



Statistics show middle age is a peak period for divorce. Mid-life crisis affects both men and women causing relationship problems and breakdowns. In this article we explore the possible reasons for this and seven ways to protect your relationship.

Changes in mid-life can take both parties by surprise - some people have walked out of marriages after 20 or 30 years together. Surviving this phase is about your personal ability to cope with change and the way that you and your partner face the changes together. Mid-life doesn't have to signal the end of fun and excitement or the end of your relationship. It is a time when you have more financial and emotional freedom than ever before so this is a time to embrace the change and all the better if you have someone to share it with. Although every person and every situation is unique there are some common themes that we can learn from. Through interviews I've conducted, and research findings from two brilliant pioneers in the field of gender socialisation: Terrance Real and John Badalament it appears each sex experiences a different type of pull in mid-life.

For boys to be accepted into the male fraternity they're expected to be tough, in control and above all, an achiever. To risk stepping out of this narrow version of masculinity is to be labelled a sissy, cry-baby or pansy. In expressing his emotions a boy runs the risk of being laughed at by his peers and told to be "strong" and "manly" by his parents. With each one of these painful lessons boys learn to retreat from their hearts, their emotional centre and live out their adult life in their more logical heads.

The journey for girls is different. Girls learn painful lessons when they attempt assert themselves or rock the boat in relationships. In the face of conflict girls routinely silence themselves for fear of being rejected and losing of approval. Society's conditioning teaches them to place a lot of emphasis on their appearance, and to put other people's needs ahead of their own.

Learning to conform to these powerful stereotypes causes each sex to filter their self-worth and self-esteem from a different source; for boys it's derived from performance and achievement and girls it's relating and connecting well with others.

Mid-life switch

It appears that at midlife there's a "switching" or balancing of the masculine and feminine energies that takes place. In the first half of life a differentiation of the corresponding energy takes place but in the second half of life a call to integrate the opposite energy arises. What happens at a basic level is that men are pulled to develop their capacity to feel, to open up, to be vulnerable, and relate better in relationships and integrate their feminine energy. While women are pulled to being more achievement orientated, to claim their independence, courage, power and wisdom, to integrate their masculine energy. This crossing of paths has the potential for significant relationship conflict and misunderstanding, as each person is moving towards the early interests each other had.

Relationship conflict

Each person is at cross-purposes but they may not recognise it as such. For women who have spent the majority of their time being wives and mothers, midlife provides a chance to let go of the feeling of guilt arising from putting their own needs ahead of everyone else's. They start questioning what they have sacrificed in order to be a devoted wife, mother, and career woman. An awakening enables them to step free of the scripted roles defined by society to find who they really are. A growing assertiveness and a stronger sense of self empowers them to say "no", to redefine their boundaries and choose how they want to spend their time. They re-evaluate all aspects of their lives, careers, and relationships. Long forgotten dreams and needs are reclaimed. Their interests start to spread beyond the confines of family life. One lady I interviewed said midlife for her was a time of remembering, and this remembering enabled her to remerge from midlife a new, better and stronger person.

For men who feel drained from years of trying to achieve in their work world, midlife offers the opportunity to return to the values of home and family. Opening up to feelings and being vulnerable leads to greater intimacy with loved ones. It's not uncommon for a male mid-lifer to deeply reconnect with his wife or children after years of being too busy and emotionally detached.

Getting and staying close

When I speak with couples I ask each person independently how close they feel on a scale of 1-10. Their answers can be very revealing. Remember you got into the relationship to be close, not to be distant. Closeness will feed your heart and make you happy, while being distant saps your energy. Working at closeness may feel risky, but being distant will kill the relationship. Here are seven things to pay attention to in order to stay close even during times of conflict.

1. Learn all that you can about mid-life transition. Understanding can go a great way to managing conflicts.
2. Have realistic expectations. Each person is on their own course and will adjust that course in their own time.
3. Plan time to be together. Don't leave getting quality time together to chance – plan it in. Find out what's been keeping you apart and how you can reconnect.
4. Express your feelings. Use 'I' statements not 'you' statements. Blaming each other with 'you' statements only leads to greater conflicts and only serves to push the relationship further apart.
5. Don't take how the other person is behaving personally. They are doing what they are doing because of something inside themselves – nothing to do with you – everything to do with them.
6. Ask for help when you need it. Joint counseling is a great way to stay communicating during the most difficult times.
7. Work at it as a team.

If you follow these your mid-life relationship stands the best chance of growing stronger, warmer, and more satisfying.

All the best

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