



In this article, I write about the five crisis of middle age and that life's storms needn't knock off our feet. I show how each crisis can provide a wonderful opportunity for personal transformation into greater wisdom and wholeness.

During middle years we can find ourselves walking into five different “wake up” walls. Each one providing its own “crisis.”

The five crisis of mid-life are:

1. **Cultural,**
2. **Health,**
3. **Relationship**
4. **Financial/Career**
5. **Existential.**

Generally, I refer to mid-life as the range from 40 to 60 years. However, these life-changing crises can occur before or after these ages. A generation ago mid-life started on one's 30th birthday and old age began at 50. Although I'll explained these crises individually for ease of understanding, it's worth remembering that they rarely work in isolation. There's more of an interdependent relationship between them. For example, if someone is unhappy at work they may stick for years at it to avoid a financial crisis but the effect on their overall psyche can lead to a marriage break up, a health breakdown, and spiritual crisis. Or, if somebody comes down with a life threatening illness they may lose their job, their marriage, their health and ultimately their will to live.

1. Cultural

Midlife transition is a universal phenomenon whereas midlife crisis is more a Western phenomenon. It happens far more in our culture. Our Western culture favours youth over age and wisdom. This adds to the stress of aging. Most people in their forties and fifties don't look forward to the benefits of eldership like they do in the East. Tribal people have always acknowledged the power of someone moving to wholeness and wisdom, as they get older. Here in the West there's a stigma attached to reaching the half way mark; “I'm over the hill,” is a comment commonly heard. I don't believe we're over the hill, but standing on top of the hill. From this high vantage point we're able to look back and see the journey we've taken to get here. We can review our lives and trace our steps. We can see how our life's events have made us who we are today. We can understand and appreciate the choices we've made that have brought us to where we are today. Reminding ourselves of what we've been through and what we've learnt can provide us with valuable insights as we move forward. I call it, “doing a life review.” Then we're able look forward to the horizon and choose the direction we'd like to go in. With clarity, we are able to see the next mountain we'd like to climb. And so we set off into the unknown, to a new terrain for the next life adventure.

2. Health

There's nothing more shocking than coming face to face with your own mortality either through a life – threatening illness or the death of a loved one. By the time we hit midlife our parents are likely to be experiencing some of the issues that age

brings; physically and mentally deteriorating or even dieing. A statistic I read said mid-lifers are twice as likely to be emotionally, physically and sometimes financially supporting an aging parent. As I've entered the second half of life I've become increasingly aware of death. As a young adult I lived with the illusion of immortality and felt "bullet proof." I went through those early years as if I was indestructible. Now, in mid life I've seen many people my age succumb to cancer and heart attacks. A dear friend's mother died recently. He says now he's on his own he has a clear sense of his own mortality and it's woken him up to the fact that life is too short to be on cruise control. In midlife many of our health problems are self-imposed. Fast foods, lack of quality rest and non-stop activity takes its toll on our physical and emotional well-being. Today we're taking on more and more trying to cram every moment with more activities causing our threshold for stress to increase. The bodily alarm keeps going off but we keep hitting the snooze button so we can keep going and going. Eventually the body breaks down through neglect.

3. Relationships

The result of crises in relationships take the form of extra-marital affairs and ultimately divorce. Relationships that were founded on physical looks, sex, financial security, prestige and expediency can flounder into crisis around the midlife period. Also many mid-lifers have teenage children who are going through their rebellious, "I know it all" stage. When you add all these factors together and couple them with the angst midlife brings, you have a potent, volatile mix. Another crisis for mid-lifers today is whether to have children or not. As a woman's biological clock ticks away, couples can feel under immense pressure to make a life changing decision and then have to come to terms with the decision. They may be those that decide not to have the added burden of dealing with the social stigma that's attached to being childless. Then of course there are those who have been trying to have children for years only to find out that they can't. This can be devastating to both parties and can make or break the relationship.

4. Financial/Career

Financial crises are commonplace in midlife. Acquisitions, mergers, downsizing, advancements in technology all take their toll on the mid-lifer. Suddenly finding yourself out of a job can be shocking. If somebody loses their job in their twenties or thirties it's annoying, but when somebody loses their job in their late forties or fifties it's traumatic. To somebody who's whole identity is entwined with status and title a job brings, losing a job can be a devastating blow to his or her sense of self worth. And its not just their identity they lose, it's their financial insurance, community, and livelihood. One of my clients summed up his job loss when he said, "It's not just a job, it's my whole life!" For someone who's invested so much into his or her job, losing it is ultimate failure. The result of that perception sends some spiralling in to a deep dark black hole called depression. Some don't lose their job but are stuck in jobs they hate; it pays the bills but leaves them feeling empty. The funny thing about careers is that for a lot of people they didn't actually choose it; it chose them. Think about your own experience. Did somebody either tell you that you would be good at that particular job or did you get into it because you simply had to get a job to earn some money? All of this generally happens whilst we we're a young adult, a time when we didn't know ourselves very well, and it isn't until we hit our thirties or forties that we hit the "awake wall" and ask: "Why am I doing this?" "How did I get here?"

5. Existential

This crisis is really a crisis of meaning or a spiritual crisis. It's the drive to find out and understand the deeper meaning of life. It's an internal crisis, whereas the other four happen externally to us. This is why I believe midlife has a positive intention for us. An existential crisis causes us to ask the age-old existential questions of life. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? In one sense an existential crisis is linked to the four other crisis. When an event comes along that disrupts our fundamental assumptions about life, the result is a search for the deeper meaning of it all. For example, if somebody loses his or her job and is staring financial ruin in the face, it can lead to a search for greater meaning. Somebody facing a life threatening illness can start to seek the deeper meaning of it all. Events like these can slam us back into what we value most. We may have personally experienced the sort of family relationship healing that takes place when somebody we love is close to death. Forgiveness, love and compassion are what matter most in times like these. Many I've interviewed sum up their current existence by saying they've come to a point in their life where they feel like they're in the wrong place with the wrong people doing the wrong thing. This wake up call starts a process of deep inner reflection. They look around and wonder what they're doing and what prompted the choices they made. Usually they find that their current unhappiness had its roots firmly planted in their youth.

Nothing has any meaning other than the meaning we give it

It is a rare individual indeed who will not face anyone of these crises in their middle years. That part we may not be able to control but we do have a choice as to what meaning we give them. We can give them the meaning of great personal and family disasters, but this will only serve to increase our pain and deepen the suffering.

I did some research on the word, "crisis." In my little Bloomsbury dictionary crisis is defined as a turning point; a critical moment; an emergency. After a little more research I found the word "crisis" come from the Greek krinein, which literally means, "to decide". Before I did that little piece of research the word "crisis" for me had a negative tone. Now I think it has a positive tone. The term "mid-life crisis" now means a time in our life when important decisions need to be made.

Maybe it time we changed our language from, "I'm have a mid-life crisis" to: I'm experiencing a:

Midlife evolution, or a
Midlife empowerment stage, or a
Midlife growth stage, or a
Midlife kick, or a
Midlife challenge, or a
Midlife transition, or a
Midlife wake up call

Whish one best resonates with you?

There are no meaningless events

It is my belief that there are no meaningless events in life. Every crisis, no matter how devastating, is also an opportunity for profound and deep personal growth. It was Stephen Covey who said, "In the absence of a wake up call, many of us never really confront the critical issues of life." Each one of these five crisis are challenges, with important lessons to be learned. There a plenty of stories abound of people who have chosen an empowering meaning to life's difficulties and, as a result, turned their lives around. Mid-life is not a weak part of our evolution; its an empowering step. So lets step up!

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