

# Daily Stress in Midlife

## Charting the ebb and flow of people's lives

Life's big crises always cause stress — divorce, a death in the family, losing a job, crashing a car. But what about the little things that gradually build up from day to day — arguing with a co-worker, fighting traffic, missing deadlines? How do these irritations affect your daily well-being?

Until now, no one has really studied these smaller pressures over time in a national sample, according to David Almeida, an assistant professor in the School of Family and Consumer Resources. Using an in-depth telephone interviewing technique, he and his graduate students have amassed data from nearly 12,000 interviews taken from 1500 people across the country.

"This has been my life for the past four years," Almeida says. "I believe that the little frustrations and challenges of daily life play a big role in determining our well-being and personal development. The tricky part is how to measure these common daily stressors."

Almeida believes the best way to understand people's lives is to chart their experience over a series of days. He chose to conduct telephone diary interviews rather than rely on participants to fill out daily diaries.

"The biggest drawback with self-report diaries is that the people who have time to fill them out aren't that stressed," Almeida says. His telephone interviews are part of the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE), funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The 1500 participants in the study were randomly drawn from a sample of 8000 people who were already part of a larger study on midlife in the U.S. The sample is representative of all 48 contiguous states, and includes people from different ethnicities, education levels, ages and economic background as well as equal numbers of men and women. The group includes 250 twin pairs—half identical and half fraternal—so the researchers can study the way genetic traits affect reactions to stress.

"Because 1500 is a large number of people, I had to limit the number of consecutive days we could interview

each one," Almeida says. He decided to interview each participant for eight days in a row. "We collected data throughout an entire year, interviewing 30 to 40 people every week. I had ten part-time workers and one supervisor." Interviewers included students from The University of Arizona, and from the University of Michigan, where he began this research.

Almeida set up a special format for collecting data, consisting of a series of structured questions that would put the participant at ease and lead into gathering detailed descriptions of the events the person had experienced that day, and his or her reaction to them. The interviewers called between 6:00 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. each night.

"Interviewers were trained to probe enough to get highly specific, short narratives of daily stress," Almeida says. Initial questions covered daily arguments, disagreements, discrimination, and anything else the participant considered stressful. Other questions related to time use; giving and volunteering; physical health symptoms; non-specific psychological stress; work productivity and cutbacks; and a general daily review of stressful experiences.

"What we found out was that people really liked talking to us," Almeida says. "Most people are used to talking

about their problems on the telephone, and we actually had to figure out a protocol to end the interview. It was very important for us to be very respectful. I was amazed at how much of their lives they opened up to us." The interviewers took care not to develop any sort of therapeutic relationship with the participants. If someone was in trouble, the interviewer offered a list of numbers for the person to call to get help.

During the interviews, the information was both taped and entered directly into a computer so it could be analyzed the next day. Six UA students transcribed and coded the comments for qualitative analysis. Almeida says the data are so rich, he'll be analyzing them on many different levels for the next few years.

"The immediate goal is to get a picture of daily stress in the U.S.," Almeida says. "But the ultimate goal isn't to describe stress, it's to determine who is most likely to experience stressful situations and to explore the differing ways people react to them."

"If we could figure out who's more likely to be exposed we could devise programs to reduce stress," Almeida says. "We could devise ways to help people cope with daily stress." When people feel they have more control over their environment, they tend to perceive it as less stressful.

— Susan McGinley

### Preliminary Results

- Men and women report having at least one physical health complaint an average of four days a week. Women experience slightly more physical complaints, especially those aged 45–54. They reported having more headaches and muscle soreness than older and younger women. Older adults were more likely than younger adults to have symptoms that lasted all day, although the frequency of physical health complaints was not highest for them.

- On average, participants had at least one stressful experience between one and three days per week. Women's daily stress peaked between ages 35–44. During this time women had more stress at work and at home than at other periods of adulthood. The frequency of daily stress decreased

throughout the rest of middle adulthood for both men and women. A decline in interpersonal tensions was responsible for the decrease. Negative events that happen to friends or relatives was the only category of daily stress that was more frequent during middle and later adulthood.

- Women at midlife, ages 45–54, provided more emotional support to others than during any other period of life. During this time women listened to, comforted, and advised others an average of one day a week more than younger and older women. Women at midlife were twice as likely to emotionally support their parents and three times more likely to emotionally support children, compared to younger and older women.