

## Middle–Aged Urban Thai Women’s Management of Stress and Anger

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of urban Thai women in managing stress and anger during middle age. Utilizing Heideggerian phenomenology and feminist theory, data were gathered through interview on middle-aged, urban, Thai women regarding how they managed stress and anger. Data were analyzed using Benner’s method for content analysis.

The findings revealed the women experienced stress and anger in response to the pressures they encountered during everyday life. The process of their stress and anger management included five themes: keeping silent; forgiving; seeking spirituality; changing one’s thinking process; and, shifting interest. The stress and anger the women experienced appeared to contribute to their health problems. However, the manner in which they used the five stages of the identified stress and anger management process appeared to promote their health and happiness. These findings could prove helpful to nurses as they work with middle-aged urban Thai women who are dealing with their daily stress and anger issues.

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**Key words:** Urban Thai women; Stress and anger management; Middle-age

### Background and Significance

Many Thais tend to experience midlife, a stage of human development between 40 and 65 years of age, with some difficulty.<sup>1</sup> Middle-aged women often face positive and negative effects of such factors as: place of residence, lifestyle, physical environment, culture, beliefs, social values and biological changes.<sup>2</sup> When living in a large urban area, such as Bangkok, which has a population of approximately 10 million people, the lives of middle-aged women can become complicated, due to the city being a center of commerce, finance, education, politics, transportation, communication,

art, culture and tourism.<sup>3</sup> While some middle-aged women are able to adjust their lifestyle to be congruent with a diverse urban environment, others find their lives to be stressful and difficult to manage, especially when dealing with work conflicts, family problems, marital issues, financial problems, career changes, early retirement, housing problems, having an adolescent child at home, empty nest syndrome, death of a significant other or lack of social support.<sup>4–8</sup>

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In addition, middle-aged women going through menopause often experience emotional changes, such as stress and anger secondary to hormonal imbalances.<sup>9</sup> Although middle-aged women may experience stress and anger in their everyday lives, the severity of these two emotions tends to be intensified when dealing with the competitive environment of a large urban city.<sup>10</sup>

Stress and anger have been found to affect women's cognitive function, body, mind and spirit, including their ability to perceive, think, judge, decide and learn.<sup>11</sup> In addition, those experiencing stress and anger may experience headache, abdominal pain, hypertension and/or heart disease.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it often is challenging for menopausal women to achieve balance in their lives.<sup>11,12</sup>

Since limited research has been conducted regarding the lived experiences of middle-aged urban Thai women's stress and coping experiences, which are compounded by societal expectations, the female social role, role overload and patriarchy,<sup>13-15</sup> and vulnerability to psychological changes, this study sought to determine how these women manage the stress and anger they experience. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of middle-aged urban Thai women in managing stress and anger.

## **Method**

**Design:** An integrated phenomenological and feminist approach was employed in this study. Heideggerian phenomenology, as described by Benner,<sup>16</sup> was used to describe middle-aged urban women's experiences in managing stress and anger by listening to and interpreting their lived experiences. A feminist approach was used in establishing relationships and encouraging the women to share their experiences.<sup>17,18</sup>

**Ethical Consideration:** The study was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the researcher's

academic institution. All participants were informed about: the nature of the study; what involvement in the study entailed; voluntary participation; confidentiality and anonymity issues; and, the right to withdraw from the study, at anytime, without repercussions. All women consenting to take part in the study were asked to sign a consent form.

**Sampling Process and Sample:** A sample of 20 urban middle-aged Thai women was obtained by: a) placing printed flyers on the boards of an open market, health organization, governmental organization and private organization, in Bangkok; and, b) using the snowball technique. All 20 women approached met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. None of those selected dropped out during the study. Criteria for inclusion consisted of being a Thai woman who: was 45-55 years of age; was or had been married; was a mother of at least one child; lived in Bangkok more than one year; self-reported having good physical and mental health; and, was willing to participate in this study.

The participants: ranged from 44 to 54 years of age (mean = 49.20 years); had 1 to 5 (mean = 2.05) children who ranged in age from 5 to 25 years (mean = 14.92); and, lived in Bangkok 10 to 54 (mean = 31.4) years. Predominantly, the subjects were Buddhists (n = 18; 90 %) and had an undergraduate degree (n = 13; 65%). Nineteen (95%) of the women were married and one was divorced (5%). All of the women worked full-time, with 55% (n = 11) having a non-professional job and 45 % (n = 9) having a non-professional job.

**Data Collection:** The researcher conducted two, in-depth, interviews with each participant which were held in either the participant's home or office, or in the researcher's office. The first interview, which took 2 to 3 hours to complete, consisted of six open-ended questions to solicit general information regarding each woman's experience in managing stress and anger, and eight probing questions to solicit additional information regarding

how each participant dealt with stress and anger. Examples of the open-ended questions were: “What is your experience in managing stress and anger during in this period of your life?”; and, “Please tell me your experience in managing stress and anger.” Examples of the probing questions were: “Please tell me more about your anger and stress management;” “Please give me some examples;” “What do you do next;” and, “What else do you do?”

The second interview was conducted 4 weeks after the first interview. The data obtained from each participant’s first interview was shared with her so she could verify, add or delete her original information. The second interview also was conducted in either the participants’ homes or offices, and lasted 2 to 3 hours. As with the first interview, the PI asked the same open-ended and probing questions to verify data obtained from the first interview and to gather additional information not obtained during the first interview. Each participant consented to having her interviews tape-recorded. All of the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, by the researcher, after each interview.

**Data Analysis:** Data were analyzed using Benner’s method for content analysis.<sup>16</sup> Each interview was transcribed verbatim from the tape-recordings and checked for completeness. Data reduction then was performed to identify and code the information. Each transcript was compared and contrasted across cases. Data determined to contain the same meanings were grouped together. Themes that emerged were extracted.

**Trustworthiness:** In accord with the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba,<sup>19</sup> four criteria of trustworthiness were employed. Credibility was accomplished through prolonged engagement with the participants, including the two interviews, member-checking and peer-debriefing. Member checking, done during the second interview, involved verifying the data obtained during the first interview

by providing each participant an opportunity to correct data that might have been misinterpreted by the researcher. Peer debriefing, carried out after all data analyses were completed, was done for the purpose of preventing biases on the part of the researcher. It involved discussions with two experts in qualitative design regarding the analysis process, as well as the accuracy of the data interpretations. Discussions with the two experts regarding accuracy of the data interpretations took place until consensus occurred. With respect to transferability, no claim could be made that the participants’ experiences were the same as others during this period. However, the study can be replicated. In terms of dependability, all of the interviews were tape-recorded to allow the researcher to revisit the data, so as to increase the reliability of the interpretation of the data obtained in discerning the participants’ similar responses to the same questions. Conformability, like credibility, was accomplished via peer-debriefing.

## Results

Despite their diversity of backgrounds, the participants reflected a commonality regarding their experiences in managing stress and anger. Five themes emerged from the data: “keeping silent;” “forgiving;” “seeking spirituality;” “changing one’s thinking process;” and, “shifting interests.”

### Theme 1: Keeping silent

Silencing was a common method employed by the majority of the women. They said using the silent treatment would “help furious circumstances cool down.” They used two mechanisms to keep silent.

1.1 *Staying calm, waiting and considering what to do next.* The vast majority of participants indicated when they became stressed and angry, they kept quiet to control the situation and their

emotions. Some felt they should have used better self-control, so as to determine the best way to manage the immediate situation, as well as situations in the future. Examples of comments, from two of the women, were:

*"When I am enraged, I try to find an opportunity to remove myself from others. I go to a place where there is no one so that I can think about what happened and what made me angry. If I could not escape from the situation, I would be silent. I would not say anything because I didn't want that particular conflict to happen again."*

*"After having a quarrel with my friend, I was angry. I didn't want to talk with anybody at home. I stayed in my room and started crying to let out my anger."*

1.2 Engaging in self-reflection while keeping quiet. The participants said they had to have consciousness when stressed and angry with somebody and, thus, tended to concentrate on the causes of their stress and anger. For many of the women, self-reflection was a way to examine their emotions and how to improve themselves. As two of the women stated:

*"I think often about the times I am stressed and angry. In a quiet corner of my office area, I try to think back on the situations that make me angry. Did I do anything wrong that led others to not accept my ideas? Some found fault with my work. I repeatedly thought about what mistakes were made in my work. Finally, I tried to improve my work so that it would fit with others' ideas."*

*"My neighbors gossiped about my son and referred to him as a 'bad boy.' I got mad! After I looked back at myself, I accepted the fact that I was not a good mom. I could not teach him to be a 'good boy.' I thought that I had to improve myself as a mother."*

## **Theme 2: Forgiving**

Forgiving was an act of compassion regarding a situation or someone who made the women stressed and angry. The outcome was no longer being controlled by the stress or anger. Two ways of forgiving were expressed by the women.

2.1 Understanding what others do that lead to stress and anger. Forgiving demonstrated the way many of the women tried to understand others and be empathetic towards those who made them stressed and angry. Without forgiveness, their lives could not be pleasant and they constantly would be afflicted with feelings of suffering.

*"I forgave the ones who made me angry. I understood them because in our society there is competition. They might not want me to do things that look better than what they did. I was angry with them at that time and for a few days. Then I thought about why I had to hold that suffering in my mind. It's nonsense! I had to use my energy to do other things."*

*"I think that forgiving others when they make me stressed is the best way to do things. If I do not forgive them, I will have stress forever. Stress will be stuck in my mind. My life will be unhappy."*

2.2 Letting go of things that make one stressed and angry. Forgiving also involved them letting go of things that triggered or brought about their stress and anger. Several indicated they sometimes could not control or change the things that triggered their stress and anger. However, they wanted the things that triggered their stress and anger to go away. Some of the women were able to 'let go' by not paying attention to the situation that led to the stress and anger, and coming to terms with the fact stress and anger were part of their lives. They felt their stress and anger would disappear if they did not focus on either one. As two women stated:

*“I felt anger every time my daughter would put on her school uniform that had a shirt that was too tight and a skirt that was too short. I thought that it was impolite to go to school dressed that way. Now I realize that this manner of dress is a current fashion in the adolescent group. I had to ‘let it go’ and understand why my daughter would dress that way.”*

*“At work, I am so stressed when someone criticizes my work if it is not done the way he/she thinks it should be done. But, I follow the rules of the institution. I just “let it go.” I know that I do my best.”*

### **Theme 3: Seeking spirituality**

Seeking spirituality was another theme that nearly all of the women mentioned. Since they were Buddhist, they said they held onto Buddhist principles to guide their lives. Having Buddhist practices led them to have psychological wisdom and to release their stress and anger. The religious practices the majority of the women practiced consisted of the following three activities:

3.1 *Praying for mind serenity.* Some of the women said when they were stressed and angry they would go to a room in the house or the corner of the house that had Buddha images and start praying. They stated their mind focused on Buddhist doctrine and, as a result, they felt peaceful. Two women said:

*“When I am angry, I pray for 1- 2 hours in front of the Buddha image. I begin to feel calm and merciful. It works very well. My anger is reduced after praying.”*

*“When I feel stressed, what I have to do is pray. During my prayers, I can let go of the problem that is stressing me and begin to*

*think about good things. Those good things will happen to me in the future.”*

3.2 *Doing meditation to attain mental peace of mind and well-being.* Engaging in Buddhist meditation was a common approach the women employed to reduce their anger. Most of them stated they were taught how to do meditation from their school teachers, parents and monks. They indicated, so they could return to normal lives, Buddhist meditation helped them to call back their consciousness, think in a positive manner and make their minds calm. As two women stated:

*“When I was stressed, as a result of family problems, I sometimes got angry. I feel, during my life, I have had to face many problems. I feel stoic regarding my life. My friend told me to do meditation. After doing meditation, I felt my mind was calm. I slept well and had no bad dreams.”*

*“While doing meditation, my mind focused on the Buddha’s face. I thought about the truth. What would happen? I could not stop something from happening. If I felt stress or anger, regarding situations that made my life unpleasant, it was my perception of those situations. However, I began to see my problems as challenges that needed to be solved.”*

However, for a few of the women, doing meditation was not sufficiently effective for dealing with their stress or anger. As one woman indicated:

*“While doing meditation, my heart is furious and my body is hot. While my eyes are closed, I think of many things, particularly things that induce my anger. My mind is not calm. I can’t get rid of the anger in my heart...”*

3.3 *Making merit.* To make their minds calm, many of the participants made merit, which involved doing good things for others. There were a

number of ways the women made merit: putting food offerings, each morning, into Buddhist monks' bowls; donating money to Thai temples, orphanages or homes for the elderly; and, setting birds and fish free. Setting birds and fish free was done because the women believed birds and fish could carry the stress and anger out of their bodies and minds. Some examples of making merit were described as follows:

*"I thought making merit was a way to clean my mind so that it was pure. When I was stressed and angry, my mind was gloomy. Offering food to monks made my mind peaceful. I also set fish free in the river. The bad things in my mind would go with the fish into the river"*

*"...giving was a way of making merit. When I felt stressed from my work, I convinced my family to donate food and money to the Bangkae Elderly Home. Giving things and love to others indicated my intention to do good things. I felt happy and the stress in my mind was relieved."*

#### **Theme 4: Changing one's thinking process**

Changing one's thinking process meant the women adjusted their thoughts from being negative to being positive. Some women stated, by altering their thinking, they had the power to turn things around. There were three ways the women changed their thinking processes, including:

##### **4.1 *Ceasing to compare one's self to others.***

Many of the women stated they tried to stop comparing themselves to others, because to compare themselves to others was judging. The women thought nobody knows the internal realities of others and each person is unique. Thus, they should accept themselves as they are. With this thought, the women felt happier and their stress and anger faded away. Some examples were:

*"Previously, I tried to compare myself to others. When I compared myself to others at work, I felt stressed about the outcomes of my performance. Now I know I have to compare myself only to myself, not to others. I have to improve my work."*

*"I felt anger when I compared myself to my friend. My family is not rich. My house is too small and my car is not luxurious. Is it right for me to compare what I have to what others have? I suddenly realized I should be happy with the things I have. Because we all are from different backgrounds, there is no reason to compare ourselves to others."*

**4.2 *Engaging in positive thinking.*** During middle-age, most of the women believed they had engaged in experiences that made them able to deal with unpleasant circumstances. They stated the world has two sides, 'black and white.' When getting angry, the participants felt they were seeing the world in black, not in white. They believed if they examining the reasons for their anger (i.e. misunderstandings or miscommunications) and engaged in positive thinking, they would be able to find good things from bad situations. As several women stated:

*"I had been taught I should have positive thinking. When someone critiques me, I should not become angry or afraid of their criticism. I have to think about the fact they might help me see the points I might not have considered, as well as give me good suggestion for improvement."*

*"Because we see the world in 'black and white', stress and anger can be decreased if we use 'white' thinking. Things in the world are not entirely good or bad. If I focus on the bad side of a situation, instead of the good*

*side, I will lose a valuable learning opportunity. I should look on the bright side and think about things turning out fine.”*

## Theme 5: Shifting interests

Shifting interests referred to moving one’s focus from stress and anger to things that made the women feel better. To accomplish this shift in thoughts, the women tended to engage in the following three activities:

5.1 *Doing enjoyable activities.* Many of the participants said they moved their focus from stress and anger to engagement in enjoyable activities. For example, they would eat-out and go shopping, exercise or sleep. Eating-out and shopping were found to be enjoyable experiences, while engaging in exercise served as a distraction because the women had to focus on their breathing while exercising. Sleeping served as a natural way of recharging, re-energizing and relaxing. Statements describing the women’s experiences included:

*“When I am stressed, I go to the shopping center. I go to my favorite restaurant and order my favorite food. The food is so good I forget to focus on my problems.”*

*“I exercise when I am angry with someone. I put on my earphones and listen to my favorite songs while running or ridding my bicycle. I stop thinking about the problems that make me angry.”*

*“I think sleeping or having a nap for 1-2 hours is the best way to reduce my stress and anger. While napping or sleeping, I can’t focus on my feelings of stress or anger. When I wake up, I feel better. I have recharged myself and can now focus on other things.”*

### 5.2 *Talking with others about concerns.*

Talking with others was another way the women dealt with the problems that led to their stress and anger. The women tended to call a friend or family member and ask them to just listen to what they had to say. Sharing thoughts and bad feelings, with others, allowed the participants an opportunity to purge angry thoughts from their minds. They did not want to share personal and/or family problems with individuals they felt they could not trust. The women believed personal problems should be solved within the family and that it was not appropriate to let others know about family issues. Examples of them using this method to deal with their stress and anger were:

*“I call my best friend to complain about the amount of responsibility I have at work. My co-workers and boss take me for granted. They don’t understand that I can’t finish some tasks within one day.... After blowing off steam, I feel much better.”*

*“I don’t want my son to go out with friends every weekend. I have sternly talked to him, but he doesn’t believe me. I get mad. I release my anger by talking to my husband.”*

5.3 *Thinking about pleasant and peaceful experiences.* When experiencing stress and anger, most of the women said they tried to reflect on past pleasant experiences. This helped them realize things were not as bad as others said they were. Looking at photographs of when they received awards or when they were with their entire family was helpful. This was demonstrated by the women’s statements, including:

*“When I feel stressed or angry, I create my happiness by thinking about past good memories. When I recall good experiences or impressive life events, I realize I am of value. I sometimes read my diary, look at pictures from my photo albums and read old letters.*

*Memories of good past events help reduce my anger. I can smile again."*

*"When I am angry with someone, I look at the award I got. I thought that I am not so bad. At least, I got the award from the organization. Whoever did not like me does not matter. I am still OK."*

## **Discussion**

During middle-age, many women are faced with factors that lead to stress and anger, including: changes in menstrual patterns, leading to hormonal imbalance; employment; role overload; role burden; physical illness; family relationships; work; financial problems; lack of support; and, a negative view of aging.<sup>20, 21</sup> The middle-aged women, in this study, demonstrated a variety of ways to reduce or eliminate the presence of their stress and anger. The findings showed the women managed their stress and anger by: "keeping silent;" "forgiving;" "seeking spirituality;" "changing one's thinking process;" and "shifting interests."

The first theme identified in the study was "keeping silent," which was found to be consistent with prior research. The literature suggests that when there is a conflict that makes people angry, the optimal way to contend with anger is to keep quiet, because keeping quiet can help reduce the severity of the angry feelings.<sup>22</sup> It appeared "keeping silent" when dealing with stress and anger was used a great deal by the women in this study. By staying calm, waiting, considering what to do next and having self-reflection, while keeping quiet, the women were able to control their anger and contend with the unpleasant feeling brought on by the situations that stressed them.

Regarding the results of "forgiveness," the second theme identified in the study, the participants found understanding what others do that causes their

stress and anger, and letting go of things that lead to their stress and angry, were effective approaches to use as they contended with how they felt. Prior studies support these findings. Bhikkhu<sup>23</sup> has stated that due to Buddhist teachings, people need to get rid of their anger by forgiving others, while Viriyakitja<sup>24</sup> found forgiving others for what they have done makes one's mind relaxed and contributes to avoiding feelings of revenge.

The third theme identified in the findings was "seeking spirituality." The women felt praying for mind serenity, doing meditation to attain mental peace of mind and well-being, and making merit were the best approaches to take as one engaged in spiritual actions. Prior literature has pointed out that meditation is one way a person can investigate the truth within him/herself.<sup>23</sup> Many of the women, in this study, found meditation to be helpful as they looked inward to examine their feelings and understand themselves. According to Buddhist principles, if one can control him/herself correctly, regarding the laws of nature, the results will be serenity, freedom and happiness.<sup>23</sup>

"Changing one's thinking process," the fourth theme identified in the study, consisted of the participants ceasing to compare themselves to others and engaging in positive thinking. This finding was consistent with the work of Prayutto,<sup>25</sup> who addressed the way to decrease anger was to focus on the positive aspects of the individuals who make us angry, instead of on the anger itself. The women in this study found looking at the "good or positive" aspects of a situation to be an effective way to move beyond anger and get on with life.

The fifth and final theme identified in the study, "shifting interests," consisted of doing enjoyable activities, talking with others about concerns, and thinking about pleasant and peaceful experiences. Shifting interests is congruent with the writings of Srisayun,<sup>26</sup> who has stated that keeping anger within our minds can do harm to our physical and mental

health, and, thus, we need to relieve our anger by doing activities that focus our minds away from our anger. The women in this study felt that shopping, eating-out and looking at photographs of past pleasant experiences were effective ways to shift their thoughts away from stressful events and anger, and towards more pleasant thoughts and productive activities.

The findings of this study should prove helpful to nurses and other health care providers as they deliver care to women who are in the middle years of their life. The information obtained from the study could serve as a guide to health care providers regarding possible approaches to use to assist middle-aged women deal with stress and anger.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Like all research, this study has limitations that can influence the generalizability of the findings. First, the sample size was small and involved only middle-aged women from one urban area. Thus, the findings may not be applicable to middle-aged women from rural areas and other geographical areas within Thailand, or to women who are in other developmental stages of life. In addition, one has to assume the participants were truthful about their experiences. However, this assumption does not guarantee the women were totally truthful, especially given the topic of the research was sensitive. The findings also may not be applicable to middle-aged women from other cultures. The practice of Buddhism is very much a part of the Thai culture and, therefore, the spirituality component of the findings may not be applicable to a culture that does not embrace Buddhist principles.

Future research needs to address stress and anger issues in women who are: in other developmental stages of life; from other cultures; and, from other geographic areas within Thailand. A larger sample

size might also prove beneficial. There also is a need for intervention studies that examine the effectiveness of the various approaches the women identified as ways to contend with stress and anger during middle-age.

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## การจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธของสตรีไทยวัยกลางคนในเขตเมือง

มณี อากานันท์กุล

**บทคัดย่อ:** การศึกษาครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาประสบการณ์ชีวิตของสตรีไทยในเขตเมืองในการจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธระหว่างช่วงวัยกลางคน โดยใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพด้วยวิธีการทางปรากฏการณ์วิทยาของไฮเดกเกอร์และทฤษฎีสตรีนิยม เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์สตรีไทยวัยกลางคนในเขตเมืองในเรื่องวิธีการจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธ ข้อมูลได้รับการวิเคราะห์ด้วยวิธีการวิเคราะห์เชิงเนื้อหาของเบนเนอร์

ผลการศึกษาเปิดเผยว่า สตรีมีความเครียดและความโกรธซึ่งเป็นการตอบสนองต่อความกดดันที่สตรีต้องเผชิญในชีวิตประจำวัน วิธีการจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธของสตรีประกอบด้วย 5 ประเด็นหลักได้แก่ การเงยบ การให้อภัย การแสดงออกทางจิตวิญญาณ กระบวนการเปลี่ยนแปลงความคิด และการเบี่ยงเบนความสนใจ ความเครียดและความโกรธที่สตรีเผชิญส่งผลต่อปัญหาสุขภาพของสตรีได้ อย่างไรก็ตาม การปฏิบัติที่สตรีใช้ทั้ง 5 วิธีการเพื่อจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธนี้จะช่วยสร้างเสริมสุขภาพของสตรีและทำให้สตรีมีความสุข ผลการศึกษาครั้งนี้มีประโยชน์สำหรับพยาบาลที่ทำงานกับสตรีไทยในเขตเมืองที่กำลังจัดการกับปัญหาความเครียดและความโกรธในแต่ละวัน

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**คำสำคัญ:** สตรีไทยเขตเมือง; การจัดการความเครียดและความโกรธ; วัยกลางคน

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