

Planning Your Mid-Life “Crisis”

The term “midlife crisis” was coined by psychologist Elliott Jacques in 1965, and was grasped by Freudian psychologists of the time. Freud’s one-time protégé Carl Jung described it as a normal part of adult maturation, a period in which a taking stock occurred and resulted in typical existential anxiety. The period was described as “middle adulthood” by personality theorist Erik Erikson, and he postulated that it was a period in which one naturally grapples with the notions of meaning and purpose, which would presumably result in some angst. **However, more recent research suggests that this period, when approached consciously and actively, can actually be a period of deeper meaning and profundity rather than anxiety.**

There is perhaps no other time in life less studied and understood than the mid-life “crisis” – the period during middle adulthood in which most people are undergoing the related yet distinct processes of reflecting on the first half of their lives while planning for the second half. According to psychologist Orville Gilbert Brim, Ph.D., “midlife--the years between 30 and 70, with 40 to 60 at its core--is the least charted territory in human development.” The potential reasons for this are varying – from the complications of the shifting of the center of “middle aged” from 40 to 55 due to the elongating life span to the possibility that those in middle age being so busy that they simply don’t have the time to participate in studies - but the fact remains that many people aren’t receiving the guidance they require during this critical life period.

How Can a Mid-Life “Crisis” Manifest?

Symptoms of a mid-life transition can include:

- Discontentment or boredom with life or with the lifestyle (including people and things) that have provided fulfillment for a long time
- Feeling restless and wanting to do something completely different
- Questioning decisions made years earlier and the meaning of life
- Confusion about who you are or where your life is going
- Daydreaming
- Irritability, unexpected anger
- Persistent sadness
- Acting on alcohol, drug, food, or other compulsions
- Greatly decreased or increased sexual desire
- Sexual affairs, especially with someone much younger
- Greatly decreased or increased ambition

Who is Most Susceptible?

Research indicates women experience more “crossover stressors” during midlife – that is, simultaneous demands from multiple arenas in life (i.e. work and home) than males, and as a result report significantly more distress. Additionally, there are socioeconomic factors; while those from lower SES report the same number of stressors as those from higher SES, they reported significantly more distress.

There is also a specific subset of men that are particularly susceptible to the distress of midlife transition. This is related to what's known as "gender expansion," or when gender roles become less rigid later in the life span, and males become more nurturing and females become more assertive at midlife. Research indicates that men who perceived their mothers as strong and domineering, and their fathers as weak and ineffectual, begin to experience fears that this natural process of gender expansion will result in their wives becoming their mothers, and they will become their fathers, and these projections result in distress.

Meaning Making

One of the challenges of this age period is the natural inclination to look back on the first half of life, reflect on it, and attempt to contextualize one's experience. What have I contributed to society? Am I living according to my internally prescribed values? Am I happy with where I am? Am I well-positioned for the future? This process can easily expand to include a reconsideration of human existence. While this can obviously result in some distress, including potential regret, fear for the future, or a realization that life's goals are not being met, it can also be an opportunity to assess and recalibrate and live more intentionally in accordance to current values.

Approaching This Period of Life Consciously and Actively

Here are some ideas of how to best deal with the distinct challenges mid life can bring:

- **Get a jump on it.** Beginning the process of assessing and reassessing early can be of help. Those who change careers in their 20s and 30s experience less severe distress during midlife.
- **Embrace the process of meaning making.** Meaning can be found in service to others, in reconnecting with one's spiritual life, and having a purposeful work life. Volunteering, spending time with your spiritual mentors, and connecting with the deeper purpose of your career can mitigate some of the stress associated with midlife transition.
- **Look forward as well as back.** Find some role models of those who aged gracefully. Create a positive image of yourself and consciously develop into that, rather than regressing.
- **Continue to respect and honor your body.** Prioritize your physical and sexual health. Eat properly, exercise regularly, and emphasize healthy sleep patterns.
- **Talk to others about it.** A solitary process is more likely to be experienced as sad or confusing. Talk to friends or family about your thoughts and feelings, and/or work with a therapist to help you embrace this time of growth in your life.

References

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