

Chapter 1

I Can't Believe This Is Happening to Me!

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night and felt as if a thief was sneaking into your house? You distinctly remember locking the windows and bolting the doors, but this doesn't quiet your nervousness. Every board that creaks, every sighing of the wind outside raises your level of anxiety.

At first you are sure your ears are playing tricks on you, but then you hear what sounds like the muffled footfalls of a burglar. It's only my imagination working overtime, you say to yourself-only that and nothing more. You know your little castle is safe. You barred the gates and raised the drawbridge. So, ignoring the sounds, you try to go back to sleep.

But the footfalls persist, in fact they become more audible. No, you say to yourself, I'm not dreaming....Suddenly you notice clusters of hair collecting at the bottom of the bathroom sink. Clusters that used to wave gently on your head now lie lifeless on the cold porcelain. You wash your face a second time and looking in the mirror, notice that your forehead has increased disproportionately to what it used to be. As you comb your hair you feel the comb sort of skip over an area near the back of your head. You notice that combing seems to require more skill, because you have to flip the hair "up and over" rather than straight back, like you used to do.

As you search your face in the mirror you continue to look for evidence of the dreaded blight of midlife. Do you really look any different today than you did yesterday? No! Emphatically, NO! you repeat to yourself. But what about last year? Wasn't there more hair on your head? Wasn't the hair a darker color? When did that bare spot appear on your scalp? How long have others noticed it? What! me getting bald. Oh NO! Not me. I'm too young for that to happen!

You're really beginning to feel anxious about now. Perhaps you need to wake up and take the Midlife Entrance Exam:

_1. Do you remember the taste of Mom's cookies-but forget where you ate lunch yesterday?

_2. Do you recognize more names in the obituaries than in the box scores?

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_3. Do you still care about the whales-but identify more with Jonah?

_4. When your wife suggests a massage, do you take off your shoes?

_5. Do you find yourself squaring your shoulders and holding in your stomach whenever you are in the presence of others?

_6. Did you finally give up the notion of becoming president of the nation, the company, or the Cub Scouts?

_7. Do you find yourself thinking more about sex-but enjoying it less?

If you answered these questions positively, you can be sure the thief has crept into your house.

As one author suggests, one has entered midlife when he finds himself preoccupied with such matters as health, success, and sexual potency. Along with this he may experience a loss of interest in his work and a loss of faith in his abilities. He may find it hard to concentrate and make decisions, may become cranky and bored or irritated with his spouse-may even lust after extramarital affairs.¹

Those afflicted with the midlife malady know it is a time of confusion, urgency, fear, insecurity, depression, boredom, anger, and identity crisis all rolled up in one shivering mass of humanity.

The crisis precipitating this phenomenon may come in many forms, but they all begin with the same word: LOSS-loss of looks, loss of youth, loss of health, loss of fertility, loss of libido, loss of religious beliefs, loss of marital commitment, loss of promotions, loss of creativity, loss of poise, loss of personality-loss, Loss, LOSS!

Edmund Bergler refers to the midlife crisis as “the revolt of the middle-aged man.” For some men it is a time of introspection. As they look back over their lives they realize they have been molded by everyone along the way-from their mothers, teachers, wives, companies, policies, vocational expectations-until they literally do not know who they are.

When a man finally feels he has given the basics to his wife and family, he often feels betrayed or even rejected because in so doing he has missed so much himself. He has missed the new cars, new clothes, time off, and long vacations. Filled with frustration and uncontrolled emotions, he reaches out for everything he thinks he has missed. However, these symbols of his rebellion are merely the outward expression of an inner frustration that has been present for some time-a deep sense of depersonalization.

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I have felt most of these feelings myself. My wife used to good-naturedly poke fun at me because I bought an old 1957 Chevy convertible and restored it at the age of forty. I could not afford one when they were new, yet I had always wanted to own this classic automobile. To be honest I suppose I actually enjoyed it more at midlife than I would have in my teens. Somehow it helped me realize a dream and boost my drooping self-image at the same time. Often, when I was feeling depressed, I would go out to the garage, back the car out on the driveway, put down the top, turn on the radio, and just sit there for twenty or thirty minutes. If that therapy didn't work, I would go for a short drive and enjoy watching the passersby waving and pointing at my car. It never failed to lift my spirits. Of course, it didn't help me regain my lost youth, but it helped anyway.

One of the major factors contributing to the midlife crisis is the realization that time flies and that much of it has already passed you by. You have lived more than half of your life. It is like being at the top of a mountain, and all that lies ahead is downhill. Everything from that moment on seems to be anticlimactic as you realize that you have passed the peak of your experience. Whether that is actually true or not is immaterial to the midlife male. He feels that it is true, and that is enough. As Roger Gould has put it, "The desire for stability and continuity which characterized our thirties is being replaced by a relentless inner demand for action. The sense of timelessness in our early thirties is giving way to an awareness of the pressure of time in our forties. Whatever we must do must be done now!"²

Middle age actually intensifies all the difficulties we thought would go away someday. Difficulties in our own behavior or that of our spouse. Difficulties with our job or our children. All these problems are still there at midlife, waiting for us, bigger and bolder than ever.

Oftentimes the problems are actually a more intense repetition of problems we've always lived with. But, now we can no longer stand them nor expect them to go away. A sense of frustration overtakes us as we recognize the finality of it all. This realization brings about new tensions based upon old problems that have never been resolved. But, believe it or not, such tensions can actually lead to real growth and change. If they do not, they can cause us to fall in despair.

When the midlife crisis hits a man, his closest ally may be an understanding wife and a strong marriage. Yet, at this time in his life he is liable to have neither. His wife may not realize that he is struggling-or she may not care, because of her own problems. He may find it

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difficult to explain to her. Their communication may have become focused on running the family, not explaining the depths of his soul. They no longer exchange ideas or talk about their feelings. Their sexual relationship may have become almost nonexistent because they are usually tired or busy. Not only do they find their married life dull and boring, but if there are tensions between them these can become almost unbearable.

A midlife male has a special brand of insecurity not known to others. He sees change taking place so rapidly in today's society that his skills have become obsolete. Most companies today find it easier to hire a young man or woman fresh out of college to run the computers than to retool an old brain that has so much to unlearn. Job security is, in fact, a real crisis for the midlife male. He used to feel confident and perhaps even "cocky" about his abilities. Now he realizes that some may classify him as obsolete-along with the equipment he was trained to work with.

As he looks back over his life, the midlife male may even feel cheated that he was forced to work at a job he didn't really enjoy. One father reminded his son (with a trace of bitterness in his voice), "Why do you think you're entitled to find work that makes you happy? I made it by the rules of the game, why can't you? I worked all my life in a mundane, routine job that I simply endured in order to give the family security."³

A major emotion frequently manifest in the midlife male is anger. In fact he may display various stages of the anger process most of the time. He is angry because he is growing old, angry because he feels tired, angry because of financial obligations, angry that he has not reached his career goals (or if he has, it hasn't made any difference), angry that people don't understand him, angry that the kids only want him for the things he provides, not who he is, angry that no one seems to appreciate him, angry that life is such a big waste of time, angry that God has let his life be this way-angry, Angry, ANGRY!

When the midlife male becomes angry with himself he may just sit for hours, depressed with all these negative emotions churning inside. Self-pity ranks high on his list of feelings along with self-judgments that constantly eat away at his self-confidence. One thing is certain-self has become the center of his being. As he turns his anger inward, depression becomes more and more evident, and, the sad thing is that he will eventually lose his self-confidence which has seen him through all the previous crises in his life.

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When all of these feelings of frustration and insecurity are combined with a general feeling of the uselessness of life, you have the picture of the midlife male drowning in a sea of intense feelings and helplessness. These feelings tend to become self-feeding. The more helpless he feels himself to be, the more helpless he becomes. The more helpless he becomes, the more evident his feelings, which only verify his own feeling of inadequacy.

To break this vicious cycle of depression requires strong positive action on the part of the midlife male and those around him. He must begin to act on the basis of his own personal worth—as measured by the value God places upon him. As he regains his sense of self-worth, he is enabled once again to find his role in life. By understanding what is happening to him, he can begin to chip away at the painful, destructive feelings of depression.

Dr. Edgar Jackson, in his book *Coping With the Crises in Your Life*, recommends positive action in three areas to reverse the progressive nature of depression:⁴

Physical: “At the physical level we can exercise the large muscle system until the blood flows freely, purifying itself and stimulating glandular and visceral activity. This restoration of a more healthful function of physical organs aids in restoring intrapsychic balance.”

Emotional: “At the emotional level we can stop passing destructive judgments upon ourselves and begin to accept the universe and the people in it as if they had a right to be themselves rather than projections of our own way of looking at things.”

Intellectual: At the intellectual level “we can set some goals for our growth into a new and more adequate philosophy of life that can stimulate our development and our next step into maturity.”

The problem with depression and that other midlife symptom—boredom—is that each is essentially a vacuum. A bored person is one whose life has become empty. Similarly, a depressed person is one who has forced everything of value out of his life and is likewise empty. But as the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum, and sooner or later something is bound to rush in to fill the void, and thus change can be good or bad.

Change is a vital ingredient in the midlife male’s attempt to cope with these strange feelings and forces in his life. Unfortunately, the initial changes are frequently negative, and the midlife male’s reactions to them can make it difficult (if not impossible) to understand his strange behavior. Thus he may seem to have some deep-seated

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compulsion to change everything in his life. But these changes are as futile as attempting to delay the inevitable. The simple fact is, such a person is growing older.

Sally Conway, the wife of a man who went through a dramatic midlife crisis and author of *You and Your Husband's Midlife Crisis*, offers this helpful description of the typical midlife male undergoing changes in his life:⁵

Grouchiness and sharp words often replace his customary kindness and gentleness. Restlessness and vacillation erode his usual stable composure. Instead of exuding an air of confidence and boldness, he often seems anxious and insecure. Sometimes he wants to be babied; at other times he demands to be left alone. He is aloof and uncommunicating, or he lashes out irrationally at everyone and everything. He wears an air of martyrdom.

Formerly optimistic and challenged when difficulties came along, he now sits depressed and immobilized by self-pity. He sometimes lets obligations slip by without meeting them as he did faithfully for years. He finds excuses for not spending time with you or the children and shuns social activities at every opportunity. Perhaps he has resigned his leadership positions in the church, attends the services less frequently or not at all now, and sometimes voices profane complaints against God that greatly disturb you.

These changes in your midlife husband are symptoms of a struggle going on inside him.

References

1. Robert Lee and Marjorie Casebier, *The Spouse Gap: Weathering the Marriage Crisis During Middlecence* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 62.
2. Roger L. Gould, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 217.
3. Lee, p. 78.
4. Edgar N. Jackson, *Coping With the Crises in Your Life* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980), p. 133.
5. Sally Conway, *You and Your Husband's MidLife Crisis* (Elgin, 111.: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 16, 17.