

Adaptation and validation of a quarter-of-life crisis questionnaire – The Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12)

Agnieszka Kulik¹, Monika Dacka², Krzysztof Jurek³, Natalia Mazur⁴

¹ John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Department of Psychotherapy and Health Psychology

² John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Department of Developmental Psychology

³ John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin,
Department of Sociology of Culture, Religion and Social Participation

⁴ We Love Life Mental Clinic, Warsaw

Summary

Aim. The aim of this article is to introduce the Polish adaptation of the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12). In Poland, there is currently no tool for measuring the quarter-life crisis, hindering empirical exploration and cognitive understanding of this phenomenon. The DCQ-12, developed by Petrov and colleagues, serves as an age-independent measure of adult developmental crisis for research and applied purposes.

Method. This research was conducted online by an external company specializing in research panels. The sample comprised a total of 1,176 subjects. To assess the psychometric properties of the scale, internal structure analyses, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, were performed as well as validity assessment.

Results. Statistical analyses indicated that the Polish adaptation of the DCQ-12 is a reliable tool for examining the severity of the quarter-life crisis and its components. The obtained results confirm the tool's structure, with psychometric properties in the Polish study comparable to the original data. The Cronbach's α for the entire scale was 0.78 which suggests that the reliability of the questionnaire is satisfactory and acceptable.

Conclusions. The Polish version of the DCQ-12 demonstrated good psychometric properties. Its utilization in therapeutic practice can be particularly beneficial and provide insights into specific aspects of the quarter-life crisis.

Key words: quarter-life crisis, quantitative method, psychometric assessment

Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period lasting from 18 to 29 years of age, different from adolescence and adulthood [1], characterised as a time of searching and discovering one's own identity, accompanied by a sense of freedom and involvement in the areas of love, education and work [2]. Characteristics describing emerging adulthood also include a sense of instability and uncertainty, the pursuit of autonomy and individuality, a tendency to focus on oneself, and the postponement of developmental tasks such as entering marriage, starting a family and having a job [1, 3].

Differences in individual and developmental spaces of life are clearly revealed [4, 5]. The period of entering adulthood can take on complex developmental trajectories [6] that differ significantly from standard expectations. It is sometimes considered a critical stage of human development. The literature emphasises its favourable as well as unfavourable changes. Positive ones include striving to discover oneself and one's environment and taking on various developmental roles and tasks. Negative changes can include anxiety, depression, loss of meaning in life, difficulties with mental health, and engaging in risky behaviour, as well as frustration and disappointment with past achievements in various spheres of life [1–6].

Robinson et al. [9] showed that the quarter-life crisis is a crisis phase occurring in young people aged 20–29. Most often, crises experienced during the period of entering adulthood are associated with the experience of being blocked from fulfilling employment or emotional relationship commitments, feeling unstable and uncertain of functioning, and feeling poorly suited to various life roles and identities [7, 8]. Atwood and Scholtz [10, p. 241] described this crisis as “a kind of emotional crisis among 20-year-olds – a sense of isolation, isolation, inadequacy and self-doubt, combined with a fear of failure”. Because of this, young people withdraw from potential developmental or life tasks [11]. They may feel helplessness, isolation, or self-doubt [12]. Other symptoms can include a sense of lack of goals, desires, lack of achievement, reluctance to enter adulthood, a tendency to compare one's own achievements with others, a sense of uselessness, dissatisfaction with oneself, identity confusion, uncertainty, or pressure from family or others [13].

Robinson and colleagues' [9] concept of the quarter-life crisis is based on their understanding of the “commitment-independence” developmental dilemma. The researchers noted that young people can experience two types of difficult situations when dealing with it [7–9]. The first situation is related to the feeling of not being able to enter the adult role (locked-out crisis), and the second concerns the feeling of being trapped in the adult role (locked-in crisis). The resolution of these situations follows four phases – stages of crisis: (1) at first there is a sense of being trapped in a situation that is unsatisfactory, (2) then comes a sense of separation from the situation defined in phase 1, distancing oneself mentally and physically from unsatisfactory commitments, which may be accompanied by a sense of confusion and disorientation, motivating the avoidance of new commitments and needing time to achieve distance from the problem, (3) later comes the search for ways to live a life more in line with one's values and aspirations, exploring new opportunities for development, (4) in the

last phase there is transformation and reconstruction associated with commitment to long-term commitments and having clear goals in life.

The positive resolution of a crisis is an opportunity for a more authentic life and is associated with a sense of autonomy. However, crisis can also be a threat to development, causing difficulties with self-determination [9]. The quarter-life crisis undoubtedly threatens the health of young people because it can lead to mental health disorders like depression or other mental difficulties [11]. The phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis is a relatively new research problem. Prior analyses have mostly used phenomenological research, gathering descriptions of young people's experiences. Over the course of nearly 2 decades of research, various forms of interviews, observations and case studies have been mainly used. Only in the second decade of the 21st century did quantitative tools with proven psychometric properties emerge [14–18].

In 2021, based on Erikson's model of crises, Levinson's developmental stages and the results of qualitative research, a team led by Robinson developed the *Developmental Crisis Questionnaire* (DCQ-12) [19]. It consists of 12 statements to which the respondent responds on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (5), assessing whether the statements generally describe their life over the past 6 months or a similar period with a particular focus on experiences different from the participant's adult life to date. The tool measures the severity of the crisis and its three components: (1) "Disconnection and distress" (feeling a loss of meaning and purpose in life, questioning one's previous life, experiencing heightened negative emotions), (2) "Lack of clarity and control" (feeling unstable and losing control over one's life; feeling a lack of personal resources to cope with life's uncertain demands), and (3) "Transition and turning point" (experiencing a change in life; going through an important 'turning point' and being aware of a change in the way one thinks about one's life). The severity of the crisis is expressed by the sum of responses from all scales. According to the authors, if a person scores 42 points or more it indicates the presence of a crisis, while 41 points or less shows no crisis. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the entire scale is 0.79 and for individual factors is 0.78 for "Disconnection and distress", 0.76 for "Lack of clarity and control", and 0.72 for "Transition and turning point". Confirmatory factor analysis showed adequate model fit (GFI = 0.910, CFI = 0.911, RMSEA = 0.082) [19].

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this article is to present the Polish adaptation of the DCQ-12. There was no tool to measure quarter-life crisis in Poland. This prevented an empirical exploration and cognitive explanation of this phenomenon. The DCQ-12 is a highly conceptually consistent with the holistic model of early adulthood crisis, Caplan's crisis theory, Erikson's and Levinson's developmental theories, and has met the psychometric requirements (satisfactory validity, reliability). It was created in a European environment, which is important because of the cultural sensitivity of the phenomenon under study. This aspect may be important for planning therapeutic interventions.

Material

The study included 1,176 people (57.2% F; 41.2% M; 0.9 other; 0.7 not willing to disclose) aged 23–29 ($M = 25.9$; $SD = 2.1$), mostly living in cities (69.7% urban; 30.3% rural). The respondents were students, including working students (33.6%), employed (33.3%), and unemployed (33.1%) individuals. The study sample was randomly divided into two parts. This provided mutually independent samples for the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) ($N = 623$; Sample 1) and for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) ($N = 553$; Sample 2).

Method

Procedure

The Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Psychology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KEBN_8/2023) approved the project to adapt the DCQ-12 by Petrov et al. to Polish conditions. The adaptation process took place in three stages: preparing the tool, conducting questionnaire tests, and statistical analyses.

The first stage involved translating the instructions and items from English into Polish using the corrections made by the original authors [19, 20]. The translation was carried out by two independent translators. The agreed common Polish version of the tool was then back-translated by three translators. The prepared version of the back translation was sent to the author of the method with a request for approval of the translation. The proposal has been accepted.

In the second stage, online surveys were conducted. They were outsourced to an external company that specialises in conducting survey panels. Based on data from the Central Statistical Office [21, 22] and a sample size calculator (error maximum of 5%), the necessary sample size was obtained: 384 each for the student group (including working students) and the employed group, and 383 for the unemployed group. Gender proportions were also considered. The contract with the contractor also included data protection provisions. In addition to the pre-test questionnaire and the DCQ-12, respondents completed: the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener et al.) in the Polish adaptation of Juczyński [23], the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (SES; Rosenberg) in the Polish adaptation of Łaguna et al. [24], the *CES Depression Scale-D* (CES-D; Andresen et al.) in a Polish adaptation by Jankowski [25], the *Turska-Kawa's "Z" Sense of Alienation Scale* (SPA) [26], and the *Purpose of Life Test* (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick) developed by Życińska and Januszek [27]. The selection of additional questionnaires resulted from the procedure used by the original authors and the legal possibilities of using the scales in Polish online surveys.

The third stage consisted of checking the psychometric properties of the scale by: analysing the internal structure by means of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis; estimating reliability – calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient; and establishing the questionnaire's validity by referring to construct and criterion validity. The method's validity was established by analysing the internal structure of the

test and analysing the DCQ-12's linkage to the tools identifying variables that should theoretically correlate with the developmental crisis.

Statistical analyses

The questionnaire's internal consistency was assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (>0.7). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA, PA [Principal Axis Factor Analysis] method) was conducted to detect the structure of the relationships between the indicator variables. First, the assumptions involved in performing EFA were checked. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of the adequacy of variable selection verified that the partial correlation coefficients of the analysed variables were small. In turn, Bartlett's sphericity test was used to assess whether the correlation matrix is a unitary matrix. A method for oblique (nonorthogonal) rotation was performed. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the adequacy of the resulting factor model. To assess model fit, we used a number of model fit indices, including standardised χ^2 (the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom – χ^2/df); comparative fit index (CFI); the Tucker – Lewis index (TLI); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA); the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

Convergent validity was assessed by the proportion of average variance extracted (AVE), which should have a value of at least 0.5. Also, composite reliability (CR) was indicated for the factors, which should have a value of at least 0.7. SPSS (Version 29.0; Chicago, IL, USA) and AMOS packages were used for statistical analyses of the data.

Results

During data collection, it was assumed that there may be cultural differences related to the status of the respondents (student, employee, unemployed) and gender (female, male, other). Before proceeding to the main analyses, intergroup comparisons were made, which showed no statistically significant differences. Therefore, adaptation of the tool was performed on the entire group, dividing it randomly into two parts for statistical purposes.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.833, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (chi-square = 3484.51; $p < 0.001$). The Kaiser criteria of an eigenvalue >1 , the Cattell scree test and the rotated PA (Oblimin rotation) yielded a three-factor solution which explained 58.23% of the total variance. The rotated factor matrix loadings were greater than 0.5 (Table 1).

Table 1. The Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12): results of exploratory analysis using the PA method with Oblimin rotation

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Item 1	0.720	0.095	-0.015
Item 2	0.847	-0.104	-0.027
Item 3	0.790	0.094	-0.038
Item 4	0.869	-0.090	0.020
Item 5	0.108	0.192	0.520
Item 6	-0.103	-0.055	0.818
Item 7	-0.028	-0.143	0.813
Item 8	-0.085	0.088	0.737
Item 9	0.015	0.756	-0.088
Item 10	0.007	0.748	-0.006
Item 11	-0.068	0.725	0.042
Item 12	0.036	0.564	0.089

Source: own study.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The result of exploratory factor analysis indicating that the instrument was valid and reliable is not enough to assure that the conceptual model was completely identical or in accordance with the theoretical construction. To check whether the constructed model was confirmed by empirical data, construct validity and reliability tests through a first order confirmatory factor analysis were carried out. Two models were tested. Model 1 was undimensional, each item was influenced by a single common factor and a term that included systematic and random error. Factor loadings for the one-factor model ranged from 0.05 to 0.86. The indices were not acceptable: CMIN/DF=1570.70; p -value <0.001; CFI=0.552 (threshold >0.95 is acceptable); TLI = 0.452 (threshold >0.90 is acceptable); SRMR = 0.186 (threshold <0.08 is acceptable); and RMSEA=0.212 (threshold <0.05 and <0.08 is acceptable). The second model considered three correlated factors ("correlated traits"). The variance of each item was assumed to be a weighted linear function of the factors. Factor loadings for the three-factor model ranged from 0.39 to 0.88 (Figure 1). The model was associated with good model fit: CMIN/DF=4.185; p -value <0.001; CFI=0.961 (threshold >0.95 is acceptable); TLI = 0.928 (threshold >0.90 is acceptable); SRMR = 0.062 (threshold <0.08 is acceptable); and RMSEA=0.076 (threshold <0.05 and <0.08 is acceptable).

Reliability

The internal consistency of the Polish version of the DCQ-12 was satisfactory (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.776; 0.887 for “Disconnection and Distress”; 0.804 for “Lack of Clarity and Control”; and 0.789 for “Transition and Turning Point”). The AVE and CR values for the “Disconnection and Distress” factor were 0.68 and 0.89, for “Lack of Clarity and Control”, 0.51 and 0.79, and for “Transition and Turning Point”, 0.50 and 0.79.

The DCQ-12 score ranged from 14 to 60 points (12 items). The mean of total scores was 36.91 (Table 2). The mean values of the subscales were correlated with each other (Table 3). The raw score was converted to a sten score (Table in the appendix 1).

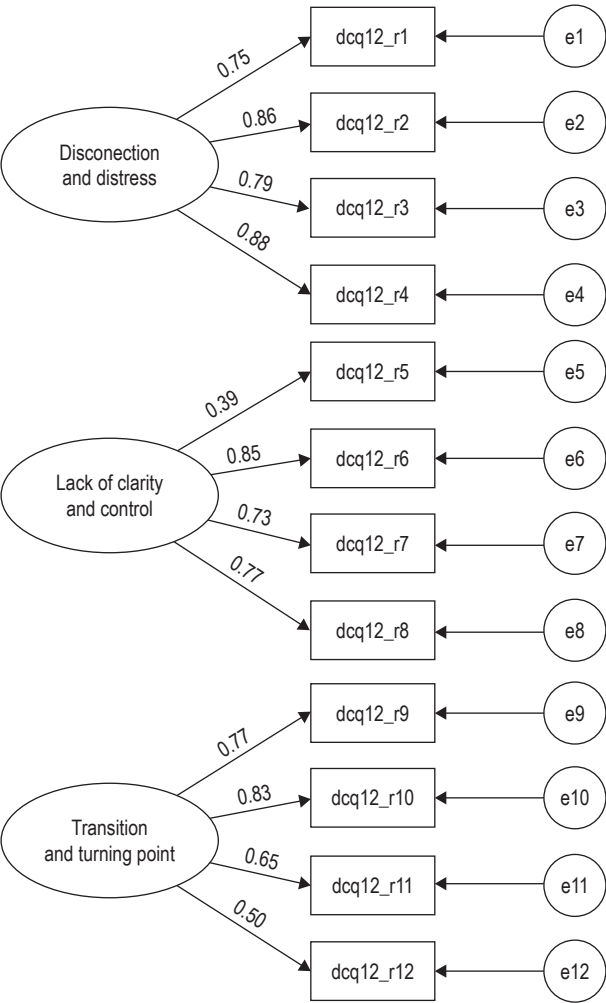


Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the Three-Factor Structure (AMOS)

On this basis, high scores (sten 7–10) were found to range from 41 to 60. It was assumed that a scale score of 41 points or more indicates the presence of a crisis, while 40 points or less suggests no crisis.

Table 2. The Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12): descriptive statistics

	M	Me	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min	Max
Disconnection and distress	12.49	12.00	4.03	-0.10	-0.49	4.00	20.00
Lack of clarity and control	10.88	11.00	3.15	0.22	0.27	4.00	20.00
Transition and turning point	13.54	13.00	3.10	-0.02	-0.08	4.00	20.00
DCQ-12	36.91	36.00	6.79	0.02	0.33	14.00	60.00

Source: own study.

Table 3. The Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12): Pearson's r correlations between subscales

	Disconnection and Distress	Lack of Clarity and Control	Transition and Turning Point
Disconnection and distress	-		
Lack of clarity and control	0.396**	-	
Transition and turning point	0.176**	-0.212**	-
DCQ-12	0.858**	0.602**	0.463**

Source: own study.

Validity

Table 4 shows Pearson's correlations between DCQ-12 subscales and total score and measures of depression (CES-D), self-esteem (SES), life purpose (PIL), satisfaction with life (SWLS), and sense of alienation (SPA). The total scores on the DCQ-12 were positively correlated with depression and sense of alienation scores. The total scores on the DCQ-12 were negatively correlated with the self-esteem, satisfaction with life and life purpose scores.

Table 4. Pearson's r correlations between the DCQ-12 and its subscales and CES-D, PIL, SES, SWLS, and SPA:

Scales	DCQ-12	Disconnection and distress	Lack of clarity and control	Transition and turning point
CES-D	0.535**	0.594***	0.153***	0.242**
PIL	-0.632***	-0.678***	-0.604***	0.111***

table continued on the next page

SES	-0.587***	-0.609***	-0.504***	0.019
SWLS	-0.557***	-0.521***	-0.614***	0.081**
SPA – a sense of power and powerlessness	0.489***	0.473***	0.511***	-0.064*
SPA – a sense of isolation-integration	0.354**	0.437***	0.249***	-0.045

* <0.05; ** <0.01; *** <0.001

Source: own study

Discussion

The presented analyses show that the Polish adaptation of the *Developmental Crisis Questionnaire* (DCQ-12) is a reliable tool for studying the severity of the quarter-life crisis and its components. The obtained results confirm the structure of the tool. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that individual statements have high factor matrix loadings (above 0.6), that is, they function well within factors. Conversely, some statements from the CFA had loadings below 0.6, including statements: 5 (0.39: “I have been confident about what I need to do to make it in life”) and 12 (0.50: “I have noticed that the way I have thought about my life has changed”). The fifth statement contributes to the “Lack of clarity and control” factor; the 12th to the “Transition and Turning Point” factor. The values of item 12 in both versions are comparable. Item 5, despite its poor score, remained in the test because it showed content consistency with the obtained factor. In addition, acceptable values of other indicators (CR, AVE) were shown. An attempt to explain the result may relate to the cultural context of the process of entering the ‘real world’ and becoming independent [7–10, 12–15].

The psychometric properties obtained in the Polish study are comparable to those of the original: The Cronbach’s α for the entire scale was 0.78 (original – 0.79), for the “Disconnection and distress” factor – 0.89 (original – 0.78), “Lack of clarity and control” – 0.80 (original – 0.76), and “Transition and turning point” – 0.79 (original – 0.72).

Structure of the adapted tool

Exploratory factor analysis revealed a three-factor structure of the tool. It explained 68.51% of the total variance. Confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the structure of the questionnaire. The model has a good fit (CFI = 0.961; TLI = 0.928; SRMR = 0.062; RMSEA = 0.076). Correlations between scales were low (0.18 for “Transition and turning point” and “Disconnection and distress”; – 0.21 for “Transition and turning point” and “Lack of clarity and control”) or moderate (0.40 for “Lack of Clarity and Control” and “Transition and turning point”). In contrast, correlations of scales with overall scores ranged from moderate (0.46 for “Transition and turning point” and 0.60 for “Lack of clarity and control”) to high (0.86 for “Disconnection and distress”).

Construct validity of the adapted tool

The positive relationship between the DCQ-12 and the severity of depression and alienation can be considered an indicator of convergent validity. Previous work on the relationship between depression, understood as a sense of hopelessness (the Beck Scale), and quarter-life crisis (DCQ-12) in adolescents shows that the severity of negative attitudes toward the future, the perception of the future as unclear and uncertain, and a sense of not finding oneself in reality increases the likelihood of crisis [11]. In the presented adaptation, this was mainly reflected in the relationship of the CES-D scale with the factor “Disconnection and distress”. Also, the content of the alienation factors shows that the obtained results are consistent. The more intense the sense of powerlessness (the belief that there is little possibility of influencing one’s surroundings) and the absence of people or values around one to follow, the greater the severity of the crisis. In qualitative studies of quarter-life crisis, this characterisation appears in the description of the first stage of the crisis, referred to as being stuck/blocked [13].

The negative relationship between sense of meaning in life, self-esteem and life satisfaction, and the severity of scores on the DCQ-12 scales may be an indicator of discriminant validity. The presented results can be interpreted in the category of not having a sense of meaning in life and the severity of the crisis as a time of intense search for meaning [13, 19]. Self-esteem was negatively correlated with overall crisis severity and its two factors: “Disconnection and distress” and “Lack of clarity and control”, while it showed no relationship with the “Transition and turning point” factor.

Limitations of the study

This study was conducted online, whereas tools developed for the paper-and-pencil procedure were used. This may have influenced the obtained data. It would be worthwhile to perform an equivalence analysis of the scales for different age groups of the respondents. Some researchers believe that the period most at risk of crisis is the age of 25 and above, which is preceded by a change in the existential situation of a young person after completing education.

Conclusions

The Polish version of the *Developmental Crisis Questionnaire* was shown to have good psychometric properties. The ability to identify people in crisis and determine its structure can help in therapeutic practice. The deteriorating state of mental health and the undetermined genesis of difficulties in the functioning of young people are of increasing concern to psychiatrists and psychologists. The tool can also be used to further study the phenomenon.

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Address: Agnieszka Kulik
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
e-mail: agn.kulik@gmail.com

Appendix 1

Table. Sten norms in the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire for 23–29 year olds

	Total score	Disconnection and distress	Lack of clarity and control	Transition and turning point
Sten 1	12–23	4	4	4–7
Sten 2	24–26	5–6	5–6	8
Sten 3	27–30	7–8	7	9–10
Sten 4	31–33	9–10	8–9	11
Sten 5	34–36	11–12	10	13–13
Sten 6	37–40	14–14	11–12	14–15
Sten 7	41–43	15–16	13–14	16
Sten 8	44–47	17–18	15	17–18
Sten 9	48–50	19–20	16–17	19
Sten 10	51–60	–	18–20	20

Appendix 2

Proposed translation of items of the *Developmental Crisis Questionnaire* (DCQ-12)

Kwestionariusz kryzysu rozwojowego

Proszę wskazać, czy poniższe stwierdzenia w ogólny sposób opisują Twoje życie w ciągu ostatnich sześciu miesięcy. Jeśli doświadczyłeś/doświadczyłaś czegoś innego, nietypowego w ciągu ostatnich sześciu miesięcy, dokonaj oceny tego w odniesieniu do swojego dorosłego życia.

Skala:

- 1 – Zdecydowanie się nie zgadzam
- 2 – Nie zgadzam się
- 3 – Ani się nie zgadzam, ani się zgadzam
- 4 – Zgadzam się
- 5 – Zdecydowanie się zgadzam

1. Kwestionowałam/kwestionowałam siebie i swoje życie bardziej niż zwykle.
2. Miałam/miałem poczucie, że moje życie toczy się bez celu.
3. Doświadczałam/doświadczałam negatywnych emocji mocniej niż zazwyczaj.
4. Myślałam/myślałam, że życie nie ma sensu.
5. Byłam pewna/byłem pewny tego, co muszę zrobić, aby osiągnąć cel w życiu. (R)
6. Czułam/czułem, że mam kontrolę nad swoim życiem. (R)
7. Moje życie wydaje się stabilne i przewidywalne. (R)
8. Czułam/czułem, że jestem przygotowana/przygotowany, aby poradzić sobie z wyzwaniami stawianym mi przez życie. (R)

9. Przechodzę przez okres zmian w swoim życiu.
10. Przechodzę przez ważny punkt zwrotny w swoim życiu.
11. Czuję, że mogę być w procesie pozostawiania za sobą „starej mnie”/„starego mnie”/ i rozwijania „nowej mnie”/„nowego mnie”.
12. Zauważyłam/zauważyłem, że zmienił się mój sposób myślenia o życiu.