

# HOW TO ... survive mid-life crisis



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# HOW TO ... survive mid-life crisis

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"I thought that there must be something wrong with me that I was feeling so hopeless; that I looked at my four lovely sons and a life which has so much good in it, and felt a hollowness about it all. There was nothing dramatic to report; I didn't have a single serious problem which people could understand. It was just the feeling of nothing being right anymore had crept over me and wouldn't go away."

**This booklet examines some of the causes and symptoms of a mid-life crisis and describes ways of coping and moving on. The feelings associated with mid-life crisis can be extremely painful and frightening, but they can also provide an enormous impetus to change and develop in ways that might have seemed impossible any earlier.**



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

Many people find that they experience powerful emotional upheavals at some point in the 40 to 60 age range. A mid-life crisis may involve complex factors. It may be to do with some unresolved difficulties from the past, or dissatisfaction with the present. It could be a sense of lost opportunities, or a fear of diminished options in the future and of growing older in what can be an ageist society.

During our 20s and early 30s, many of us strive to conform to handed-down ideas about how we should live our lives. We follow a map that has largely been drawn up by others. This route may involve passing exams, getting a job, building a career, forming close relationships and perhaps having children. Of course, many people don't conform to this traditional pattern and have been more concerned with self-expression and with developing a less conventional way of life.

Whichever path we have followed during the earlier part of our lives, in our later 30s and early 40s we realise that it's half-time. The growing recognition that we are not young anymore can trigger painful feelings of loss. We may feel that we haven't done what we really wanted to do, and are dissatisfied with what we've achieved. We may recognise that we need to change and find a new direction and different sources of fulfilment.

Naturally, it's not the case that we all go merrily through life until aged 45 or 50, we suddenly have a mid-life crisis. Many of us will have experienced crises and losses earlier on in life. What we go through during our middle years will be an expression of each person's unique life-history 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's a time of transition that 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. It can be a time when we become more interested in exploring parts of ourselves that we have lost touch with, when we develop greater self-knowledge and a sense of inner strength, and become less dependent on the approval of others. We may cultivate a greater interest in spiritual matters and express hidden skills and creativity. Many people also find that relationships become deeper and more rewarding.

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## **What are the signs of a mid-life crisis?**

Everyone reacts in their own way to what amounts to an 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.

## **Breaking away**

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 our lives and the desire to create a more positive future. 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 job, the painful feelings would go away.

## **Fear of the future**

Many people feel fearful about leaving their youth behind them. The goals and ambitions that keep 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.

There are many ways in which you can work on making sense of confusing feelings, and particularly if your emotional turmoil is extreme. You may find it useful to talk about your distress and explore the meaning of such feelings with a counsellor or therapist (see *Useful organisations* on p. 12 and *Further reading* on p. 14 for more information).

### **What are the causes of mid-life crisis?**

In our culture, youth is too often portrayed as the ideal state. The patronising and stereotyping imagery of older people in advertisements, television programmes and films is enough to make you nod in despairing agreement with American writer Dorothy Parker who declared, 'People ought to be one of two things, young or dead'. Older people are seen as being less interesting, attractive, creative or energetic than young people. In Western cultures, we do not value the knowledge, skills and wisdom that many older people have developed, and the importance of learning from them.



#### **Physical appearance**

Many of us may have been particularly influenced by the notion that a youthfully attractive appearance is the be-all and end-all. We may find it very difficult to realise the worth of a different outlook; of the values and depth of understanding that we may acquire in growing older. There is an enormous denial of our own mortality and a 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.

#### **Standard of living**

Ageing emphasises class and gender inequalities. People who are well-off are able to maintain their standard of living and are more likely to view their older years as providing exciting opportunities. Older women may find it particularly difficult to build up security for their later years. Many women spend less time in paid work because of family responsibilities and are more likely to have been in less well-paid jobs with lower pensions, if any. Ageism operates in the field of employment. Job advertisements frequently specify upper age limits and stress the need for quick thinking and bubbling energy as though these attributes only belong to the very young. People may find it hard to get into certain areas of employment after the ages of 40 to 45.

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## **Awareness of death**

In spite of death being a taboo subject, we become increasingly aware at mid-life 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 with the pain of their loss, as well as realising that we are the next generation in line.

People who have had distressing childhood experiences and have cut themselves off from family members may feel the need for reconciliation before it's too late. Unresolved childhood difficulties may cause acute distress at mid-life, which may give us the impetus to finally come to terms with them. If we ourselves experience serious illness, this may act as a powerful catalyst for change. We may have a greater sense of focus and feel that we can't continue to live in an unsatisfying way.

## **Changing roles**

Because women still tend to spend more time with their children and have closer relationships with them, they may experience particular difficulties at mid-life as their children grow up and leave home.

Men may also find the experience of their children moving on painful. If they have 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. Men whose whole lives have been built around the structure of work and achievement may find redundancy or early retirement very difficult. Mid-life may be the time when people have to accept that younger people are being promoted over them.

## **Relationships**

Some 30 per cent of marriages split up between the ages of 40 and 60 and there are complex reasons for this. Marriages may have been cemented by the shared responsibility of child-rearing 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. For example, a man may have to take early retirement as his wife is developing greater confidence, retraining for work and enjoying greater freedom as the children leave home.

Many people in their mid-life years, particularly women, are also involved in caring for disabled or ill partners and relatives, and their physical and mental health may be undermined by this demand.

### **What impact is the menopause likely to have?**

There is an enormous negative mythology about the menopause. Much of the medical literature suggests that woman going through the menopause are thoroughly overwhelmed by their changing hormone levels and become incapable of rational thought and behaviour and prone to depression. In contrast, there is the stiff-upper-lip school of thought exemplified by the phrase 'she sailed through it' that implies that women shouldn't make a fuss about something so trivial.



In fact, there are a great range of responses. Some women may mourn the loss of their fertility whilst others feel liberated. Women who have chosen not to have children may experience doubts about their choice and those who wanted children, but were not able to have them, may feel great anguish. Some women experience debilitating symptoms such as hot flushes and sweats for several years, whilst others have no more than minor discomfort. It's a myth that the menopause causes all of the changes we experience at mid-life. Research has shown that unemployment or poverty have more to do with any mental or physical symptoms than whether a woman is going through the menopause.

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A large number of women are prescribed Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) to relieve menopausal symptoms. There are risks as well as benefits associated with HRT and many women use alternative and self-help approaches, such as adjusting their diet, relaxation and meditation and joining support groups. If you are experiencing problems, your doctor should be able to point you to a support group.

## Male menopause

Many older men also experience distressing physical changes and a decline in sexual potency. As men age, a number of hormonal, physiological and chemical changes occur in their bodies. This is sometimes referred to as the male menopause, but is more commonly known as the andropause. Characteristic medical conditions, like enlarged prostate, may develop. Sexual function is often compromised, stamina and temperament can be affected too. Emotionally too, men can have quite serious repercussions from andropause, including severe depression.



## How can I cope with mid-life difficulties?

You may feel in a state of emotional turmoil without being able to define what, if anything, you wish to change. 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. Other people see no need for radical change, but wish to improve their relationships, develop creative interests, retrain, or start their own businesses. Be realistic and as honest with yourself as possible.

### 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? What alternatives might there be?

### Plan for the future

Oscar Wilde famously stated, 'Youth is wasted on the young'. Mid-life can provide tremendous opportunities for personal growth and positive change. Many people acquire a wisdom, maturity and self-confidence that was distinctly lacking in earlier life. 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 employment 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. For more information on careers or training for older people, see *Useful organisations* on p. 12.

### Couple counselling

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 (see *Useful organisations* on p. 12 and *Further reading* on p. 14.) You may wish to put more time into reaching out to others and developing friendships.

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## **Identify the positive aspects of mid-life**

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 the image of ourselves as young people, we can also put behind us past disappointments, failures and memories of our own less-than-perfect behaviour.

Many people, even those who dread the prospect of ageing, actually say they would not wish to be young again. It's important to remember problems and insecurities you had when you were younger, and identify skills and knowledge that you can now use to deal with your present difficulties.

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, such as talking to a new person or joining a society or evening class. Bear in mind that Tolstoy, the Russian author, learned to ride a bike at the age of 67. Don't use age as an excuse not to try new approaches.

## **Assert yourself**

You will need to be assertive about shaping home, family, life and work as you would like them to be. Many people, particularly women, may feel guilty about taking care of themselves, having time to themselves, saying 'no' to others' demands and setting boundaries. There may be a long-standing pattern in your life of fitting in with everyone else's wants and needs and neglecting your own (see Mind's booklets, *How to Assert Yourself* and *How to Increase Your Self-esteem*, details on p. 14).

### Talk it through

Some people find that talking about their problems with a psychotherapist or a counsellor helps them to make sense of confusing and painful feelings. Counselling may be short-term and focus on immediate practical issues and goals. Psychotherapy tends to be a more long-term process and involves looking at deeply-rooted patterns of behaviour and attitudes, developing an understanding of why we may be trapped in destructive situations and relationships and what we can do to change. See *Useful organisations* on p. 12 and Mind's booklet, *Understanding Talking Treatments*, details on p. 14.

### Take care of yourself

Health professionals stress that it's possible to prevent potential health problems if you make some changes at mid-life. This may involve stopping smoking, cutting down on alcohol, starting an exercise programme and eating healthily. Women may find that distressing menopausal symptoms may well be helped by changing what they eat without having recourse to drugs. Many people find that learning a relaxation technique or meditation, or trying alternative approaches, such as acupuncture and massage, are useful tools in dealing with stress. For more information on taking care of yourself, see *Useful organisations* on p. 12 and *Further reading* on p. 14.

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## Useful organisations

### Cruse Bereavement Care

126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR

helpline: 0870 167 1677

office tel. 020 8939 9530, fax: 020 8939 9530

web: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

e-mail: [info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk](mailto:info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Provides support services for people who have been bereaved

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwicks CV21 2PJ

tel. 0870 443 5252, fax: 0870 443 5160

minicom: 0870 443 5162, e-mail: [bac@bac.co.uk](mailto:bac@bac.co.uk)

web: [www.counselling.co.uk](http://www.counselling.co.uk)

Send an SAE for details of practitioners in your area

### Carers UK

20–25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT

carers' line: 0808 808 7777, tel. 020 7490 8818

minicom: 020 7251 8969, fax: 020 7490 8824

e-mail: [info@ukcarers.org](mailto:info@ukcarers.org), web: [www.carersuk.demon.co.uk](http://www.carersuk.demon.co.uk)

Information and advice on all aspects of caring

### Careline

Cardinal Heenan Centre, 326 High Road, Ilford IG1 1QP

helpline: 020 8514 1177, office tel. 020 8514 5444

fax: 020 8478 7943, e-mail: [careline@totalise.co.uk](mailto:careline@totalise.co.uk)

Telephone counselling on any issue

### Men's Health Line

Medical Advisory Service, PO Box 3087, London W4 4ZP

helpline: 020 8995 4448, fax: 020 8995 3275

Health information service on issues relating to men's health



### **New Ways to Work**

26 Shacklewell Lane, London E8 2EZ

helpline: 020 7503 3578, fax: 020 7503 2386

e-mail: [info@new-ways.co.uk](mailto:info@new-ways.co.uk), web: [www.new-ways.co.uk](http://www.new-ways.co.uk)

Advice and information about employment and return to work

### **Relate**

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP

tel. 01788 573241, fax: 01788 535007

web: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

Relationship counselling

### **The Samaritans**

10 The Grove, Slough SL1 1QP

helpline: 0845 790 9090, fax: 01753 819 004

e-mail: [jo@samaritans.org.uk](mailto:jo@samaritans.org.uk), web: [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

Helpline offering emotional support for anyone in a crisis

### **Women's Health**

52 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT

helpline: 0845 125 5254, tel. 020 7251 6333

fax: 020 7250 4152

e-mail: [health@womenshealthlondon.org.uk](mailto:health@womenshealthlondon.org.uk)

web: [www.womenshealthlondon.org.uk](http://www.womenshealthlondon.org.uk)

Telephone helpline on various aspects of women's health

### **Women Returners Network (WRN)**

Chelmsford College, Moulsham Street, Chelmsford CM2 0JQ

tel. 01245 263 796, fax: 01245 491 712

e-mail: [womenreturners@hotmail.com](mailto:womenreturners@hotmail.com)

web: [www.women-returners.co.uk](http://www.women-returners.co.uk)

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## Further reading and order form

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- The Assertiveness Workbook* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- How to Accept Yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- Essential Help for your Nerves* Dr C. Weekes (Thorsons 2000) £8.99
- How to Assert Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope as a Carer* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Cope with Relationship Problems* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Increase Your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 1999) £1
- How to Survive Family Life* (Mind 1998) £1
- How to Stop Worrying* (Mind 1998) £1
- Learn to Meditate* D. Fontana (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.95
- Learn to Relax* M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.99
- Learn to Relax* M. George (audio tape) (Duncan Baird 2000) £4.99
- Making the Most of your Relationships: How to find satisfaction and intimacy with family and friends* W. Stewart (How to Books 2001) £7.99
- Meditation: An introductory guide to the healing power of touch* S. Mitchell (Element 1999)
- The Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Physical Activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Shift Your Thinking, Change Your Life* (Sheldon Press 2001) £6.99
- Stress: Restoring balance to our lives* B. Grant Viagas (The Women's Press 2001) £7.99
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Bereavement* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Childhood Distress* (Mind 1997) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1

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Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:  
**autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.**

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 0845 7660 163 Monday to Friday 9.15am–5.15pm.

For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Tynetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Tynetalk dial 0800 959598, fax. 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000.

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474.



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