

Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?

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We've all heard the cliché about the guy who, as middle age approaches, ditches the family wagon for a red-hot sports car and trades in his wife for a younger model. This exaggerated response to reaching middle age certainly doesn't happen in every household. But it's not uncommon for both men and women to experience some form of 'midlife crisis.' What's to blame, and how can you survive it and even come out ahead? Here's what the experts have to say.

Are Hormones to Blame?

Some experts say hormones -- declining ones, that is -- play a role in the midlife crisis. "At midlife, males' biological production of testosterone begins to wane," says James Sniechowski, PhD, co-founder of the Men's Health Network, a national nonprofit. Men's overall drive and stamina diminish along with their sex hormones, says Sniechowski.

During middle age, women also experience the decline of a sex hormone, estrogen. But as a woman loses estrogen, another pre-existing hormone becomes more dominant. "The percentage of testosterone increases," says clinical psychologist Judith Sherven. As a result, says Sherven, many of her female patients report feeling more energy, more ambition, and more gumption -- characteristics typically attributed to males.

While Sherven suggests that females' changing ratio of testosterone to estrogen fuels these changes, she admits that what's happening in a woman's life may also account for a renewed sense of self. "Particularly for women who have stayed home with children, as their familial responsibilities decline they feel a drive to create something new," Sherven tells WebMD. Not necessarily the result of a 'crisis,' these changes are more aptly perceived as arising from midlife 'opportunities.'

Psychiatrist Robert Tan concurs. "After completing their family-raising duties, a lot of females have the urge to spend the next phase of their life challenged in new ways. They may return to school, start a business, or otherwise launch themselves into another productive phase," says Tan, associate professor of geriatrics at the University of Texas.

While medical experts do not dispute the physiological changes that occur during midlife, not everyone agrees that hormones drive the midlife crisis. "Because the timing of hormonal decline coincides with midlife, there's some confusion. But the midlife crisis is really more of a psychological phenomenon than a hormonal issue," Tan says.

When Midlife Leads to Depression

For some, says Tan, a midlife crisis can trigger depression. "The adjustment to midlife may make people unable to cope with reality. Feelings, like 'I'm inadequate,' or 'I can't

perform,' may follow," Tan tells WebMD. These emotions, particularly when repressed, can cause depression to surface. Men tend to be at greater risk. "Men, by and large, do not express themselves well," Tan says.

But that may be changing. "There are more options for men to make real connections these days," says Glenn Good, PhD, associate professor of counseling at University of Missouri. "There's increasing support for men to have real friendships -- outside of the sports bar, the gym, or sporting events." In a more supportive environment, men confronting midlife may be willing to talk about things they wouldn't otherwise, like waning feelings of invincibility and uncertainty about the future.

Coping With a Crisis

As we reach our 40s or 50s, most of us will begin to question what we've done with our lives thus far, and what lies ahead. We cannot change the fact that we are aging and will eventually confront our own mortality. But we can choose how to cope with this truth, and how we want to live out the remainder of our lives. Midlife needn't be a crisis. But if you feel one brewing, consider the following coping strategies.

Address it. "Not paying attention to a midlife crisis only intensifies it. It can lead to severe and damaging behavior," Sniechowski says. Trying to 'block out' the internal crisis may lead to harmful behaviors like alcohol and substance abuse. And, as emotions surrounding the crisis build, they can manifest in misdirected anger at family and friends. Plus, ignoring it won't make it go away. "If you suppress it, it will resurface," Tan says.

Don't dump your long-term relationship like a hot potato. "It's easy to become disenchanted with a long-term partner. But there's much to be said about being in a relationship in which a person knows you well," Good tells WebMD. He advises middle-aged people who feel restless in their personal relationships to ask themselves whether they can be repaired, or even strengthened.

Talk about it. "Couples need to start talking as they've never talked before," Sherven tells WebMD. "For couples who have thought they would just go along and pretty much stay as they've always been, changes in midlife can be upsetting." Couples who don't talk about the changes they're undergoing end up feeling resentment, annoyance, and a general undercurrent of unhappiness with their partner, warns Sherven. Other experts suggest that finding a neutral party in whom to confide may work best. "You may want to share your feelings with someone who won't pass judgment, like a friend or a counselor," Good says.

"Don't jump at the easiest answer," Good suggests. Distractions like a new 'toy' or playmate, while tempting to some, are relatively fleeting, he explains. "Instead, ask yourself, 'What goals are appropriate for me now?'" Good says.

Try to approach midlife as an opportunity. "A midlife crisis can be extremely exciting. It can be a thrilling 'jumping off' point to do what we've never been willing to risk doing before," Sherven says.

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SOURCES: James Sniechowski, PhD, co-founder, Men's Health Network. Robert Tan, MD, associate professor of geriatrics, University of Texas. Judith Sherven, PhD, clinical psychologist. Glenn Good, PhD, associate professor of counseling, University of Missouri.

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