

VINCENT R. WALDRON

---

DOUGLAS L. KELLEY

MARRIAGE  
  
at *Midlife*

*Counseling Strategies  
& Analytical Tools*

SPRINGER  PUBLISHING COMPANY

# Marriage at Midlife

*Counseling Strategies and  
Analytical Tools*

**VINCENT R. WALDRON, PhD**

**DOUGLAS L. KELLEY, PhD**

  
**SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY**  
New York

**Doug Kelley, PhD**, is associate professor of communication studies at Arizona State University's West campus. Professor Kelley studies communication in personal relationships, with a specific emphasis on marital interaction. His recent work has appeared in such outlets as the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, the *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, and *Communication Quarterly*. He is co-author, with Vince Waldron, of *Communicating Forgiveness*. In addition, Professor Kelley finds particular enjoyment in teaching and mentoring college students and conducting community workshops on various aspects of healthy relationships. Doug lives near the mountains in central Phoenix and spends most of his leisure time hiking, swimming, and kayaking with his wife, Ann, his two boys, Daniel and Jonathan, and his two dogs, Allen and Billy.

**Vince Waldron, PhD**, is professor and director of graduate studies for the Communication Studies program at Arizona State University where he also is affiliated with the program in Aging and Lifespan Development. He researches the communication processes that promote longevity, satisfaction, and justice in personal and work relationships. Dr. Waldron's recent research publications include the book *Communicating Forgiveness* (with Douglas Kelley) and articles in such outlets as the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, the *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, and *Communication Quarterly*. Professor Waldron founded the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Arizona State University and continues to serve as its research director. A dedicated teacher, Dr. Waldron is the recipient of a *Professor of the Year* award from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Vince lives in Glendale, Arizona, with his wife Kathleen and his daughters Emily and Laura.

Copyright © 2009 Springer Publishing Company, LLC

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or authorization through payment of the appropriate fees to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, info@copyright.com or on the web at www.copyright.com.

Springer Publishing Company, LLC  
11 West 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10036  
www.springerpub.com

*Acquisitions Editor: Sheri W. Sussman*  
*Production Editor: Wendy Druck*  
*Cover Design: Mimi Flow*  
*Composition: Aptara Inc.*

09 10 11 / 5 4 3 2 1

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-8261-2563-7

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Waldron, Vincent R.

Marriage at midlife : counseling strategies and analytical tools / Vincent R. Waldron, Douglas L. Kelley.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8261-2562-0

1. Marriage—United States. 2. Married people—United States—Psychology. 3. Middle-aged persons—United States—Psychology. 4. Marriage counseling—United States. I. Kelley, Douglas L. II. Title.

HQ1059.5.U5W247 2009

306.810973—dc22

2009001391

---

Printed in the United States of America by Hamilton Printing Company.

The author and the publisher of this Work have made every effort to use sources believed to be reliable to provide information that is accurate and compatible with the standards generally accepted at the time of publication. The author and publisher shall not be liable for any special, consequential, or exemplary damages resulting, in whole or in part, from the readers' use of, or reliance on, the information contained in this book.

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

# Contents

*Contributors* xiii

*Preface* xv

*Acknowledgments* xxi

## 1 Guiding Perspectives and Analytical Tools 1

- Defining the “Centerstage” Marriage 2
- Our Research: How Did We Learn About Centerstage Marriages? 4
- Five Couples: Five Different Challenges 5
- This Book’s Organization 6
- A Guiding Perspective: Communicating Across the Life Course 7
  - Partners Develop and Change* 8
  - Time Matters* 8
  - Marriages Have “Turning Points”* 9
  - External Circumstances Will Change* 9
- Accounting for Differences Among Clients: Culture, Gender, and Religion 10
- Understanding Centerstage Couples: Three Frameworks 13
  - The Relational Dialectics Framework* 13
  - A Resilience Framework* 15
  - The Roles Framework* 17
- Best Practices of Centerstage Couples 18
  - Renew Relationship Commitment* 18
  - Prioritize the Relationship* 19
  - Negotiate Changing Expectations* 19
  - Find a Common Voice* 19
  - Maintain an External System of Support* 19
  - Develop the Habit of Dialogue* 20
  - Sustain Intimacy* 20
- Concluding Thoughts: Remodeling the Empty Nest 20
- References 21

## **PART I: RECOUPLING: OPTIMIZING RELATIONAL PROCESSES 23**

### **2 Improving Communication 25**

- Reassessing Familiar Patterns 26
- Building Communication Capacity 28
- Sources of Distress 29
  - Inadequate Relationship Maintenance Practices* 29
  - Rigidity in Communication Practices and Perceptions* 33
  - Deficits in Communication Skills* 37
  - Physiological Effects of Aging* 40
- Analytical Tools 41
  - Applying the Dialectical Framework* 41
  - Applying the Resiliency Framework* 43
  - Applying the Roles Framework* 43
- Working With Clients 44
  - Inventory Relationship Maintenance Practices* 44
  - Change Mindless Behavior* 44
  - Keep Arousal in Check* 45
  - Expand the Listening Repertoire* 46
  - Redevelop Intimacy* 47
  - Use Metacommunication to Disrupt Reciprocity* 48
  - Reconceptualize Conflict* 48
- Concluding Thoughts 49
- Questions for Clients 49
- Exercises 50
  - Exercise 2.1 Changing Negative Mindless Behaviors* 50
  - Exercise 2.2 Building Rituals* 51
  - Exercise 2.3 Relationship Maintenance* 51
  - Exercise 2.4 Using Relational Dialectics* 51
  - Exercise 2.5 Conducting a Conflict Assessment Meeting* 52
- References 53

### **3 Forgiving Past Transgressions 55**

- Defining Forgiveness as Relational Negotiation 57
- Why Forgive? 57
- What Forgiveness Is Not 58
- Sources of Distress 59
  - Listening to Midlife Couples: What Needs Forgiving?* 59

Complicating Conditions: Helping Clients Judge the Seriousness of Transgressions	61
<i>Was the Transgression Intentional?</i>	62
<i>Has the Offense Been Forgiven Previously? Is It Likely to be Repeated?</i>	62
<i>Is the Transgression a Chronic Pattern or a Single Traumatic Event?</i>	63
<i>How Does the “Audience” Complicate Matters?</i>	63
<i>Is Responsibility Shared?</i>	64
<i>Is the Offense “Unforgivable?” Why?</i>	64
Analytical Tools	65
<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	65
<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	68
Working With Clients	70
<i>The Communicative Tasks of Forgiveness Model</i>	71
Concluding Thoughts	78
Questions for Clients	79
Exercises	79
<i>Exercise 3.1 Movie Night</i>	79
<i>Exercise 3.2 Case Analysis</i>	80
<i>Exercise 3.3 Build on Past Successes</i>	81
<i>Exercise 3.4 Forgiving Climate</i>	81
References	82

## 4 Finding New and Meaningful Activities 83

Constraints on Activity During Childrearing	85
<i>Structured Activity</i>	85
<i>Sanctioned Activity</i>	86
<i>Identity-Affirming Activity</i>	86
<i>Shared Social Activity</i>	86
<i>Coordinated Activity</i>	86
Midlife Transitions: Finding Fulfillment in New Patterns of Activity	87
<i>Increased Spontaneity</i>	88
<i>Self-Fulfillment</i>	88
<i>New Directions</i>	89
<i>More Time for Intimacy</i>	89
<i>Easy Companionship</i>	90
<i>Time for Reflection and Mutual Planning</i>	90
Sources of Distress	90
<i>The “Too Quiet” House</i>	90

	<i>Loss of Identity</i>	91
	<i>Relational Boredom</i>	92
	<i>Social Isolation</i>	92
	<i>Uncertainty and Fear</i>	93
	<i>Relationship Stresses</i>	94
Analytical Tools		95
	<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	95
	<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	96
	<i>Applying the Roles Framework</i>	99
Working With Clients		100
	<i>Seeking Meaningful Activity: Six Foundational Steps</i>	100
Emerging Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement:		
	Examples for Clients	103
	<i>Significant Service</i>	103
	<i>Lifelong Learning Programs</i>	103
	<i>Civic Engagement</i>	103
	<i>Green Volunteerism</i>	104
	<i>Mentorship Programs</i>	104
	<i>Entrepreneurship</i>	104
Concluding Thoughts		104
Questions for Clients		105
Exercises		105
	<i>Exercise 4.1 Evaluating Constraints of the Childrearing Years</i>	105
	<i>Exercise 4.2 Taking Steps Now to Create New Activities</i>	106
	<i>Exercise 4.3 Rediscovering Common Interests</i>	107
	<i>Exercise 4.4 Stability or Change? Past or Present?</i>	107
	<i>Exercise 4.5 Building Resilience</i>	108
	<i>Exercise 4.6 Time Together Pie Chart</i>	109
References		109

## **PART II: RETOOLING: ADAPTING TO MIDLIFE EVENTS 111**

<b>5</b>	<b>New Career Directions: Coping With Job Loss and Returning to School</b>	<b>113</b>
	Job Loss	114
	Returning to School	116

Sources of Distress	118
<i>Distress From Job Loss</i>	118
<i>Distress Upon Returning to School</i>	121
<i>Shared Sources of Distress</i>	124
Analytical Tools	125
<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	125
<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	126
<i>Applying the Roles Framework</i>	128
Working With Clients	130
<i>Helping Clients Respond to Job Loss</i>	130
<i>Helping Returning Students</i>	133
Concluding Thoughts	136
Questions for Clients	137
Exercises	137
<i>Exercise 5.1 Identifying Job Loss Distress</i>	137
<i>Exercise 5.2 Identifying Returning to School Distress</i>	139
<i>Exercise 5.3 Anatomy of Risk Taking</i>	139
<i>Exercise 5.4 Using Your Internal Resources</i>	140
<i>Exercise 5.5 Negotiating Changing Roles</i>	140
<i>Exercise 5.6 Learning to be Supportive During Career Change</i>	141
References	141

## 6 Managing Boundaries: Boomerang Kids, Adult Children, and Grandparenting 143

**Kathleen M. Waldron and Vincent R. Waldron**

Boomerang Kids	145
Helping Adult Children	146
Grandparenting	147
<i>Varieties in Grandparenting Experience</i>	148
Sources of Distress	151
<i>Problems With Boomerang Kids</i>	151
<i>Stressful Relationships With Adult Children</i>	153
<i>Grandparenting Complexities</i>	154
Analytical Tools	156
<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	156
<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	157
<i>Applying the Roles Framework</i>	159
Working With Clients	159
<i>Responding as a Couple</i>	159

<i>Negotiating Expectations With Boomerang Kids</i>	160
<i>Transitioning Relationships With Adult Children</i>	164
<i>Addressing Grandparent Challenges</i>	166
Concluding Thoughts	173
Questions for Clients	174
Exercises	175
<i>Exercise 6.1 Making a Boomerang Plan</i>	175
<i>Exercise 6.2 Using the Past to Manage Boundaries</i>	176
<i>Exercise 6.3 Couple Boundary Meetings</i>	176
<i>Exercise 6.4 Grandparent Couple Time</i>	176
References	177

## 7 Relocation at Midlife: Marking a New Era 179

**Dayna Kloeber and Vincent R. Waldron**

Understanding the Relocation Experience	180
<i>Types of Relocation</i>	181
<i>Why Couples Move: Expectations and Motives</i>	183
<i>Stages of Relocation</i>	184
Sources of Distress	187
<i>Differing Motives</i>	187
<i>Unrealistic Expectations</i>	188
<i>Personality Differences: Openness to Change</i>	189
<i>Autocratic Decision Making</i>	189
<i>Loss of Friends</i>	189
<i>Moving to Family: Tensions/Expectations</i>	190
<i>Increased Closeness</i>	190
<i>Financial Stresses</i>	190
<i>Negotiating the Relocation Plan: Whose House?</i>	
<i>Where?</i>	191
<i>Periods of Separation</i>	192
<i>Culture Shock</i>	192
Analytical Tools	192
<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	193
<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	194
<i>Applying the Roles Framework</i>	195
Working With Clients	196
<i>Review Motives</i>	196
<i>Probe Beliefs</i>	196
<i>Inventory Advantages/Disadvantages</i>	196
<i>Check for Realistic Expectations (Financial, Social, Health)</i>	197
<i>Are Old Plans Right for New Circumstances?</i>	197

	<i>Assess Relational Impacts</i>	197
	<i>Managing Uncertainty: Developing and Monitoring Plans</i>	198
	Concluding Thoughts	198
	Questions for Clients	198
	Exercises	199
	<i>Exercise 7.1 Stages of Relocation: Where Are You in the Process?</i>	199
	<i>Exercise 7.2 Identifying Sources of Distress</i>	200
	<i>Exercise 7.3 Handling Role Loss</i>	201
	<i>Exercise 7.4 Family and Friendship Impact</i>	202
	<i>Exercise 7.5 Developing an Action Plan</i>	202
	References	203
<b>8</b>	<b>Illness and Caregiving</b>	<b>205</b>
	Sources of Distress	208
	<i>Effects on the Ill Partner</i>	209
	<i>Disruption of Key Marital Functions</i>	211
	<i>Health of the Caregiver</i>	212
	<i>Loss of Financial Resources</i>	214
	<i>Cultural Expectations</i>	215
	Analytical Tools	217
	<i>Applying the Dialectical Framework</i>	217
	<i>Applying the Resilience Framework</i>	221
	<i>Applying the Roles Framework</i>	222
	Working With Clients	224
	<i>Articulate Meanings and Emotions</i>	225
	<i>Recognize Personal and Relational Stressors</i>	225
	<i>Identify Sources of Resilience</i>	226
	<i>Negotiate Realistic Expectations</i>	226
	<i>Connect With Sources of Support</i>	227
	<i>Practice Unfamiliar Behaviors and Roles</i>	227
	<i>Practice Self-Care</i>	228
	<i>Tend to the Marriage</i>	228
	Concluding Thoughts	229
	Questions for Clients	230
	Exercises	231
	<i>Exercise 8.1 Movie Night</i>	231
	<i>Exercise 8.2 Build on Past Successes</i>	232
	<i>Exercise 8.3 Learning From Those Around You</i>	232
	<i>Exercise 8.4 Identifying Sources of Distress</i>	233
	References	233

**9 Reimagining the Empty Nest: Helping Clients Think Differently 235**

Alternative Metaphors 236

*Recoupling* 236*Retooling* 237*Centerstage Marriage* 238

Best Practices Revisited 239

*Renew Relationship Commitment* 239*Prioritize the Relationship* 239*Negotiate Changing Expectations* 240*Find a Common Voice* 240*Maintain an External System of Support* 241*Develop the Habit of Dialogue* 241*Sustain Intimacy* 241

References 242

**Appendix: Resources 243****Dayna Kloeber****Index 257**

## Contributors

**Dayna Kloeber** is a graduate student in the Communication Studies program at Arizona State University. Her research addresses conditional forgiveness in romantic and intergenerational family relationships with an emphasis on the dynamics of power and relational morality. Communication in families with children who face health and disability challenges is another research interest. Through her teaching, mentoring, and community outreach activity, Dayna provides practical support to practitioners and families. Dayna lives in Peoria, Arizona, with her husband, two sons, and daughter.

**Kathleen Waldron** is director of the School of Aging and Lifespan Development at Arizona State University, where she also teaches courses on such topics as caregiving, family relationships, sexuality and aging, and gerontological research methods. Ms. Waldron organizes community education seminars on aging issues and facilitates a support group for family members caring for older parents. Kathleen lives in Glendale, Arizona, with her husband Vince and their two daughters.

## Preface

This book is intended as a professional resource for those who provide counsel to married clients experiencing the challenges and opportunities of middle age, which is the period of life we have labeled “centerstage.” These professionals encounter middle-aged clients in a multitude of settings such as private counseling practices, community service agencies, faith communities, university student services offices, hospitals and healthcare agencies, and job retraining centers.

The centerstage of marriage begins when a couple realizes that their children will soon be leaving home. Its ending point is less certain, but for many couples, the decision to retire signals the end of this marital era and the beginning of another. This middle period of married life is marked by startling opportunities for growth and renewed intimacy. But for many veteran couples, it also brings daunting challenges, including illness, job loss, problematic relationships with adult offspring, and caregiving burdens. This is particularly true at the present moment in American history when traditional visions of midlife stability no longer apply. To note just a few American trends, middle-aged workers are losing their jobs and long-term couples are joining the ranks of the divorced at higher rates than in the past. One result: More couples and individual partners are seeking professional assistance. Distressed middle-aged clients are showing up with increased frequency at the offices of counselors, therapists, religious advisors, and other helping professionals. For many, this is the “make or break” point in a lifelong relationship.

Despite these trends, few existing books are designed to help professionals understand the dynamics of the centerstage marriage. Even fewer provide practical, research-based suggestions for practitioners.

## WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

As we researched the communication practices of veteran couples over the last few decades, the need for this book became obvious. A massive generation of married Americans, the baby boomers, is solidly middle aged, with its leading edge now approaching retirement age. The generation immediately after is on its cusp, contemplating a midlife landscape in rapid transformation. Indeed, as they have with so many of our social institutions, baby boomers are changing the definition of what it means to be middle aged, married, with adult kids. Many rejected the traditional childraising practices of their parents. But now, they struggle with the inevitable questions that follow the launching of children, an event that is particularly troubling for a generation defined by hyper-self awareness and high-intensity parenting. How do I find meaning in life now that I am no longer at the center of my kids' universe? Changing social trends raise disconcerting questions that rarely bothered their parents. Questions like: What do I do now that I have lost my job at the age of 51? What do we do about adult children who continue to live at home? Should we try to recapture the intimacy we lost years ago, or simply "hang it up" after 2 decades of marriage?

Unfortunately, the existing literature is largely unhelpful to the professionals who hear these kinds of questions in their practices. Marriage researchers have been somewhat preoccupied by the conflicts experienced early in marriage or the challenges faced by elderly partners. Although important studies of middle-aged couples have been conducted, most are too dated to be of use with the current generation. Popular books tend to oversimplify the centerstage of marriage. The overused metaphor of the empty nest is an inadequate characterization of this rich period of married life. Midlife clients, those roughly 40 to 65 years old, often have more on their minds than the fact that their children no longer live at home. Of course, many welcome the launching of children into adulthood, and some find that the "nest" is frequently reoccupied by boomerang children.

## WHAT TOPICS ARE COVERED?

Chapter 1 introduces the analytical tools we use when interpreting the experiences reported by centerstage couples. We bring a life span perspective to our work, focusing on the communication practices that help

couples manage relational tensions, negotiate changing roles, resolve lingering disputes, renew intimacy, and adapt to changing circumstances. We also take a resilience-based approach, focusing less on limitations and more on the strengths and resources that help couples preserve long and satisfying relationships.

Subsequent chapters are divided into two sections. The first section provides research-based insights and practical resources for helping clients with the process of *recoupling*—the conscious effort to reinvent and deepen the marriage through improved communication (chapter 2), forgiving past transgressions (chapter 3), and the development of new and meaningful shared activities (chapter 4). The chapters in the second section address *retooling*—the adaptations couples make when faced with challenging midlife circumstances, such as job loss and returning to school (chapter 5); redefined relationships with “boomerang kids,” adult children, and grandchildren (chapter 6); midlife relocation (chapter 7); and the stresses of illness and caregiving (chapter 8).

A brief final chapter emphasizes the importance of relational metaphors in helping clients reimagine their marriage. We address the implication for counseling practice of the recoupling, retooling, and centerstage metaphors. We end the book by revisiting the best practices of resilient centerstage couples.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is organized to help you quickly find and apply the information you need in your counseling work. It is grounded in research, but we intentionally avoided long lists of research citations. Key concepts are often summarized in tables and textboxes, labeled with headings like, “*How do I use it?*” and “*What you might hear from clients.*” We ground our work in the experiences of real couples, so you will see plenty of illuminating examples and quotations from the couples we have interviewed over the past decade.

With the exception of the introductory and concluding chapters, each chapter conforms to a standardized structure. The common organizational scheme helps readers quickly locate the issues that concern them and their clients. For example, those interested in fostering resiliency in clients will always find a resiliency heading in the *Applying the Analytical Frameworks* section of each chapter. Specific suggestions for practice

are labeled *Working With Clients*. Each chapter includes the following sections:

## **Opening Narrative**

We begin with an opening narrative, which grounds the chapter in the lived experiences of clients. These brief stories are from couples who participated in our studies or class assignments. Some are based on couples we know personally. All stories have been altered to disguise identities. The opening narratives, along with other brief stories, are used to illustrate key concepts from the text.

## **Chapter Introduction**

The first section of each chapter introduces the topic, grounds it in a social and family context, explains its importance to clients and counselors, and briefly discusses relevant research findings.

## **Sources of Distress**

Here, we address the reasons why clients seek counseling and therapy. We consider the relational and individual challenges typically reported to us by couples in our studies and some of the likely causes of their distress.

## **Analytical Tools**

Our approach to understanding centerstage couples is guided by three analytical frameworks: relational dialectics theory, resilience theory, and role theory. Each framework provides counselors and clients with a unique language for interpreting the experience of midlife marriage. We apply at least two of the analytical frameworks in each chapter.

## **Working With Clients**

In this section, the reader finds a streamlined set of suggestions and “tasks” to incorporate in counseling sessions or workshops. We provide many practical suggestions throughout each chapter, but the primary purpose of the *Working With Clients* section is to make these easily accessible for the professional reader.

## Questions for Clients

We provide a list of questions for your clients to consider. Linked to key themes raised in the chapter, these questions are designed to prompt reflection and productive discussion during counseling sessions.

## Exercises

This section provides activities to incorporate in your counseling sessions or workshops. These have been formatted to be easily copied for client use.

## References

This book is based on our own research and that of other scholars, but for the purposes of readability, we limit the number of research citations. The reference list includes key research sources for the interested reader.

## Resources

For every chapter we have included resources (in Appendix A at the back of the book) for you and your clients. In some cases, you can refer your clients directly to these sources as a supplement to counseling. We include links to useful internet sites, assessments and inventories, popular and professional books, inspirational stories, organizations, government programs, and myriad other sources of assistance.

We are university researchers and teachers who study how romantic relationships change and persist over the life span. Our research focuses mainly on the communication practices of resilient couples—those who manage to sustain, and even optimize, their partnerships as they progress together through the life course with its many transitions and obstacles. You can learn more about our perspective in chapter 1, but it is important to know that our own research informs the book. For nearly 20 years, we have published studies based on interview and survey data collected from hundreds of couples, many of them marriage veterans of 3 or more decades, and some married as many as 80 years (e.g., Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Waldron & Kelley, 2005,). Our recent book, *Communicating Forgiveness*, presents our work on the role of forgiveness in preserving long marriages (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

In recent years, we have turned our attention to the dynamics of marriage at midlife. We adopted the term “centerstage” because the metaphor works at several levels of meaning. The first is temporal. Many of the couples we report on in this book are middle aged—at the “temporal center” of what they hope will be a long life of 8 or 9 decades. At a second level of meaning, the metaphor says something about the center of attention. With their active parenting years behind them, these couples have the time and opportunity to reassess the opportunities and challenges of marriage. Concerns about the quality of the relationship, which may have been relegated to a peripheral position in a busy child-filled life, now move up the priority list. In the language of the theater, marriage moves from the wings to center stage.

We are joined in this effort by Kathleen Waldron, a life span scholar and highly successful teacher at Arizona State University’s School of Aging and Lifespan Development. Kathleen took primary responsibility for chapter 6, which addresses relationships with boomerang children and adult offspring, as well as the special relational challenges that sometimes accompany grandparenting.

We have engaged many of our students in our efforts to more fully understand the experiences of centerstage couples. We have learned enormously from the personal stories of our middle-aged students, and from the hundreds of relational narratives our students have collected from “centerstage” friends, parents, and relatives. Dayna Kloeber, one of the most dedicated and insightful graduate students, has been instrumental in the development of this book. She is the primary author of chapter 7, which focuses on relocation at midlife.

*Marriage at Midlife* is our effort to translate years of research into a resource that is accessible, useful, and grounded in the experiences of real couples. We hope you find it helpful in your efforts to guide clients through the sometimes turbulent transitions that characterize the centerstage of married life.

# Acknowledgments

The authors thank graduate student, Dayna Kloeber, the lead author of chapter 7 and the primary architect of the Appendix, who contributed in myriad ways to the creation of the book. We are thankful for Dayna's creativity, enthusiasm, and amazing work ethic. In addition, thanks to Colleen McQuade for her diligence in locating internet and print resources, running down research references, and responding cheerfully to innumerable requests for assistance.

The original proposal for this book was refined through conversations with colleagues in the Communication Studies department at Arizona State University. We are grateful to work in such a supportive and collegial environment. In addition, a number of professional counselors gave feedback and encouragement as we refined the book proposal during the early stages. These include Marian Hopkins-Busby, Anne Conser, and Natalie Keller.

Much of what we have learned about midlife marriage comes from the many veteran couples who agreed to share their experiences in interviews and surveys. We cannot thank them enough for their generosity. The authors also acknowledge the students who worked with us over the years on this and other marriage projects. Their efforts to interview, record, and analyze the experiences of veteran couples yielded rich insights, for them and for us.

Finally, at Springer Publishing Company, Senior Editor Sheri W. Sussman was encouraging, responsive, and insightful from the moment we shared our ideas for this book. Sheri challenged us to write a research-based book that would be truly useful to counselors. With her considerable assistance, we were able to do just that.

Vince Waldron offers special thanks to his spouse Kathleen, whose unyielding support and sense of adventure make her the perfect companion for a ride on the roller coaster that is midlife marriage.

Doug Kelley is especially grateful to Ann, his wife of 27 years, for being an exciting and challenging partner as they have worked to keep their marriage centerstage.

# 1

## Guiding Perspectives and Analytical Tools

We always got along pretty well, despite a few rough spots. Anna was very involved with the kids, even though she always had a part-time job. I helped out too, with coaching and boy scouts, that kind of stuff. But my job was 24/7, especially during the early years. We had fun on vacations and had dinner together most nights of the week. I thought Anna and I made a pretty good team. The kids are out of the house now, and I thought it would be fun. But, Anna went back to school, and she wants to be a nurse. She is gone a lot, and we don't really have much time for the fun things I thought we would be doing. Anna kind of has another life she is building up, with new friends at school. After all these years, my job is boring me. It pays the bills, but it's gotten routine. In some ways, we have more to talk about—its not just the kids, so that is good. But we are arguing a lot. To be honest, things are confused right now. It's not what we expected.

Joe and Anna, who have been married for 26 years, are among the millions of couples discovering that the “middle years” of marriage can be both perplexing and challenging. Inspired by the stable relationships their parents enjoyed, Joe and Anna launched their marriage with a lifetime commitment firmly in mind. However, the societal forces that supported their parents' long marriages are largely obsolete. The stigma of divorce is

a thing of the past. Fewer couples are staying married simply to avoid the disapproval of religious leaders. Expectations are higher. Veteran spouses like Joe and Anna want their marriages to be fulfilling and happy, not just stable and long.

Faced with this changing cultural backdrop, with marriage bonds fraying and the “empty nest” years now upon them, Anna and Joe recognized the need for change and enlisted the help of a therapist. The therapist helped this baby-boomer couple realize that the practices that sustained their marriage during those hectic early years were no longer working. Together they confronted recurring relational tensions, renegotiated unrealistic expectations, and identified dysfunctional communication patterns. “Our world had changed radically,” Joe confided, “and we needed to change if we were going to grow old together.” Their counseling continues, and Anna and Joe are growing more hopeful about what the future holds for them.

## **DEFINING THE “CENTERSTAGE” MARRIAGE**

In recent decades, the once stalwart ideal of lifelong marriage has been battered by changing cultural tides. Even experienced couples are sometimes knocked off course as they navigate tricky and sometimes treacherous trends: Boomerang children. Job insecurity. Friends divorcing. Change in gender roles. Care for long-lived parents. But compared to their younger and older counterparts, middle-aged couples are expected to negotiate these challenges with surprisingly little assistance from family, church, or other sources. Moreover, research on the marriages of middle-aged people is relatively thin and increasingly out of date. As a counseling professional, you likely recognize the need for a deeper and different understanding of what we call “centerstage” marriages.

As researchers who study the communication patterns of experienced partners, we collect “relational narratives” from couples like Joe and Anna. Different in important ways from those describing younger and older relationships, these stories reveal the unique stresses and opportunities that arise during the middle years of long marriages. Our research confirms what one of our marriage counselor friends has observed in her practice—that this is a “make or break” period for many of her married clients.

---

**BOX 1.1 THE EMPTY NEST—AN EMPTY METAPHOR?**

We use the term *empty nest* sparingly in this book, preferring the term *centerstage marriage*. Although widespread, the empty nest metaphor distorts important aspects of a complex and lengthy phase of married life. We object to the implication that a marriage is emptied of meaning because children no longer live in the home. The empty nest label ignores the ongoing and sometimes difficult relationships parents have with adult children, some of whom actually return to the “nest.” Empty nest language focuses attention on loss rather than opportunity. Some couples do grieve the passing of their active parenting years, but many others find this stage of married life to be freeing and even exhilarating. The period of married life that starts as the children begin to leave and ends with the onset of older age, the centerstage, can be a time of challenge, growth, and renewed intimacy, not emptiness.

---

So what do we mean by *centerstage marriage*? First, the term *centerstage* emphasizes a period of time, the middle period of a lengthy relationship. Second, centerstage is a metaphor. By using it, we emphasize that midlife is a time when couples reexamine their marriage, as if it were under a spotlight. With parenting responsibilities receding, relationship concerns move from the periphery to the center of attention, from backstage to centerstage. The lengthy centerstage of a marriage begins as parents first confront a new reality: Their children will soon be (relatively) independent adults. Its onset is signaled by bittersweet emotions: The heady anticipation of new freedoms mixed with a palpable grief over the loss of the joint mission of parenting. But what has popularly been known as the empty nest syndrome (see Box 1.1) is just one in a cascade of changing conditions that couples negotiate at midlife. The first of these concerns is relational identity. What kind of a marriage will we have now that our identity as “coparents” is fading? In the wake of this identity question comes a series of others. What kinds of activities will bring us fulfillment in this next stage of our lives? Should we move to a new home or stay where we are? How will we respond when our adult children need help? What adjustments will we make in response to job loss, a partner’s return to college, or the needs of elderly relatives? How will we cope when one of us becomes seriously ill?

Our research examines how successful couples answer these questions and many others. Most of the couples we study are marriage veterans. Having reached the centerstage of marriage, they have been together between 20 and 40 years. These are, in most cases, *first* marriages with partners ranging in age from the mid-40s to the mid-60s. Couples who have chosen not to be parents deserve more attention from researchers and clinicians. Nevertheless, in the interests of clarity and brevity, this book focuses on the unique experiences of those who are parents.

## **OUR RESEARCH: HOW DID WE LEARN ABOUT CENTERSTAGE MARRIAGES?**

This book is based on our research with veteran married couples. Through interviews, anonymous surveys, and even personal observations, we have studied their communication practices for nearly 2 decades. Much of this research focuses on times of trouble in resilient marriages. How do marriages survive, even thrive, in the face of serious challenges? Our results are reported in traditional journal articles and also in books, such as *Communicating Forgiveness* (Waldron & Kelley, 2007), a volume written for researchers and students.

As we recorded the stories of veteran couples, we often heard about the adjustments they were required to make during the newlywed years. Older age certainly brought its own trials and tribulations, but we were surprised by the large number of couples who reported significant relational changes, and sometimes serious difficulties, *at midlife*. Of course, we expected to hear about adjustment to the empty nest, and we did. But many of the challenges were encountered well after the kids left home. Some described trying times of tumult, despair, and stress; others experienced profoundly positive turning points in once satisfying marriages that had simply gone stale. Intrigued, we delved back into the interview data. We also invited our college students to join us in the quest by interviewing their parents and friends; the ensuing audiotaped interviews and written accounts were rich sources of insight. The data convinced us that the challenges and relational accomplishments of centerstage couples were frequent, varied, and underappreciated. Adapting to the “empty nest” was only the beginning of a long period of adjustment.

## FIVE COUPLES: FIVE DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

Consider Rafer and Vielka. Two of their three sons have left for college and the youngest, Noah, is leaving soon. Devoted parents, this couple's conversation has been mostly devoted to the kids for better than 2 decades. The house is already strangely quiet. Vielka wonders what she and Rafer will talk about after Noah leaves. Will they find a new "project" to share? Will they drift apart?

Regina and Dallas face a different challenge. Their kids left too—but now one is back. Their daughter Riki graduated from college and quickly found a new job. But the economy turned for the worse, and Riki was laid off. Unable to pay the rent, she asked to move back home until she could get back on her feet. Her parents were certainly willing to help out in the short term. However, it has been 9 months since Riki settled back into her old room and tensions are mounting. Dallas wants to be firm in setting a move-out date, but Regina disagrees. She argues that "patience will pay off." Regina feels certain that as the economy improves, Riki will find a job and their relationship with her will be better for having been supportive during her time of crisis.

Raul and Teresa are in their mid-50s. Both are working hard, trying to build up the retirement fund that was neglected during the child raising years. Recently, Raul's mother Maria fell and broke her hip. The couple invited Maria into their home where they could help her recover. Using limited vacation time, one of them leaves work whenever Maria must be driven to one of her many medical appointments. Now, having filed for divorce, their oldest daughter is moving home too, with her three children.

Judy has been married for 30 years to her husband Sean who is faithful, stable, and supportive. After raising two kids and working for nearly a decade as a clerk at the local courthouse, Judy admits to being bored with life. At her recent high school reunion, she became reacquainted with Scott, a high school flame, who left their small town to attend college on the East Coast. The pair talked deep into the night, laughing about old times and lamenting missed opportunities. The conversation continued by e-mail. Divorced and single, Scott asked Judy to visit him some weekend. She is mulling the offer and its implications for her marriage.

After years of hard work, Dean and Sally are about 10 years from retirement. Dean dreams of a move south—anywhere the weather is warm and the golf courses are open all year. Sally wants to live close to their current home in the suburbs of a midwestern city. She enjoys

the company of her daughters and grandchildren and has been offered a part-time position by the large bank that employs her. “Easing into” retirement suits Sally.

Veteran couples commonly benefit from a store of relational goodwill and a history of mutual problem-solving. Nevertheless, these five couples, and your own midlife clients, are facing unfamiliar challenges. They often need the assistance of counselors and other professionals as familiar strategies fail and stresses start to mount. In this book, we provide the information you need to help them.

## **THIS BOOK’S ORGANIZATION**

This book can be read as a whole, but we anticipate that many readers will select chapters to read based on their professional needs at a given moment in time. For that reason, chapters 2 through 8 are designed to stand alone as useful resources for your professional practice. Chapter 1 provides you with the analytical tools that we use to interpret the experiences reported by centerstage couples. It also shares some of the “best practices” of resilient couples. The bulk of the book is organized in two parts: Recoupling and Retooling. The first examines fundamental processes that help couples reassess, and sometimes redesign, a midlife marriage. This recoupling period often requires partners to improve communication (chapter 2), forgive past transgressions (chapter 3), and locate new and meaningful activities to share (chapter 4).

The second part examines the adjustments couples must make as they encounter difficult life events. This retooling occurs when partners experience job loss or return to school (chapter 5). Changing family obligations also challenge midlife couples. Chapter 6 addresses “boomerang children,” difficult relationships with adult offspring, and stressful grandparenting. Relocation can be a source of marital stress at midlife. Chapter 7 addresses the challenges and opportunities of midlife moving. Finally, illness and care giving burdens can profoundly change a marriage, as we discuss in chapter 8.

The brief closing chapter challenges couples and counselors to think more creatively about the opportunities offered by midlife marriage. We offer several provocative metaphors and leave the reader with an enriched understanding of the best practices of centerstage couples.

Each chapter is designed around a common structure so you can easily find the information you need. After an introductory section, you will

find sections labeled *Sources of Distress*, *Analytical Tools*, and *Working With Clients*. Prior to an intentionally brief set of research *References*, you will find sections entitled *Questions for Clients* and *Exercises*. These are designed to help you apply the chapter concepts in your counseling sessions or workshops. Finally, we provide a detailed Appendix A, with links to books, organizations, and Web sites that should prove useful to your clients.

The chapters are research-based but intentionally light on research jargon and technical references. The references we do include are chosen for their relevance and applicability. To increase interest and utility, each chapter features a special section labeled “*How do I use it?*” and “*What you might hear from clients.*” The conceptual material in each chapter is “fleshed out” by stories and examples from the midlife couples we have observed (names and identifying details are altered).

## **A GUIDING PERSPECTIVE: COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE**

Our understanding of couples, like the five mentioned previously, is grounded in our work as communication researchers and teachers. We believe that careful observation of communication patterns reveals a lot about the dynamics of a marriage. Underlying emotions and attitudes can often be detected in marital discourse—the patterns of talk that define a marriage. Relational messages about trust, power, respect, and intimacy are often communicated nonverbally, sometimes without awareness. Indeed, habitual patterns of everyday communication sustain both functional and dysfunctional marriages. In our view, counselors and therapists play the crucial role of helping partners identify dysfunctional patterns while increasing the capacity to engage certain kinds of constructive communication such as expressing emotion, negotiating conflict, or forgiving transgressions.

The development of improved communication practices helps a marriage adapt to changing conditions, including those encountered at midlife. Of course, a couple’s satisfaction at midlife is only partly determined by current events and interactions. It is also a product of roles that the partners have embraced or rejected, adaptation to changing social norms, career trajectories, and the many other forces that build as the decades pass. With other researchers who find relevance in this larger historical picture, we operate from what is frequently called a *life course*

*perspective*. Four life course principles emerge from the stories told to us by midlife couples.

## Partners Develop and Change

Change is (ironically enough) a constant in human relationships. Although acknowledging that personality, cohort characteristics, and social structure remain relatively stable, life span researchers assume that people and their social arrangements are constantly developing. Change in intimate relationships is driven by the development of individual partners as they mature, adapt to changes, and pursue new goals. One implication is that spouses need to adjust the expectations they have for themselves, their partners, and the marriage.

## Time Matters

Time is an important consideration as we try to understand the current status of a relationship. We consider the past. In relational narratives, couples often recount “critical incidents” and “turning points.” They reveal how currently dysfunctional practices might have been useful in the past. But we also consider the future. The content of current interactions may reveal fear, uncertainty, or excitement about what lies ahead. Veteran couples often benefit from long experience, and they can see some relational phases unfold over long periods of time. In our research on long-term marriages (over 40 years in duration), we noted that even happy older couples describe surprisingly long periods of dissatisfaction. One implication is that patience sometimes pays off in the long run.

However, we also noticed that fall-out from serious transgressions often lasted years, even decades. Angela’s story illustrates how the passing of time changes perspective.

When my husband first confessed to having an affair, the emotions were so raw I wasn’t sure how I would survive, much less how our marriage would. Even now, I can recall the pain. It was the kind that takes your breath away, makes your knees buckle, takes years to digest. But now, some 15 years later, I see that time has allowed a great deal of healing and in a weird way, that incident made us appreciate each other more because we realized how much we wanted a future for ourselves and our family. It made us stop to work on it. Our life together isn’t perfect, but that almost makes it better. We have two amazing children who have not only brought enormous joy to our lives but also provided the initial incentive to work toward forgiveness. I’m so glad we took the time.

## Marriages Have “Turning Points”

Life span perspectives acknowledge that critical events punctuate relational development. Parenthood, childrearing, death of a parent, leaving or entering the workforce, children leaving the home—all of these bring stress as well as opportunities for relational growth. We often think of relationship development as a gradual and steady process. But when couples tell their stories, they sometimes describe these events as important turning points when relationship quality rapidly improved or declined. A key lesson is that surviving these turning points requires adaptability and the willingness to retool the marriage.

## External Circumstances Will Change

A new marriage is inevitably influenced by prevailing cultural values. Once adopted, these persist over time, determining the practices that seem normal for a given cohort of married people. Even the most traditional of marriages can be stressed by a failure to adapt to changes in the larger culture. Relaxed gender roles, economic upheaval, adjustments in parenting expectations, new definitions of old age, expanded communication technologies, and other macroforces can alter the expectations of one or more partners. They also influence the couple's relations with others, including extended family. The importance of adaptation to changing circumstances became obvious as we studied nearly 500 older couples who had decided to relocate late in life (see Box 1.2). Those who were willing to use communication technologies maintained their social support networks, despite a radical change in living arrangements. Those who did not were more likely to report social isolation.

How does a life span approach change things? For researchers, it means looking beyond simple survey assessments—snapshots of the current state of the relationship. Instead, we collect richer data about the relationship's past and its developmental trajectory, often by collecting extended relationship narratives. Life span researchers also separate cohort effects from the simple effects of age. A group of married people in their 50s may share similar beliefs about marriage, not because they are the same age, but because they were all married during a particular cultural period. Their collective approach to marriage was shaped by common role models, mass media depictions, and family norms. However, the next generation of 50-year-olds may hold quite different views.

**BOX 1.2 RESEARCH EXEMPLAR: GENDER ROLES AND ADJUSTMENT TO RELOCATION**

In a longitudinal study of more than 500 husbands and wives (aged 50 and older), we examined how long-distance relocation affected a couple's social ties with family and friends (Waldron, Gitelson, & Kelley, 2005). The study demonstrated the importance of gender roles in a couple's adjustments to major life changes. It appeared that wives were more profoundly affected by the disruption of existing family and friend relationships. They reported reductions in supportive social ties after relocation, while men reported little or no reduction. In fact, males appeared to increase social connectedness after moving to the new community, probably because they started the study with few close relationships. Perhaps more important, persons of either sex who used electronic communication to stay in touch with distant family and friends reported higher levels of social support. This study of "later midlife" couples illustrates the importance of being able to maintain supportive relationships. These results not only illustrate how gender norms influence responses to a major life event, but they also provide insight about how environmental factors, such as communication technology, can impact relational health.

---

An understanding of these generational differences is critical during counseling. Couples married in the late 1960s and early 1970s may express different attitudes about money and sex, than those married earlier and later. Table 1.1 presents several American generations, their average age at marriage, and historical/cultural factors that influence attitudes about marriage. Interestingly, although there are many differences between the generations, we were surprised in our interviews by number of couples, across generations, who had sought counseling during the middle stage of their marriage.

**ACCOUNTING FOR DIFFERENCES AMONG CLIENTS: CULTURE, GENDER, AND RELIGION**

Thus far, we have made the marital dyad our primary focus and assumed that despite their differences midlife couples grapple with similar developmental events, such as the cessation of active parenting or the need to care for aging parents. However, as any experienced counselor will attest,

Table 1.1

**GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND MARRIAGE**

World War II	Born 1910–1920s	Age at marriage: 18–20 years, rigid gender roles; valued formality and authoritarian parenting style
Window (“Silent”)	1930s–1945	Age at marriage: 20 years; valued conformity; valued extended family ties
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	Age at marriage: 22 years; raised in suburban families; value androgyny and individuality
Generation X	1965–1970s	Age at marriage: 26 years; children of divorce; leery of romantic commitments; value informality
Generation Y	1980s	Age at marriage: 26 years; highly individualistic; value technology

no two marriages are the same. The inevitable variation is explained in part by the unique blend of personalities that defines a marriage and by the patterns of interaction that sustain it. But another important consideration is the larger cultural context in which a marriage is embedded. Similar to many other authors (see, e.g., the recent volume edited by Szinovacz & Davey, 2007), we encourage counselors to consider a midlife client’s cultural background, gender, and religious orientation. It is certainly true that the middle years bring changes and challenges to nearly every life, but it is obvious from our research that some spouses are impacted more, or differently, than others.

The effects of culture and gender in relationships are examined within three research traditions (for an accessible review, see Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). The *behavior differences* approach looks for unique patterns of relational behavior displayed by men and women, either religious or nonreligious, or those of different cultural backgrounds. Certainly, counselors should expect such variation, as the research suggests, example, that women sometimes prefer indirect approaches to conflict, whereas men prefer more competitive communication styles. However, considerable research supports another perspective, the *behavioral similarities* approach. Proponents argue that research results showing differences tend to be of modest statistical strength and that similarities often outweigh differences. For example, although some faiths encourage the value of forgiveness, it appears that religious people are only modestly more

forgiving of an unfaithful spouse than their nonreligious counterparts. Behavioral similarities theorists argue further that variations *within* a cultural group may outweigh any differences *between* groups. For example, Hispanic and Asian clients may experience different types and levels of intergenerational conflict due to cultural differences in familial values. But a more important factor might be the degree of acculturation *within* a given Hispanic or Asian family. In this way, Hispanic clients who are less identified with their culture of origin will report different experiences, compared to Hispanic clients who remain heavily identified. These differences may be indicated by factors such as their choice of language or participation in cultural rituals.

A third approach, the *perceptual filters* approach assumes that the effects of culture are not so noticeable in patterns of behavior but in the ways that behavior is interpreted and evaluated. From this approach, clients of different genders or cultures might report similar patterns with different social consequences. For example, due to prevailing gender norms, the caregiving behavior offered by a female client may simply be “expected” by her extended family, whereas similar behavior by her husband may be regarded as heroic or unselfish. The perceptual filters approach may be particularly useful in counseling, as spouses often are aware of differences in their behavioral responses to midlife challenges but sometimes need assistance in understanding that the very same behaviors may be evaluated differently due to the cultural, gender, and religious filters used by the couple, their friends, and family members.

For this volume, we have chosen not to include a separate chapter on client differences. Instead, we address gender and culture differences in places where they seemed to matter most in our observations of midlife couples. For example, an extended discussion appears in chapter 8, which addresses the role of cultural differences in caregiving obligations and responses to illness. The interested reader will find many other examples. With regard to gender, we explore how women are more likely than men to assume the responsibilities of custodial grandparenting (chapter 6) and, as suggested earlier, women are more likely to experience social isolation due to long-distance relocation (chapter 7). Mothers and fathers may react differently to the loss of a job or a return to school (chapter 5). We encourage counselors to also take religious orientation into account. Some clients will be motivated by religious principles to forgive past transgressions (chapter 3). Others will find that the religious practices that served them well during the parenting years are less meaningful in later life (chapter 4).

In short, every midlife transition is likely to be influenced, in some way, by the cultural values of the individual partners, the couple, and the larger social networks to which they belong.

## UNDERSTANDING CENTERSTAGE COUPLES: THREE FRAMEWORKS

Centerstage marriages are sometimes distressed by threats to familiar patterns of living and relating. Buffeted by changes in the external environment, married clients may report feelings of confusion, frustration, or powerlessness. We have found three analytical frameworks to be particularly helpful in understanding centerstage couples. Readers may find one or more of these useful in their own professional work. The *why* of relational distress, the underlying causes and explanations, often become clearer as a framework is applied. The three frameworks presented here differ, but each focuses attention on certain variables while pushing others into the background.

### The Relational Dialectics Framework

An interesting and useful way to think about the dynamics of centerstage marriage emerges from the *dialectical tradition*, rooted in the work of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Dialectical theory encourages us to question the assumption that relationships “progress through” stages. Instead, marriage is in a state of continuous flux and negotiation. Leslie Baxter (2003), a prominent relationship researcher, emphasizes the central themes of contradiction and dialogue. *Contradiction* involves the co-occurrence of relational qualities and traits that are opposites, such as openness versus closedness, vulnerability versus protection, interdependence versus autonomy, or novelty versus predictability. Table 1.2 introduces some of the commonly observed relational dialectics. Tensions emerge inevitably because these opposing qualities are both desirable and incompatible. Successful partners find ways to manage or integrate them into the marriage. During a period of relational distance, for example, they might disclose previously unexpressed emotions, a move which reduces psychological distance and increases vulnerability. Subsequently, they might choose to edit or “tone down” negative feelings until things have “cooled off” a bit. This behavior temporarily moves the relationship to a more closed and protective stance.

Table 1.2

## SOME COMMONLY OBSERVED RELATIONAL DIALECTICS

DIALECTIC	DESCRIPTION
Openness vs. closedness	Ambivalence about revealing information or keeping it private
Vulnerability vs. protectedness	Competing needs to reveal the self and shield the self from hurt
Interdependence vs. autonomy	Wanting to collaborate and wanting to act with freedom from constraint
Novelty vs. predictability	Wanting predictability and comfort as well as uncertainty and new experiences
Real vs. ideal	Pragmatic relational concerns are considered against romanticized views

*Applying the Dialectical Framework*

For theorists like Baxter, relational contradictions are *dialogic*. In other words, they are *not* located in the psychological perceptions of individual partners; rather, they emerge in the patterns of discourse that express and manage contradictory relational states. Counselors better understand the dynamics of a middle-stage marriage by listening for dialectics embedded in *language* used by clients. For example, the interdependence versus autonomy dialectic often appears when couples discuss the empty nest. As a collective activity, childrearing requires considerable interdependence and joint action. Having largely completed the childrearing task, a mother may desire new levels of autonomy. However, these efforts to gain freedom of action may trigger anxiety in a mate who prefers close consultation.

It is essential to recognize four approaches that couples use to deal with dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The *sequence or separate strategy* allows contradictory impulses to be expressed in the marriage, but they are enacted at different points in time or in different contexts. By sharing some decision-making responsibilities (e.g., childcare, family budgeting) and entrusting others to individual members (e.g., home maintenance decisions, managing in-law relationships), partners experience both autonomy and interdependence.

A second approach is to *embrace* one relational quality while actively suppressing its opposite. Partners who insist on “total honesty” are choosing vulnerability over protectedness. “*What they don’t know can’t*

*hurt them,*” is a relational maxim that expresses the opposite position. A third approach is the *integration* of the opposites. Some communication practices allow simultaneous expression of contradictory relational needs. Couples may find predictability in certain “ritualistic” practices, such as taking the dog for a walk every evening, but they may also find novelty by changing the topics they discuss along the way. Finally, contradictions are sometimes *reframed* in marital discourse. For example, a young adult may approach parents for a loan when purchasing a first home but may chafe at the conditions offered “as part of the deal.” Should the parents seek influence in this purchasing process or should they take a hands-off approach? As an alternative to viewing this situation as a struggle between autonomy and interdependence, the parties might label it as a “period of growth” in the family. This kind of reframing makes issues of control less salient even as it creates opportunities for family members to express maturity, mutual learning, and openness to change.

## A Resilience Framework

Grounded in the growing “positive psychology” movement (see, e.g., Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), resilience is the idea that people possess a great capacity to withstand life challenges. Rather than focus on losses and deficits, resilience perspectives focus on the relational resources and communication tools that help couples bounce back from challenges and thrive in the face of change. Resilience is also fostered by certain kinds of community resources. Specifically, counselors and other professionals can help clients discover and exploit sources of resilience.

What are the components of resilience? In answering that question, we are guided by the research of the nationally known *Resilience Solutions Group* (2008), located at Arizona State University. Researchers find that resilience includes these seven components:

- 1 *Optimism:* Resilient people focus on positive results. When faced with a crisis, they are hopeful rather than despairing. They imagine positive rather than negative outcomes.
- 2 *Flexibility:* Adaptation to changing circumstances is essential. Even as they embrace lessons of the past, resilient people make adjustments in light of new requirements and conditions.
- 3 *Determination:* A strong commitment to future success is another characteristic, which is accompanied by perseverance, patience, effort, and resolve.

- 4 *Sustainability*: Good stewardship of one's personal and relational resources is another feature of resilience. This involves a long-term commitment to healthy behavior and the cultivation of a broad-based sense of well-being.
- 5 *Diversity*: Resilience is fostered when people perceive a range of alternatives and options. Resilient people draw on a variety of skills and past experiences. They imagine a variety of potential outcomes to problematic situations.
- 6 *Balance*: Stability, centeredness, and harmony contribute to a sense of composure in resilient people. Living a balanced life leads to psychological and physical balance.

### *Applying the Resilience Framework*

The components of resilience provide concrete ways to help couples thrive despite the challenges of centerstage marriage. For example, some couples have adapted their communication patterns to sustain their marriage after the children leave home. Our data frequently reveal couples who “flexed” when a spouse unexpectedly became ill. The healthy partner accepted new caretaking tasks and the ill partner adjusted to unfamiliar feelings of dependency. A couple that loves dancing may find new pleasure in watching old movies together. The resilience framework is an inventive and optimistic one. In using it, counselors help clients inventory their own strengths, imagine more hopeful futures, and connect to helpful resources.

---

#### **BOX 1.3 HOW DO I USE IT? APPLYING RESILIENCY CONCEPTS**

- Focus on client resources, strengths, opportunities, and hopeful outcomes, not just their losses and limitations.
  - Prompt reflection on unnecessarily limiting or pessimistic assumptions.
  - Encourage clients to identify positive role models in their relationship network.
  - Help clients locate past experiences that could prove helpful now.
  - Connect clients with information and resources in the community.
  - Encourage clients to practice new behaviors that promote flexibility, sustainability, and balance in their relationships.
-

## The Roles Framework

The notion of the social role is one of the most familiar explanations for human behavior (see Blumer, 1969). We use it throughout this book because role changes experienced by one or both partners often appear as significant events in the relational narratives of veteran couples. As we use the term, a *role* is simply a set of regularly expected behaviors. Learned through exposure to family, cultural, and religious norms, a role provides structure and predictability in social relations. Much of human behavior is role guided, including behavior exhibited by married partners.

---

### BOX 1.4 HOW DO ROLES CAUSE DISTRESS?

Role conflict:	Incompatibility of multiple roles such as parent or student
Role Loss:	Valued roles are given up or taken away, as with job loss
Role Ambivalence:	Uncertainty about the desirability of a role, such as grandparent
Role Resistance:	Unwillingness to adopt a new role, such as patient or caregiver
Role Rigidity:	Inflexible role performance, as when a spouse refuses to share responsibility for financial decision making.
Role Ambiguity:	Uncertainty of role requirements, such as that experienced by a middle-aged spouse returning to college.

---

### *Applying the Roles Framework*

Distress at midlife often involves role stress. When couples share narratives about midlife challenges, role dynamics are often implicated. Relinquishing parenting duties, loss of a job, career changes, a spouse returning to school, caretaking for parents, relocation to a new community, health challenges—these events all imply role change. Roles influence marriages in a variety of ways. Partners who are unable or unwilling to meet changing role expectations may experience anxiety, guilt, or

rejection. Role rigidity makes a person impervious to changes in partner needs. Some roles are incompatible, as couples sometimes discover when they try to balance work and caretaking obligations. Professionals can assist centerstage couples in diagnosing role-related stressors and help them renegotiate roles.

## **BEST PRACTICES OF CENTERSTAGE COUPLES**

Having studied many successful couples, we approached this book with the spirit of hope, for it is certainly the case that many of your clients will overcome the challenges we describe in the following chapters. The centerstage of marriage is often a time of positive transition and relational growth. We wrote this book, in part, because we wanted to share the experiences of the resilient couples we have encountered in our various research projects. Each chapter integrates some of that accumulated wisdom with our own analysis. But before proceeding, we offer this summary of seven best practices of successful midlife couples. Derived from our own research and that of other researchers (Mackey & O'Brien, 1996), these practices are applicable to each of the transitions and life events described in this book. Of course, there exists no one magical communication formula. Centerstage couples will need your assistance in adapting these ideas to their own circumstances as they explore new terrain *beyond the empty nest*.

### **1. Renew Relationship Commitment**

Many couples told us “recommitment stories,” tales of trying times or wavering allegiances, followed by pledges of renewed commitment to the marriage. Having entered a new stage of life, spouses may need to “rechoose” their partnership. One couple implemented this process by drawing a line on a piece of paper, and placing an X toward the middle. In the space before the X, they wrote descriptions of the “old couple” and their child-raising years; the space after the X described possibilities for their future. They committed to seek that future together. As they would say, new commitments breed hope. Hope creates the possibility of change. Recommitment is an important theme in chapter 3, which examines the process of forgiveness.

## 2. Prioritize the Relationship

Faced with new opportunities and changing obligations, some midlife couples can find their relationship slipping down the list of priorities. Careers often peak at this time of life. A return to school or a new career can be exhilarating, but also time-consuming. Family obligations, such as caring for elderly parents, can be emotionally exhausting. Nevertheless, we find that successful couples continue to make their marriage the highest priority, even in the midst of such challenges as job loss and a return to school (chapter 5). They look for the warning signs of neglect and talk about them. Relationship time is built in to their schedules, the health of their relationship is a major consideration when making important decisions, and regular communication is used to navigate these dynamics.

## 3. Negotiate Changing Expectations

Conflict at midlife often stems from changing expectations. How much time will we spend together? How much money do we want to save? How often do we want to have sex? Resilient couples “surface” problematic expectations, negotiate differences, and find creative ways to blend their expectations. As noted in chapter 7, relocation decisions often bring different expectations to the surface.

## 4. Find a Common Voice

When faced with a crisis or challenge, resilient couples speak as much as possible with a common voice. For example, in deciding how to respond to an adult child’s request for assistance (chapter 6), they discuss the options and negotiate a common course of action. They avoid the temptation to negotiate “side deals” with family members, and they support each other in conversations with family and friends.

## 5. Maintain an External System of Support

Resilient couples build supportive relationships outside the marriage. They tend to nurture relationships with friends and often find support in their family relationships. Connections with external groups (volunteer organizations, religious communities, recreational groups) are

important when individual and relational identities are revised (chapter 4). In addition, external support systems are a source of distraction and strength during times of crisis. They provide and an unending source of meaningful conversation and joint action during the normal periods.

## **6. Develop the Habit of Dialogue**

Dialogue is the kind of communication that promotes understanding during times of disagreement (chapter 2). It can be contrasted with debate, which is designed to yield a winner, and even persuasion, which is designed to change opinions. Dialogue fosters cooperation rather than competition, even as it honors real differences of opinion. Partners who engage in dialogue agree to “join the same team” in an effort to better understand a problem and develop a collaborative solution.

## **7. Sustain Intimacy**

Most successful couples actively cultivate emotional and physical closeness. They recognize signs of emotional distancing and talk about them. They respect a partner’s need for an “emotional break,” but they also expect emotional honesty. Self-disclosure is used freely in many of these marriages. Feelings are acknowledged and explored. When couples describe their partners’ strengths, they often mention empathy and understanding. Typically, these couples value their sexual relationship. They talk about sex freely and find ways to keep it fresh. Chapter 2 discusses the communication practices that function to redevelop intimacy.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: REMODELING THE EMPTY NEST**

Our intention in this chapter has been to introduce the reader to the assumptions and key analytical concepts that guide us as communication educators and lifespan researchers. These ideas inform subsequent chapters and help us organize them. But their main purpose is to help you identify potential explanations for the emotional and relational stresses reported by clients. We find that concepts like resilience, dialectical tensions, and roles, when appropriately adapted by a professional, give clients an enriched relational language—one that helps them move beyond the limiting metaphor of the empty nest.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialectic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Baxter, L. A. (2003). A tale of two voices: Relational dialectics theory. *Journal of Family Communication, 4*, 181–192.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Theory and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Mackey, R., & O'Brien, B. (1995). Lasting marriages: Men and women growing together. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 58*, 527–528.
- Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*, 603–619.
- Resilience solutions group. (2008). [www.asu.edu/resilience](http://www.asu.edu/resilience)
- Szinovacz, M. E., & Davey, A. (2007). *Caregiving contexts: Cultural, familial, and societal implications*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Waldron, V., & Kelley, D. (2008). *Communicating forgiveness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Waldron, V., Gitelson, R., & Kelley, D. (2005). Gender differences in social adaptation to a retirement community: Longitudinal changes and the role of mediated communication. *Journal of Applied Gerontology, 24*, 283–298.
- Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. (2007). *Interpersonal conflict* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.