

MIDLIFE CRISIS?



FINDING YOUR
WAY OUT

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“Probably the happiest period in life most frequently is in middle age, when the eager passions of youth are cooled, and the infirmities of age not yet begun; as we see that the shadows, which are at morning and evening so large, almost entirely disappear at midday.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt

Introduction

The dreaded midlife crisis doesn't strike everyone, but it's a common enough occurrence that everyone is familiar with the concept. If you find yourself in the middle of one, your own concern is finding your way out.

There are many theories about what causes this common phenomenon in one's older adult years. Many cultures, including Japanese and Indian, don't seem to suffer from midlife crises. At least part of the issue seems to be influenced by culture.

A midlife crisis occurs in middle age and usually affects one's self-confidence or identity. ***There may be a significant amount of regret over how you've lived your life and an intense desire to correct it as soon as possible.***

There is often a precipitating event that causes the sufferer to examine their life from a new perspective.

A variety of trigger events can start the ball rolling and begin a midlife crisis.

Causes of a Midlife Crisis

The most common age for a midlife crisis is between 40 and 60, with 45 being the most common age. Men and women can both face this issue, but the causes and reactions tend to differ. In men, a midlife crisis is most commonly triggered by career issues.

In women, changing relationships or roles are most often the factor. It may be due to children leaving the home to live their own lives or the realization that their marriage wasn't all they had hoped for.

There are several factors that can precipitate a midlife crisis:

1. **Death or significant change in health status of parents.** On one level, we're all aware that our parents won't live forever. But down deep, we fail to truly process the issue until one of them takes a turn for the worse.
 - ❖ This is a reminder of our own mortality, which causes the mind to begin asking questions regarding one's own life. You realize that a lot of time has already passed by, and a limited amount of time remains.

2. **Career issues.** Perhaps you always dreamt of being a CEO, but you're 50-years old and still a department manager. Or maybe you always wanted to be doctor and always believed there would be time to go back to school.

- ❖ While nearly anything is possible, age does bring certain limitations that can take more effort to overcome than they're worth.
- ❖ It's not easy to accept that your life isn't going according to plan, and that some dreams have to die.

3. **Aging.** At 30, most adults believe they could get back into the kind of shape they enjoyed at 20, true or not. At 40, most adults still believe it's a possibility, but acknowledge that it would be very challenging. Around the age of 45, the writing is on the wall. It's not even a remote possibility.

- ❖ A receding hairline, bags under the eyes, age spots, wrinkles, and undesirable distribution of body fat become a reality sooner or later.
- ❖ Obvious signs of aging are another notification by the universe that you won't live forever.

4. **Relationship with significant other.** The death of a spouse or divorce can trigger a midlife crisis, since the remainder of your life becomes much less clear. This isn't limited to married couples. The change of any long-term romantic relationship can serve to begin a midlife crisis.
 - ❖ It's also possible that you always imagined yourself with a spouse that loved the arts and wanted to travel, but find yourself with someone that prefers watching TV and never wants to leave the house.
 - ❖ The lack of a spouse or significant other can also be a cause. You may have always wanted to be married, but now it seems that it will never happen.
5. **Children.** Those pesky kids. They're simultaneously your greatest source of joy and grief. Children growing and leaving the home is enough to throw anyone for a loop. So much of your time is spent caring for your kids that it can be hard to readjust how you'll spend your time and attention.
 - ❖ The lack of children can be another cause. A time arrives when older adults reach the conclusion that they're too old to have kids. If you've

imagined a life with kids and grandchildren, this can be hard to handle.

These are the most common triggers leading to a midlife crisis. **You'll notice that all are related to either one's mortality or a significant change.** It isn't that your job stinks, but that you believe it's too late to make the most desired alternative a reality.

While having a life that avoids having a midlife crisis is ideal, it's better to have one sooner rather than later. It's a wakeup call to address the changes that are occurring in your life. You can do more with a midlife crisis at age 40 than you can at age 60!

"There was a time in my 40s where I thought, oh, it's all over - not just work, but I'm never going to feel young again, I'm always going to feel like I know what's going to happen, I'll know what to expect. Looking back, I don't know if that was a midlife crisis, I don't know - but I don't feel that now. There's possibilities. It gets better."

- Paul Weller

Signs That You May Be Having a Midlife Crisis

Keep in mind that the causes of a midlife crisis are different from the signs that you may be suffering from a midlife crisis. **Keep your eyes open for these signs in yourself and others.** The sooner you can identify the issue, the better!

The presence of these signs isn't cause for alarm. It's a sign that you should take a hard look at your situation.

The presence of a midlife crisis can reveal itself in several ways:

1. **The desire to run away.** It's not uncommon to dream of running away after a bad week at work, but this is on another level. It's a deep-rooted desire to drop out of your current life and reinvent yourself somewhere else.
2. **The sudden urge to quit a job.** Panic that you chose the wrong career path can create the desire to do something else, or maybe just anything else. Few of us are fortunate enough to love our jobs.

- ❖ After spending 20+ years in mild misery, the pressure can build to the point that drastic action starts to feel reasonable.
- ❖ The belief that this misery will continue until you're too old to do anything else only adds to the urgency.

3. **Spending a lot of time examining your childhood.**

There can be many reasons for this. Sometimes, we just want someone to blame. We want to know what happened to us that caused us to make less-than-perfect decisions later in life.

- ❖ We also try to remember what used to fill us with passion and where our plans were derailed.
- ❖ You might dream of starting over again. The magic age seems to be either the beginning or the end of high school, depending on the quality of your grades!

4. **Questioning the meaning of life and your life in**

particular. *"Is this all there is?"* It's a common subject of contemplation among those in their adult years. After living as an adult for an extended period of time, you might start to question your assumptions and values.

- ❖ Our culture places a premium on accomplishment and acquiring possessions. These might seem attractive in your younger years, but have less significance later in life. You wonder if you've wasted the last couple of decades of your life.
 - ❖ You might blame your parents for emphasizing certain things, such as income or worrying about the opinions of strangers.
 - ❖ ***Questioning your long-held assumptions is one of the most common signs of a midlife crisis.***
5. **The desire to get in shape.** If you've been 30-pounds overweight for the last 25 years, but suddenly have the desire to see your abs, you might be having a midlife crisis.
- ❖ Getting in shape and being healthy are positive goals, but a sudden urge to make a big change can be a sign that something is going on besides a new desire to improve your health.
6. **Major purchases that are out of character, like a shiny, red sports car.** Big purchases should also raise a red flag. It might be an expensive car instead of the economy car you've always been known for. It might

be a swimming pool or a putting green in the backyard.

- ❖ There's nothing wrong with enjoying yourself. Just examine your motivation. You might discover something interesting.

7. **Replacing your current friends with younger friends.** It's easier to feel younger when you hang out with a younger crowd. They often have more energy and enthusiasm for life. It can be contagious.

- ❖ Again, having younger friends isn't an issue, but consider your reasons. ***Be especially suspicious of a desire to dump long-standing friends.***

8. **Searching for a new religion or life philosophy.** Do you feel the need for a new perspective on life? Have you been a Christian for 50 years, but suddenly feel the urge to practice Tibetan Buddhism?

- ❖ Most of us keep the religions that were decided for us as children. There's nothing wrong with making your own choice. Just ask yourself why.

9. **A sudden interest in adventure.** Have you always enjoyed renting a condo on the same beach in Florida each summer, but suddenly have the need to ride a

camel across the Moroccan desert? You might be showing signs of a midlife crisis.

10. **A sudden interest in extreme sports or activities.**

Most 47-year olds don't suddenly choose to go rock climbing, skydiving, auto racing, or surfing. Why do you feel the need now?

11. **A dramatic change in hairstyle or dress or any obsession with appearance.** Have you worn your hair to your shoulders since the third-grade, but now want to cut it all off? Why?

- ❖ Have you decided to dress much more casually or formally? Why?

12. **Feeling trapped or limited by your life.** Do you dream of a life with fewer constraints and obligations? Have you lived in a suburban neighborhood for a decade but dream of living on a mountain in a cabin? Do you want to just drop your life and travel the world? Do you feel smothered?

- ❖ ***A strong desire for more freedom may indicate that a midlife crisis is blooming.***

13. **Reliving the past.** Did you spend your 20's tailgating at the local college football games and now want to

revive the practice? Does the idea of hitting your old drinking locations have an appeal? Again, this isn't necessarily a bad idea, but it's suspicious that a midlife crisis may be to blame.

There are countless symptoms of a midlife crisis. Examining the past, questioning your assumptions, the desire to make a major change, or to relive the past are common signs that you may be in the midst of a midlife crisis.

What can you do about it?

"There are no atheists in foxholes, they say, and I was a foxhole atheist for a long time. But after going through a midlife crisis and having many things change very quickly, it made me realize my mortality. And when you start to think about death, you start to think about what's after it."

- Peter Steele

How to Deal With a Midlife Crisis

You know you're not happy, but what can you do about it? You aren't the first to face this challenge and you won't be the last. There are several ways to handle a midlife crisis.

Consider these ideas:

1. **Stay positive.** It's easy to become discouraged when you know you have a challenge, but you don't know how to resolve it. That doesn't mean that a solution doesn't exist. You might not even need a solution in the conventional sense. You might only require a change in perspective.
2. **Find a group activity that you enjoy.** Join a dancing class or a coed volleyball league. Spend time with others in an enjoyable setting doing something you love. Branch out a little and shake your life up.
3. **Look for small changes that can make a difference.** Is it possible that a new hobby or a new friend could bring about a change for the better? ***Look for small solutions that don't require drastic changes.***

- ❖ Your life might need a Band-Aid rather than an amputation. Look at small changes before getting carried away.
 - ❖ Try joining a gym and losing ten pounds or taking a new position within your current company. Try a new vacation location. Reach out to a few old friends and reconnect. They'll be glad to hear from you.
4. **Think about getting professional help.** The right therapist is worth her weight in gold. Mental health professionals are trained to help you navigate this type of issue. There's no reason to tackle your challenge alone.
- ❖ The wrong therapist can cause more challenges than they solve. Not all lawyers or mechanics are equally skilled. Avoid believing that all health professionals are created equal.
5. **Take care of yourself.** Depression can be a part of a midlife crisis. It's common to let your self-care and grooming slide.
- ❖ Eat appropriately.
 - ❖ Avoid alcohol and drugs.

- ❖ Bathe, brush your teeth, comb your hair, and maintain your grooming routine.
 - ❖ Get sufficient sleep.
6. **Keep your mind in the present.** There's often little to be gained by dissecting the past or speculating about the future. To do so in an intentional way can be helpful, but sitting around and ruminating can make your situation even more challenging. Your solution lies in the present, so focus your attention there.
7. **Decide what you really want.** You know that you don't want what you currently have. That's a start, but it's not a solution. What do you want? If you can make any change to your life, what would it be?

These are universally useful tips! ***A midlife crisis is similar to any other challenge in life that leaves you feeling dissatisfied.*** A calm and thoughtful approach will give better results than acting impulsively. Take care of yourself and stay social. There are plenty of things to enjoy in life.

"Everything I read about hitting a midlife crisis was true. I had such a struggle letting go of youthful things and learning how to exist and have enthusiasm while settling into the comfort of an older age."

- David Bowie

Finding A Solution

You have a good attitude. You just need a solution. ***Finding a suitable solution to a midlife crisis requires flexibility, creativity, and an open mind.*** It's necessary to let go of the past and allow for an alternative you may not have ever considered. Being too attached to a particular outcome is at least half of the challenge.

Create a solution to your midlife crisis:

1. **Determine the cause of your midlife crisis.** Put some time into this and determine the actual cause. There are only a few common causes:
 - ❖ Your own mortality
 - ❖ Aging
 - ❖ A perceived lack of options
 - ❖ Relationships
 - ❖ Children
 - ❖ Many other causes are actually a version of items on this list. For example, you might be an

accountant, but always wanted to be a physician. The issue is aging or a lack of options. Otherwise, you'd be able to pursue your dream of being a doctor.

2. **What are you missing?** What would you have gained if your life had been the way you desired?

- ❖ What would having children mean to you?
- ❖ What if you lived forever? How would that be comforting?
- ❖ If you had the perfect relationship, what would you get from it?

3. **What can you substitute for what you're missing?**

If you're upset that you never had children and are too old to start, what else could you do? Maybe you could be a foster parent or volunteer with children.

- ❖ ***Once you know what you're missing, search for an alternative that can satisfy the same needs.***

4. **Set goals.** Once you've determined a substitute, create goals that will enable you to accomplish your objective.

5. **Avoid giving up.** Expect some challenges along the way.

A midlife crisis can feel like the end of the world.

However, a solution can be found if you're open to other alternatives. Keep an open mind and examine what you believe you would receive if your life were different. It's just a matter of finding something that can fulfill the same needs. Set appropriate goals and see them through.

"It is utterly false and cruelly arbitrary to put all the play and learning into childhood, all the work into middle age, and all the regrets into old age."

- Margaret Mead

Let's look at an example.

Imagine that you've always dreamed of being a neurosurgeon. That was your dream from the time you were 9 years old. You did well in high-school and attended a good college. You had the grades and test scores to get into medical school.

However, you decided that you were sick of school and couldn't stand the thought of four more years, not to mention the 6 years of residency necessary to become a

neurosurgeon. Now you're 55 years old and an accountant.

Your dad just died, and it has triggered some soul searching. You're finally faced with the undeniable truth that you'll never be a neurosurgeon.

What can you do?

You already know the cause of your midlife crisis. You'll never have the career you desire. You have two kids in college and lack the finances to attend medical school. Neurosurgery residency programs don't like older residents anyway.

What would a career as a neurosurgeon mean to you?
What would you get out of it?

You decide that:

- ❖ You would be helping people.
- ❖ You would be respected by society.
- ❖ Your mom would be proud of you.
- ❖ You would receive a large income.

- ❖ You would enjoy the challenge of attending medical school and residency.

What is a suitable substitute?

- ❖ **Helping others.** There are countless ways to help others. You don't need to be a doctor to be helpful. You can volunteer or take a position with a charity. Coach a baseball team for children. In fact, doctors can only help one person at a time. You can find a way to help millions.
- ❖ **Respect.** Do you actually need this? Working on your self-esteem might be in order. A healthy adult isn't too concerned about the opinions of others. However, there are ways to be respected other than being a doctor.
- ❖ **Parental pride.** Again, this is something that might not be as important as you think. Your mom might actually prefer that you had been a priest. But there are other ways to make her proud. Just being a good, happy person is enough for most parents.
- ❖ **Income.** A physician is all but guaranteed to make a substantial income, but there are even better options if money is a concern. A successful entrepreneur, investor, or real estate agent can

make far more money than any neurosurgeon even dreams of making. There are other ways to make a lot of money that require less time and effort.

- ❖ **Challenge.** Becoming a physician is challenging, but so are climbing Mount Everest, writing a best-selling novel, and starting your own company.

You might decide to start your own business that helps low-income families with housing. You'd have the potential to meet all of the needs fulfilled by a career as a neurosurgeon.

- ❖ There's the potential for challenge, excellent income, respect from your neighbors and society, and making your mom proud. You're also helping others.

There's an alternative if you're willing to look. Setting goals is the final step.

"I think midlife crisis is just a point where people's careers have reached some plateau and they have to reflect on their personal relationships."

- Bill Murray

Setting Goals

Most of us are good at creating a compelling future. It's easy to get excited about making a lot of money or losing a lot of weight. The challenge lies in getting from your present situation to your goal. The idea is easy. The realization is elusive.

Set goals that ensure success:

1. **Start with the end in mind.** Then work your way back to the present. It's no different than following a map. You must know where you're going. Then you can figure out how to get there.
2. **Work back until you reach a step that you can take today.** If you're interested in starting a charity, you might have some research to do first. If your desire is to lose weight, joining a gym might be in order.
3. **Become the person necessary to achieve your goals.** Becoming healthy and fit requires becoming a person that puts health and fitness above those pleasures that move you away from your goals. Be willing to transform yourself.
4. **Develop a list of daily activities you can perform that will take you closer to your goal. It's more**

important to do the necessary little things each day than it is to do something spectacular once.

- ❖ For example, eating healthy meals, taking two daily walks, and avoiding dessert will do more to trim your waistline than one grueling session at the gym once a week.
 - ❖ Focus on daily tasks. These are much easier to turn into habits than activities that occur less frequently.
5. **Review your goals daily.** Avoid forgetting about your goals by reviewing them regularly. Five minutes in the morning or evening is sufficient.
 6. **Persist.** This is the most important step. Persist until you're successful.

Goals are the path to changing your life. ***It's not enough to know what you want.*** It's necessary to make changes to create the results you're targeting. Set realistic goals that excite you and create daily habits that will lead you to success. Be willing to become a new version of yourself in the process.

"Middle age is when you're sitting at home on a Saturday night and the telephone rings and you hope it isn't for you."

- Ogden Nash

Conclusion

A midlife crisis happens to many middle-aged adults. It can serve as a natural transition into later adulthood. **A midlife crisis is an opportunity to reevaluate and create new meaning for the next chapter of your life.** The worst response is to panic and take drastic action without careful consideration.

Attempt to be dispassionate for a moment and review your situation objectively. What is missing? What can you substitute that will provide the same results? You might feel that you're settling for a second-best alternative. Even if that were true, does it make sense to be upset about it for the rest of your life?

Your current situation determines your options. Your current situation is different from your situation 25 years ago. Keep your mind in the present and be accepting. Avoid being too attached to what might have been. You still have many wonderful years ahead of you!