

Resilience, Social Support, and Meaning in Life among Koreans During Midlife

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Abstract

Background: To investigate the associations between resilience, social support, and meaning in life during midlife and the factors related to meaning in life.

Methods: In this cross-sectional study conducted from May 22 to June 21, 2019, 159 South Koreans aged 40–64 years were surveyed about resilience, social support, meaning in life, and personal characteristics. Descriptive statistics, t-tests, analysis of variance, bivariate Pearson's correlations, and multiple regression analyses were performed.

Conclusion: The difference in resilience according to general characteristics showed significant differences in age, educational attainment, religious affiliation, and health status. Differences in social support were significantly correlated to gender, social class, and health status. Meaning in life varied significantly according to differences in religious affiliation, social class, and health status. Resilience, social support, and meaning in life were significantly correlated. In the multiple regression model, resilience, social support, and self-rated health status significantly influenced meaning in life. Strengthening resilience and social support during midlife might increase meaning in life, in turn, positively influencing the quality of life in old age.

Keywords: *meaning in life, middle adulthood, midlife, resilience, social support*

Introduction

Middle adulthood (midlife), a developmental stage between young adulthood and old age, has been increasingly receiving scholarly attention because of increased life expectancy owing to the medical advances¹. This period of the life course is work- and family-oriented². Middle-aged individuals in South Korea are responsible for both their dependent children and parents, and therefore, must be financially stable and

have adequate healthcare to ensure the fulfillment of their familial obligations¹. Lifespan extension is characteristic of aging societies, and health during midlife should be in focus to help ensure health and wellbeing during old age³. More importantly, midlife is a period when one's life thus far is given meaning⁴.

In some rapidly changing societies, people tend to experience decreased value of life and feel inner emptiness, and some studies have found that considering one's life to be meaningful is particularly important for health during midlife^{5,6}. Meaning in life is related to a personal assessment of the purpose of life and has been found to significantly influence mental health and wellbeing⁷ because it orients people toward actively living and urges them to accomplish worthwhile things⁸.

Meaning in life develops from personal experiences that support (or do not support) a sense of purpose². The

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sense that one's life has meaning helps people interpret their experiences positively, which is then reinforced by positive emotions⁹. Pursuing meaning in life might increase a person's sense of self-worth, thereby buffering the effects of adversity by supporting positive responses and stability⁸. In addition, meaning in life might increase life satisfaction, as people with relatively more meaning in life are more satisfied, positive, and open-minded⁸. Moreover, people who believed their lives were meaningful adapted better with less negativity and reported lower levels of depression and anxiety than those with less meaning in life¹⁰.

The developmental tasks of midlife include finding a sense of meaning in life and reconstructing personal identity¹¹. Since meaning in life is vital to the psychological and spiritual aspects of developmental tasks, people should prioritize its pursuit in midlife¹². Moreover, given that establishing meaning in life during midlife is critical for achieving successful and happy aging, this should be a period of growth with balance; thus, studying midlife from an integrative perspective is necessary¹.

Resilience is defined as the ability to successfully deal with and withstand stress or adversity^{13,14}. It improves individuals' adaptive capacities by transforming negative emotions into positive emotions¹⁵. Resilience is an innate trait involving optimism, which creates happiness¹⁵, and everyone has some level of resilience with which they cope and grow through stressful and adverse experiences¹⁶. Previous research has found that resilience is positively correlated with optimism¹⁷, and meaning in life¹⁸.

Social support is one of the most effective ways to cope with stressful situations¹⁹. Regardless of maladjustment problems, social support might prevent and resolve psychological or social challenges^{19, 20}. As midlife is a significant transitional period, people might feel highly stressed or experience psychological crises¹. Despite this being a period of increased social activities, middle-aged people perceive that they are less socially supported and are less aware of social support because

they think they have few resources to help in a crisis²¹. Social relationships might help people find meaning in life and live healthy lives²². Thus, social support is a significant variable that affects one's meaning in life during midlife⁴.

Although previous studies found that resilience and social support were related to optimism and meaning in life, the associations between these variables during midlife are poorly understood. It is necessary to clarify the roles of resilience and social support as correlates of meaning in life during midlife to promote healthy and successful aging. Accordingly, this study investigated the associations between resilience, social support, and meaning in life during midlife in a sample of South Koreans. The findings could be used as a reference for developing national-level studies aimed at improving quality of life throughout the life course.

Materials and Method

Design: This study employed a cross-sectional design.

Participants and data collection: Convenience sampling was employed to recruit people known to the researchers through avenues such as social gatherings and town meetings. The study procedure was explained to potential participants. They were assured of the confidentiality of their data and that they could withdraw at will at any time. Individuals who indicated that they understood this information and provided written informed consent were included in the study. The Institutional Review Board of S University (SMUIRB; AP-2019-001) approved the study. The inclusion criteria for participants were that they had to be age 40–64 years and Korean. Finally, 159 participants were included. The desired sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1.9.2 with the following input parameters: effect size = .15, significance level of $p = .05$, power = .90, and number of predictors = 11. The minimum sample size was identified as 152. A researcher either mailed the questionnaires to a representative or handed them over during a meeting; subsequently, the representative distributed them and collected the completed versions.

The collected questionnaires were either returned in person or via mail. The data were collected between May 22 and June 21, 2019.

Measurement: Meaning in life was measured using the Korean version of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire²³; the translation and validation were undertaken by Won et al.⁷. The 10 items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = absolutely untrue and 7 = absolutely true. Higher scores indicated more meaning in life, and the tool's internal reliability as demonstrated by Cronbach's alpha was .93.

Resilience was measured using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale¹³. The 25 items were scored on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all true and 5 = true most of the time. Higher scores indicated more resilience. The Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Social support was measured using the Perceived Social Support Scale²⁴. The 12 items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree. Higher scores indicated more perceived social support, and Cronbach's alpha was .93.

Statistical Analysis

All analyses were performed using SPSS/WIN 21.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were generated. Then, independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance tests were used to assess the differences in resilience, social support, and meaning in life by the participants' characteristics, and Scheffe's tests were performed for the post hoc analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to assess the bivariate correlations among the key variables, and a multiple correlation regression analysis was performed to estimate the effects of resilience and social support on meaning in life.

Results and Discussion

General characteristics of the subjects: As shown in Table 1, there were slightly more females (54.1%) than males, and most respondents were aged 40–59. Approximately 7% were not married, 59.1% had an educational level of college or higher, 59.7% did not have any religious affiliation, 90.6% were employed, and 83% considered themselves middle class. Finally, less than 6% had poor health status.

Table 1. General characteristics of the subjects (N = 159)

Variable	Category	N(%) or M±SD
Gender	Male	73(45.9)
	Female	86(54.1)
Age	40–49	72(45.3)
	50–59	72(45.3)
	60–64	15(9.4)
	Mean	50.58±5.75
Marital status	Unmarried	11(6.9)
	Married	148(93.1)
Educational attainment	≤High school	65(40.9)
	College	76(47.8)
	≥Graduate school	18(11.3)

Cont... Table 1. General characteristics of the subjects (N = 159)

Religious affiliation	No	95(59.7)
	Yes	64(40.3)
Employment	Yes	144(90.6)
	No	15(9.4)
Economic status	Upper	11(6.9)
	Middle	132(83.0)
	Lower	16(10.1)
Health status	Good	55(34.6)
	Moderate	95(59.7)
	Poor	9(5.7)

Degree of resilience, social support, and meaning in life: As shown in Table 2, the mean resilience score was 3.69 ± 0.45 on a five-point scale, and those for social support and meaning in life were 5.72 ± 0.85 and 5.43 ± 0.99 , respectively, on a seven-point scale.

Table 2. Degree of resilience, social support, and meaning in life (N=159)

Variable	M±SD	Range
Resilience	3.69±0.45	2.60-4.92
Social support	5.72±0.85	2.17-7.00
Meaning in life	5.43±0.99	2.00-7.00

Differences in resilience, social support, meaning in life depending on general characteristics: As shown in Table 3, significant differences in resilience were found for age ($F=3.70$, $p=.027$), education attainment ($F=3.41$, $p=.036$), religious affiliation ($t=-2.10$, $p=.037$), and health status ($F=12.06$, $p<.001$). Participants aged 50–59 had higher mean resilience than those aged 40–49, and those with a graduate education or higher had higher resilience scores than those with high school or less education. Those with a religious affiliation had higher mean resilience than those without. Lastly, the better the health of the group, the higher the resilience. These results support a previous study that found higher resilience among Christians than among non-religious people²⁵, and health seemed positively correlated with resilience²⁶. Regarding resilience in middle-aged adults, studies making gender-stratified comparisons are scarce

and not comparable to the present study, and the lack of a gender difference in the present study should be investigated further using a larger sample of middle-aged South Koreans.

Significant differences in social support were found for gender ($t=-3.41$, $p=.001$), economic status ($F=10.76$, $p<.001$), and health status ($F=5.31$, $p=.006$). The mean social support score for women was significantly higher than for men. This may be because women's social and economic activities increase in middle age²⁷, and as interpersonal relations expand, they perceive higher social support. Furthermore, social support was higher in the upper or middle economic group, and they had better health. These results are consistent with the results of a previous study²¹, wherein social support was higher when one was in a higher economic group and

had a better state of health. During midlife, one’s close relationship with family, work and society, and social roles are important. Such social and environmental conditions are likely to result in conflicts²¹, emphasizing the need to secure resources to help overcome crises.

Significant differences in meaning in life were found for religious affiliation ($t=-2.21$, $p=.028$), economic status ($F=7.11$, $p=.001$), and health status ($F=15.92$, $p<.001$). Those with a religious affiliation had higher mean meaning in life than those without. The meaning in life was higher in the upper or middle economic groups,

and they had better health. This supports previous research that found that religion promoted meaning in life and helped individuals lead healthier lives²⁸, and studies that found that economic status and health were positively correlated with meaning in life⁴. As familial and financial responsibilities tend to be stressful during midlife, meaning in life might decrease during this period. In the present study, those who belonged to a low economic status had less meaning in life; therefore, it is important to help them successfully handle challenging situations⁵.

Table 3. Differences in resilience, social support, and meaning in life depending on the general characteristics of the subjects (N=159)

Variable	Category	Resilience		Social support		Meaning in life	
		M±SD	t/F(p)	M±SD	t/F(p)	M±SD	t/F(p)
Gender	Male	3.70±0.48	0.36	5.47±0.95	-3.41	5.41±1.09	-0.28
	Female	3.68±0.42	(.721)	5.92±0.70	(.001)	5.46±0.90	(.778)
Age	40–49a	3.58±0.39	3.70	5.70±0.81	0.05	5.29±1.00	1.45
	50–59b	3.78±0.47	(.027)	5.74±0.90	(.954)	5.56±1.02	(.238)
	60–64c	3.74±0.37	(a<b)	5.68±0.86		5.54±0.69	
Marital status	Unmarried	3.69±0.57	-0.01	5.76±0.94	0.16	5.12±0.98	-1.11
	Married	3.69±0.44	(.998)	5.71±0.85	(.876)	5.46±0.99	(.270)
Educational attainment	≤High schoola	3.62±0.46	3.41	5.61±0.89	2.26	5.25±1.09	2.62
	Collegeb	3.69±0.44	(.036)	5.73±0.85	(.108)	5.51±0.93	(.076)
	≥Graduate school c	3.93±0.35	(a<c)	6.08±0.64		5.79±0.69	
Religious affiliation	No	3.63±0.43	-2.10	5.63±0.93	-1.73	5.30±0.97	-2.21
	Yes	3.78±0.46	(.037)	5.85±0.71	(.086)	5.65±0.99	(.028)
Employment	Yes	3.71±0.45	1.65	5.71±0.87	-0.52	5.46±1.00	0.92
	No	3.51±0.33	(.100)	5.83±0.74	(.604)	5.21±0.91	(.360)
Economic status	Upper a	3.73±0.46	2.73	5.83±0.85	10.76	5.62±1.06	7.11
	Middle b	3.71±0.44	(.068)	5.82±0.80	(<.001)	5.52±0.90	(.001)
	Lower c	3.44±0.49		4.83±0.82	(a,b>c)	4.59±1.26	(a,b>c)
Health status	Good a	3.86±0.48	12.06	5.99±0.72	5.31	5.87±0.79	15.92
	Moderate b	3.63±0.37	(<.001)	5.61±0.86	(.006)	5.30±0.94	(<.001)
	Poor c	3.18±0.47	(a>b>c)	5.21±1.16	(a>b>c)	4.19±1.23	(a>b>c)

Correlation among resilience, social support, and meaning in life: Table 4 shows that the three variables were moderately correlated. These results support previous studies reporting that the social support

perceived by people with high resilience increased as they actively and positively overcame difficult situations²⁶.

Table 4. Correlation among resilience, social support, and meaning in life(N =159)

Variable	Resilience r(p)	Social support r(p)	Meaning in life r(p)
Resilience	1		
Social support	.48(<.001)	1	
Meaning in life	.63(<.001)	.51(<.001)	1

Factors that influenced the participants’ meaning in life: As per the preliminary analyses, there were significant differences in meaning in life by religious affiliation, economic status, and health status (Table 3), and these three variables were converted into dummy variables and tested along with resilience and social support in the multiple regression analysis. Table 5 presents the results, which indicated that the model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), explaining about 45.4% of the variance in meaning in life. The Durbin–Watson test was performed to determine the independence of the residuals. The result was 2.17, indicating no correlations. The tolerance of 0.72–0.97 and variance inflation factor of 1.03–1.38 indicated no multicollinearity problems.

The variable with the strongest influence on meaning in life was resilience($\beta=.46, p<.001$), followed by social support ($\beta=.25, p<.001$) and health status ($\beta=.13, p=.041$). These results support previous studies reporting that resilience significantly predicted the sense of a meaningful life²⁹, and social support and meaning in life were positively correlated^{4,30}.

Table 5. Factors that influenced the participants’ meaning in life (N=159)

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	-0.14	0.53		-0.26	.798
Religious affiliation	0.12	0.12	0.06	0.97	.332
Economic status	0.03	0.23	0.01	0.12	.903
Health status	0.27	0.13	0.13	2.06	.041
Resilience	1.02	0.15	0.46	6.71	<.001
Social support	0.29	0.08	0.25	3.69	<.001
$R^2=0.47, \text{ Adjusted } R^2=0.45, F=27.33, p<.001^*$					

Conclusion

This study's results provide a basis for the formulation of strategies to strengthen meaning in life during midlife. To strengthen social support and resilience, it is necessary to build resources customized to the surroundings and utilize them in a healthy way. To promote health—a factor influencing the meaning of life—daily exercise and healthy lifestyle practices are necessary.

Despite some significant findings, this study has limitations that cannot be overlooked. Owing to the small sample size and use of convenience sampling, the results are not generalizable to all middle-aged South Koreans. Future studies should examine the relationships between resilience, social support, and meaning in life using population data.

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