

## FEAT FACTSHEET

### How to survive mid-life crisis

#### What do we mean by mid-life crisis?

Many people find that they experience powerful emotional upheavals at some point after they reach forty or fifty. A mid-life crisis may involve complex factors. It may be to do with unresolved difficulties from the past, dissatisfaction with the present, a sense of lost opportunities, a fear of diminished options in the future or of growing older in an ageist society. The growing recognition that we are not young anymore can trigger painful feelings of loss, a sense that we haven't done what we really wanted to do, a sense of dissatisfaction with what we've achieved, and a recognition that we need to change, to find a new direction and different sources of fulfilment.

Naturally, it's not the case that we all chug merrily through life until we suddenly have a mid-life crisis. Many of us will have experienced crises and losses earlier on in life, and what we go through during our middle years will be an expression of our unique life story and the problems that we have encountered. But it's possible to view mid-life difficulties as having a very real purpose in terms of our personal development. It is a time of transition, which enables us to grow and explore different ways of being and living. The analytical psychologist, Carl Jung, emphasised that 'the greatest potential for growth and self-realisation exists in the second half of life'. If we can be honest about our painful and confusing feelings, mid-life can be a time for reassessment and reappraisal, a learning period providing the opportunity to change. We may become more interested in exploring parts of ourselves that we have lost touch with, develop a greater self-knowledge and sense of inner strength, and be less dependent on the approval of others.

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## **What are the signs?**

Everyone reacts in their own way to this upheaval in their view of themselves and the world. For some people, a sense of restlessness seems to come out of the blue. They may not be able to identify any particular reason for their feelings of depression. They may experience a sense of meaninglessness, in spite of having so many positive elements in their lives. Others feel an urge to destroy what they've built up, in order to be the kind of person they feel they need to be and to lead a more contented and fulfilling life. People may leave the security of jobs, break family ties and leave relationships in order to deal with distressing feelings.

This may represent a realistic assessment of the negative aspects of their lives and the desire to create a more positive future. But, in other cases, it may be a destructive flight away from feelings of anxiety and depression. It may represent the unrealistic belief that 'new' means 'better' and that if we only had a new partner or a different job, the painful feelings would go away.

Many people feel fearful about leaving their youth behind them. The goals and ambitions that kept us focused and single-minded during the first part of life may seem to be fading away. We may feel great uncertainty about how to replace them, and become very fearful about the future.

## **What's the cause?**

In Western cultures, youth is too often portrayed as the ideal state and we do not value the extra knowledge, skills and wisdom older people have developed, or the benefits of learning from their experience. Those who have grown up believing that a youthfully attractive appearance is all-important now find it difficult to realise the worth of a different outlook or depth of understanding that we may acquire in growing older. There is also a great fear that getting older inevitably means ill health. In fact, the majority of us will continue to be healthy and to lead independent lives, even into late old age.

Ageing emphasises differences in wealth and gender. People who are better-off are able to maintain their standard of living and are more likely to view their older years as providing exciting opportunities. Others may find it very difficult to build up security for their later years. For years ageism has been operating in the field of employment. Job advertisements often specified upper age limits and the need for quick thinking and bubbling energy, as though these qualities only belong to the very young. As a result, people often have difficulty in getting into certain areas of employment after the age of 45. However, the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 have now come into force and ban discrimination on the grounds of age, in both employment and vocational training, which should hopefully improve access to work opportunities for all.

## Causes of mid-life crisis

**Fears about our mortality:** As a rule, people have a strong desire to deny their own mortality. But, at mid-life, we become increasingly aware that we are moving towards older age and our own eventual death. As we grow older, people around us die. When we lose a parent, we have to cope both with the pain of losing a loved one and the awareness that we are the next generation and our turn is next. Sometimes, people who have had distressing childhood experiences cut themselves off from family members. Now, they may feel the need for reconciliation, before it's too late. Unresolved childhood difficulties may cause acute distress at mid-life, and this may give people a push towards finally coming to terms with them. If we ourselves experience serious illness, it may create a powerful urge for change. We may have a greater sense of focus, and feel that we can't continue to live in an unsatisfying way.

**Empty nest syndrome:** Because women still tend to spend more time with their children and have a closer relationship with them, they may experience particular difficulties at mid-life as their children grow up, leave home and lead independent lives. But men may also find the experience of their children moving on painful. If either parent has been too busy pursuing their career to have a close relationship with their children, they may feel that any chance for a deeper relationship has slipped past.

**Working life:** Mid-life may be the time when people have to accept that they are not going to be at the top of the tree. They may have to face up to the fact that younger people are being given greater opportunities for promotion. If someone's whole life has been built around the structure of work and achievement, he or she may find redundancy or early retirement very difficult.

**Marriage break-up:** Some 30% of marriages split up between the ages of forty and sixty, and there are complex reasons for this. Marriages may have been cemented by the shared responsibility of bringing up children and can break up when that common purpose no longer exists. If people have been in an unhappy relationship for years, mid-life may be the crunch period; the time when they feel it's their last chance to strike out for themselves. The power balance in a partnership may change when, for example, a man has to take early retirement just as his wife is developing greater confidence, retraining for work and enjoying greater freedom because the children have left home.

**Becoming a carer:** A substantial number of people, particularly women, in their mid-life years are also involved in caring for disabled or ill partners and relatives. Their physical and mental health is quite likely to be undermined by this demanding job.

**Menopause:** There are a great range of responses to menopause. Some women may mourn the loss of their fertility, whilst others feel liberated. Men can also experience physical changes and a loss in sexual potency. Contact your GP for further information.

**How can I cope with mid-life difficulties?** You may be in a state of emotional turmoil without being able to define what, if anything, you want changed. It's important to look carefully at all the different areas of your life, to identify how you want to live in the future. You may have an instinctive feeling that this is make or break time, and that you need to leave a job or a relationship in order to flourish. Or you may see no need for radical change, but wish to improve your relationships, develop creative interests, retrain, or start your own business, for instance. Be realistic and honest with yourself.

**Reassess your life:** Try considering all the important beliefs you hold, perhaps unwittingly, about your own life, such as, "I must stay in this relationship, however painful it is, because there's no alternative", or "I only have value in my role as a parent and taking care of others". Write down the reasons why you hold these views. Are they still valid? Do they fit in with the life you want in the future?

**Plan for the future:** Mid-life can provide tremendous opportunities for personal growth and positive change. Many people acquire a wisdom, maturity and self-confidence they lacked earlier. These can be immensely useful in dealing with existing relationships and lifestyle as well as forging new beginnings. You may decide to work part-time, so as to develop a creative interest, or spend more time with your family. You may identify an area of work that interests you more than your current job. Or you may wish to become involved in voluntary work or to retrain and acquire new skills.

If there have been long-term difficulties in your relationship, you could consider having counselling as a couple. Many people who feel isolated by the problems that they experience in their middle years find support groups vital in coming to terms with their difficulties. You may wish to put more time into reaching out to others and developing friendships which, at an earlier stage in your life, you may not have had time for.

**Identify the positive aspects:** It's possible to view mid-life crisis as a mid-life quest. It can be a time of opportunity when, in letting go of our younger selves, we can also put behind us past disappointments, failures and memories of our own less-than-perfect behaviour. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of growing older, you can view this period as a time for moving forward, a time for developing your own sense of values, rather than conforming to the expectations of others. Start by doing things you wouldn't normally do and don't use age as an excuse not to try new approaches.

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