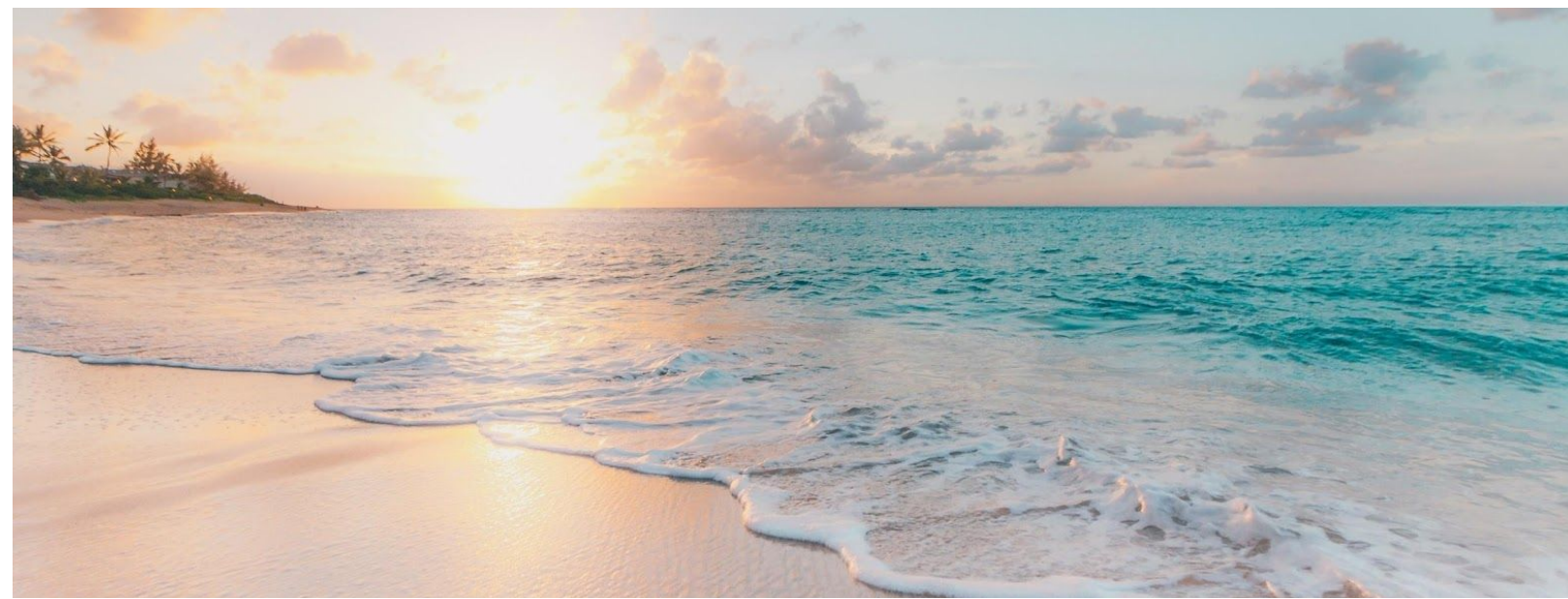


5 STEPS TOWARD HANDLING MIDLIFE STRESS

By Liz Hanzi

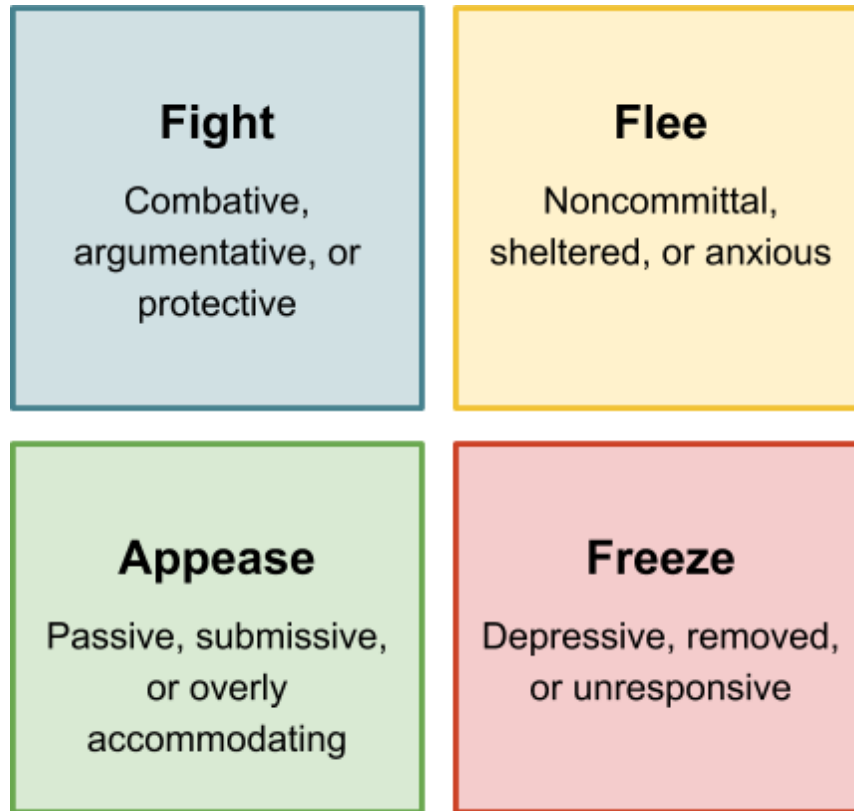


Midlife carries several unique stresses that can lead to unfamiliar overwhelm. What is it about midlife stresses that sets them apart?

Unlike more isolated transitions such as a divorce, a job change or a move, there are often overlapping transitions inherent to midlife such as navigating the empty nest while dealing with stagnation in the marriage or while experiencing the changes of menopause. There may be the need to declutter or downsize while also taking care of aging parents. Our own physical changes along with any combined discontent or pressure may prompt unresolved, or even unapparent, issues. As this period in life naturally evokes reflection on where we've been, where we are now, and where we're going, it is only logical that buried questions, concerns, and anxieties come to light.

For example, as we witness our own children transition into adulthood, perhaps we are triggered by our own early adult experiences. We may compare our relationships to theirs; we may feel regret or nostalgia for our college years. In addition, we may see our own parents aging by the day, while our own health and physical changes follows suit. We are reminded that each decision made 'way back when' has brought us to the here and now. Our current well-being, our habitual neural pathways and brain chemistry, and our decision making can all be thrown into doubt and disconnect. As we expect ourselves (and oftentimes, are expected by others) to keep things running smoothly, we can't help but feel bullied or be in angst by all of life's changes. It's no wonder midlife stresses can trigger some basic fear responses.

The Four Fear Responses:



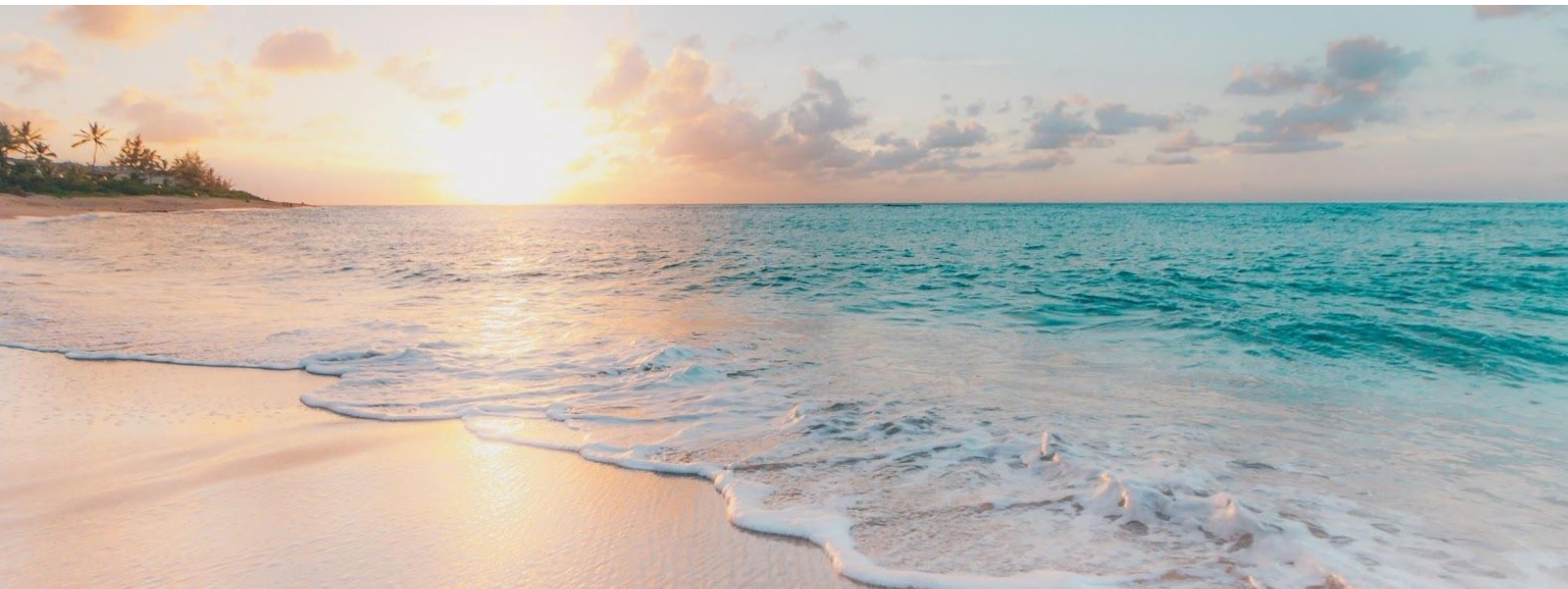
By operating and reacting out of our fear responses, the executive function and decision-making portion of our brain is compromised and overwritten to make our responses more reactive and less intentional. As our brain acts on high-stress instincts, we exacerbate and create more stressful conditions.

Ahead are five simple steps to assist in navigating midlife overwhelm and negative reactivity. With some motivation, these tools can shift your brain chemistry towards healthier and more effective stress management.

I call these **The 5-Step Process for Right Mindedness and Right Action.**

These steps help us...

- *recognize the triggers which affect us most*
- *prevent 'fight or flight' reactions*
- *favorably express negative emotions and foster trust in communication*
- *resolve conflicts we've already caused or take responsibility for our part.*



Step 1 --- Be Aware

Practice being more acquainted with how you feel.

Start to notice more often how you respond, how you react, what your body language, vocal tone, and facial expressions are. Increase your ability to identify your triggers. Be more alert to your



surroundings and attentive to what's happening around you. Try to separate emotions and check in with yourself to first see if you are hungry, tired or need hydration. Satisfy those basic needs first if possible and see if your feelings are the same. Remind yourself that your feelings are valid and they should be acknowledged. The easiest way to access this is to practice asking yourself, "How do I feel right now?" When you're not aware of how you feel, you are more likely to react with habitual and automated fear responses.

If you find yourself being reactive, try to catch yourself and take a moment to notice which fear response you go to or are tempted by: Is it to take flight or flee the situation? Is it to get defensive and fight? Are your feelings prompting you to freeze and become immobile?

Or, are you more likely to step back and appease and compromise your values or boundaries? (This point is also an opportunity to reflect on the trigger. Do these feelings bring up old childhood wounds, traumas, or harmful experiences? Does this situation trigger memories that bring up base fears such as abandonment, loss of autonomy, death, separation? If so, set aside time to explore these deeper.)

Also, be conscious of others and strengthen your ability and willingness to listen more openly, without judgement and with patience and curiosity. This type of awareness will keep you less reactive and more proactive.

Step 2 --- Name How You Feel

As you identify what it is you're feeling, be specific and give it a name. By answering the question, "How do I feel right now?" we are giving a voice to something internal, and as such we can begin to separate ourselves from our feelings. When we do this, we are transforming and diffusing an issue into something more external and more objective. If possible, express how you feel out loud.



Just by uttering the words aloud to yourself or to another, we can begin to experience a healthy detachment. In addition, by recognizing and naming how we feel, we are pausing the brain's automatic response to ruminate or spin off into our own story making.

Discomfort and distrust may prevent you from being able to genuinely express yourself to others in the moment so if it's not possible to share your feelings with someone present, try to reach out to someone you feel comfortable with. You might text or call someone to share how you feel. You'll find that not only naming your feelings aloud, but having someone else stand witness or give you feedback, creates even greater relief.

Step 3 --- Accept What is

Once you have identified and named a feeling, normalize it and remind yourself that these feelings are common and natural during this transition or stage of life. For this moment, pause and take a deep breath to value yourself and validate yourself. Normalize your feelings with compassion. If someone else cannot provide this feedback for you, you can create a token or action to remind you to be accepting like turning a ring on your finger or taking hold of your other hand.

Participating in this physical action further reduces any cortisol produced by the initial stressor. If you're by yourself, you could light a candle as a reminder to be compassionate with yourself. This step is easily overlooked and is vital for your serenity. Accept - without judgement - any person, place, event or circumstance exactly as it is. Brainstorm ways you can generate and foster acceptance.

Step 4 --- Reframe and Choose

So far you have paused to notice and to be aware of your surroundings, you have noticed how you feel, you've named it outloud, you've normalied it to accept it, and now you have a choice: to react or to be 'responsible' (response - able) for your feelings and able to respond in a way that is healthy. We can shift perspectives at the moment of threat or shortly thereafter to a more empowering one. (If you have already had the willingness to be accepting and to move into action toward self-compassion or forgiveness, you have already moved into this step). After actively or passively choosing acceptance, you can now consciously choose to embody another perspective. One perspective might be one of gratitude, or curiosity, or the perspective or belief system of a highly respected and meaningful person in your life. Once again, it is important and most empowering to consciously choose your perspective. (Look for Liz's Tool Box of Healthy Recoveries and Interruption Strategies available for purchase soon).

Step 5 --- Act

This is where your growth and learning multiplies. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where theory, beliefs, and faith get activated intentionally. You will move into action and behave in such a way that enables you to feel more alive, be more inclusive, engaged, creative, innovative, appreciative, expansive, curious, and celebratory. For example, take one of the perspective suggestions offered in Step 4 and allow yourself a moment to embody that perspective. If it's one of gratitude, do a gratitude list right then and there of 10 things you are grateful for. If you choose the perspective of curiosity, take a moment to look around with the eyes of a 3-year-old and look at your current environment through eyes of wonder and curiosity. Don't just think about it, DO it.

Embodying a different perspective may be all the action you need to take at this time. This action can reduce the negative effects of the stress and increase the neurochemicals that can generate happier states.

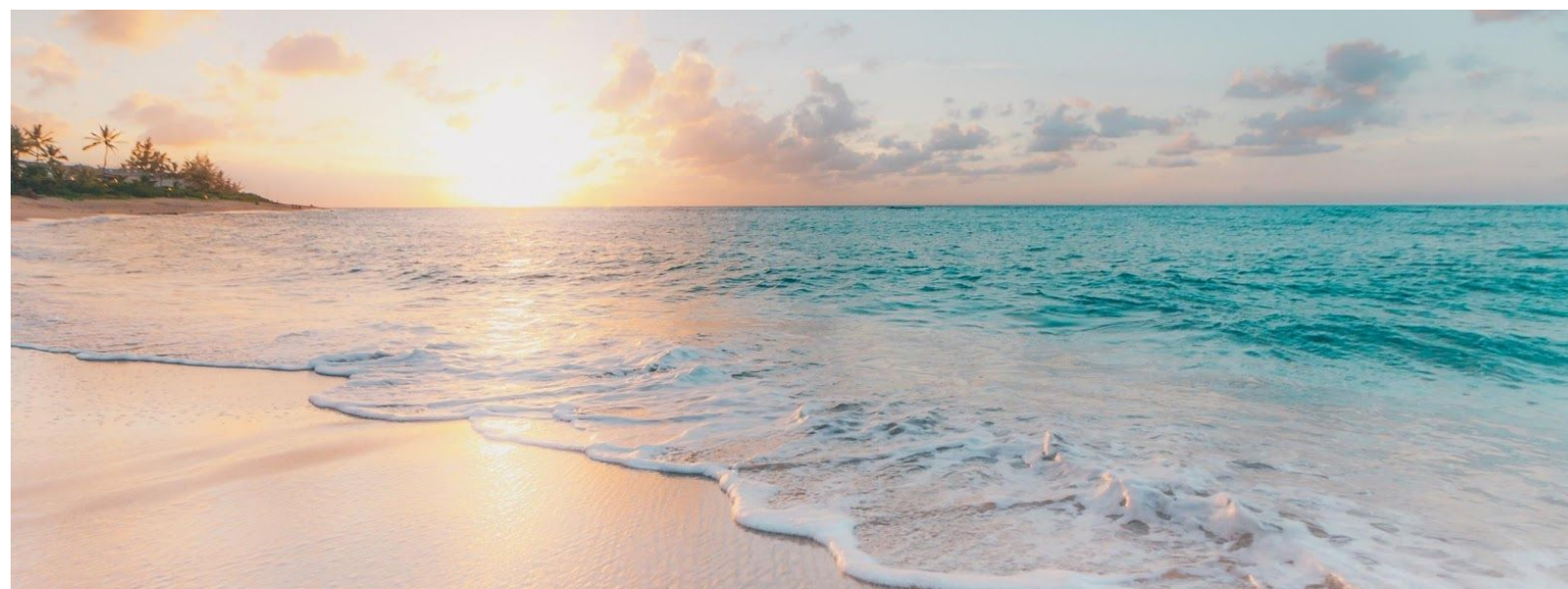


Taking action strengthens your realizations. By solidifying the first four steps of this process through intentional action, you gain clarity, confidence and you begin to reinforce a positive pathway of thought and rewire your brain to healthier habits and ways of being.

You'll find, that as you do this, your feelings about the overwhelm or uncertainty will subside and more creative solutions are more likely to arise.

So, when you are experiencing the overlapping or overwhelming stresses of Midlife, practice each of these steps in order. Then, move forward and wear your new perspective, step into it, and become and be who it is you want to be by your actions. This is what it means to be integrated and whole when what you think, what you feel, what you say and how you act are in harmony. **You'll find that your original feelings about the situation, or the general overwhelm or uncertainties in your life will subside and you'll be able to make the space for more creative solutions to arise.**

Midlife Integrity



Each of these steps are scientifically proven to shift the neurotransmitters in our brains. It is important to be aware of the ability to change the negative effects of unaddressed stress and to have the tools to be able to change our reactive pathways and brain chemistry from that fearful, distrustful, primitive, cortisol-producing part of the brain (that wants to fight, flee, appease or freeze) to the more creative, trusting, and innovative part of our brain where oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin -- the good feeling hormones -- are generated!

When we operate from this area of the brain (the prefrontal cortex, where our higher functions live) we are more able to envision things. We look beyond the stress of 'here and now', we are empathetic, and we make decisions with integrity.

So, instead of creating more conflict and stress with sad, fearful, angry or confusing feelings, we can use these steps to understand them and to transform them into creating more ease, more freedom, and more connectedness which enables us to have more successful relationships.

The messiness of Midlife is a difficult thing to navigate, but through awareness, expression, acceptance, reframing, and action, we can develop healthy habits that will serve us well in the future!

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Viktor E. Frankl

Reflective Worksheets

Think of a particular area of your life or a particular circumstance that produces anxiety or stress and write it down. Then, use the worksheets below to help you sort through your difficulty.

Current challenge: _____

Step 1 — Awareness			
Which of the four fear reactions do you default to when feeling threatened? What are the results?			
Fight	Flee	Appease	Freeze

Step 2 — Naming

When thinking about this situation, what are you feeling? This can range from one to many emotions. Learn to use the full array of adjectives to describe how you feel and write down as many as you can think of. (Then, circle one that really resonates and say it aloud to yourself or share it with someone else. Then, write down the name(s) of the people who you can reach out to.

Step 3 — Acceptance

Think about what provoked these feelings or what the triggers are. It can help deepen your level of understanding and therefore your self-compassion and deeper acceptance. After you write them out, take a moment to consciously generate acceptance. (This is not implying that something that's not ok is ok. This exercise is to allow you to see it fully and accept what is right now and what you can do about it)

Trigger	Feelings	Words of Acceptance/Normalization

Step 4 — Reframe and Choose

How would you like to respond to this situation or person? What healthy perspective would you like to embody? Brainstorm ways you could look at this. We used the perspective of gratitude or curiosity before. Anything goes here--think outside the box. (What if you could take on the 'water perspective'. What comes to mind? Refreshment. Hydration. Coolness. Weightlessness. Expansiveness. Fun. Flow.) Write out some different perspectives, circle the one you will choose to embody. Or, just write out how you'd really like to 'be' in this situation (I want to be loving and patient, or I want to be strong and direct...)

Step 5 — To Act

Now that you've chosen a perspective to embody, what will you do? How will you actively embody your perspective? Do you need to find someone to be accountable to?

Do you need to address a particular person and if so, how do you want to be?

Perspective	Action(s)

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