

‘Midlife crisis’ is more fiction than fact for most people

Stability generally reigns during the middle years

By Dan Harvey, special to *Click!* Magazine

During New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s recent news conference when he announced his split with wife Donna Hanover, a reporter asked him if he thought he was experiencing a “mid-life” crisis.

“That’s an interesting way to think about it,” Giuliani replied, according to *The New York Times*.

The incident underscores how the media can reinforce assumptions about a topic like mid-life crisis.

It happens not only with the news, but with entertainment as well. The Oscar-winning “American Beauty” depicts a 42-year-old lead character (played by Kevin Spacey) who attributes his troubles to a mid-life crisis.

“Both my wife and my daughter think I’m this gigantic loser,” he bemoans. “And they’re right. I have lost something.”

The idea of mid-life crisis has been common currency for about 30 years now, or at least as far back as when Bruce Dern went “Middle-Age Crazy” in the 1980 movie of the same name.

The prevailing notion is that if, when reaching a certain age, we start misbehaving, or demonstrating an overall sense of malaise, we’re suffering a mid-life crisis.

“I think it is certainly true that most people, before reaching mid-life, seem to harbor very negative views about it,” said Professor Elaine Wethington, a member of Cornell University’s department of human development and sociology. “I can’t help but notice the constant references to the term in popular culture, art and social commentary.”

And recent research even suggests that the mid-life crisis may only be a myth.

Wethington, herself, has been looking at mid-life in the United States for the past two years. She feels that it would be inaccurate to say that most Americans will experience such a crisis.

“There has never been any hard research evidence that the ‘mid-life crisis’ was ever an expectable crisis in adulthood,” she said.

Wethington based her work on the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, a survey of enormous scope conducted by the MacArthur Foundation, who, for a 10-year period (1989-1998) questioned 7,861 Americans about their middle-age years. In the first of a series of reports on its findings, released in 1999, MacArthur researchers say they found that most middle-aged people were quite happy with their lives.

Wethington's own findings appear to support the MIDUS report. Starting her research in 1998 and questioning 731 participants from the MacArthur study, she now feels that most people misinterpret the meaning of mid-life crisis.

“Only a minority of the crises the respondents reported fit a standard definition of the ‘mid-life crisis,’ which is a crisis brought on by the awareness of aging, occurring around the age of 40,” she pointed out.

Wethington further explained that the “mid-life crises” these people reported were actually the kind of major events that would normally upset the course of life—at any age—in a significant or profound way. Examples include serious legal problems, children having life-threatening diseases or conditions, and financial problems caused by “downsizing.”

“The majority of people reporting [these] crises described things that happened before age 38 and after the age 50,” she said. “These were major life events, not a ‘mid-life crisis.’”

Wethington also feels we tend to make too many generalizations about mid-life, some of which can come from misinformation.

“The average American, even a very educated one, is not likely to have come into contact with research on mid-life that questions the theories they read about in college or hear about in the media,” she said. “We also draw generalizations from vivid, rather than not-so-vivid, cases. People who are in trouble at mid-life stand out, and we probably overestimate our own risk of following their path.”

But for those mid-lifers that do, indeed, feel they are suffering a “crisis,” Wethington offers some advice.

“I believe the most effective strategy for depressed mid-lifers is to find social support and a way to talk about their difficulties,” she said. “The best way to do this is the one most consistent with one's personal sense of values: seeking advice from friends, seeking comfort from religion or a minister, or seeking professional psychological help. These are all effective for different people.”

Ruth Luban, who received her Master's in counseling psychology at Columbia Pacific University and meets with many mid-lifers in her practice, has some advice, too. In fact, she provides some proactive measures people can take to maintain their sense of well-being in their middle years.

- Develop a “futurist” mentality: “Determine what new technologies you need to learn to move forward. We all have a choice to be at the cutting edge.”
- Take care of your health: “All the old maxims are true. Maintain a healthy weight, focus on good nutrition, get enough rest, and make sure you get some daily exercise.”
- Determine your values and be true to them: “The gift of having lived this long is the getting of wisdom.”
- Be a continuous learner: “The people I see who are unhappy are the ones who no longer feel mentally challenged. They are not seizing the existing opportunities that would allow them to grow.”