Midlife crisis
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For the song by Faith No More, see Midlife Crisis. For the psychological concept, see Generativity vs. Stagnation.

Midlife crisis is a term coined in 1965 by Elliott Jaques stating a time where adults come to realize their own mortality and how much time is left in their life.[1] A midlife crisis is experienced by many people during the midlife transition when they realize that life may be more than halfway over. Sometimes, a crisis can be triggered by transitions experienced in these years, such as andropause or menopause, the death of parents or other causes of grief, unemployment or underemployment, realizing that a job or career is hated but not knowing how else to earn an equivalent living, or children leaving home. People may reassess their achievements in terms of their dreams. The result may be a desire to make significant changes in core aspects of day-to-day life or situation, such as in career, work-life balance, marriage, romantic relationships, large expenditures, or physical appearance.

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Crisis vs stressors

Academic research since the 1980s rejects the notion of midlife crisis as a phase that most adults go through. In one study, fewer than 10% of people in the United States had psychological crises due to their age or aging.[2] Personality type and a history of psychological crisis are believed to predispose some people to this "traditional" midlife crisis.[3] People going through this suffer a variety of symptoms and exhibit a disparate range of behaviors.

It is important to understand the difference between a midlife crisis and a midlife stressor. As stated before midlife is a time from 40-60 where a person is often evaluating their own life. However, many midlife stressors are often labeled as a midlife crisis. David Almadia states that day to day stressors are likely to add up and be thought of as a crisis but in reality it is simply an "overload".[4]

Many middle aged adults experience major life events that can cause a period of psychological stress or depression, such as the death of a loved one, or a career setback. However, those events could have happened earlier or later in life, making them a "crisis," but not necessarily a midlife one. In the same study, 15% of
middle-aged adults experienced this type of midlife turmoil.

Some studies indicate that some cultures may be more sensitive to this phenomenon than others; one study found that there is little evidence that people undergo midlife crises in Japanese and Indian cultures, raising the question of whether a midlife crisis is mainly a cultural construct. The authors hypothesized that the "culture of youth" in Western societies accounts for the popularity of the midlife crisis concept there.[5]

Researchers have found that midlife is often a time for reflection and reassessment, but this is not always accompanied by the psychological upheaval popularly associated with "midlife crisis."[6]

**Occurrence**

For the approximately 10% of middle aged adults who go through an age-related midlife crisis, the condition is most common ranging from the ages of 40-60 (a large study in the 1990s[7] found that the average age at onset of a self-described midlife crisis was 46). Midlife crises last about 3–10 years in men and 2–5 years in women. A midlife crisis could be caused by aging itself, or aging in combination with changes, problems, or regrets over:

- work or career (or lack thereof)
- spousal relationships (or lack thereof)
- maturation of children (or lack thereof)
- aging or death of parents
- physical changes associated with aging

Midlife crises seem to affect men and women differently. An American cultural stereotype of a man going through a midlife crisis is that he buys a sports car. Researchers[8] have proposed that the triggers for midlife crisis differ between men and women, with male midlife crises more likely to be caused by work issues and female crises by personal evaluations of their roles. Even though there are differences between why men and women go through a midlife crisis, the emotions they both encounter can be extremely frightening.

**Characteristics**

One of the main characteristics of a midlife crisis perspective is one assumes that their midlife is about to be eventful, usually in a negative way, and potentially stressful. Additionally, they often see their life coming to a drastic decline.

Individuals experiencing a midlife crisis have some of these feelings:

- search of an undefined dream or goal
- a deep sense of remorse for goals not accomplished
- a fear of humiliation among more successful colleagues
- desire to achieve a feeling of youthfulness
- need to spend more time alone or with certain peers

They exhibit some of these behaviors:

- abuse of alcohol
- acquisition of unusual or expensive items such as motorbikes, boats, clothing, sports cars, jewelry, gadgets, tattoos, piercings, etc.
- depression
- Having remorse for one's wrongs.
- paying special attention to physical appearance such as covering baldness, wearing youthful designer clothes, etc.
- entering relationships with younger people (either/or sexual, professional, parental, etc.)
- placing overimportance (and possibly a psychologically damaging amount) on their children to excel in areas such as sports, arts, or academics

**Treatment and prevention**

Dealing with a midlife crisis may take time and energy but it is important to understand that there are many coping skills that can help as well as lifestyle changes that can be made earlier in life. It is very important for a person to explore and share their feelings by either trusting a friend or seeing a therapist. A person in midlife needs to reevaluate and think of what their life goals can be.

Exercise and a good diet are also lifestyle decisions that can help. Most of all it is important to embrace midlife, and not fear it.⁹ By improving your lifestyle behaviors, many problems in life can be reversed. Physical activity can reduce an extreme amount of tension and reduces a good amount of stress one may be feeling. A balanced, nutritious meal plan is also important along with sleep and rest.

A psychotherapist can be helpful during a mid-life crisis because it provides an opportunity to enter the next step of your life with a greater awareness of who you were, who you are, and who you want to be. With the help of this therapist, one's issues and problems that have been building up can be worked on. Additionally, they will help you set up a plan to take the next step in your life, without bringing up your negativity from the past.⁹

There are also life changes that can be made early in life to prevent a midlife crisis. Susan Krauss Whitbourne found in her research that those who switched jobs earlier in life had a greater sense of generativity.¹⁰

Dr. Prabha Chandra, a professor of psychiatry, believes that a midlife crisis can be prevented. It is recommended to treat it as a transitional phase. In other words, view it as an opening for new opportunities and positive growth. Also, it can be beneficial to accept aging early. Mental preparation may reduce overwhelming feelings that lead to crisis.

**Theoretical basis**

The notion of the midlife crisis began with followers of Sigmund Freud, who thought that during middle age everyone’s thoughts were driven by the fear of impending death.¹¹ Although midlife crisis has lately received more attention in popular culture than serious research, there are some theoretical constructs supporting the notion. Jungian theory holds that midlife is key to individuation, a process of self-actualization and self-awareness that contains many potential paradoxes.¹² Although Carl Jung did not describe midlife crisis per se, the midlife integration of thinking, sensation, feeling, and intuition that he describes could, it seems, lead to confusion about one's life to date and one's goals.

Erik Erikson's life stage of generativity versus stagnation also coincides with the idea of a midlife crisis. Erikson believed that in this stage adults begin to understand the pressure of being committed to improving the lives of generations to come. In this stage a person realizes the inevitability of mortality and that they will not be around forever and the virtue of this stage is creating a better world for future generations in order for the human race to grow. Stagnation is the lack of psychological movement or growth. Instead of helping the community a person
is barely able to help their own family. Those who experience stagnation do not invest in the growth of themselves or others. This is relatable to midlife crisis because a person becomes aware of the time they have left on Earth and decide how they want to spend that time.

Some psychologists believe men's midlife crisis is a psychological reaction to the imminent menopause and end of reproductive career of their spouses. Their genes may be influencing men to be more attracted to reproductive women, and less attached to their non-reproductive spouses.

**Criticism**

Some people have challenged the existence of midlife crises altogether. One study found that 23% of participants had what they called a "midlife crisis," but in digging deeper, only one-third of those—8% of the total—said the crisis was associated with realizations about aging.

The balance (15% of those surveyed) had experienced major life experiences or transitions such as divorce or loss of a job in middle age and described them as "midlife crisis." While there is no doubt these events can be traumatic—the associated grief reactions can be indistinguishable from depression—these upheavals aren't unique to middle age and aren't an age-related midlife crisis.

University of California - Davis researchers Carolyn Alwin and Michael Levenson presented the current view of midlife crisis in a 2001 article:

Costa and McCrae (1980) found little evidence for an increase in neuroticism in midlife ... While they did find that some people were likely to experience such crises, ... these individuals were likely to experience crises in their 20s and 30s, and these experiences were not unique to midlife. ...Robinson, Rosenberg, and Farrell (1999) reinterviewed (500) men. Looking back over their midlife period, it became evident that while not necessarily entailing crisis, it was a time for re-evaluation.

Wrapping up their review of men's midlife crisis, Alwin and Levenson wrote that "... Given the bulk of the data, it is likely that, for most men, midlife is a time of achievement and satisfaction. For a certain proportion of men, however, the passage is not at all smooth." They found a similar pattern when they reviewed research on what are commonly thought to be triggers for women's midlife crisis: menopause, children leaving home, the "sandwich" of caring for both parents and children. Most women navigated those periods without a traumatic psychological "crisis."

The enduring popularity of the midlife crisis concept may be explained by another finding by Robinson et al. As Alwin and Levenson summarize: "... younger men, now middle-aged Baby Boomers, used the term "midlife crisis" to describe nearly any setback, either in their career or family life."

Levinson's findings were research about the possible existence of a midlife crisis and its implications. Whereas Levinson (1978) found that 80% of middle-aged participants had a crisis, and Ciernia (1985) reported that 70% of men in midlife said they had a crisis (Shek, 1996) others could not replicate those findings including Shek (1996), Kruger (1994), McCrae and Costa (1990), and Whitbourne (2010). The debate of whether or not there is a midlife crisis is being answered through recent research that attempts to balance such factors as response bias and experimenter effects in order to establish internal validity. The above mentioned research does not support Levinson's model of a single age in the middle years that is a designated time of transition and potential "crisis." Instead, changes in personality can occur throughout the adult years with no peak in general distress or psychosocial crisis (Whitbourne, Sneed, and Sayer, 2009).
Many view midlife as a negative, but in reality many hint to the experience being a positive. If looked at as a time of personal growth, the experience can be greatly beneficial and rewarding. If treated as a transitional phase, psychologists believe the initial experience may be difficult and confusing but as time passes becomes an experience of self growth and self-realization.[16]

In popular culture

The midlife crisis has been the subject of many television series and films, often the source of amusement in sitcoms, soaps and other television productions. The 1970s Polish television series, Czterdziestolatek meaning "The 40-Year-Old" was entirely geared towards covering midlife crisis issues in a comedy series. In the Australian television series, Neighbours, Karl Kennedy went though a midlife crisis dating young women and changing his appearance. The American television show Louie sees a fictionalized Louis C.K. struggle with his midlife crisis, attempting to readjust to single life after the breakdown of a nine-year marriage and trying to raise his two young daughters.

While the classic 1955 movie The Seven Year Itch deals with the supposed decline of marital quality after seven years of marriage, the protagonist Richard Sherman (played by Tom Ewell) is obviously going through a midlife crisis. In fact, the book that proposes the seven-year-itch hypothesis, entitled "Of Man and the Unconscious", even has a chapter on "The Repressed Urge in the Middle-Aged Male: Its Roots and Its Consequences" connecting it to the midlife crisis in men. As an editor for a publishing house, Sherman reads – and reads into – this psychological study which he believes directly corresponds to increasingly erotic, frenetic, and ultimately frantic daydreams stemming from his flirtation with the new nubile neighbor upstairs (Marilyn Monroe in one of her most memorable roles).

Decidedly more serious takes on the subject include John Cheever's short stories, "The Country Husband" and "The Swimmer", shedding light on modern '60s era suburbia, as well as more bittersweet and timely turns at the turn of the millennium in the films American Beauty (2000 Academy Awards Best Picture winner) and Lost in Translation.

English progressive rocker, Roger Waters, formerly of Pink Floyd, also released a solo album, The Pros and Cons of Hitch-Hiking, which explores a man and his midlife crisis as he dreams of having an affair and tries desperately to find solutions to his problems. Similarly, The Kinks' songs, "Shangri-La" and "Clichés of the World (B Movie)", also appear to describe someone going through a midlife crisis.

See also

- Meaning of life
- Quarter-life crisis
- Empty nest syndrome
- Understanding the Mid-Life Crisis

Notes


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Categories: Middle age