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BRIEF REPORT

Examining the Role of Emotional Support Equity in Marital Relationships in Later Life: Findings From the National Study of Daily Experiences

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The experience of receiving and/or providing emotional support to one's spouse is a common occurrence among older couples. While previous research indicates that receiving emotional support can paradoxically elevate negative mood, achieving supportive equity—where both partners reciprocally exchange emotional support—mitigates these negative effects and is associated with better well-being. To date, this buffering effect of support equity has been documented among younger couples but remains underresearched among older populations. The present study uses data from the National Study of Daily Experiences, an 8-day daily diary study ($N = 672$ married individuals), to examine the impact of supportive equity on negative affect in middle-aged and older adults. Results indicate that emotional support equity is associated with decreased negative affect for older adults compared with middle-aged adults, highlighting the benefit of supportive equity for older adults and the need for more research on middle-aged adults.

Keywords: emotional support equity, reciprocity, mood, Midlife in the United States, National Study of Daily Experiences

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Exchanging emotional support between partners is a common occurrence in romantic relationships and has major implications for each individual's mental well-being. Support providers consistently experience positive outcomes, such as improved psychological well-being and reduced stress (e.g., Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Shrout et al., 2006), but somewhat paradoxically, support recipients often experience increases in negative mood (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Iida et al., 2008). Importantly, the negative impact of receiving support from one's partner can be mitigated by engaging in supportive equity, in which the support recipient also provides support (Gleason et al., 2003, 2008). The positive effects of emotional support equity have been well-documented in younger couples, but less is known about how this dynamic operates in middle-aged and older adults, despite the fact that support exchanges between partners become more common in later life (Ko & Lewis, 2011). Given the potential for emotional support equity to benefit the well-being of middle-aged and older individuals, examining its impact provides critical insight into relationship dynamics and mental health in this demographic. The present study fills this gap by utilizing daily diary data from the National Study of Daily Experiences to examine the impact of emotional support equity on mental well-being among married middle-aged and older adults.

Emotional Support in Close Relationships

The role of emotional support has been studied extensively among younger adult couples. This robust literature finds that offering emotional support to one's romantic partner (e.g., listening to or comforting your partner, providing information or advice) is

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The hypotheses and analyses presented in this article were not preregistered. Data are available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan (Grant ICPSR #38529). Data analytic process can be found on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/58eq3/. Portions of the results of this research were presented at the biennial conference of the International Association for Relationship Research in July 2024. The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

Po-Heng Chen played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, software, visualization, and writing–original draft and an equal role in project administration. Sae Hwang Han played a supporting role in formal analysis, methodology, software, supervision, and writing–review and editing. Marci E. J. Gleason played a supporting role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, validation, visualization, and writing–review and editing. Hannah C. Williamson played a lead role in supervision and writing–review and editing, a supporting role in formal analysis, methodology, validation, and visualization, and an equal role in project administration.

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associated with positive health and well-being outcomes for the support provider, including reduced levels of anxiety, lower levels of depression, and improved physical health (e.g., Biehle & Mickelson, 2012; Shrout et al., 2006). By contrast, the effects of receiving emotional support are more complex and often paradoxical, as it may make recipients feel incompetent or undermine their sense of self-control and self-efficacy, subsequently increasing their negative mood states (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Gleason et al., 2008; Iida et al., 2008). Such outcomes suggest that receiving support can carry psychological costs, contradicting its intended benefits (Gleason & Iida, 2015; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009).

These adverse effects of receiving emotional support on mental well-being, however, can be mitigated if the couple engages in supportive equity, in which the support recipient also provides support to their partner on the same day. This reciprocal provision of emotional support can buffer against the potential negative effects of receiving support, thereby enhancing overall emotional well-being (Gleason et al., 2003; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Indeed, reciprocity theory (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999) argues that a balanced exchange of support creates a favorable cost–benefit ratio, which benefits each partner as an individual, as well as the relationship, whereas unbalanced support is detrimental to mental well-being because it fails to uphold this ratio. Furthermore, social exchange theory (Cook et al., 2013; Wan & Antonucci, 2016) posits that providing emotional support to one's support provider aligns with the norm of reciprocity, which helps maintain relational equity.

Despite the extensive focus on younger couples in the social support literature, the effect of supportive equity in older adults remains underexplored. Prior research suggests that emotional support equity is more prevalent in later life (e.g., Keyes, 2002). In other words, as people age, they are more likely to engage in reciprocal exchanges of emotional support with their partners (Ko & Lewis, 2011). However, empirical studies investigating the effects of emotional support equity among older adults are limited. This lack of research presents a critical opportunity to examine whether emotional support equity serves the same salutary effect in midlife and older adults than it does in younger adults.

Emotional Support Between Partners in Midlife and Older Adulthood

Among older adults (i.e., those aged 65 and above), the literature examining the impact of emotional support exchanges on personal well-being is somewhat sparse, but the studies that do exist have mirrored the findings observed in younger populations. Providing emotional support is associated with higher levels of well-being and self-esteem (Krause, 2016), and a reduced risk of mortality (Brown et al., 2003), while receipt of emotional support from one's partner is association with poorer individual well-being outcomes, such as increased negative mood (Huo et al., 2019). This literature also indicates that older adults are more reciprocal in their exchange of support (Keyes, 2002; Ko & Lewis, 2011; Liang et al., 2001). Indeed, the socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that as individuals progress into later years, they tend to spend more time with their closer bonds, particularly with their intimate partner (Carstensen, 1995). This increase in interdependence may be what accounts for the increase in emotional support exchanges (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Walker & Luszcz, 2009).

Despite the fact that older adults are engaging in more supportive equity than younger adults, the impact of this process has been understudied in older adults. Nonetheless, theoretical perspectives suggest that the positive effect of emotional support equity should exist in older adults and may be even more powerful in this population. For example, the strength and vulnerability integration model (Charles & Luong, 2013) suggests that older individuals prioritize thoughts and interactions that lead to more positive and less negative experiences, but when negative experiences cannot be avoided, the impact may be intensified. Thus, when older adults engage in supportive equity, the impact on their well-being may be heightened, whereas a lack of reciprocity in emotional support may exacerbate negative effects. Though the impact of the supportive equity process has not been rigorously examined through daily diary data with older adults, there are some cross-sectional studies that provide suggestive evidence of its importance in this group. For example, multiple studies have classified people into groups based on their reports of the amount of support they provide to and receive from their partner in general and found that an imbalance of support is associated with worse well-being (Keyes, 2002; Liang et al., 2001).

In contrast to older adults, in which supportive equity has been studied to some extent, the role of supportive equity in the relationships of midlife couples has been overlooked. However, emotional support provision and reception between intimate partners may be particularly salient and important for midlife adults, who navigate various stressors associated with their multiple social roles, such as caregiving for older parents while parenting young adult children, which pose substantial implications for their health and well-being (Fuentecilla et al., 2020; Infurna et al., 2020). Despite the crucial role that spouses play as support providers in midlife (Antonucci et al., 2001), research on emotional support exchange between middle-aged romantic partners remains limited. Consequently, questions regarding how support exchanges between partners and supportive equity influence well-being in this demographic remain largely unaddressed. Given this gap, it is essential to extend research to this understudied group, with the expectation that findings observed in younger couples may also hold true for middle-aged adults.

The Present Study

The present study examines the association between provision and receipt of emotional support and personal well-being (operationalized as negative affect) in middle age and later life. We focus on supportive exchanges between spouses because their daily proximity provides ample opportunities for reciprocal support exchanges, making them a key support provider. The use of a daily diary design also allows for examination of the effect of supportive equity by determining days in which support provision and receipt were reciprocal between partners (Bolger et al., 2003). Our first hypothesis was that emotional support equity would be positively associated with individual well-being at the within-person level. In other words, individuals will report lower levels of negative affect on days when they experience supportive equity. Our second hypothesis was that the within-person effect of supportive equity will be moderated by age, such that the association between supportive equity and negative affect will be stronger for older adults compared with middle-aged adults.

Method

Overview and Participants

Data come from the National Study of Daily Experiences (Ryff & Almeida, 2022), which is a subproject of the Midlife in the United States Study III (MIDUS III; Ryff et al., 2019) conducted in 2013/2014. These data are available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan (ICPSR #38529). Participants ($N = 3,294$) completed a self-report survey through telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires. A random subsample of MIDUS III participants ($N = 1,236$ individuals) was later selected in 2017–2019 to participate in the National Study of Daily Experiences III, in which they completed an 8-day telephone daily diary intended to capture daily interactions and stressors. The present study selected participants who were married and participated in MIDUS III and the National Study of Daily Experiences III, resulting in 672 individuals, with 5,093 observations (days).

Measures

Negative Affect

Negative affect was measured in the daily diary study with 14 items. Respondents were asked "How much of the time today did you feel" for a list of options, such as "worthless," "restless or fidgety," "hopeless," and "upset." Response options were 0 (*none of the times*), 1 (*a little of the time*), 2 (*some of the time*), 3 (*most of the time*), and 4 (*all of the time*). The scores of the 14 items were averaged to create the scale score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of negative affect ($\alpha = .89$).

Supportive Equity

This construct is defined as the mutual exchange of emotional support between the participants and their spouse on the same day. Providing spousal emotional support is measured in the daily diary by first asking participants "Who did you give emotional support?" and "Who gave you this emotional support?" Participants were presented with a list of people (e.g., spouse, child) and could check "yes" or "no" for each role. When "spouse/partner" was selected, these variables were coded as 1; otherwise, they were coded as 0. Supportive equity is operationalized through the interaction of providing and receiving spousal emotional support: A value of 1 indicates the presence of supportive equity, while a value of 0 represents its absence.

Age

This time-invariant construct was assessed using participants' self-report from the MIDUS III.

Covariates

Marital quality (measured by two items in the MIDUS III survey), daily stressors (measured with five items in the daily diary), the day of the week the diary was completed, the day of the study the diary was completed (i.e., 1–8), household income (reported by participants in the MIDUS III survey), gender (1 = female, 0 = male), and race (1 = non-Hispanic White, 0 = non-White) were entered into the models as covariates (see Supplemental Material for details of covariates).

Analytic Approach

Multilevel modeling was used to analyze daily diary data nested within individuals. We estimated two-level linear models to consider the person level (Level 2) and the day level (Level 1) using Stata (v17; StataCorp, 2021). All analytic codes can be found on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/58eq3/; Chen et al., 2025) At Level 1, we included predictors of daily support provision, daily support receipt, and the interaction between daily support provision and receipt, which represents supportive equity. Following the recommended statistical procedures for examining within-person effects (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013), we decomposed the support variables into between-person and within-person effects. Between-person effects were modeled with person mean support variables to account for possible between-person differences. Because the support variables are binary, the person mean represents the percentage of days across the diary period that the person provided support/received support/had supportive equity. Within-person effects were modeled by subtracting the person mean from each participant's daily support variable, which represents daily individual variability in support across the study period. Finally, to examine the moderating effect of age on the association between supportive equity and negative affect, we included the three-way interaction term between Providing Support × Receiving Support (i.e., supportive equity) and age. An unstructured covariance matrix was used to allow for flexibility in modeling the correlation between errors across different time points and outcome variables. We also included race, gender, marital quality, weekday, study day, and daily stress as covariates.

Results

Descriptive characteristics of the study sample are presented in Table 1. The participants' age ranged from 43 to 86 ($M = 61.9$, $SD = 9.56$). About half (51%) of our participants were female, and the majority of participants were non-Hispanic White (89%). The mean annual income was $47,700 per person ($SD = $38,100). In general,

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables: Midlife in the United States Study III Daily Diary Study

Variable	*M*/%	*SD*	Range
Level 2 variables			
Age	61.86	9.68	43–86
Female (%)	50.74%		
Marital quality	−0.07	1.0	−4.04 to 0.91
Household income[a] (per person in $1,000)	47.7	38.1	0–300
Non-Hispanic White (%)	89.1%		
Level 1 variables			
Providing emotional support days (%)	25.2%		
Receiving emotional support days (%)	21.5%		

Note. $N = 672$ participants; total observations = 5,093.
[a] Household income is adjusted for household size.

participants reported providing emotional support to their spouse on 25% of the days and receiving emotional support from their spouse on 22% of the days during the study period.

The primary model (see Model 1, Table 2) examining the association between supportive equity and negative affect indicated that there was no significant link between experiencing supportive equity and daily negative affect ($b = -.011$, $p = .670$). However, the moderation by age model (Model 2, Table 2) indicated that there was a significant interaction between age and supportive equity ($b = -.008$, $p = .003$). To further identify the specific age range within which supportive equity has a significant moderating effect, we conducted a region of significance analysis (Preacher et al., 2006). This technique allows for the identification of specific age ranges wherein the association between supportive equity and negative affect becomes statistically significant. The analysis indicated that the association between supportive equity and negative affect was nonsignificant between the ages of 47 and 64. Below the age of 47, supportive equity was significantly associated with higher levels of negative affect for middle-aged adults. By contrast, above the age of 64, supportive equity was significantly associated with lower levels of negative affect.

The interaction plots in Figure 1 show the pattern of results for individuals at the sample mean age (62 years) and 1.5 *SD* below and above the mean (47 and 76 years) to illustrate the marked age difference in the impact of emotional support equity. For younger middle-aged adults (top graph), on days when they did not receive support from their spouse, their level of negative affect did not significantly differ depending on whether they provided support to their spouse. However, on days when they received support from their spouse, their negative affect was significantly higher when they also provided support (i.e., supportive equity) compared with days in which they only received and did not provide support. For older middle-aged adults (middle graph), levels of negative affect did not differ based on whether they had provided or received support.

For older adults (bottom graph), on days when they did not receive support from their spouse, their level of negative affect did not significantly differ depending on whether they provided support to their spouse. However, on days when they received support from their spouse, their negative affect was significantly lower when they also provided support (i.e., supportive equity) compared with days in which they only received and did not provide support.

Discussion

Social support between spouses plays a crucial role in health and well-being across the lifespan. In middle-aged adults, support from a spouse significantly contributes to work–life balance and overall life satisfaction, with higher levels of spousal support associated with reduced stress and improved emotional well-being (French et al., 2018). For older adults, strong spousal support is linked to better cognitive function, emotional resilience, and physical health outcomes, including lower rates of depression and improved cardiovascular health (Piolatto et al., 2022).

The present study examined the impact of emotional support equity between spouses on negative affect among middle-aged and older adults, using daily diary data from a national data set. A large literature has examined the impact of supportive equity on well-being among younger couples, and this literature consistently finds that the daily experience of providing and receiving support is associated with greater well-being compared with receiving support without providing support in return. The association between daily supportive equity and well-being in relationships of older adults has not been examined, but we expected to find similar pattern of results within this group. Specifically, we expected to find that there would

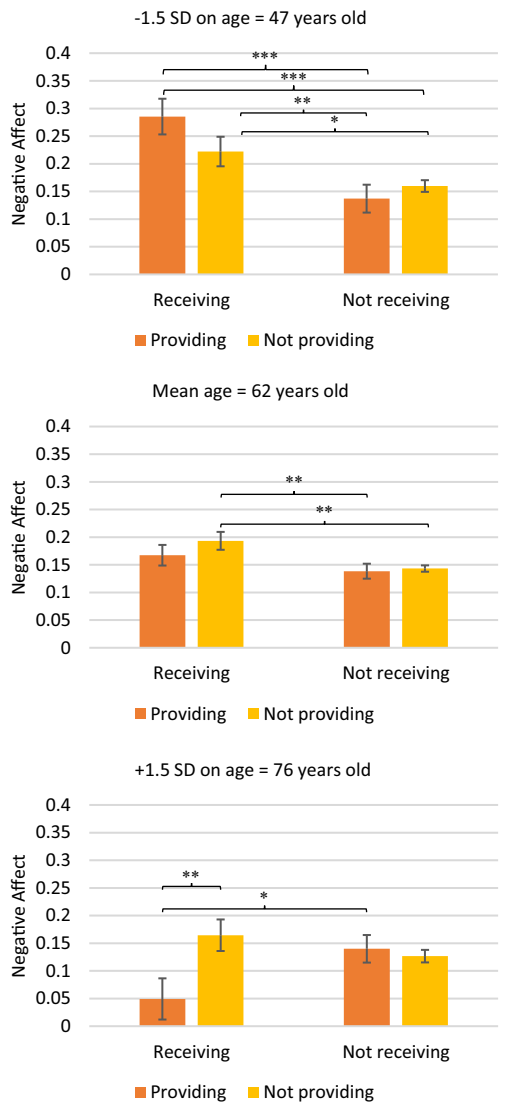
Table 2
Results of Multilevel Models Testing Association Between Supportive Equity and Negative Affect

Variable	Model 1: Primary model			Model 2: Moderation by age		
	b	*SE*	95% CI	*b*	*SE*	95% CI
WP provide support	−0.003	0.013	[−0.03, 0.02]	0.004	0.013	[−0.03, 0.02]
WP receive support	0.050**	0.016	[0.02, 0.09]	0.052***	0.016	[0.02, 0.08]
BP provide support	0.022	0.050	[−0.08, 0.12]	0.008	0.050	[−0.09, 0.11]
BP receive support	0.151*	0.059	[0.04, 0.27]	0.142*	0.059	[0.03, 0.26]
WP Provide × Receive	−0.011	0.026	[−0.06, 0.04]	−0.060	0.049	[−0.16, 0.04]
BP Provide × Receive	0.071	0.106	[−0.14, 0.28]	0.536*	0.230	[0.09, 0.99]
Household income	−0.001	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]	−0.001	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]
Age	−0.000	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]	−0.000	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]
Race	−0.006	0.018	[−0.04, 0.03]	−0.005	0.018	[−0.04, 0.03]
Female	0.000	0.011	[−0.02, 0.02]	0.002	0.011	[−0.02, 0.02]
Marital quality	−0.018**	0.006	[−0.03, −0.01]	−0.018**	0.006	[−0.03, −0.01]
WP stress	0.086***	0.004	[0.08, 0.09]	0.087***	0.004	[0.08, 0.09]
BP stress	0.157***	0.014	[0.13, 0.18]	0.158***	0.014	[0.13, 0.18]
Weekends	−0.017**	0.006	[−0.03, −0.01]	−0.026***	0.006	[−0.04, −0.02]
Study day	−0.004***	0.005	[−0.01, 0.01]	−0.008***	0.001	[−0.01, −0.01]
WP Provide Support × Age				0.001	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]
WP Receive Support × Age				−0.000	0.001	[−0.01, 0.01]
BP Provide Support × Age				0.007	0.005	[−0.01, 0.02]
BP Receive Support × Age				−0.015*	0.006	[−0.03, −0.01]
WP Provide × Receive × Age				−0.008**	0.002	[−0.01, −0.01]
BP Provide × Receive × Age				0.011	0.012	[−0.01, 0.04]

Note. $N = 672$. *B* coefficients are unstandardized. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; WP = within person; BP = between person.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Specific Contrasts of the Association Between Emotional Support and Negative Affect at Different Levels of Age



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

be a significant positive association between supportive equity and well-being across the full sample and that this would be moderated by age such that the association would be even stronger for older adults compared with middle-aged adults.

Contrary to our expectations, results indicated that supportive equity was unrelated to well-being in this study sample, which consisted of middle-aged and older adults. Instead, we found that the nature of the association between supportive equity and well-being significantly differed by age. Specifically, older adults (those aged 63 and older in this sample) had the lowest levels of negative affect on days in which they received and provided emotional support compared with days in which they did not receive support and days in which they received support without reciprocally providing support. The pattern of results for older adults matched the expected results, such that supportive equity buffered against the negative impact of receiving support, which is consistent with prior research in younger couples (Gleason et al., 2003, 2008). This finding builds on the existing literature on emotional support in older couples by indicating that supportive equity is especially beneficial for older couples, above and beyond the positive impacts of providing/receiving support, which have already been documented. Given that older couples engage in more support exchanges than younger couples (Ko & Lewis, 2011), this underscores the major impact spouses have as primary sources of support for each other in older age.

For middle-aged participants in their 40s, the results told a different story, as the pattern of results was the opposite of what was expected. Receiving support was associated with higher levels of negative affect compared with days on which support was not received, and providing support on these days (i.e., supportive equity) resulted in even higher levels of negative affect. Additionally, supportive equity was not significantly associated with negative affect for individuals in their late 40s to early 60s, where receipt of support was associated with higher levels of negative affect, but whether or not they also provided support on that day (i.e., supportive equity) did not have any impact on the level of negative affect.

Overall, the results for middle-aged individuals were in direct contrast to the large existing literature on supportive equity in younger adults. Given the scarcity of research and theories on couple relationships in middle age, it is unclear why emotional support equity was not beneficial, and in some cases detrimental, for this age group. However, the small but growing literature on midlife development indicates that middle-aged adults juggle a much larger constellation of simultaneous roles and demands on their time compared with younger and older adults (Infurna et al., 2020). Thus, compared with younger and older couples, middle-aged individuals may be so strapped for time and energy that providing support to their spouse on top of all of their other responsibilities may have a negative, rather than salutary, impact on their mood. Interestingly, the age at which supportive equity shifted to become positive (around 63 years of age) coincides with the transition from midlife to old age, suggesting that middle age is a distinct developmental period with unique implications for the couple relationship.

Despite the strengths of this study, which include the use of a daily diary design in a large sample of middle-aged and older married individuals, who have historically been underrepresented in the study of relationship processes, there are also important limitations that must be acknowledged. Although we used data from a national data set, study participants consisted of healthy individuals who were predominantly non-Hispanic White. In addition to the age gradient identified in this study, support processes may also vary across race/ethnicity and culture, which also remain underrepresented in the study of relationship processes. This important contextual factor should be examined in future studies of emotional support. In addition, health status is an important consideration for older couples, who often find themselves transitioning into the role of caregiver. The pattern of results found for older adults may be different in a sample of couples who are more characterized by health challenges and caretaking duties.

Additionally, all participants in the present study were married; thus, results may not be generalizable to less established relationships, or nonmarried but otherwise similar partnerships, including cohabitating couples. Americans are increasingly delaying their age

at marriage, with nearly 20% of women having never been married in their early 40s (Raley et al., 2015). Similarly, more older adults than ever are spending time single and dating (Rauer et al., 2024). Thus, there are a number of relationship experiences that occur in middle age that are not captured in this data, including those who are in new relationships and those who are dating after a divorce and juggling blended families. Clearly, the study of romantic relationships in middle age and older adulthood is ripe for increased attention. Finally, daily diaries cannot establish directionality or causality, so future research should utilize other methodologies to further develop our theoretical understanding of the role of support in mid and late life.

Although these sample characteristics limit the generalizability of our results to more diverse couples, a benefit of this sample is that it mirrors the demographics of samples of younger adults used to study support processes, which allows us to have more confidence that age is responsible for the differential pattern of results that we observed rather than some other factor. Nevertheless, we are unable to directly test the differences between younger adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults within this sample because we did not have any participants younger than age 43. A broader age range would allow us to clarify at which point

In sum, the present study replicates the buffering effect of emotional support equity in older adults, indicating that this is an important way that older couples can receive support in a manner that is beneficial for their well-being. Additionally, this study found that supportive equity did not have a buffering effect in middle-aged adults, indicating that support processes may be more complex to manage for middle-aged couples. This highlights the need for relationship science to pay more attention to middle-aged couples to understand the unique challenges faced during this life period.

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