

Chapter 22

Leisure and Health in Middle Age

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Life expectancy has become much greater in recent years, and North Americans can now expect to live well into their late 70s or early 80s (78.2 years in the United States 80.3 years in Canada). Because this increase has occurred relatively recently, it can be said that interest in adult development during middle adulthood is only just now entering "middle age." That is, it was only about thirty or forty years ago that serious research regarding peoples' lives during their middle adult years began to appear. Prior to this time, those interested in human development focused on infancy, childhood, adolescence, and the elderly. They were intrigued by the clear evidence of factors associated with growth early in life and then decline in later life and essentially paid little attention to human development in the middle years.

This lack of interest in middle adulthood began to shift in the 1970s, with the work of developmental theorists like Daniel Levinson, Roger Gould, and George Valliant. Drawing from and building on earlier works by Erik Erickson, Bernice Neugarten, and Robert Havighurst, they shed new and enhanced light upon what happens to people and how they feel about their lives during middle adulthood. Since then, researchers have continued to examine concepts embedded in psychological, biological, personal, and social theories and in doing so, increased our understanding about what many find to be the longest and most dynamic period of time in the life span.

Middle age is said to start around age thirty, after young adulthood. Most scholars today agree that middle age lasts a minimum of thirty to a maximum of forty-five years of a person's life, thus well beyond the age of 60. Yet the span of years has increased as adult health and wellness practices increase longevity. As a cohort, middle adulthood keeps including more years because we live longer, healthier lives.

Contrary to many popular conceptions, middle adulthood is anything but a static period of time. Rather, it appears to be highlighted by many ups and downs and many life changes that can be viewed as both gains and losses. In addition, people who are in middle age have diverse lifestyles. This increases the likelihood that changes experienced during this period of time will take many twists and turns unique to the pattern of an individual's life and social roles. This chapter examines the role of leisure, health, and

wellness during this developmental period. We use data from a unique longitudinal study of leisure among middle-aged adults to explore changes and continuities in views regarding leisure and the ways in which health and wellness affect their perceptions.

Leisure During Middle Adulthood

The concept of leisure tended to be overlooked or minimized by adult developmental researchers historically. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that leisure researchers with interests in middle age development began to study and write about general issues related to this age group. Concurrently, by exploring recreation behavior and leisure perceptions from social-psychological perspectives, several leisure researchers were increasingly demonstrating the role of leisure for middle-aged adults (1). More recently, leisure researchers with interests in both adult development and health and well-being are adding to the body of knowledge about leisure during the middle adulthood years (2, 3).

In considering leisure, health, and wellness in this chapter on middle-aged adults, we will focus on one study that was conceptually based in theories associated with adult development and leisure. Called "A Study of Leisure During Adulthood" (ASOLDA), the study collected in-depth information on individuals' lives for ten consecutive years. Researchers were interested in assessing change and continuity of leisure, life perceptions, and values in the lives of middle-aged adults over time. As a result, the information available helps us illustrate how the thread of leisure has been spun into individuals' lives in-depth over a decade of life in middle age.

Eighty-four middle-aged adults participated in ASOLDA by providing their perceptions regarding leisure and life on a 13-page survey sent to them each year from 1987 through 1996. Midway through the study, participants were invited to be included in an interview phase of the study. Sixty-six of the original study participants agreed to be interviewed, demonstrating their commitment to the study and enabling researchers to develop informative case studies.

Those participating in ASOLDA were primarily of Euro-American descent, female (61%), well educated (54% of respondents held post graduate degrees), and geographically distributed throughout North America. Variables investigated included leisure attitude, measured by the Leisure Ethic Scale (LES) (4); perceived freedom of leisure as measured by the Perceived Freedom in Leisure Scale (Short Form) (PFLS) (5); Valuing Leisure, Life Structure (6); List of Values (LOV) (7); and the Life Experiences Survey (8).

Using ASOLDA data, we have a rich reservoir of facts about participants' leisure attitude, perceived freedom in leisure, and the value they place upon leisure in their lives. We also have information about the broad range of life experiences they encountered during the decade, including times of stress and anxiety such as serious illness or injury or the death and illness of loved ones. Study participants provided both an extensive record of their actual life experiences and their thoughts regarding how they felt about these events, so we are able to reflect upon the relation such experiences may have to their values and leisure using longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data. We thus have continuous information from respondents who provided us with insights regarding their leisure, health, and wellness during many years of mid-life adulthood. We can both examine the group as a whole and we can look inside certain individuals' lives for some answers.

By examining leisure, health, and wellness in this way, we have the benefit of exploring these concepts from either an interindividual or intraindividual perspective. That is, we can focus on the group as a whole and note how individuals may perceive or change, or we can focus on one individual in order to note how he or she perceives or change over time. In developing this chapter, we intended to show the benefits of both perspectives as we have examined key concepts related to leisure, health, and wellness for the total group or for selected individuals. If we have been successful, you can *see* a snapshot of factors that relate to the leisure, health, and wellness for the group of adults as a whole and you can *see* several snapshots found a photo album taken over time during a person's middle adulthood that relate to that person's perceptions related to leisure, health, and wellness.

Leisure Continuity

The quantitative data from ASOLDA show that middle-aged adults value leisure and hold very positive attitudes over time. Consistently, the vast majority of the participants indicated that leisure was their most enjoyable time, that they admired people who know how to relax, that they don't feel guilty about enjoying themselves, and that it is good for adults to be playful. Each year, participants were asked to rank how important family, leisure, and work were in their lives. Not surprisingly, people prioritized family as most important, but leisure and work were ranked equally.

Of course, people vary in the views that they hold. For instance, some people prefer to have less free time than others and some value leisure more or less than other people do. At the same time, even those who prefer less free time still place a high value on leisure. In addition,

individuals have remarkably consistent views regarding leisure over time. This stability suggests that leisure maintains its importance to individuals during middle adulthood regardless of their life experiences. That is, whether or not individuals have ups and downs, their leisure values and attitudes toward leisure do not appear to be altered greatly. As a result, we can suggest that leisure perceptions maintain their strength and resilience during middle adult years.

Take the cases of Allison, Jeff, Annie, Ed, and Betsy for example. Allison retired early from her professional career at age 54 in order to pursue her interest in art. Over time, Allison held a high regard for leisure evidenced by her positive attitudes and valuing leisure. She perceived freedom in leisure, "I think I'm just very happy to have time when I can really let myself be who I am, which is, of course, perfect freedom, and then to find out who I am...I guess I am letting myself become more of who I am through my experience of leisure." Jeff, who retired at the age of 50, left a constrained work environment that lacked autonomy. Having a positive attitude about and valuing leisure, he saw "work as a way to pay for my toys." He looked forward to a "life of leisure" having indicated his most important want out of life was fun and enjoyment. Annie, following the death of her husband, found herself with way too much free time for leisure, yet she consistently felt positive about and valued leisure and perceived freedom in leisure. Ed and Betsy, married 39 years at the point of retirement, attributed their ease of transition into retirement in part due to their positive feelings toward leisure and perceptions of freedom that they experienced in leisure over time.

Health and Life Experiences

Over the ten years that we followed the people in our sample, almost ten percent experienced a significant health event, such as a serious illness or injury. The vast majority reported that they had little control over the event and perceived it as having a negative impact on their lives. In other words, it was unexpected and traumatic. Nevertheless, those who experienced illness or injury continued to report attitudes toward leisure that were similar to other participants. They continued to place the same value on leisure and to prioritize leisure as others did. These similarities appeared even if the health event was perceived as being negative or positive.

The case of Annie depicts this situation. Though she experienced health-related changes in sleeping and eating habits, sexual difficulties, and bouts with personal illness and injury, she maintained her high regard for leisure. And though Allison expressed frustration about a longer than expected recuperation period following knee surgery when she experienced persistent

mobility challenges, she too maintained her high regard for leisure.

The concept of “life structure” was used by Levinson to describe the unique pattern or design of an individual’s life at a given point in time, suggesting that adults go through alternative periods of stability and change. In the periods of stability, which he called “structure-building,” individuals are generally reaffirming their choices and decisions and maintaining their life structure. In the periods of change, which he called “structure-changing,” individuals are in the process of questioning their life structure and reassessing, rather than reaffirming it. The participants were given Levinson’s definitions and asked to reflect upon their own lives using these terms. Slightly more than half (58%) said that they were structure-building, while the remainder said that they were in the process of structure-changing and questioning their life structure.

When we compared the leisure-related attitudes and values of the participants in these two groups, we found no differences in their attitudes toward leisure, how much they valued leisure, or in the average hours of leisure that they experienced or wanted. When asked to rank the relative priority that they currently gave family, work, and leisure, there were also no differences in their rankings of family. However, there were slight differences in the average ranking that they gave to leisure and work. Those who saw themselves as structure changing and reassessing their lives gave slightly higher priority to leisure and slightly lower priority to work. The opposite was true for those who were structure building and who gave slightly higher priority to work than to leisure. In general, leisure remained important for participants in various stages of life and appears to become even more important in times of change.

To illustrate, consider Dottie’s case. The year that Dottie learned she had lung cancer was also the year she recorded her highest positive and negative impact scores related to her life experiences. She indicated that her life structure was changing in both that year and in the next year, the year she died. She also identified self-fulfillment and fun and enjoyment out of life as her most important values. Her leisure perceptions were always high and were the highest in the year that she died.

Wellness and Life Perceptions

People in middle adulthood often find themselves caring for others, from aging parents to spouses and even siblings. As time goes on it becomes increasingly likely that they will experience serious illness and death of significant others, especially parents, but also spouses. Such caregiving and loss are often seen as a challenge to individuals’ well-being. We were able to use data from ASOLDA participants’ reports on the Life Experiences

(LE) Survey to see how these difficult experiences might be related to their leisure perceptions.

In any given year of the ASOLDA study, about one-fifth of the participants reported the death of a family member or close friend during the previous year. The data indicate that those who had these experiences valued leisure at least as much, if not more, than those who did not. For instance, those who had experienced a death of a loved one were slightly more likely than other participants to report positive attitudes regarding the role of leisure in their lives. They also tended to rank order family, work, and leisure in different ways. As would perhaps be expected, they gave family a higher priority and work a lower priority. However, reflecting the way in which attitudes toward leisure remain constant, the priority attached to leisure remained the same as for other participants.

To highlight the relation of wellness and leisure in middle adulthood, consider these case study findings for Annie, Ronny, and Connie. When Annie was asked when she sought leisure, it was when she felt stress and wanted relief. As such, leisure provided Annie with an escape from stress, adding to her sense of well-being. And though Ronny reported that the impact of life experiences related to his work were quite negative, he still valued leisure and held it in high regard. Of leisure he said, "It's an escape from the workplace." Connie had to adjust to a major life transition when twins she had given up at birth unexpectedly re-entered her life. She experienced major shifts in her perceptions regarding her life structure, values, and in how she used her leisure. The tendencies observed prior to the epiphany changed and then over time reverted as her life evolved around her new and expanded family role. Throughout the transition, however, her leisure perceptions remained intact.

Each year, the ASOLDA participants were also asked to reflect upon things that they looked for or wanted out of life and indicate which of the following was most important to them in their daily lives: a sense of belonging, warm relationships with others, self-fulfillment, being well-respected, self-respect, a sense of accomplishment, fun and enjoyment in life, excitement, and security. The vast majority of the participants rated relationships with others, self respect, and being respected by others as most important to them and, on average, these participants were very similar in their views toward leisure. In contrast, a few participants (no more than 6% of the total in any one year) said that "fun and enjoyment" was most important. No participant gave this response every year and most of those who reported this value as most important did so only once or twice during the ten years of participation. Yet, during the year when they saw fun and enjoyment as most important, these participants had significantly more positive attitudes toward leisure, valued it more, actually spent more

time in leisure activities, and wanted to spend even more times in leisure than the other participants. Thus, while the participants had remarkably similar leisure views over time and in varying circumstances, there were periods when leisure became especially important in the lives of some of the participants.

Looking at important values associated with well-being (i.e., self-fulfillment, warm relationships with others, sense of accomplishment, self-respect, and fun and enjoyment), differences along with consistencies are notable in the case studies for two married couples. The first couple is Rick and Rita, who are in their 40s and 50s and working full time. The second couple is Pete and Laura transitioning into retirement. Values that they singled out most frequently as 'most important' over time included warm relationships with others and self-respect. Their verbal comments illustrate the relevance of these values to their sense of well-being. Rita takes "tremendous pleasure in self-fulfillment out of making something happen out of nothing...things I do in my leisure [are] valuable to me as part of being a human being." Rick feels that self-respect is "something I get from how I behave in all settings." Laura "always appreciated and enjoyed the warm relationships," particularly with her grandchildren. And Pete connected warm relationships with people and almost anything he pursued that he also called leisure in saying "most of the things that I like to do involve people."

Summary

So what might all of this mean in terms of leisure, health, and wellness? Using the brief assemblage of information garnered from grouped and case study data, we can see that a high regard for leisure exists in spite of positively or negatively rated life experiences and life perceptions. The clear pattern of continuity in leisure perceptions across the life span during this period is striking. It should also be apparent that multiple aspects play a role during middle adulthood and contribute to individuals' leisure, health, and wellness perceptions and experiences. It is important to acknowledge individual uniqueness, for one size does not fit all. Every adult has and thinks about their unique life experiences in relationship to the unique nature of their life structure.

Though the grouped and case study ASOLDA data clearly show that a high regard for leisure exists, we still cannot say with certainty that leisure behavior, satisfying or not, will follow. Just knowing that adults hold positive attitudes about leisure, value leisure, and perceive freedom in leisure is not enough information for professionals to make prudent decisions about planning and providing recreation opportunities and services.

Leisure behavior is a far more complex phenomenon, one that Mannell and Kleiber (9) remind us involves the interplay of internal psychological dispositions (e.g., perceptions, feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, needs, personality characteristics) and situational influences that are part of an individual's social environment (e.g., other people, group norms, human artifacts, and media).

Within this context then, let us briefly put forward responses professionals may want to consider when thinking about providing leisure, recreation, and physical activity programs designed to encourage adult participation. These include responses directed toward both the facilitation of programs and services made available to middle-aged adults and to ways in which professionals choose to view this demographic. Drawn from ASOLDA findings presented in this chapter, we conclude by offering factors that would likely influence our thinking about providing recreation programs and services designed to encourage adult participation.

- Life experiences will vary for most adults during middle adulthood. Such variances may open or close discretionary time available. Their high regard for leisure alone does not necessarily translate into participation interests or behaviors.
- Constraints resulting from physical health or injury may be temporary or chronic. There are times when adults may not participate in recreation or other forms of activity even though they value leisure highly and may be in good or poor health (or in times of stress).
- Adult participants would be well served if professionals used facilitative practices in designing and delivering programs. Given the varied life experiences adults have, professionals will want to rely upon good needs assessment processes when developing and managing programs. Those professionals who facilitate programs and services in ways that acknowledge and honor adults' tendency for self-determination in making life choices will likely be more successful.

We hope you have enjoyed this leisure journey through middle adulthood. Having taken this journey with us, we hope you can see the relevance of leisure and how it impacts health and well-being of middle-aged adults during this portion of the life span. Considering leisure over time, as we have done using ASOLDA longitudinal data, provides us with both several snapshots of the total group of adults and with a few photo albums for selected individuals. It seems to us that this perspective which

emphasizes interindividual and intraindividual concepts is representative of the way professionals are encouraged to design and implement programs and services. Professionals are typically responsible for programs and services designed to meet both the needs and interests of both groups of people and for individuals seeking leisure experiences. In thinking about and programming for adults, prudent professionals should be employing their knowledge associated with this particular age group of middle aged adults, and then using their skills to produce experiences that adults would find attractive.

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