

Strategies for Men in the

Midlife Transition

(Part one)



A FortySixty Publication

© January 6, 2007

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The Midlife Crisis – Strategies that work

"Many men tell us they feel burned out at midlife:

"I'm tired of it all."

"I just want to escape."

"When is it time for me?"

"I'm tired of giving, giving, giving."" (Jim Conway)

So what happened?

- Men experiencing this transition at midlife can change, seemingly overnight, from "peaceful" to "agitated," from "loving to mean," From "content" to "discontent.
- Although not always the case, there may be some triggering event such as a crisis with a close friend or relative.
- Often the man describes his roles as a son, a father, a husband, a friend. He may feel trapped and believe he has lost his sense of self, his own sense of identity. "When will it be time for me?" he may want to scream.
- In his fear and confusion he may feel he has to pull away, destroy the old in order to move on to something new.¹

Without a doubt, the one that finds his self in the midst of these at midlife has arrived here completely unaware and unprepared.

This Transition seemed to approach you naturally over the course of time; paradoxically, it appears in your life rather suddenly - typically within the span of a year or possibly two.

The spouse of a man in this "interlude" is often bewildered by his sudden change in posture. In reality though there have been several precursors to the "big one" that suddenly appears to change everything. He may have had several shorter bouts of depression or irritability prior to this but they seemed minor in comparison to what appears today.

A man in this state will often deny that he is having a problem because this did occur "gradually sudden" and also included a measure of decision on his part. Instead he might indicate various *problem points* in his marriage relationship as the issue that he is reacting to. These "problem points" arrive at the forefront of his explanations for his behavior. They very often blindside him to the factual issues at the foundation of his actions. The reality is however that for xx number of years he has effectively managed through these problem points yet today he is not. He may debatably infer that he has "simply had

enough” to justify his actions. The bottom line is the question – are his actions **out of normal character** for the man that he is? If so, then he may be in a midlife crisis.

Midlife Transition

Midlife Transition means many things.

First it is a reassessment of where you have been in life followed by a change in where you are going.

Second it is a physical change. Your body is changing and the male hormone – testosterone – that makes you male is not being produced at the levels you formerly knew. This change is frequently called “andropause” or “male menopause”.

Third, it is an emotional change. There is nothing to be ashamed about undergoing emotional change. Many men in midlife transition experience **deep depression** yet we demand we “be strong” and many men fail to get help through this time of change. Neither do we care to speak about how we are feeling. This emotional change however, is very deep seated and very real. A man that has experienced such change is often radically transformed into being more of a man than he has ever been before. Men are more likely to act out their inner turmoil while women are more likely to turn their feelings inward. The following chart from Jed Diamond's book, *Male Menopause*, illustrates these differences.²

Differences between Male and Female depression:²

Magnetic depression (Female)	Dynamic depression (Male)
• Blame themselves for problems	• Blame others for problems
• Feel sad and tearful	• Feel irritable and unforgiving
• Sleeps more than usual	• Has trouble sleeping or staying asleep
• Vulnerable and easily hurt	• Suspicious and guarded
• Tries to be nice	• Overtly or covertly hostile
• Withdraws when feeling hurt	• Attacks when feeling hurt
• Often suffers in silence	• Over-reacts, often sorry later

• Feels they were set up to fail	• Feels the world is set up to fail them
• Slowed down and nervous	• Restless and agitated
• Maintains control of anger/ May have anxiety attacks	• Loses control of anger/ May have sudden attacks of rage
• Overwhelmed by feelings	• Feelings blunted, often numb
• Lets others violate boundaries	• Rigid boundaries; pushes others away
• Feels guilty for what they do	• Feels ashamed for who they are
• Uncomfortable receiving praise	• Frustrated if not praised enough
• Accepts weaknesses and doubts	• Denies weaknesses and doubts
• Strong fear of success	• Strong fear of failure
• Needs to "blend in" to feel safe	• Needs to be "top dog" to feel safe
• Uses food, friends, and "love" to self-medicate	• Uses alcohol, TV, sports, and "sex" to self-medicate
• Believe their problems could be solved if only they could be a better... (spouse, co-worker, parent, friend)	• Believe their problems could be solved if only their... (spouse, co-worker, parent, friend) would treat them better
• Wonders, "Am I being loved enough?"	• Wonders, "Am I loveable enough?"

Male depression is significantly different from female depression. You don't often see what could be considered usual signs but you see it in the *effect* it produces. The man in midlife is supposed to be strong and to him – depression is evidence of weakness. Instead of getting help the midlife man begins to "self-medicate" his condition with a variety of "feel-good" antidotes. When he masks all his feelings of depression the result is that his condition at best is often misunderstood and at its worst – misdiagnosed. This man is in ***midlife crisis!***

Male Depression Unmasked

"We see them as bad boys rather than sad boys"

Harvard psychologist William Pollack, Ph.D insists that depression is vastly under-diagnosed in men. *"When the body count is taken, depression may be as common among men as it is among women, although current dogma holds that depression favors women two to one."* Dr. Pollack and others contend that culture goes to work early on boys to suppress their real rate of suffering. *"Boys are trained in ways*

that make it likely they get depression later. If it doesn't destroy their relationships sooner, it shows up by midlife. Midlife crisis is a euphemism for male-based depression."

Terence Real, MSW, of the Family Institute of Cambridge reports concerning male and female depression that there are many men who experience the "classic" signs of depression, too. But there is a difference even in them, **they hide it**. Their shame at having feelings inconsistent with the male role silences them. They suffer a compound depression--on top of their now-hidden depression they are depressed about feeling depressed.

Even more men exhibit what Terence Real calls **covert depression**. *"You don't see the depression itself but the defensive maneuvers men use to evade or assuage it."*³

The Signs include:

- ***Self-medication***. First and foremost is drinking, but also abuse of other drugs.
- ***Risk-taking***, including compulsive gambling, womanizing, and acts of bravado that show up as high rates of accidental death. *These are "desperate acts" that both numb the pain and show the world "I'm a real man" by denial of vulnerability. "We see them as bad boys rather than sad boys."*
- ***Radical isolation***. Men withdraw from relationships, from their wives.
- ***Lashing out***. This can run the gamut from increased irritability to domestic violence.

You are not alone in the numbers:

According to MIDMAC – research by the MacArthur Foundation in their well-funded study would indicate that only around 15% of respondents admitted to a "turbulence" in midlife transition. ⁴

MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Successful Midlife Development ("MIDMAC"), which studied this and other midlife issues from about 1994-2004.

Analysis of their data shows that 26.8% of adults aged 40 - 60 reported ever having a midlife crisis, but this is broadly defined to include turmoil

associated with a death in the family, marital difficulties, and other issues not specifically tied to middle age.

In a 1998 article, the Washington Post summed up the MIDMAC findings:

Nearly all 750 participants in one in-depth study recognized the term "midlife crisis," but only 23 percent had actually experienced one. When researchers analyzed their responses, they found that only 8 percent tied the emotional turmoil to the realization that they were aging. The remaining 15 percent said they had experienced a turbulent period in their middle years but the crisis was caused by significant life transitions--not by aging.

"When you look more closely, they are saying this is my crisis that occurred when I was 40 years old rather than what caused it was the fact that I was 40," said Elaine Wethington, a research team member who is a professor of sociology at Cornell University. Among the events that sent lives into a tailspin were divorce, loss of a job, the death of a child, the serious illness of a close relative or friend or severe financial problems.

While we at FortySixty cannot endorse the MIDMAC findings or even their conclusions the influence of this study is broad and may seem to contribute to too much of the professional rejection experienced by those that earnestly are seeking help in their transition. Why such a low number? Could it be that they found what they were looking for? A glance at the actual questions might indicate that they did.

A more recent questionnaire posted on a Men's Health Website by Therapist/Author Jed Diamond and responded to by more than 10,000 men would indicate that the percentage of men experiencing IMS is closer to 30 – 40%. You really are not alone. So is there help? We believe that there is.

Strategies that work:

The following compiled by FortySixty Research are items that work to bring you through your midlife transition.

What can I do about it?^{1,5,6,7}

Apart from hormone replacement therapy, certain lifestyle changes have helped men in going through this period of their lives:

1. Diet. Metabolic decline is the number one contributor to a midlife crisis. A healthy diet, which includes a balanced amount of vegetables, fruits, meats, fish and dairy products, is essential.

2. Fitness. Engage in regular exercise, especially *resistance* weight training but also including aerobic, muscular and flexibility exercises.

3. Get regular health checkups. Regular health care visits and screenings are important contributors to men's health and longevity, due to the potential risks of developing, for example, cardiovascular problems, prostate and testicular cancer, and strokes.

4. Check hormone levels as you get older. After age 34 a number of important hormones in a man's body begin to decline. A full hormone workup should be done with careful attention given to levels of FREE (or Bio-available) TESTOSTERONE levels not only TOTAL levels.

5. Reduce stress and worry in your life. Stress is a major source of trouble for men at midlife. Exercise and relaxation help to reduce stress, as does talking to your partners, friends and family about your problems.

6. Sex can still be important to a man, but, as you go through midlife crisis, you might start to view sex as only a part of a relationship which also includes friendship, love, intimacy, sharing and spirituality.

7. Get plenty of sleep. Sleep deprivation and midlife crisis go hand-in-hand. Your primary 'recovery period' during *deep* sleep is between 11:00 PM and 2:00 AM; every hour past eleven is robbery from your well-being and physical & mental health.

8. Find a supportive friend or group and talk to them about what you're going through.

9. Work on your relationships. By midlife most marriages are at the lowest ebb that they ever will be. The marriage has become dull and stale because it has been ignored. Too many pressures at work or too many activities with the kids can crowd out time to understand each other and to build a warm marriage relationship. Work at it! A strong marriage will help prevent a midlife crisis.

Deepen your relationships with other friends. Get involved in a group that is not built on political or social advancement. Most men by midlife have very few true friends. Correct the problem.

10. Rethink your career direction. What is your real purpose in life? What are your gifts and talents? Are these being used in your career and does your career have a dimension of improving other people's lives? Doing something for other people is going to become increasingly important as you age. You will want to leave something behind you when you die. Does your career invest your time and energy in the lives of other people?

Perhaps now is the time to think about working in line with your gifts and abilities rather than just working for money or ego. Possibly your midlife crisis will give you the courage to rethink your career and maybe--just maybe--do what you've always wanted to do.

11. Reexamine your values. The young adult asks, "What am I going to do?" The midlife adult needs to ask the question, "Why am I doing this?"

You have three major resources: dollars, time, and energy. Ask yourself, "How am I going to use these assets for the rest of my years?" "Why do I choose to use them in that way?" Go through your typical day, asking over and over again about every detail of the day, "Why am I doing this? Is this really important to me?"

Do all the pieces of your life--clothes--house--car--friends--really fit your values? Ask "Am I spending my dollars, time, and energy in the way I really want to spend them?"

Rethink the special gifts and abilities you have. Seek coaching or help to refocus your life so that you don't waste energy, or

the precious years you have ahead of you.

12. Seek emotional stability. Discover or rediscover your spirituality. If you are a Christian and even though God may seem distant at some times; you feel distant because you are in crisis now. Keep on talking to God and keep on reading His Word. Read through the Psalms and let God slowly massage your heart. He really does care for you.

13. Encourage the development of your unique person. Young adults tend to be "group-think" people. The midlife man begins to function on self-chosen moral principles. He sees himself more clearly as his own man. Don't just go along with the crowd.

14. Throw away unnecessary obligations. Make a list and prioritize all the things you do and get rid of ten percent of them at the bottom of the list.

15. Appreciate your perspective of seeing life with greater variety and complexity. The young adult tends to think in black-or-white terms. Don't fall back into that narrow thinking. Practice considering other people's opinions. Look for the gray areas so that you can understand the subtleties of life more accurately.

16. Reestablish friendships from the past. Pick up the phone and call a high school or college buddy. Renew acquaintances, but also let him know how you're changing as a person.

17. Refocus your spiritual life. You may feel disillusioned with the institutional church. Jim Conway says, *"Be careful that you don't throw God out if you are struggling with problems in a religious organization. God is your best friend to help you during this difficult time."* Rediscovering your spiritual life is an important part of your transition.

18. Agree with and encourage the changes that are taking place in you. Conway says, *"Remember, God is carrying out a process in you so that you will be more rounded and fully developed as a person."* It's OK to change. It's OK to feel tender, to express your feelings, to cry. Take opportunities to talk to your family and your close friends about how you're changing.

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