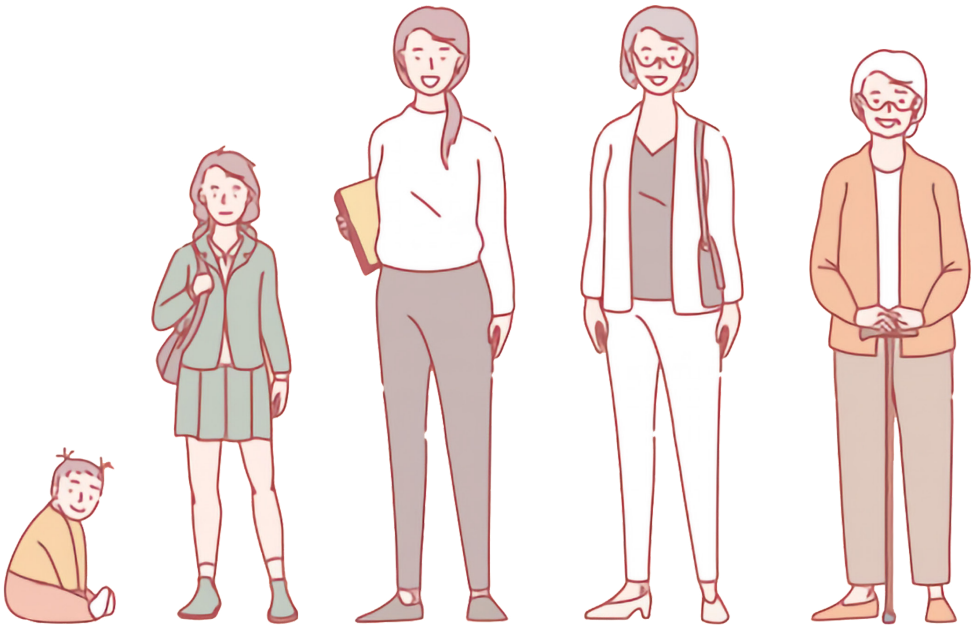


Midlife Challenges and Self-compassion for Women

Take a breath and
make time for yourself.



STAGES OF A WOMAN'S LIFE



Biologically, a woman will typically go through the following five stages across lifetime:

- **Infancy**
- **Puberty** (adolescence)
- **Sexual Maturation** (reproductive age)
- **Climacteric Period** (midlife)
- **Post-climacteric Years** (elderly)

(Takeda, 2010)

This booklet will focus on women's climacteric period, i.e., midlife, to highlight the multiple challenges women face in this transition period and share some self-compassion tips for women to take good care of physical and mental wellbeing in this phase of life.



Women's unique challenges in the contemporary world

Women's evolutionarily caring ability may have equipped them with higher social-emotional sensitivity but could have put them at a higher risk of emotional issues having to survive in the jungle of the fast-paced modern world. It is also evident that emotional issues, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are more prevalent in women, though men are more likely to develop addiction issues such as drug abuse and alcohol dependence. This is not to imply that either gender is superior or inferior, but just to acknowledge the existence of gender differences in response to stress. By powerful shaping of nature and nature, men and women have their unique sets of challenges across different life stages.

Juggling among different social roles and trying to balance family and career in midlife, women may have the tendency or even be expected by others or the social-cultural norms to put others' needs at the expense of their own. When things go awry, they may internalize the problem and criticize or blame themselves. On top of the psycho-social stressors are the physical and emotional turmoil of the menopause, which places extra challenge to women's wellbeing in midlife. Therefore, it is important for women in midlife to be compassionate towards themselves and attend to their own needs.

CULTIVATING SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion is befriending yourself

According to Dr Kristin Neff, a pioneer in the field of self-compassion research and co-founder of Mindful Self-Compassion programme, self-compassion is

“When we suffer, caring for ourselves as we would care for someone we truly love.”



She further breaks down self-compassion into three core elements:

1) Mindful Awareness

Be mindfully aware of and acknowledge the stressful experience as it is, neither denying nor amplifying the negative.

2) Common Humanity

Understand that experiencing stress is part of being human. Any woman of your age with similar background undergoing similar situation will probably feel the same way as you do.

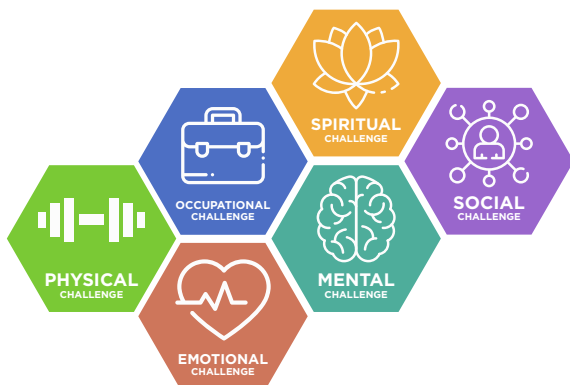
3) Self-Kindness

Treat yourself with kindness. Offer yourself kind and supportive words or actions, just as how you would treat a dear friend who is going through a similar struggle in life.

Research shows that high level of self-compassion is associated with

- more positive mental state
- less negative mental state
- better coping with chronic illness
- more pro-health behaviours
- more motivated to learn and grow
- less burnout or compassion fatigue

The following pages highlights the unique challenges women face in midlife and provides some self-compassion tips in response to these challenges.



PHYSICAL CHALLENGE

Women's multiple psycho-social stressors and tendency to internalise problems may cause them to experience stress in the form of somatic symptoms (such as physical tension and pain). Physiological and hormonal changes during menopause may also lead to various unpleasant symptoms (such as hot flashes and night sweats) and cause sleep disruption.



Potential issues:

Menopausal symptoms, somatization, insomnia

How could you care for yourself physically?

Can you think of different ways to release the tension and stress that builds up in your body?

Physical self-compassion tips:

Engage in relaxing activities

E.g., progressive muscle relaxation exercise, diaphragmatic breathing exercise, yoga, Pilate, massage, warm bath, have a cup of tea/coffee, etc.

Healthy eating

- Regular mealtime
- Avoid certain food that may cause sweating (such as spicy food)

Sleep hygiene

- Maintain a regular bedtime schedule
- Keep bedroom cool and well-ventilated
- Wear loose clothing to bed
- Avoid caffeine before bedtime
- Regular exercise but not right before bedtime



EMOTIONAL CHALLENGE

Women's multiple roles in the family and at workplace may increase their risk to experience burnout, affecting mood and emotional wellbeing. Physiological and hormonal changes during menopause may also lead to frequent fluctuations in mood. It may even develop into depression if the low mood persists.



Potential issues:

Burnout-related depression, menopausal depression

How could you care for yourself emotionally?

Is there something different you would like to try?

Emotional self-compassion tips: ♦♦

Engage in self-soothing/comforting activities

E.g., pet the dog/cat/small animals, journaling, cooking, aroma therapy, walking in nature, etc.

Accept negative feelings

- Identify and validate your own feelings in a gentle and understanding voice, e.g., *"oh, this is frustration."*
- Be open and allow your feelings to exist, instead of resisting/avoiding/rejecting the feelings, e.g., *"though I don't like it, it's ok to feel it."*
- Understand that there is no right or wrong feeling. Every feeling has a hidden message. Read the hidden message and take helpful action for yourself, e.g., anger usually means you are not happy with the situation or being treated unfairly.
- Understand the transient nature of feelings, seeing emotions come and go as waves and believing that *"it will pass eventually."*



MENTAL CHALLENGE

Women's multiple responsibilities and tendency to internalise problems may put them at higher risk of self-criticism or self-blame, especially when things go wrong. This may lead to their constant rumination over the past wrongdoings and excessive worry about future negative outcomes. It may even develop into anxiety if the mental agitation persists.



Potential issues:

Negative thinking pattern, worry, rumination, anxiety

How could you care for your mind?

Is there a different way you would like to try to let your thoughts come and go more easily, especially when you are under stress?

Mental self-compassion tips: ◆◆

Reduce mental agitation

Train the mind to focus on one pleasant thing to do at a time, e.g., practice mindfulness meditation, watch a funny movie, read an inspiring book, etc.

Relate to negative thoughts differently.

- See your thoughts as passing mental events. Allow them to come and go as passing clouds in the sky or floating leaves on the stream.
- Reflect on truthfulness and helpfulness of your thought. If it is not true or not helpful, drop the thoughts. You do not have to follow them.
- Write your thoughts down to get them out of your mind. You may notice your unhelpful thoughts or thinking patterns more easily when you write them down.

Positive reframing

Reinterpret a negative or challenging situation in a positive light or search for silver lining in a negative or challenging situation. It could help balance the negative thinking.



SOCIAL CHALLENGE

While juggling multiple social roles (mother, daughter, wife, worker, caregiver, and more), women may become “superwomen” but easily overlook their social-emotional needs and even experience social alienation or isolation. Depending on the family cycle, women may also experience sadness and loss after all children leave home, or experience caregiver fatigue if they are the primary caregiver for sick parents.



Potential issues:

Superwomen syndrome, empty-nest syndrome, caregiver stress for elderly parents

How could you care for yourself socially?

When and how do you relate to others that brings you genuine happiness?

Social self-compassion tips:

Connect with others

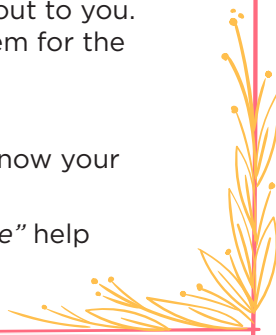
- Put in effort to maintain social bonds and ties with others, e.g., meeting with friends, sending a birthday card, playing sports and games together, etc.
- Establish a routine of activities to keep socially active, e.g., community and volunteering activities.

Express and share your concerns with someone you trust

- This is not to get the problem fixed, but to get emotional support from the person. Sometimes what you need may be just a listening ear.
- Conversely, be a listening ear when someone reaches out to you. Listen with empathy. Do not rush into fixing the problem for the person.

Seek help from others when needed

- It is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it is a strength to know your limits well and know when to seek help
- Be open to “receive” help from others, so you can “give” help to others in future.



OCCUPATIONAL CHALLENGE

With the impact of menopause and decreased stamina due to aging, midlife professional women may have to work harder with longer hours to keep up with the pace and demands at workplace, not to mention the additional pressure if they want to maintain an upward trajectory either in professional development or in climbing the corporate ladder.



Potential issues:

Lack of work-life balance, job burnout

How could you care for yourself at work?

Is there something different you would like to try at work?

Occupational self-compassion tips: ◆◆

Set healthy boundary

- Set physical boundary by separating work and living areas if you need to work from home.
- Set time boundary by following a regular work schedule and/or set a limit to knocking-off time, regardless of working in office or working from home.
- Set psychological boundary by training the mind to rest fully while you are physically away from work, e.g., through mindfulness training.

Adjust expectations and priorities

- Lower expectations at work and re-connect with what is important to you in life.
- Prioritise and make time for what is important to you, e.g., spend more time with family if family is more important, or spend more time on exercise if health is more important.

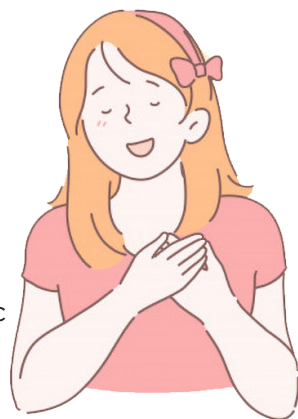
Kind actions towards self

- Say “No” assertively and negotiate unreasonable workload or timeline at work
- Take regular breaks at work, e.g., take a walk in nature, or look at greenery nearby



SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE

Midlife is a transition period of identity and may affect self-confidence in women due to various bio-psycho-social changes. Women may feel intense depression, anxiety, and even emptiness or remorse if they perceive lack of purpose and accomplishment in life. This may trigger a strong desire to make drastic changes to their current life, so “midlife crisis” could also be called “midlife awakening”, awakening to spirituality¹.



Potential issues:

Midlife crisis

What could you do to care for yourself spiritually?

If you have been neglecting your spiritual growth, is there anything you would like to do differently?

Spiritual self-compassion tips:

Nurture your values

- Identify your topmost important values, e.g., authenticity, generosity, helpfulness, etc.
- Examine to what extent your current behaviour or lifestyle is consistent with your values.
- Reflect on internal and external barriers to act in accordance with your values.
- Identify and commit to actions that help overcome the barriers and live a value-consistent life.
- Regularly check in and steer back to a value-consistent life if it goes off track.

Cultivate gratitude

- Appreciate what you already have, instead of constantly focusing on the gap between what you should have and what you do not have.
- Start a gratitude journal and count 10 blessings at the end of a day, a week, or a month.

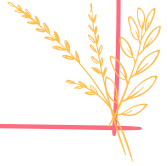


¹Take note that spirituality does not only apply to people with religion. Spirituality is a universal human experience that involves a search for meaning in life.

Mini-Exercise: Take a self-compassion break

This self-compassionate break (Neff & Germer, 2018) is a way to remind yourself to apply the three core elements of self-compassion when difficulty arises in your life. You may find your own words, and then talk to yourself in a gentle and validating voice.

If something bothers you or you are in a stressful situation, pause and feel the discomfort in your body.



1. Mindful Awareness

**First, be mindful of your difficult experience.
Fully acknowledge and validate your struggle or distress.**

You may say to yourself:

"This is a moment of distress/struggle/suffering."

"This is stressful/tough/difficult."

2. Common humanity

**Second, remind yourself that as human beings we
all experience distress some way or another in our life.**

You may say to yourself:

"I'm not alone feeling this way."

*"Any woman of my age and background in my circumstance may
also feel/struggle/experience in this way, just like me."*

3. Self-kindness

**Last, remember to be kind, not harsh, to yourself. Support yourself
with kind words or actions, just as how you would support a dear
friend in a similar situation.**

You may say to yourself:

"May I be kind/gentle/easy to myself."

"May I give myself a warm hug", and then offer a big hug to yourself.

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Mind Art Experiential Lab (MAELab)
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