

Midlife crisis or

midlife transition?

Midlife! Is it a time of Crisis, or is it a time of transition and possible transformation? The first noticeable change is appearance with the reflection in the mirror not necessarily depicting one's true feelings of identity - 'too young to feel old' as they say.

BY WENDY COTTER

And the changes don't end there! Along with greying, balding and the emerging wrinkles, bones and joints also begin to deteriorate. We start to recognise a decrease in endurance and failing eyesight. If this isn't enough to contend with other new challenges emerge with hormonal changes causing their own brand of havoc to both men and women. Whilst women experience the beginning biological changes of menopause, men also go through a reproductive change with a possible decrease in sperm production and testosterone levels, both of which can cause difficulties within a marriage (Kail & Cavanaugh 2013, pp. 351). We also live in a beauty obsessed and achievement orientated era. Yet with all this evolving is it a wonder stress also becomes a major factor in our life during this mid adulthood age?

In saying this evidence indicates that not everyone experiences midlife in the same way, and definitely not all involving a crisis (Clay, 2003). Moreover it

represents a time of negotiating unique challenges and issues not experienced before therefore with some referring to it as a time not of crisis but rather of correction or transition (Bumpass & Aquilino, 1995). It is not all negative with cognitive functioning measured against when one is 25 scoring higher in verbal and numerical ability, reasoning and verbal memory (Willis & Reid, 1999).

The image of a mid-life crisis in the past has been portrayed as one of a man buying a sports car, re-inventing his image, getting a tattoo, and trading in his wife for a younger model. (My husband's midlife crisis was no exception, all except for the trading in of me for the younger model! I am happy to say he is now passed it.)

The wife on the other hand was pictured as dealing with her empty nest by sitting at home and babysitting the grandchildren. Current statistics now show that 46.2% of all employees in Australia are women and over 1/3 hold management positions whilst some men

take over the duties of being a house husband (Workplace Gender Equality, 2016) (Changing role of women in the workplace, 2012). These changing roles are a sign of the 21st century with midlife transitions / crisis uniquely affecting both genders.

This midlife event, either negative or positive, affects both genders differently. According to Erickson's life cycle stages he describes this period of life whereby people begin to naturally struggle with questions about their meaning and purpose, 'looking back with question and looking forward with wonder' (Erikson, 1998). This is seen manifested as men can tend to focus on success and stature during this life stage often looking back with question or regret. Women on the other hand are inclined to look forward with wonder, life not ending after parenting, otherwise known as the 'empty nest syndrome,' but rather in search of 'what is next.' As presented you can see women are no longer the home bodies reliant on the male as in past generations, they are now on their

own quest for personal identity. Unlike males whereby reaching midlife can be a time of trying to recover their lost youth, for women it is about discovering 'who they can really be.' The last 30 years have been a defining moment for women whereby they have been empowered by the words 'you can be anything you want to be,' with the statistics showing just that (Changing role of women in the workplace, 2012). The result of this for women is restlessness, presenting itself during midlife with children leaving home and as they endeavour to discover what is their true life's potential.

With life expectancies continuing to grow so too are life expectations. For those addressing the years of midlife they are mostly no longer content with a job that merely pays the bills, or content to stay in an unfulfilling marriage with statistics showing the 40-44 age bracket leading the divorce rate (Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2014, 2016). This in fact though does not mean every marriage failure during this developmental age is due to a midlife event neither is the buying of a new car, change of job or any other out of the usual behaviour. But for some it is, with statistics showing that one in five do experience a crisis of identity or purpose (The Mid-Life Crisis Does and Doesn't Exist, 2016).

Because it is a period seen as one's midlife there are times of reflection which can be challenging leading to re-evaluation or forced re-evaluation (Vickers-Willis, 2014). The result of this can be identified as an awakening or transformation, whereby for some the idea of their life being more than half gone can manifest itself psychologically bringing about depression or behavioural problems, hence labelled a midlife crisis. These developmental life stresses involved with midlife are ever increasing and include not only the physical changes one goes through but the sociological such as job losses, children leaving home, forced retirement, retrenchment becoming more common, changing roles of the main source of income, the loss of health or the loss of a family member, and caring for aging parents (Lachman, 2001).

As with most psychological quandaries the key is in the acknowledgment that something is happening you can't quite identify and seek assistance. With an emerging midlife crisis or correction the picture is one of driving in your car on a well travelled road when you come upon an unanticipated sign – 'Warning, roundabout ahead.' Upon approaching the roundabout your first reaction is you are unsure which direction to take, bewildered because you have never been here before. Your first option is to go in repeated circles, feeling confused thinking to yourself – 'Is this it? Is this all there is?' Another option is to just go straight as you always have, 'to go through the motions' of what is known and familiar. There is the option of 'being impulsive, and even irresponsible,' throwing caution to the wind and taking one of the turns and hope all will be OK. You could always turn around, like 'turning back the clock,' and try beginning your journey again.

But then again, there is another option. Stopping the car, accept that you are lost in unknown territory, get out your map, and seek help before continuing on. The first step of a midlife event is recognizing the signs, and the second step is dealing with the underlying emotions.

The goal of a counsellor is to assist one to discover which road they are on and understand the next phase in their journey of life by helping them to explore and summarise personal goals and values. Giving them an opportunity to work through repressed thoughts or attitudes, by giving them a voice it will help them better understanding who they were, who they are now and where it is they desire to end up in life by focusing on personal strengths, life contributions and achievements. Any form of life transition may also result in depression or anxiety, and for some marriage counselling may also be required if the challenges of midlife have created distance or disharmony with their partner. So, either a midlife crisis or transformation, what is clear is there is a transition to be manoeuvred through, a time of opportunity to recreate for themselves a new and empowering future.

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