.

Relational contexts are equally important. Midlife often involves shifts in family dynamics, including parenting responsibilities, marital changes, and care for ageing parents. Practice that involves family members, where appropriate, can help address tensions that are not solely individual in nature. Such approaches also make it possible to move beyond viewing men's distress in isolation and instead situate it within ongoing relationships.

Group based interventions offer another important avenue. Many men experience midlife challenges in ways that are private and unspoken, which can increase isolation. Structured group settings can provide opportunities for shared reflection, where individuals recognise that their experiences are not unique. When carefully facilitated, such spaces can reduce stigma and make it easier to discuss concerns that might otherwise remain unaddressed. This approach aligns with social work's emphasis on mutual support and collective processes.

Workplaces represent a particularly relevant setting for engagement, given the central role of employment in shaping many men's identities during midlife. Interventions that focus on work-related stress, role transitions, and work-life balance can create entry points for support that feel more

acceptable and less stigmatising. Collaboration with organisations can also help in developing preventive programmes rather than relying only on individual help-seeking.

At a broader level, there is a need to strengthen community-based responses. Framing men's midlife well-being as a shared concern rather than a private issue can contribute to reducing stigma and encouraging earlier engagement. Community initiatives, awareness programmes, and partnerships with local institutions can help create environments where conversations around stress, ageing, and changing roles are more accepted.

Institutional and administrative dimensions also play a role in shaping practice. Decisions about programme design, funding, and service priorities influence which groups are recognised within welfare systems. Incorporating men in midlife as a relevant group within mental health and family services does not require entirely new structures, but rather an expansion of existing frameworks to include their experiences. This includes integrating preventive approaches and ensuring continuity of care rather than focusing only on crisis intervention.

Research is central to strengthening practice in this area. There is a need for studies that engage with men's lived experiences in more depth, particularly through qualitative and longitudinal approaches. Such research can provide insight into how men understand responsibility, success, and change over time, and how these meanings influence their responses to stress. Incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives is especially important to ensure that practice is informed by an understanding of how masculinity shapes behaviour and help-seeking.

Finally, social work has a role in advocacy. Challenging narrow assumptions about who is considered vulnerable is part of the profession's broader commitment to social justice. Recognising men's midlife mental health as a legitimate concern does not take away from existing priorities, but instead contributes to a more inclusive approach. Advocacy efforts can support the development of policies and programmes that acknowledge life stage specific needs and promote more balanced understandings of mental health.

These implications point toward a form of practice that is not limited to individual intervention, but extends across relationships, institutions, and communities. Such an approach is better suited to addressing the complexities of men's experiences during midlife and to supporting well-being in a more sustained and meaningful way.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper examined men's midlife mental health by situating it within a broader developmental and social context. Rather than approaching midlife as an isolated psychological event, the discussion highlighted how it reflects a combination of life transitions, shifting roles, and changing expectations that unfold over time. The perspectives considered in the paper show that men's experiences during this phase are shaped not only by individual factors, but also by relationships, social norms, and structural conditions.

The analysis also pointed to a clear gap in how these experiences are addressed within social work in India. While the profession has made significant contributions in working with populations facing structural disadvantage, men's psychosocial concerns, particularly during midlife, have received limited attention. This has resulted in a situation where many of the challenges men face during this stage remain insufficiently recognised within both research and practice.

Addressing this gap requires a shift in how men's mental health is understood. Instead of viewing distress only through a clinical or crisis-oriented lens, there is a need to engage with the everyday realities of work, family life, ageing, and responsibility that shape men's experiences. Such an approach allows for a more grounded understanding of midlife as a phase that may involve both strain and adjustment, rather than assuming it to be either a universal crisis or an insignificant transition.

The paper also emphasised the importance of expanding social work responses beyond individual-level interventions. Meaningful engagement in this area involves working across different contexts, including families, workplaces, and communities, while also strengthening institutional support and research efforts. Recognising men as individuals navigating ongoing life transitions, rather than only as providers or authority figures, creates space for more responsive and inclusive forms of practice.

In this sense, bringing attention to men's midlife mental health is not about shifting focus away from existing priorities, but about broadening the scope of social work to better reflect the range of experiences across the life course. A more inclusive approach, informed by context and grounded in lived realities, can contribute to stronger and more balanced understandings of mental health within the Indian setting.

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