

Boomers coping with fragility of being middle aged

By Anita Creamer, Sacramento Bee

Rachael Mahoney is in the midst of a decade of loss. In the past few years, her father and her sister, her only sibling, died. Her marriage ended in divorce. And now her elderly mother's health is failing.

"It's tough," said Mahoney, 50, who works for the state and lives with her mother in Sacramento so she can care for her. "But people have gone through these things for generations. It's how we accept these circumstances that matters."

In huge numbers, the nation's 70 million baby boomers, now age 48 to 66, find themselves coping with a numbing range of expected and unexpected midlife changes, including divorce, the death of parents, the diminishment of health and youth, and these days the loss of jobs and homes as well.

The kids leave home. The body is less forgiving. Caregiving for ailing spouses and parents, although a necessity, can bring an unforeseen loss of freedom.

In many respects, loss could be considered the signature challenge of middle age. The question for boomers, a generation bred on optimism, is how to embrace the changes that occur as they launch more or less willingly into the next chapter of their lives.

"During midlife, there's a confluence of events that can create depression and a sense of despair and loss," said psychologist Douglas LaBier, who blogs on midlife issues for the Huffington Post and directs the Center for Progressive Development in Washington, D.C.

“It helps to see everything as something to learn from on our journey of evolution through life.”

While some losses, such as the deaths of elderly parents, can be absorbed as an inevitable part of the cycle of life, the unanticipated losses can reverberate more deeply: the death of spouses, siblings and same-age friends, perhaps, or people’s own health crises and career struggles.

In 2009, almost 22 percent of Californians in their 50s described their health status as less than good, twice the rate of people in their 30s, researchers found in the California Health Interview Survey. Other state data show that 50-year-olds were three times as likely to die that year as people a decade younger.

Almost 30 percent of Americans who lost jobs that year – more than 4 million people – were in the midlife age group, and they were unemployed twice as long as people in their 20s, Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show.

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