

Life Cycles of Single Adults

Linda Hardin, DMin.

Little research has been completed to determine the life cycles for single adults and to identify how they differ from married adults. *Single in a Married World* reports on one study by three counselors. While this book is written from a secular viewpoint and does not always reflect Christian perspectives, the authors' insights make it a book worth reading. For married Single Adult Ministries leaders, it provides an overview of the stages of singleness, the tasks, and issues faced.

North American culture continues to hold marriage as the rite of passage into adulthood. Marriage is the expected progression from dependency to adulthood. When this passage is delayed or not taken, it becomes difficult for portions of society to view these individuals as adults. This emphasis on marriage often makes it difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable, for single adults to make decisions frequently deemed as those made by couples. This includes purchasing a home, beginning a retirement plan, purchasing furniture and other household items, and many others.

This reluctance becomes a major challenge for Single Adult Ministries. We must validate the individuals involved in our ministries as adults. We must applaud their decisions to move on with their lives and affirm the adulthood of the more reluctant ones. As our single adults understand the task of each life cycle stage and receive encouragement and support, we empower them to forge ahead. Single Adult Ministries may well be the first entity of the church to recognize their adulthood.

Even with these developments, marriage continues to be the anchor point of adulthood. For the majority of people and for the culture as a whole, couplehood remains the desired status. Many stereotypes about single adults are negative, ranging from irresponsible and selfish to unfit or pathological. The absence of marriage leaves single adults in undefined territory.

Singleness may provide time to devote to career development without the constraints of a family life. Single women continue to receive less salary than their male counterparts. Single women may also be seen as less serious in their career pursuits, since they are just waiting to marry. Single men are frequently viewed as less stable or not fit for the corporate model of family man. Without a marriage partner, the single male's masculinity may be questioned.

The social network of many single adults becomes their family. However, the societal view of singleness as a deviation from the norm leads to a devaluation of the social network of single adults. Society often view these friendships as transient and insignificant. As a result of these perceptions, single adults may be seriously limited in their ability to view their lives as authentic or to envision a rich and rewarding life without marriage.

Schwartzberg, et. al. identify five life cycle stages for single adults. They also identify the emotional processes for each stage.

Young Adulthood: Not Married Yet

1. Shifting the relationship with the family. Not yet married: Restructuring interaction with family from dependent to an independent orientation.
2. Taking a more autonomous role with regard to the world outside the family in the areas of work and friendship.

Entering the "Twilight Zone" of Singleness: The Thirties

1. Facing single status for the first time.
2. Expanding life goals to include other possibilities in addition to marriage.

Midlife: The Forties to Mid-Fifties

1. Addressing the fantasy of the Ideal American.
 - (a) accepting the possibility of never marrying.
 - (b) accepting the possibility of not having own biological children.
2. Defining the meaning of work, current and future.
3. Defining an authentic life for oneself that can be accomplished within single status.
4. Establishing adult roles for oneself within family of origin.

Later Life: The Fifties to Failing Health

1. Consolidating decisions about work life.
2. Enjoying fruits of one's labors and the benefits health fails of singlehood.
3. Acknowledging the future diminishment of physical benefits.
4. Facing increasing disability and death of loved ones.

Elderly: Between Failing Health and Death

1. Confronting mortality.
2. Accepting one's life as it has been lived.

Young Adulthood: The "Not Married Yet" Phase

Due to cultural expectations of marriage, there is a sense of expectancy among young adults and their families that marriage will occur. While the average age for marriage is mid-twenties, the number of friends getting married often intensifies pressure for many young adults. When anxiety about getting married becomes life's focus, other age-appropriate emotional tasks are placed on hold. Loneliness, self-esteem issues, and depression are some of the emotional challenges some feel will be alleviated if they find the right person to marry.

The primary emotional tasks of young adulthood are leaving home, carving out a life path, and developing a network of emotional connections outside the family.

Leaving home

- represents beginning to establishing a separate self from the family of origin.
- implies making choices that previously would have been handled by parents.
- represents the ability to shift relationships within the family so young adults act like mature persons with their parents.

Carving out a life path involves career selection and establishing career goals. Another aspect is developing intimate relationships with others. In much of North American culture, men are taught to consider several career options. Women have been taught to develop relationships with others. This culturalization creates disadvantages for both men and women--men as they work to establish relationships and women as they seek career options that will adequately support them.

During the twenties, emotional support is shifted from family to friends, thus accomplishing a significant goal for this stage. Peer groups balance the tentative separation from family and support and strengthen the individuals' abilities to deal with frustrations involved in career selection, failed romances, and struggles to become independent. Peers share a vision and understanding that parents cannot experience.

Peer groups provide the opportunity to experiment with various adult roles. This surrogate family often provides support for individuals as they try various adult roles without entering into marriage prematurely.

Entering the "Twilight Zone" of Singlehood: The Thirties

Although men tend to focus on professional goals while women focus on relationships, by age 30 the concerns of single adults of both genders move to other aspects of life. The longer individuals are single, the more they tend to cross gender lines in developing roles typically reserved for a spouse.

According to Koons and Anthony, many women become anxious about marriage prospects between the ages of twenty and thirty. After the age of thirty, women begin to accept the realization that singleness may be a longer-term lifestyle than originally anticipated. While single men face a similar experience, it usually occurs a few years later. Young men, coping with pressure for advanced degrees, tend to delay marriage until certain goals, educational and career related, are achieved. They believe this provides a better foundation for a stable relationship.

Never-married adults entering their thirties tend to differ according to gender how they respond to singleness. Females become resigned to singleness and tend to focus on career development. Affirmations from jobs and hobbies provide a sense of purpose and meaning, and lessens the earlier anxiety regarding marriage.

For men, however, the anxiousness about singleness continues to build and they may begin a search for the perfect mate. Thirty-something single men are frequently viewed as irresponsible and unstable. Men may find women in their age group less eager for marriage. Women have learned to live without a male partner, and may have larger incomes than the men. While men tend to want to "get married and settle down", the women may not be as interested in a permanent relationship. This contributes to an identity crisis for men.

During this decade, open, nonreactive discussions of singleness need to occur with members of biological families. This open dialog enables single adults to continue progression in developing their self-identity within their family structures. To accomplish this single adults need to take the initiative in these discussions rather than responding to the roles assigned to them. Accomplishing this goal may be a long process with setbacks before the family grants acceptance as adults.

It is crucial for individuals to nurture friendship networks throughout their lifetimes. The meaning and importance of these networks may shift from decade to decade. In the thirties, friendships counterbalance concerns about work and finding a spouse. Continuing to develop a network of friendships is an emotional task of this stage. When the quality of friendships deepen and provide a familial structure, these friendships provide opportunities for the articulation of an adult self. As friendship networks strengthen, conflicts between them and family demands may develop. Individuals must learn to balance the needs of friends and family.

Because culture views marriage as the rite of passage into adulthood, it is easy for individuals to find themselves in a "holding pattern." This gives the illusion that singleness is a temporary state. For individuals to command their adulthood, they must confront this illusion and begin to accept singleness as a long-term lifestyle. To create a home, some individuals will purchase a house, condo, or townhouse. Others will invest in furniture and decorative items to allow their dwellings to reflect themselves. Accompanying this task is grieving the loss of the hoped for marriage, yet keeping alive realistic expectations for marriage.

During this decade, individuals must begin to plan for retirement years. Financial planning helps single adults, especially women, to move beyond the waiting and take control of their lives, both present and future.

Developing Alternative Scripts: The Forties to Mid-Fifties

Midlife is a time for taking stock, of reshaping and rethinking one's place in life. How individuals react to this stage typically varies with gender. Women hear their biological clocks beginning to wind down. Men often experience a type of internal beeper reminding them "It's time."

No matter how positively single adults view themselves, there is frequently a counterbalancing feeling that life is somehow "off track." This is understandable in view

of the societal messages that marriage is the "only sane goal for a mentally healthy adult." Single adults in this life stage frequently noticed a drift between them and their married friends. Single adults return home following the work-day ready to analyze the options for the evening. Their married counterparts hurry home to face an evening filled with family responsibilities. This differing flexibility leads single adults to form a network of people whose "evening freedom" mirrors theirs.

Single women who did not face or experience an increasing awareness of their biological clocks during their thirties tend to have a heightened awareness in this decade. Many single adults will decide not to rear a child. Mourning the loss of "what will never be" will be intense for some and minimal for others. For those to whom it is a loss, this sadness needs to be acknowledged as real. Experiencing the sadness helps individuals to move ahead and deepen available relationships with children, rather than avoiding such relationships due to the pain they create.

Forming a network of people who share their single adult lifestyle becomes increasingly difficult for men. The accepted life path for men is rigid: get your work in place, get married, and have children. Not following this path gives appearances of irresponsibility, instability, selfishness, and doubts regarding sexual orientation. What was perceived as an enviable lifestyle in their thirties becomes a detriment at midlife. Since most men experience this attitudinal shift, their sense of self-worth is affected.

Work is more than making money. It involves using skills and talents in valued and valuable ways. For many single adults, work becomes the anchor and organizational focus of daily life. Personal meaning is derived from pride in earning one's living, giving to society, creating something enduring, and a sense of power.

During this stage, the important network of friends becomes more valuable as individuals continue to experience love and intimacy with friends of both genders. At midlife intimacy is primarily linked to long-term friends and family, people with a shared history.

Putting It All Together: The Fifties to Failing Health

Single adults who resolved emotional issues regarding their singleness are ideally situated at this stage to enjoy the freedom and autonomy of their lifestyle. They, especially those without children, can devote time and energy as needed to shaping personally meaningful work. They have the freedom to move into new areas of employment or work related ventures. Without the restraints of a spouse or family, they can make work related decisions with fewer ripples of anxiety. Counterbalancing this freedom is the realization that they are solely responsible for their financial security.

Preparation for retirement now receives more attention. While some may experience another upsurge in the desire for marriage, other may given consideration to finding a roommate to avoid living retirement years alone. Since quality of life in retirement hinges on physical health, health issues may receive a higher priority.

As individuals continue to age, they begin to experience the illness and death of friends. Rules, procedures, and customs often limit hospital visitation privileges to family members only. These guidelines disregard friends that are closer than biological family members. Funeral homes often have reserved seating for the family. Unless family members choose to include them, close friends may attend memorial services with little or no support for their grieving.

Society often does not recognize or acknowledge the grief individuals experience when a friend dies. Culture perceives these friendships as supportive and passive rather than active. Understanding and acknowledging this grief becomes imperative in view of the role of friendships for single adults. The death of a friend has consequences: emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and physically. Friends can be in shock, in denial, and may have intellectualized or depersonalized the death of a friend long after the funeral. We must recognize and allow these friendships to exercise their rights to mourn without embarrassment. Thus providing opportunity for healthy resolution of the grieving process and affirmation of the value of friendships.

Elderly Phase: Between Failing Health and Death

Planning for retirement and failing health may allow single adults to enter this stage with fewer fears. Economics is the most important determinate of living arrangements. Therefore, preparations for this life stage need to begin early in life.

An unwritten expectation of parenting children is that they will be a source happiness and care as people approach late adulthood. In view of this expectation, single adults without children often wonder who will care for them during their final years of life. Yet issues of childlessness appear to be insignificant in determining happiness, satisfaction, or loneliness. One study found that 20 percent of senior adults do not have living children and another 10 percent were estranged from them.

Long-term single adults may enter this stage with some advantages. Once such advantage, self-sufficiency, can prove to be an added benefit. However, as health declines, this same self-sufficiency may make it difficult for some to contact agencies for assistance or allow friends and extended family to assist them.

As a means of maintaining emotional links, many elderly people decide to give some of their possession to younger persons prior to death. Unfortunately, younger people may be reluctant to accept these gifts, denying the giver and receiver the opportunity to deepen their relationship.

Single adults face challenges in some or all of life stages due in part to the lack of role models and mentors. As singleness becomes an accepted lifestyle, some of these challenges will diminish. As with the married lifestyle, planning for the future plays a significant role in future happiness. Until society changes its views regarding singleness, it is our ministry task to assist single adults as they anticipate each life stage and empower them to participate fully in life.

