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Friendships, Subjective Age, and Life Satisfaction of Women in Midlife

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Friendships, Subjective Age, and Life Satisfaction of Women in Midlife

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The authors conducted a study of 422 women, ages 31 to 77 years, to explore the relationships among friendship networks, subjective age, and life satisfaction. Friendship network size was related to lower subjective age but not to chronological age. More frequent visits with friends were related to lower subjective age and to higher life satisfaction. Satisfaction with the number of friends and a larger number of friends were related to higher levels of life satisfaction. Subjective age, group belonging, and being someone's best friend were significant predictors of life satisfaction.

Keywords: midlife, women, friendship, social support, life satisfaction

The stage of life known as "midlife" describes a life stage with somewhat blurry age boundaries that women may be hesitant to not only "grow into" but also "grow out of" when older adulthood is on the horizon. Most often, midlife is considered to begin in the late 30s or early 40s and to stretch through the mid to late 60s. Midlife women are a sizable segment of the U.S. population, as women ages 40 to 64 accounted for approximately 32% of the total U.S. female population in 2018 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Midlife women also compose the bulk of the client population for an exceptionally large number of counselors (Shallcross, 2012). Thus, it is clear that there are significant changes and challenges that arrive during midlife for which women may feel the need to seek support.

Historical representations of midlife have suggested that it is a period of psychological upheaval and letdown (Jacques, 1965; Levinson & Levinson, 1996) that can also encourage psychological awakening and significant inner development (Jung, 1971) and deeper involvement in generative pursuits (Erikson,

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1968). Contemporary researchers (Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015) concur that midlife is an important period of the life span influenced by both decline and growth. For many women, physical decline represents a dreaded marker of aging. Perimenopause signals important physiological changes that accompany psychological changes that frequently and negatively influence self-appraisal, body satisfaction, and self-esteem (Séjourné, Got, Solans, & Raynal, 2019). Although it would be ideal if women embraced the arrival of menopause with "postmenopausal zest," a term attributed to famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, not every woman is ready to embrace this change, even in light of the potentially positive outcomes that await. Midlife women enjoy greater freedom in their life choices than prior generations in areas such as career, relationships, and motherhood, but freedom can generate stress and present risk (Schwartz, 2004). The popular media promotes the idea that "50 is the new 30" or that "reinvention" of oneself at midlife is easily achievable, but not all women embrace this perspective. In fact, there are harrowing statistics that suggest that midlife is an increasingly troubling time for many women. Women between the ages of 40 and 59 years have the highest depression rates of any age group in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). The suicide rate for women aged 45 to 64 has increased dramatically in the past 2 decades; in fact, the rate jumped 60% between 2000 and 2016 (Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016). Midlife is clearly a period in which women could benefit from psychological and emotional support.

Regardless of how midlife is defined, Lachman and James (1997) noted that even though people cannot know with certainty when they have reached the precise midpoint of their lives, people do, indeed, recognize when they have entered the middle years. In midlife, people undergo a shift in time perspective and awareness in that they begin to recognize their own mortality (Barber & Strickland-Hughes, 2019; Neugarten, 1968). People begin to think about their lives in terms of "time left to live" rather than the time they have lived since birth. This awareness might create a sense of unease and negatively affect life satisfaction; however, holding a younger subjective age, or feeling younger than one's actual age, accompanied by adequate social support, may mitigate trepidation and bolster life satisfaction.

FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS

There may not be one single, unified definition of social support, but it is believed to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative aspects, such as meaning and quality of social connections, perceived availability of assistance, size of social network, longevity, and reciprocity (Rook, 1994; Thoits, 1982). Social support has been found to be an important factor in maintaining physical and psychological well-being among women, regardless of age (Glass et al., 2000; Wayment & Peplau, 1995). However, although communication technology

has increased the breadth of social network sizes, research suggests that online support does not offer the depth of support to mental health that face-to-face support can do (Han, Han, Qu, Li, & Zhu, 2019). Friendships positively influence levels of anxiety and depression, self-esteem, parental stress, and social isolation (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin & Lein, 1997; Fantuzzo, Stevenson, Kabir, & Perry, 2007). Although there is limited research about the role of best friends in midlife, research indicates that best friends can help ease transitions and positively influence emotional well-being and academic achievement in younger women (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). In adulthood, women tend to perceive close friends as family members and report the importance of continuity and reciprocity in their friendships, which support further growth of maturity and therefore a greater sense of confidence (Piotrowski, 2018), which can enhance overall life satisfaction and well-being.

LIFE SATISFACTION

Life satisfaction is an overall self-assessment of feelings about life fulfillment and life contentment at a particular moment in a person's life (Stevens-Ratchford, 2011). Global measures of well-being are often used to assess subjective life satisfaction in order to determine the factors that play influential roles in this measure. Factors that have been identified as supporting midlife women's life satisfaction include a broad range of demographic variables as well as outwardly directed activities, including volunteering (Hansen, Aartsen, Slagsvold, & Deindl, 2018). Hope and resilience also have been found to be related to life satisfaction in midlife (Shetty, 2015). Research also indicates that having supportive persons in one's life supports midlife women's overall well-being (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Women are especially invested in the development of relationships, and they place significant value on social networks (Gilligan, 1982). The presence of a strong social support network has been found to promote psychological health in midlife (Blieszner, 2015). In addition to feeling good about one's social support system, self-efficacy, personal resources, and self-assessment have been found to be positively related to life satisfaction (Zielińska-Więczkowska, 2017). These findings suggest that self-perceptions can influence life satisfaction; subjective age, or the age one feels oneself to be, may be among these factors.

SUBJECTIVE AGE

Although chronological age provides an objective marker of physiological status, it does not capture qualitative data related to an individual's self-assessment of subjective age. The construct of subjective age is based on individuals' self-perceived age evaluation of their activities, behaviors, interests, and appearance. Researchers have found that individuals in mid- and late adulthood

tend to hold subjective age identities that are several years younger than their chronological ages and that these discrepancies grow larger as chronological age increases, particularly for women (Gainey, Kennedy, McCabe, & Degges-White, 2009; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). The media encourages women to consider landmark birthdays as representing ages a decade or two younger than the chronological marker, such as "60 is the new 50" or "50 is the new 30." Although the goal may be to encourage women to let go of the negative associations that midlife birthdays carry, the cultural message emphasizes the negative connotations of aging.

Research suggests that feeling younger than one's chronological age appears to offer protection against negative mood states (Bergman & Bodner, 2019). Weiss, Reitz, and Stephan (2019) found that holding the belief that aging is a flexible, nonfixed process and being open to experiences are two factors that support younger subjective ages. The presence of healthy relationships also has been found to be related to endorsement of a younger subjective age (Zee & Weiss, 2019). However, social network size has been found to decrease over the life span (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013), which can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. No study has explored whether a connection between subjective age and network size exists. This is an area that this study explored in addition to friendship networks and life satisfaction.

The purpose of the current study was to explore relations among women's satisfaction with their friendships, perceptions of subjective age, and life satisfaction. We examined the following five hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is a relationship between friendship network size, subjective age, and chronological age.
Hypothesis 2: There is a relationship between the frequency with which women visit with their friends face-to-face and their subjective ages.
Hypothesis 3: There is a relationship between the frequency with which women visit with their friends face-to-face and their levels of life satisfaction.
Hypothesis 4: There is a relationship between the number of close friends, satisfaction with the current number of friends, and life satisfaction.
Hypothesis 5: The variance in life satisfaction can be accounted for by the status of having someone who is considered a best friend, being another's best friend, experiencing a feeling of group belonging, and subjective age.

METHOD

Prior to the collection of data, approval for the research was received from the institutional review board. Women between the ages of 30 and 79 were recruited via electronic mailing list announcements, social media link posts, and electronic blog posts that address emotional well-being and relationships. The survey was completed electronically using Qualtrics survey software, and

multiple responses from a single IP address were not allowed. Using G*Power analysis (Version 3.1; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), we conducted the a priori sample sizes for each of the statistical tests. With expected medium effect size and an alpha level of .05, approximately 305 participants were calculated to be needed for the analysis of variance (ANOVA) calculations, 129 for the regression, and 138 for the bivariate correlation. Of the 491 completed surveys, 422 (86%) respondents qualified as being female and within the age guidelines, thus providing an adequate sample size for all planned analyses.

Participants

Respondents' ages ranged from 31 to 77, with a mean age of 55.95 years (*SD* = 8.19). Of the sample, 3.3% were in their 30s, 20.1% in their 40s, 39.6% in their 50s, 33.2% in their 60s, and 3.8% in their 70s. The majority of the respondents were European American (82.2%), 5.9% were Hispanic, 2.6% were African American, 1.4% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.4% were Native American/American Indian, 5.9% marked other as their race, and two participants did not respond. Married or partnered respondents made up 64.5% of the participants, 8.1% were in dating relationships, 25.1% were single, and 2.4% did not specify their relationship status. Regarding employment status, 45.6% were employed full-time; 18.5% were retired; 18.3% were employed part-time; 8.1% were disabled and unable to work; 5.2% were unemployed, but not looking for work; 3.3% were unemployed, but looking for work; and 1.0% were students.

Measures

Participants completed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); a series of questions that addressed friendship network size, composition, and satisfaction; a subjective age questionnaire; and a brief demographic questionnaire. These were all completed online via Qualtrics.

SWLS. The SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) was designed to measure individuals' overall or global satisfaction with their lives. The SWLS is composed of five items (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"), which are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The assessment provides a single measure of global life satisfaction that continues to show strong validity and sensitivity (Pavot & Diener, 2009). Internal consistency of the five-item instrument has been supported by reported alpha coefficients that consistently exceed .80 (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The test-retest reliability for a group of 76 students was .82 for a 2-month interval (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Pavot and Diener (1993) also explored the convergent and discriminant validity of this instrument and found support for each. Specifically, the SWLS was positively correlated with assessments of well-being and negatively correlated with assessments of psychological distress. The Cronbach's alpha calculated for the SWLS was .89 in the current study.

Friendship Network Questionnaire. This questionnaire included questions that assessed multiple areas of social support networks. These included questions regarding the presence of a "best friend" relationship, the number of close friends in one's friendship network, feelings of belongingness with a social network, one's satisfaction with the size and composition of one's friendship network, and the frequency of contact with friends (daily, a couple of times a week, weekly, a few times a month, monthly, a few times a year, and never).

Subjective Age Assessment. Subjective age (Barak, 1987) is a measure of how old one feels oneself to be related to actual chronological age and takes into account the following factors: feel age, activity age, interests age, and look age. In this study, we used a variation of Barak's (1987) original Subjective Age Questionnaire, in which participants are asked to select one of eight age-decade responses for each factor (e.g., teens, 20s, 80s). Rather than asking participants to select a particular decade, the assessment asked whether they felt older than, the same as, or younger than their actual age regarding each of the four factors. Each factor was assessed with a single question (e.g., "I enjoy the activities of someone who is [younger than/the same as/older than] age that I am"). Each item was scored using a scale ranging from 1 (*younger than*) to 3 (*older than*). Scores were averaged together, and final scale scores ranged from 1 to 3, with higher scores indicating higher subjective ages. The Cronbach's alpha for this assessment was .72 in the current study.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 24.0), and an alpha of .05 was set for determining statistical significance. Cases missing data were excluded from analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic variables and for scales of the instruments. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, ANOVAs, and regression analysis were used to examine the research questions.

RESULTS

In Table 1, the means and standard deviations for SWLS scores (range = 5–35) and subjective age scores (range = 1–3) are presented by age category. In Table 2, information related to the size of close friendship networks and participants'

TABLE 1

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) and Subjective Age (SA) Means and Standard Deviations by Chronological Age Group

Variable	Total (N = 422)		30s (n = 14)		40s (n = 85)		50s (n = 167)		60s (n = 140)		70s (n = 16)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SWLS	17.53	7.53	18.21	8.34	18.54	7.34	16.90	7.21	17.50	7.55	22.31	7.53
SA	1.72	0.52	1.89	0.47	1.88	0.53	1.76	0.53	1.58	0.50	1.47	0.33

TABLE 2

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) and Satisfaction With Current Number of Close Friends (SCNCF) Means and Standard Deviations by Chronological Age Group

Chronological Age Group	%	SWLS		SCNCF	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Total (*N* = 420)					
Too few friends	42	15.73	7.12	2.05	4.30
Just right number	58	18.74	7.58	3.93	2.54
30s (*n* = 14)					
Too few friends	36	13.20	5.07	2.40	0.89
Just right number	64	21.00	8.73	4.78	2.86
40s (*n* = 85)					
Too few friends	44	19.46	7.54	1.84	2.03
Just right number	56	17.83	7.19	3.79	2.04
50s (*n* = 166)					
Too few friends	45	14.79	6.72	2.40	6.22
Just right number	55	18.57	7.20	3.69	2.27
60s (*n* = 139)					
Too few friends	38	14.30	6.31	1.72	1.92
Just right number	62	18.60	7.81	3.93	2.87
70s (*n* = 16)					
Too few friends	31	19.80	10.66	1.60	0.89
Just right number	69	23.45	8.88	5.82	3.09

Note. N = 420 because two cases were missing data.

satisfaction with the number of their close friends is presented; data are categorized by chronological age.

The Relationships Among Friendship Network Size, Subjective Age, and Chronological Age

To test the first hypothesis that a significant relationship existed between friendship network size, subjective age, and chronological age, we calculated a Pearson product-moment correlation. This calculation indicated a significant relationship between subjective age and chronological age ($r = -.24$, $R^2 = .06$), indicating that the older a participant's chronological age, the younger she felt herself to be. This calculation also revealed a significant relationship between the size of a participant's friendship network and her subjective age ($r = -.25$, $R^2 = .06$), indicating that the younger participants felt themselves to be, the larger their friendship network size. However, no relationship was found between friendship network size and chronological age. Thus, the first hypothesis was partially supported.

Frequency of Face-to-Face Visits With Friends and Subjective Age

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test the second hypothesis (i.e., the frequency of face-to-face visits with friends is related to subjective age). The mean subjective age scores for participants, according to how frequently they

visit with friends face-to-face, are shown in Table 3. Frequency of visits with friends was used as the independent variable and subjective age was used as the dependent variable. There was a significant relationship at the $p < .05$ level, $F(6, 400) = 3.15$, $p = .005$, supporting the second hypothesis. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .05, indicating that 5% of the variance in subjective age was related to the frequency of visits. Women who visited with friends a couple of times a week exhibited the highest level of life satisfaction. A Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test indicated that individuals who visited with their close friends "a couple of times a week" had significantly lower subjective ages than those who visited a few times a year or not at all.

Frequency of Face-to-Face Visits With Friends and Life Satisfaction

A second ANOVA was conducted to test the third hypothesis (i.e., the frequency of face-to-face visits with friends is related to levels of life satisfaction). The mean life satisfaction scores for participants, according to how frequently they visit with friends face-to-face, are shown in Table 3. Frequency of visits with friends was used as the independent variable, and life satisfaction was used as the dependent variable. There was a significant relationship at the $p < .05$ level, $F(6, 406) = 3.03$, $p = .007$, supporting the third hypothesis. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .04, indicating that 4% of

TABLE 3

**Frequency of Face-to-Face Visits With Friends,
Number of Close Friends, Subjective Age (SA), and
Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)**

		SA		SWLS	
Variable	%	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Frequency of visits[a]					
Daily	3.4	1.64	0.53	19.57	7.90
A couples of times a week	14.3	1.54	0.47	20.41	7.53
Weekly	14.0	1.65	0.50	18.60	7.61
A few times a month	20.1	1.62	0.51	17.55	7.40
Monthly	13.1	1.81	0.55	17.39	7.03
A few times a year	24.5	1.81	0.56	16.45	7.17
Never	10.7	1.87	0.52	15.05	7.91
Number of close friends[b]					
0	11.6	1.98	0.55	13.69	7.27
1–2	35.8	1.85	0.54	16.27	7.30
3–4	31.0	1.59	0.48	18.73	7.39
5–6	14.0	1.53	0.41	19.98	7.17
7–8	3.6	1.60	0.51	19.53	6.73
9 or more	4.0	1.54	0.48	20.24	7.50

Note. Number of participants varied due to missing data.
[a]$N = 413$. [b]$N = 422$.

the variance in life satisfaction was related to the frequency of visits. Tukey's HSD test indicated that participants who visited their friends a couple of times a week had significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than those who visited only a few times a year or not at all.

Number of Friends, Satisfaction With Current Number of Friends, and Life Satisfaction

To test the fourth hypothesis, that a significant relationship existed between number of close friends, satisfaction with the current number of friends, and life satisfaction, we calculated a Pearson product-moment correlation. This calculation revealed a significant positive relationship between current number of friends and life satisfaction ($r = .24$, $R^2 = .06$) and satisfaction with the current number of friends and life satisfaction ($r = .32$, $R^2 = .10$). Thus, the fourth hypothesis was supported. See Table 3 for additional details related to number of close friends and its relation to life satisfaction.

Predictors of Life Satisfaction

According to the fifth hypothesis, a significant amount of the variance in life satisfaction would be accounted for by the presence of a best friend, status of being another's best friend, a feeling of group belonging, and subjective age. To test this hypothesis, we entered each of these variables into a regression equation, and the standardized regression coefficients of the variables were analyzed to determine their predictive value regarding life satisfaction. The results indicated that these variables together accounted for 17.5% of the variance in life satisfaction, $R^2 = .18$, $F(4, 396) = 22.23$, $p < .001$, supporting the fifth hypothesis. Examination of the beta weights of the regression coefficients revealed that all of the variables, except for the presence of a best friend, were significant predictors of life satisfaction. Results indicated that being considered someone's best friend, $\beta = .22$, $t(4, 396) = 2.72$, $p = .007$; having a strong sense of belonging, $\beta = .20$, $t(4, 396) = 3.51$, $p = .001$; and having a subjective age younger than actual age, $\beta = -.27$, $t(4, 396) = -5.71$, $p < .001$, explained a significant proportion of the variance in life satisfaction.

Post Hoc Analysis

On the basis of findings related to friendship network size and life satisfaction, attention was directed to number of friends and its relation to life satisfaction. Categories were created to organize the data related to the number of friends participants stated that they had. These categories were 0 friends, 1–2 friends, 3–5 friends, and 6 or more friends. A one-way ANOVA was calculated to determine the statistical difference in levels of life satisfaction based on the number of friends one had. Results revealed a significant relationship at the $p < .05$ level, $F(3, 415) = 11.22$, $p < .001$. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .08, indicating that 8% of the variance in life

satisfaction was related to number of friends. Tukey's HSD test indicated that participants who had 0 or 1–2 friends had statistically significant lower levels of life satisfaction than those who had 3–5 or more friends.

DISCUSSION

A study of 422 women, ages 31 to 77 years, was conducted to explore relationships among friendship network size and satisfaction, subjective age, and life satisfaction. Five hypotheses were put forth, and all five were at least partially supported by the findings. The size of one's friendship network was found to be negatively related to one's self-perception of age, with women who felt themselves younger than their actual ages having larger friendship networks. No relation was found between the size of a friendship network and chronological age. In addition, the frequency of visits with friends was related to subjective age and life satisfaction. Women who visited a couple of times a week with friends had significantly younger subjective ages and higher levels of life satisfaction than those who visited only a few times a year. Higher levels of life satisfaction were experienced by women who had larger numbers of friends and those who were more satisfied with the number of friends that they had. Post hoc analysis indicated that having three or more friends was indicative of higher levels of life satisfaction. Last, subjective age, feeling a sense of belonging within one's social network, and being considered someone else's best friend all were found to predict life satisfaction. However, having a best friend was not predictive of life satisfaction, even though this suggests the presence of a social support network.

Although women who feel younger than they are tend to have larger social support networks, there was not a parallel relationship with chronological age and support network size. Contrary to Wrzus et al.'s (2013) findings, there was not a decline in friendship network sizes over the life span. Expectations of shrinking networks may reflect the experiences of those who hold subjective ages older than their chronological age. Feeling older than one's chronological age may limit the desire and capacity for maintaining social relationships, as this may reflect compromised physical and emotional well-being. As women are increasingly able to take advantage of advances in health care and wellness promotion that increase mobility and longevity, they may be feeling much younger than they expected they would as they move through middle adulthood. Women are also reaching many traditional "life milestones" later than prior generations, which may encourage and support women's beliefs about feeling and engaging in activities that reflect a younger chronological age than they actually may be. For example, the median age for marriage is almost a decade older than it was a generation ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and grandparenthood may also be experienced at a later age. Cultural shifts in timelines such as this may positively influence a woman's perception of subjective age.

Although some milestones today are "out of sync" with experiences of previous generations, these shifts may be beneficial across the life span and may allow women to feel increasingly able to establish and manage larger social networks than in generations past as they age.

Although electronic communication and social media may have become primary mediums of connection between friends, findings from this study indicate that the more frequently women visit with their friends in face-to-face interactions, the higher their levels of life satisfaction and lower their subjective ages. Connections with others in women's lives play an important role as women continue to thrive and grow through friendships (Piotrowski, 2018), and prioritizing time with friends makes sense. With more support and positivity in life, women may feel inspired (Piotrowski, 2018), energized, and relieved; therefore, feeling zeal and zest may help them feel subjectively younger as well as enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, the presence of friends can provide support and hope in difficult times; for instance, friendships also serve as a protective factor when family relationships prove difficult (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006; Shetty, 2015). The present study not only concurs with these previous studies but also further expands on such findings clarifying that the more frequently women get together with friends, the more satisfied with the life they feel.

In addition to the frequency of get-togethers with friends, the number of close friends and satisfaction with that number were positively related to the level of life satisfaction. Not only do healthy friendships support overall satisfaction with life, but they may help prevent or mitigate emotional distress. Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that the presence of social support is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and a greater sense of self-control, as well as self-esteem, which is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). An adequate number of satisfying close friendships contributes to higher levels of life satisfaction, as does being a good friend to another.

Although it is important to have a strong support network in place, this study indicates that being a good friend is related to higher levels of life satisfaction. In exploring factors that predict life satisfaction, we found that having a subjective age younger than one's chronological age, feeling a sense of belonging with one's social network, and being another's best friend were all significant. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs included a sense of belonging just under esteem and self-actualization. Women typically play many roles in midlife; however, as transition timelines have shifted (Degges-White & Myers, 2006), there remains a strong need to feel connected to others. Being considered a part of a group, social circle, or a team meets this need; therefore, it makes sense that midlife women experiencing belonging to a group predicted higher levels of life satisfaction. Not only did a general sense of belonging predict life satisfaction, so too did being another's best friend.

Being considered someone's best friend may also meet the need to feel needed, valued, and helpful. This also meets the human need for service and giving of oneself (Colarusso, 1998), thus leading to a sense of fulfillment. Furthermore, being a best friend can assist in developing and securing a self-narrative (Colarusso, 1998; Colarusso & Montero, 2007), resulting in self-understanding and a cohesive sense of self (Goldberg, 2011). These typically lead to a greater sense of life satisfaction. While having a best friend may translate into the perceived presence of social support, the value of being present for and supportive of another may hold greater value in terms of influencing self-appraisal measures such as life satisfaction or subjective age.

Having a younger subjective age predicted higher levels of life satisfaction, which likely reflects the overall sense of vitality that is likely enjoyed by women who feel younger than their actual age. As discussed previously, a combination of factors may contribute to younger self-perceptions. As life spans lengthen, women may feel younger than similar-age women did in previous generations. Thus, women may compare how they feel at midlife to how they perceived earlier generations might have felt. This sense of youthfulness may be enhancing overall life satisfaction.

In summary, the results of this study provide insight into what is important in terms of midlife friendship and the factors that contribute to life satisfaction in women. Chronological age may be less important than subjective age in a woman's attitudes and behaviors. Midlife women who feel younger have larger circles of friends and engage in more frequent face-to-face visits with their friends. The larger the number of close friends that midlife women reported and the more satisfied they felt with their friendship network sizes, the more satisfied they felt with their lives. Last, lower subjective age, a sense of belonging, and being someone's best friend were predictive of life satisfaction in midlife women.

Implications

These findings hold specific implications for counseling professionals and counselor educators as they provide valuable data regarding women in midlife that can inform mental health care and counselor preparation. Understanding the ways in which friendships influence life satisfaction is beneficial because women flourish through connections. When working with midlife women, practitioners may want to explore clients' relationships with friends, the types of friendships they have, the size of their friendship circles, and frequency of visits with friends to gain understanding into clients' social support systems. Furthermore, the presence or absence of friendships may inform practitioners about women's needs, approaches to life, worldviews, and perceptions of happiness and satisfaction.

Counselors can provide a space for midlife women to reassess existing relationships and determine whether they want to maintain these or develop new friendships, if circumstances support this. Not every client will be in a position to invest easily energy or time into finding new friends, so counselors must meet the

client where she is at. Counselors may want to provide psychoeducation related to building and maintaining quality friendships, as these can buffer stress and lead to enhanced life satisfaction over the life span. Sharing information about the value of building a variety of friendships, at least three to five in number, may help clients to refrain from placing unreasonable expectations on just one or two friends. In addition, because many women may feel disconnected due to the prevalence of electronic communications, counselors can encourage clients to seek face-to-face engagement with friends and incorporate techniques that support social skill development.

Through friendships, women are able to meet service-related needs, which can increase a woman's sense of accomplishment and life satisfaction. Emphasizing the concept of "being someone's best friend," in addition to "having a best friend," may be included as a psychoeducational component when working with women. Encouraging clients to find ways to offer support to others may positively influence their own sense of well-being and life satisfaction. Being there for another positively influences life satisfaction, which can help women find companionship and purpose when she is feeling very much alone. Also, focusing on identifying groups or a circle of friends to which female clients might belong or feel part of might be beneficial as these may boost clients' life satisfaction. Midlife is a period in which self-awareness may grow, but the need for connection remains strong. Besides offering space for self-exploration, practitioners should also model healthy relationship building and relationship maintenance through the supportive and growth-promoting therapeutic relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

A number of potential limitations may affect the internal and external validity of this study's findings. The sample included selection bias in the form of self-selection, and the individuals who completed the assessment may be different in unknown ways from individuals who chose not to complete the study. The sample was not demographically representative of the overall population, as participants were predominantly European American. Additional limitations may be inherent in the sample size and the unequal group sizes. Furthermore, self-report measures present limitations for reasons related to social desirability, response biases, and lack of triangulation with other sources.

As we look to potential areas for future research, these findings suggest that a woman's life satisfaction may be affected by a sense of belonging, being someone's best friend, and a younger subjective age. Future qualitative research might explore what it means to be someone's best friend (e.g., characteristics, traits) and how the concept of "being someone's best friend" is established and experienced. To further expand on the present study, researchers should survey women across the life span, ethnicities, and sexual orientation to find out if the results of this research would hold for younger and older women with diverse backgrounds. Moreover, the human needs for belonging, contribution, and

self-application are universal, and all people benefit from social support and friendships. It may be interesting to investigate the experiences of men across the life span and compare these findings with the results of this study.

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