



tools of the trade
for family improvement



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ARE YOU HAVING A MIDLIFE CRISIS?

As a licensed professional counselor, wife and mother of three school-aged children, I certainly see the difficulties that families are faced with in today's fast paced world. Be sure that whatever you are struggling with, you are likely not alone. We all hit bumps in the road and could use a little help and support from time to time. Check in with me each issue as I offer you some "Tools of the Trade" to help you better manage and enjoy your life and your family.

As your children embark upon their high school and college years, it may seem as if you have awakened from a long nap and wonder where half of your life has gone. For the first 12-15 years of your marriage you were consumed with working your way up in your career, and with caring for your young children at home. There was pride and purpose, and a sense that, as young adults, you still had plenty of time and that better days lie ahead. Now, suddenly you are confronted with middle age, your own mortality and no prospects for a better future ahead. Work has lost its luster and become simply a way to make a living. Resentment over your spouse's faults may have built up over the years when you were too busy to address them, and this resentment may now be fueling the urge to quit on your relationship.

Midlife crisis theories suggest that some people have a very difficult time accepting the realization that their life is half over. Another popular theory is that the root cause of the midlife crisis lies in the way our culture emphasizes youthful beauty and virility. Couples begin expressing dissatisfaction with their major life accomplishments including careers, families and social status, leading to major upheaval in their established life patterns. Men and women can equally feel as if they have lost meaning in their lives and may also feel trapped. They realize their dreams may not be fulfilled and that the next phase of their lives does not seem very enticing. They may suddenly take up a hobby as a symptom of their restlessness and/or inadequacy of their previous goals. At this life stage it often seems as though everyone around them is splitting up... which of course is a consequence of their friends experiencing similar midlife difficulties.

The best data available suggests that 5%-12% of middle aged people suffer from the classic midlife crisis-defined as "personal turmoil and coping challenges

in people 39 through 50 brought on by fears and anxieties about growing older". About the same percentage experience psychological upheaval in midlife that is not brought on by aging but rather by major life events such as death of a parent, divorce or job loss.

Men vs. Women

Although men and women alike are susceptible to midlife crisis, the triggers seem to be different for each gender. Women's midlife crises are more likely to begin with family events or problems or the realization that they haven't met their own standards or goals as a parent. Whereas a male midlife crisis is more likely to be driven by work or career issues, women's turmoil is more likely to be driven by introspection. Women are more likely to attribute their midlife crisis to some new insight into themselves through religion, therapy or reflection. Many men start to feel anxiety over their financial security as they begin to look seriously at their retirement savings, especially if they fall short of their own financial goals for this period of life.

Some professionals claim that the midlife crisis is exclusively the result of hormonal changes that occur in women as they begin the process of menopause. Others even claim that a man's midlife crisis can be directly related to hormonal shifts known as andropause or commonly coined "manopause". Most studies agree however that these hormonal factors, while an added stressor, are not an exclusive cause of a midlife crisis.

This sudden feeling of the loss of a core set of beliefs can leave many men and women reeling while they struggle to test out different life experiences in a



quest to verify their life values. **Midlife crisis symptoms include buying uncharacteristically expensive items- CARS or beach houses;** drastic changes in physical appearance- wearing a more provocative wardrobe, getting a tattoo, developing an obsession with physical fitness; relationship issues- an extramarital affair with a younger partner or increased socialization with single people. A deep depression can occur at this stage leading to alcohol or drug abuse.

There are certain **behavioral changes to look for in midlife** that might be indicative of an underlying problem:

1. Change for the sake of change
2. Impulsive behaviors especially about money and career
3. Feeling “trapped” and questioning everything in one’s life
4. Changes in sexual relationships
5. Sudden obsession with appearance
6. Excessive reminiscing about their youth and previous lovers
7. Increased alcohol use
8. Sleeping more, loss of appetite and general malaise
9. An obsession with mortality
10. Self-admission of having a midlife crisis

Recognizing these changes is easier than figuring out why they’re happening. **It may have nothing to do with middle age.** Men and women can be unfaithful in their marriages without being in a midlife crisis. A husband can decide that it’s time that he bought the car he’s always wanted without being impulsive. **People can become depressed during their midlife years for a variety of reasons not having anything to do with a midlife crisis.** The midlife years can be a time of tremendous stress and change in career, family, and health. A trigger such as a divorce, death in the family, or a job loss can also have a dramatic impact.

Can a Midlife Crisis Be Treated?

Moderation is key to preventing any erratic behavior. If you are experiencing symptoms of a midlife crisis try to avoid making any life altering decisions until you have spoken with a mental health professional. Any and all important decisions should be made only after careful consideration and finding a qualified professional to use as a sounding board during this time of upheaval and irrational thinking.

Psychological counseling and medication for depression may be helpful for some, as well as spending time with a wise adult friend who has survived a midlife

crisis and is willing to offer sage advice and support. Talking about the onslaught of strong feelings and emotional turmoil with a mental health professional can help many individuals resolve these issues without acting impulsively.

Channeling mid-life crisis energy into productive outlets like community involvement, financial planning or moderate physical fitness can help prevent excessive behaviors.

Indulging in harmless youthful interests like reading favorite childhood books, taking up an interest in sports played during high school or college, or compiling family photos into scrapbooks can help relieve the desire to regain youthfulness. Acknowledging the cultural myth that beauty and virility are reserved only for the young can be a major step towards combating a mid-life crisis.

Taking time to care for personal needs such as adequate sleep, exercise, a balanced diet can help alleviate tension before it builds into a mid-life crisis. Staying connected with other people and involved in a group that provides personal accountability and healthy friendships may be enough of an influence to help most adults steer clear of the negative aspects of a midlife crisis all-together.

Often, the thoughts and feelings of the midlife crisis run their course, and the affected lose interest in its issues. New interests, causes and passions re-energize their lives and they are ready to move on to more rewarding challenges...unless they have made life-disrupting choices while they were in the throws of their midlife crisis. After the stresses of the midlife crisis have subsided (and they do) the spouses often enter a new era of closeness. As couples work through this stage they frequently reconnect with each other and discover that the time and energy that used to be taken up by young children and burgeoning careers, can now be spent on self-fulfilling activities.

The first step is realizing that you are experiencing a midlife crisis and educating yourself about it. Be sure to get the professional help you need to work through it safely, before you make any life changing decisions.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some “tools” that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iccounseling.com.