

Kindling Midlife Fires

Advice on staying motivated and avoiding burnout, and the crucial role dermatologists play in helping patients to find, sustain or restore their positive fires.

By Richard G. Fried, MD, PhD

***“LIFE GOES ON, LONG AFTER THE THRILL OF LIVING IS GONE.”
JOHN COUGAR MELLENCAMP***

What is midlife? What are we to expect during our passage through this life phase? Arguably, the midlife period spans from as brief a period as ages 45 to 64 to as long a span as ages 30 to 60. What are the hallmarks that characterize these valuable years of life? Are they years of expanding horizons, opportunities and passions? Or, is there an inevitable diminution in excitement and zeal that defines middle age?

Our expectations about mid life are formed, shaped and colored by societal, cultural and familial messages and images. Typically, the message delivered in the United States is that we are doomed to varying degrees of decline and misery. We are told that midlife is inevitably accompanied by a “crisis”. The midlife crisis is usually described as a turmoiled and negative period of inner conflict; a time of searching, angst and confusion. Many who have already passed through the midlife period recollect experiencing a “hungry hunt” for meaning in their lives, marriages, jobs and families.

Expressions such as “what’s it all about”; “what is the point of all this”; “why bother”; and “it’s about me now” are not unusual. The commonly observed apathy, restlessness, body pierce, pony tail, tattoo, new car, marital infidelity or job change all can be viewed as symptoms of these “crises”.

THE PHENOMENON OF MIDLIFE FIRES

Speaking from both a dermatologic and psychological perspective, the midlife period can be conceptualized as a delicate balance of fires. The flames of passion must be kindled and held separate from the flames of destruction. It is my contention that the “crises” of middle age and the many behavioral and emotional manifestations of this alleged crisis are in fact symptoms of a midlife with too few positive fires and/or too many destructive fires. Kindling new and existing positive fires while controlling or extinguishing the negative and destructive fires is the key to a passionate and meaningful midlife. Life definitely need not lose its shine nor must the

thrill become evanescent or extinct. My dermatology practice is filled with middle aged people who are happier and more passionate than at any "younger" time in their lives. I believe that the dermatologist can and does play a crucial role in helping patients to find, sustain, or restore their positive fires.

FIRES

"Fire", is a simple monosyllabic four-letter word with an inherent plethora of implications. Since the creation of the universe, fire has been a ubiquitous force; sustaining life, enriching life and destroying life. Merriam-Webster offers many definitions. There are those that conjure images of excitement and thrill such as "the phenomenon of combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat"; "inspiration"; "giving life or spirit to"; "filling with passion"; "liveliness of imagination"; and "brilliance and luminosity". In contrast, there are more negative and damaging ones such as "a destructive burning"; "under attack"; "dismissal from a position"; "death or torture by fire"; and "severe trial or ordeal."

Surely, it can be assertively stated that fires are feelings, actions or events that enhance or diminish one's life from the average routine and monotony. Colloquial expressions, such as fire in the belly, heated exchange, fire storm of rage, burning desire, burning indigestion, hot topic, searing words and scorching glance, all illustrate the ubiquitous and varied role that fires play in the human existence.

Several questions are raised. How can we assure that we start or continue to kindle positive fires in our personal lives? How can we similarly help our patients, partners, family and friends? Of equal importance, what can we do to minimize

or extinguish the destructive flames of dangerous fires in our bodies and our lives?

MINIMIZING INFLAMMATORY FIRES

A very prominent theme throughout the medical literature is the role of inflammation in inflammatory skin disease, cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disease and malignancy. These potentially destructive, painful and lethal fires represent a tremendous challenge to the medical profession and all of us as existing or potential victims. The cumulative or escalating effects of inflammation often manifest clinically during midlife, and we must obtain appropriate laboratory and imaging studies to assess for existing inflammation or damage.

The Role of the Dermatologist. The dermatologist can minimize inflammatory fires in many ways. Control of inflammatory skin disease is a meaningful and concrete example. Use of anti-inflammatory topical agents such as retinoids, antibiotics and antioxidants reduce skin inflammation and slow skin aging and formation of some neoplasms. The alleviation of anxiety provided by accurate diagnosis and enhanced sense of control decrease anxiety, depression and anguish for many patients.

The Role of the Individual. As doctors, we can help the individual learn and embrace simple life style changes and stress management techniques that can decrease inflammatory fires. Engaging in anti-inflammatory activities like exercise, meditation, yoga, tai chi and progressive muscle relaxation can decrease systemic inflammation. They can also help the individual to react in a more modulated fashion with less anger, rage and anxiety. These better modulated reactions also can help people to make better and more healthful

choices in their diets, relationships and substance use. Anti-inflammatory diets high in whole grains, low saturated fat and low glycemic index diets and anti-inflammatory supplements, such as fish oil, flax seed and low-dose aspirin, can help decrease inflammation. Moderate alcohol consumption can also be part of the equation if not contraindicated medically or by personal tendency toward excess.

Engaging in positive outlook changes can also be helpful. Although it sounds rather simplistic, there is data to suggest that choosing to focus on the positive aspects of people, places and things does favorably change both mood and physiology.

AVOIDING THE EROSIIVE FIRES OF NEGATIVITY

Negativity and conflict elicit and fuel destructive fires in all the involved parties. Therefore, seeking out positive friends, employees and groups can decrease conflicts and negativity and exert a positive effect on the balance of internal fires. Avoiding "petty arguments" and choosing to focus on the positive attributes of friends and employees improves life for all involved.

Depression can smother the fires of joy and passion while simultaneously fostering destructive fires and inflammation. Sometimes the DSM signs and symptoms of depression are clearly evident to the sufferer and those around him. However, depression can manifest in more subtle and confusing ways. I refer to the entity of sub-clinical depression. People with this type of depression lack the signs of severe depression. They are still capable of going to work and performing the required tasks of their life. However, life seems to have lost much of its shine! There is a general

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AVOIDING ROLLER COASTER FIRES

Roller coasters are fun for many to ride, but not healthy for many to reside permanently on. In the context of relationships, the brief extreme burst of flames during the peak of the ride is all too often followed by the letdown and angst of the lows. Intense breathtaking passion can continue to occur throughout midlife but not with every encounter. Contrary to popular media messages, most intellectual, emotional and sexual encounters vary from the mundane to the climactic. Lasting passion and healthy fires of excitement do not usually survive nor thrive the turmoil of frequent extreme highs and lows.

The excitement and warmth of a sunset, fragrant flower, meaningful deed, genuine human encounter, ongoing friendship or soft fur of a pet are usually far more gratifying and less ephemeral than the "rush" of the roller coaster. Build your life and happiness on a foundation of positive fires and predictably gratifying activities. The roller coaster rushes of passion will occur, often at surprisingly unexpected times. During the interim, nurture and savor the positive experiences of the "everyday" ride.

overriding "blah". Anger, irritability, apathy, fatigue and loss of libido are common. Seeking appropriate psychotherapeutic and/or psychotropic intervention can be marvelously effective. It's important to try to recognize these signs in patients and refer them for help when necessary.

IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE OF OUR PATIENTS

The dermatologist can play a key role in enhancing the quality of life during the midlife period.

The Role of the Medical Dermatologist.

Controlling the fires of inflammatory skin diseases such as rosacea, acne, eczema and psoriasis have been conclusively shown to improve quality of life.

The Role of the Cosmetic Dermatologist.

Cosmetic interventions can address midlife fires in many different ways. The cosmetic dermatologist can ameliorate the burning discontent with dyspigmentation, wrinkling, volume loss, unsightly and uncomfortable skin growths that are all signs of older age.

Well-chosen cosmetic procedures can be an impetus to kindle new and positive fires. For example, the preliminary results of an ongoing Botox study being conducted at our practice center suggest that middle-aged individuals treated with Botox are more confident, happier and more amorous.

Cosmetic procedures have been shown to reduce depression and improve self-image. As these individuals are freed from the exhausting burden of these negative emotional states, they have the energy and confidence to pursue new interests and passions. The hidden lure of the garden, kitchen, tennis court, golf course, gym, classroom or bedroom often becomes visible and tantalizing.

Visual-cognitive-emotional messaging to the heart. Another aspect of dermatologic intervention deals with visual-cognitive-emotional messaging.

This probably explains the Botox-effect reported recently suggesting that depressed patients refractory to antidepressant medications had remission of their depressive symptoms after Botox treatment.

Simply stated, when you feel badly, you look stressed and distressed, and that makes you feel worse; an understandable visual-cognitive-emotional cascade. Conversely, when you look better or look good, positive feelings are elicited by the same cascade.

Don't underestimate the power of well chosen and well executed cosmetic proce-

dures. They are not a panacea which cures all life's ills, but they clearly can help!

NURTURING THE HOME FIRE – KEEPING OUR OWN FIRES IGNITED

Nothing has the potential to extinguish the flames of passion and desire more rapidly than the drudgeries of reality. Financial stress, work, home chores, children, familiarity and out-of-synch mood states all can easily lead to resentment, anger, withdrawal and disgust. Anger begets anger, negativity begets negativity.

Familiarity breeds contempt. Or is it, that familiarity illuminates the seeds of reality and provides the potential to devalue one's partner? Much of the problem is based in our expectations of life and love.

Unfair and unrealistic expectations of love, relationships and partners inevitably lead to unhappiness. Beliefs such as, "If my partner truly loved me, she would behave and react according to my idealized fantasy of love," inevitably lead to disappointment and conflict. The partner who feels unaccepted and unable to meet the expectations of their spouse will inevitably stop trying and act out in angry and hurtful ways.

Other cultures have a much different view of love and marriage. They do not have the American romanticized expectancy of relationships. They fully expect that there will be many personality negatives and relationship difficulties. To their credit, they believe that their obligation is to focus on the positive and accept the negative.

Choose to focus on the positives of your partner. Remember what the things were that attracted you to them. Work daily to focus on the positives that define them now. Find opportunities to convey acceptance, approval and respect. These positive messages warm and soften our partners and allow them to rekindle their safely rekindle their fires. Although we frequently believe that we cannot control our emotional reactions to those around us, the reality is that we often can. Try it, give it some time, the results may be warmer than you imagined.

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STRIKING THE MATCH — OVERCOMING STAGNATION

Finding the spark is not always easy. Finding the energy and desire to light the spark is not always easy. Waiting for the flame of desire to flare is often a futile endeavor. The spark necessary to ignite the flame only flickers after action. You may recall the successful Nike sales slogan — “Just do it”. Psychology studies support this simple instruction. Lethargy, depression, anxiety and indifference are often replaced by energy, passion and happiness if we engage in life. The engagement need not be a dramatic change. A short walk, new book, kind word or soothing bath may be all that is necessary to begin the process. Akin to an athlete, these emotional workouts lead to the development of a stronger, more confident and luminescent person.

Disengagement and lethargy allow the days of life to become a monotonous blur. Try a new channel, a new perfume or a new game. Hold a hand, hold a bible, hold on to the moment.

Many if not most of us operate by a set of largely unspoken rules of behavioral options. Declarations such as “I’m not the outdoor type” or “I’m not the kind of person who does group activities” are windows into these rigidly indoctrinated rules that are essentially behavioral restrictions. These are constraints that limit opportunities for discovery. It is through discovery that new fires ignite and the excitement of life increases.

The spark that ignites a new and brilliantly radiant midlife fire often comes from unexpected sources.

THE THRILL OF MIDLIFE

It is sometimes the case that an unfortunate, painful or even tragic life event can light a new fire and subsequently unleash a lifelong passion. Personal illness, illness or death of a loved one or pet, or other emotional adversity will sometimes elicit a passion for learning, involvement or volunteerism that can bring meaning and intimacy to life.

Midlife fires are necessary and inevitable. Perhaps the realization that we lack immortality forces a re-examination of the manner in which we view and embrace life.

The dermatologist can be a vital part of the goal of kindling safe and healthy fires and controlling those that are destructive or diminishing quality of life. Observe closely for the relief and spark of enthusiasm that you give to your patients. Touch them meaningfully with your expert care. To quote the great philosopher Monty Python, the individual at midlife can safely say “Not Quite Dead Yet”. John Mellencamp need not be correct. The thrill of living goes on and I suggest that the best is yet to come.

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