

*Maggie Jacobus*  
*The Outpost Exchange*  
*Midlife Crisis*  
*2,790 words*  
*November 15, 2002*

The midlife crisis appears to have gone the way of the Bee Gees, pet rocks and mood rings.

A common term in the American self-help vernacular of the '70's, the classic midlife crisis, complete with Woody Allen-style fear of aging, obsession with death, and desperate clinging to one's so-called glory days, has gone out of style, recent research reveals.

The largest study ever done on midlife, funded by the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, found that, of 700 people surveyed between the ages of 28 and 78, only about 10 percent had had a midlife crisis. At least, a midlife crisis as defined by sociologists, who confine it to being "personal turmoil and coping challenges in people age 39 through 50 prompted by fears and anxieties about growing older."

"About 25% of the people we interviewed for this study laughed out loud at the idea of a midlife crisis," Cornell University sociologist Elaine Wethington shared in a telephone interview. Wethington was one of the lead researchers on the MacArthur Foundation portion of the study that focused on midlife crisis. "They said midlife crisis is nothing but media hype, a hook for car ads or an excuse to do something bad to others."

That's not to say that people aren't having *life* crises; they are. The majority of crises, however, aren't brought on by fear of aging and they aren't restricted only to people between the ages of 39 and 50. So they technically aren't *midlife* crises, as defined by psychologist Elliot Jacques who coined the term in 1965. And they aren't an inevitable phase of life, as was initially proposed by such popular authors as Gail Sheehy in her 1970's classic book, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*. In fact, the very thing that seemed to define a life-changing crisis for participants in the MacArthur Foundation study was the very *unpredictability* of an event. "People who'd said they had a crisis attributed it to something happening that was unexpected," Wethington said, such as an accident, a divorce, a severe illness, the death of a spouse, or the loss of a job.

Dr. Ashok Bedi, M.D., a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, believes these types of events may be unexpected, but they are not random or without purpose. "The midlife crisis is a necessary initiation ritual to find one's true, authentic self," he said in an interview at his office on the campus of Milwaukee Psychiatric Hospital. He pointed out that age is not so much a factor in determining if or when a crisis might manifest.

Because midlife crisis has so many negative connotations, is outmoded and is just plain a misnomer, many counselors and other experts dislike using the word. So let's rename this life event, so people can focus on the message of it and not be hung up on the stigma of it being a *midlife* crisis.

Wethington likes the term “turning points.” Others use phrases such as “rites of passage”, a “quest,” “life re-evaluation,” a “search for the sacred.”

Some people object to the word “crisis,” finding it too overblown and hysterical. Others believe the word fits exactly, especially when examined as the Chinese character for crisis, which is actually two words combined: “danger” and “opportunity.” Hey, it’s *your* life event, call it what you like. For the purpose of this article, we will call it a life crisis.

“A crisis means there’s a dis-equilibrium in the existing balance,” Bedi said. He likens it to alchemy: “When you heat a key element, it dissolves. Then it cools and crystallizes. The crisis dissolves the dysfunctional order of the first half of life, but keeps the essence of the self and crystallizes it to its best form. The more severe the crisis, the more refined the crystallization.”

“To me, [life crisis] is the psyche correcting itself,” said Herb Stevenson, a Cleveland-based executive development consultant and creator of the Medicine of Men male initiation program, which is designed to awaken, develop and nurture the essence and fullness of being a mature man in today’s world. “To use Eastern or Native American philosophy, there needs to be a little death of who the person was so that they can be more fully who they are. You don’t have to die literally, but psychically you need to, in order to reach full maturity.” Like a real death, Stevenson acknowledges that the process is often painful and that there is mourning during the transition for the loss of who we were.

With his patients, Bedi sees life crises manifest usually in one or more of the following ways: marital problems, professional burn out, or medical issues. “These things are our soul trying to engage us,” he stated.

Some forms of life crisis may not be as easily categorized, marked only by subtle symptoms such as a nagging sense of restlessness, listlessness or unease. Goals loose focus and meaning. One might start to wonder, “Is this all there is?”

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, whose own life crisis gave rise to his most important work, would say that this is the psyche calling to help guide us back to who we really are. It’s our True Self, come knocking after years of being stuffed in the psychic basement as we tried to do what we thought society and our families expected of us throughout the first half of our lives. One has the choice of either listening to the True Self, and starting on an inner path of self-discovery, or stuffing it back down. However, Jung contended that, if ignored, it will just keep coming back, louder and stronger, until one of the above-mentioned forms of crisis results. Some people still continue to ignore it, burying it inside, eventually shutting down and becoming numb, which is a form of crisis that never transforms into a meaningful experience.

### **Midlife: A Confluence of Events**

Whatever form the crisis takes, there are many factors going on at midlife that can precipitate it.

One is living the typical high achievement American lifestyle for the first half of one's existence: going to school, getting a job, working hard, possibly getting married, perhaps having a family, continuing to work hard. The fast pace combined with the mindset that this is what one is "supposed to do" can be the makings of a major wake up call once the person takes a breather or starts to feel burned out.

Stevenson describes this moment that some call an awakening: "A person says to themselves, 'I've busted my butt, I've worked hard, I've done everything I was supposed to do. I listened to society, I've played by the rules,'" he explained. "Then suddenly that person wakes up one day and realizes, 'I have not lived my life the way I wanted to. I've lived it according to the rules of the game.' This puts the person into an identity crisis, a so-called midlife crisis. The person starts readjusting and asking questions, such as 'Were my dreams of the past valid? If so, do I still want to do them? If not, what can I do about that?'"

He goes on: "If every moment provides infinite possibilities of choices, we can choose to live consciously or unconsciously. If you're living unconsciously, you're always thinking about the next thing you've got to do for work. If all I'm thinking about is work, I'm not living this moment, I'm just existing in it while I plan my future. At some point, though, a person may suddenly realize, 'I'm a drone,' 'I'm a robot,' 'I'm Toto' (someone's dog). It's scary as hell and people can crash and burn."

The result of such a crisis may be a career change. Sally Kubly, M.S.W. and a corporate trainer in Milwaukee, sees many people who have undergone a re-evaluation of life "leaving the business world and going into jobs to help people," she said. "They want to do something fulfilling."

Stevenson says you don't *have* to give up your job to live differently. He states that people often make the mistake of assuming that in order to change, one must throw away everything one was up until this point. Rather, he advises that we make an assessment of what skills and aspects of life have served us well, and then integrate them into the new, awakened self.

Maneuvering a life crisis in the context of a marriage is trickier. It may result in the break up of the marriage. "The shift scares the partner," Stevenson said. "There was an implicit agreement: 'I'll behave this way and you behave that way and we'll get along.' All of a sudden one of them breaks the rules. The partner often doesn't want to change and wants the spouse to go back to the way they were. If they can talk about it at a place that's not threatening—a good therapist can help—the partner may be able to realize that what they're getting now in their spouse is a more full package of what they bought when they got married."

### **Physical Changes at Midlife**

Another major factor that can be a precursor to crisis is physical health. If you're having a classic anxiety-about-aging life crisis, there's plenty of evidence to back you up that things aren't what they used to be physiologically.

Physical development is a wave curve: the first half of life is the up side of the curve, the second half of life—starting at around ages 35-40—is represented by the descending side. Although the physical changes take place gradually over decades, a decline indeed begins to happen at midlife. “The peak of function you’ve had is starting to decline in midlife,” said Dr. Gary Lewis, M.D. a holistic family practice physician at Brown Deer Family Health.

For women, after age 40, the gradual shriveling of ovaries causes a decrease in the production of estrogen. The ovaries also stop secreting progesterone. This creates a hormonal imbalance that eventually culminates in menopause.

After age 40 men also start to lose certain hormones that help keep the body in balance, although not as significantly as women.

Regardless of gender, decades of overwork and pushing oneself too hard can begin to impact the nervous system, knocking it out of balance, causing individuals to become excitable and to lose energy. Adrenal exhaustion may set in, further draining the body and causing the libido to drop. Structurally, muscle constriction and contraction may result in fibrous bands of tissue and pain. Psychologically, we start losing serotonin, which depletes the neurochemistry in the brain and can trigger depression. Other functional symptoms such as insomnia, fatigue and weight gain or loss may appear. “Generally, people start to get out of balance at midlife,” Lewis said.

This is not to say that poor health is a foregone conclusion once the middle years hit. Due to expanded life spans, advances in medicine and better understanding of the importance of exercise and nutrition, most Americans at midlife are reporting feeling better than ever, according to findings in the MacArthur Foundation study.

However, as the systems begin to decline, the time to recover from stressful events takes longer and the capacity to fully recover is diminished. And there’s a direct correlation between how much stress was accumulated in the first half of life and the body’s ability to cope going forward. That means when a major life stressor hits, it more easily blossoms into a crisis if the reserves are already low.

The crisis may take the form of an illness, which Bedi terms a blessing in disguise. “Cancer, heart attack, chronic fatigue syndrome, a psychiatric episode, fibromyalgia, these things stop you in your tracks. Your soul gives you a time out to reconfigure your life,” he said. It may surprise some to learn that a physical ailment might be more than just aging, bad luck or a genetic predisposition. But those aware of the mind-body-spirit connection believe illness is the physical manifestation of spiritual and emotional imbalance. An accident is another way the soul calls, usually happening when we’ve ignored other attempts by our higher self to get in touch with us, according to Bedi. It, too, forces a time out and re-evaluation of life as we know it.

Like Bedi, Lewis believes these trials can actually be positive. “A crisis has the potential to give you insight. If you just wander through midlife without anything ever going wrong, you won’t

change. If you just keep doing what you've always done, you'll just get more of what you've always gotten," he said.

The key to averting full-blown physical break down, Lewis advises, is to "tune into your innermost essence and feel how much reserve you have and hear what your body is telling you. Look at how you're pacing yourself, how you're recovering from stress. Start to become wiser in how you use your resources." Ignoring the signals and continually pushing oneself beyond one's limits with things like overworking and too little sleep is only asking for trouble, he believes. "If the oil light comes on in your car, you don't cut the wire and keep going. You fill it up," he said.

Taking care of oneself goes beyond physical health. "Look at what turns you on and what fulfills you," Lewis said. "What wears you down are all the things you think you *should* be. What needs to take over is what *you* want. It's the ego path versus the True Self or soul path."

On an energetic level, many traditions, including Traditional Chinese Medicine, hold the view that life essence wanes through aging and is especially depleted through an excessive lifestyle. Lewis, who is also a medical acupuncturist, points out that on the "threshold of middle age, it becomes more important to protect, take care of and supplement the chi," which is the invisible energy that circulates through channels in the body bringing health and vitality. Diet, nutrition, exercise, meditation and pacing of oneself are all ways to fortify the energy.

On a spiritual level, midlife marks the beginning of introspection, a journey inward to reconnect with one's life purpose. In his book, *Path to the Soul*, Bedi explains it in the context of his Hindu background. In short, the first half of life is spent in pursuit of external things: pleasure, material wealth, success. This pursuit of wealth and pleasure is called maya. "When maya no longer feels blissful, something calls us from the depths of the soul," he writes. "This is the call of our dharma, the intentions of our souls." The goal is to get as close to the center of the soul as possible. "The journey, though simple in theory, is the opus of a lifetime," he writes. The time of awakening between maya and dharma may be fraught with restlessness, disillusion and dissatisfaction with life as it currently exists. In other words, it may be the time of a spiritual life crisis.

### **Navigating Life Crisis**

Although a crisis can be a life-turning moment, it's not necessary to have one to evolve to the next level. The experts agree there are some people who traverse smoothly through life's transitions. These are individuals who have continually evaluated who they are, where they are at in life and monitored their satisfaction with it. They recognize the many roles they play in life and integrate new aspects of themselves on an ongoing basis. "If people are aware, they don't need to have a full-blown crisis," Bedi said. "They can just hear the smoke alarm, heed the fire warning and take action."

To navigate through any form of a life crisis, take preventative measures or find the meaning in a crisis that's already taken place, Bedi recommends making room for the inner life, to "attend to the soul." This includes carving out time in one's daily life for such activities as journaling, meditation and silence. "These things go a long way to bridging us to our soul. If we do so, it guides us like

autopilot.” In addition, paying attention to diet, exercise, nutrition and how your body is handling stress is important.

The message of a life crisis, whether it be spiritual or physical, in one’s professional or personal life, is to review life as lived to this point and decide what has meaning, if it’s the life *you* want to be living and what, if any, changes could be made to make it more fulfilling. If heeded, a crisis can be a catalyst for significant life changes, a rite of passage to a deeper experience of life. The first step to getting on that path is to acknowledge a change is taking place and to consciously decide to examine it.