

LIFE

The new midlife crisis — are you having one?

Psychologist Dr Julie Hannan, aka the Midlife Crisis Doctor, has a guide for coping with the second half of your life



Crisis? What crisis? Midlife is the threshold to a new you

Peta Bee

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Are you suddenly yearning for a new career? A different relationship? Or has your life been taken over by an obsession with triathlons? If there’s a sense of dissatisfaction with your lot, a search for meaning that’s driving these thoughts, Dr Julie Hannan — aka the Midlife Crisis Doctor — is the woman to turn to. A chartered psychologist and psychotherapist, she specialises in helping clients to navigate the rollercoaster of midlife. Her TikTok posts on symptoms and practical tips have attracted six million views and she has now written a book on the subject: *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. Hannan’s advice is grounded in sound professional knowledge — although it owes much to her personal experience as well.

After qualifying as a psychotherapist in her thirties (she had left a high-flying career in finance because she found it unfulfilling), Hannan worked privately and in the NHS, married

(later divorced), had two children and embarked on a doctorate. By her mid-forties her career was thriving. “I was newly qualified as a chartered psychologist, had set up a mental health clinic with eight psychologists and psychotherapists, but I could feel my interest in work starting to wane,” she says. Her feelings were compounded by her two grown-up children leaving home. “I was experiencing this confusion and loss around the sense of my professional self and added to that the loss of my role as a mother, which hit harder than I ever expected.”

Struggling to know what to do with her life, she began researching psychology papers on midlife. She discovered that what she was suffering from was an identity crisis triggered by a profound loss of the things that were important in her younger years — and that she was not alone. What was lacking in the available literature, though, were the practical steps to deal with how she was feeling. That’s why Hannan decided to create her own. “Many of the psychotherapy manuals were flippant and dismissive, underlined by this push to refer to these symptoms as an ‘awakening’ rather than a ‘crisis’,” Hannan says. “It certainly didn’t feel like a positive awakening to me.”



At 53, Dr Julie Hannan has rekindled her love for her career and this month she remarried

A lightbulb moment for many of Hannan’s clients comes when she tells them that this profound sense of bewilderment and

loss in midlife has a name — liminality, derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, or the point at which change is inevitable. It is during this phase that steps to deal with midlife crisis can be most impactful, she believes. “If you are to be happy in the second half of your life, what you do need to do is to slowly work to cut off the dead wood and free yourself to live more authentically,” Hannan says. “There is always a way through.”

Hannan found a way through by closing her clinic to focus on working with a number of individual clients, privately and in the NHS, and she hasn’t looked back. At 53, she has rekindled her love for her career and this month she remarried. “True contentment in midlife can come from living the second half of life differently to the first, if you make conscious choices and decisions,” Hannan says. Here’s what you need to do:

Feeling ‘stuck’? Don’t worry — it’s good for you

It is human nature to find comfort in familiar habits and behaviours, even though they may no longer be working for you and you know deep down that something really needs to change. “Many of my midlifer clients describe a feeling of being ‘stuck’ because they don’t know how to move forward,” Hannan says. “But if you don’t have clarity about why you have this feeling, then it’s OK to stay stuck until you do.”

She adds: “If you know the area of your life that needs changing but aren’t sure how to go about it, then sit it out until things become clearer.”

While it can be a psychologically challenging phase during which you experience feelings of low mood, frustration and hopelessness, it will pay off not to rush through it. “I would say that this phase is essential,” she says. “It triggers a process of internal conflict resolution — you are up against yourself — that will start to make the future seem clearer.”

Stop being your own worst critic

It is easy to be self-critical in midlife, especially if you are not living the life you want or feel trapped in a life that doesn’t fit. Self-criticism can be destructive, undermining motivation. “When our stress responses are constantly activated, we overproduce the hormone cortisol,” Hannan says. “So if you are criticised at work and then attack yourself with self-criticism you become both the attacker and the attacked, a double whammy of stress hormones.”

She suggests giving yourself the same kindness and concern you would give to a friend. “If a friend said, ‘I’m worried about my health. I’m exhausted, I’m worried I’m missing things at work, and my home life is breaking down’, you wouldn’t say, ‘Oh for goodness’ sake, you’re so weak, get a grip,’ ” she says. “You might say, ‘You are doing the best you can under difficult

circumstances, keep going', so use this kind of a compassionate response for yourself."



Let your new freedom mean new passions

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Use the empty nest to find meaning in your life

It's not just the impact of adult children leaving home that can leave you feeling bereft, but also the gradual withdrawal of your parenting roles in the years preceding your children's departure. "When they leave for university or learn to drive, a part of your role is taken away," Hannan says. "It can leave you completely and unexpectedly bereft."

She suggests taking five important steps: first, celebrate your child's independence and remember that you enabled that. Second, be proud of what you have achieved and take pleasure in all the hard work you put in for them. Third, embrace treating your child as an adult — this is a whole new exciting way of interacting together. Next, process your loss of role with a counsellor or friend. Finally, and most importantly, start prioritising yourself now and divert all that love and energy from your child to finding new meaning, purpose, direction and passion in your life.

Think like a teenager. Don't fixate on the idea that 'time is running out'

In our twenties and early thirties, we are less governed by the constraints of time. "At that age we generally experience time as open-ended — there seems enough of it to take a gap year, study for a part-time qualification or go out with different people," Hannan says. "In midlife we can feel that change to a sense of time whizzing by, but what I do know from my work with clients is that they make much more worthwhile, fulfilling and meaningful life choices when they start to gain a sense that they have more time than they think."

You could take a short course in computer programming, say, but if this is truly something you're fascinated by, why not enrol in a part-time degree that in three years' time provides a new

career that could capture your interest through to retirement? Or if you are unhappy in a relationship, make the time as a couple to work through the difficulties you are experiencing with a counsellor rather than give up because time is running out.

Thinking like a teenager is helpful. “As teenagers we needed to form our sense of self over time, not based on snap decisions,” Hannan says. “There is no reason to start doing that now.”

Don't just pack in your job without a proper plan

Early retirement or voluntary redundancy can seem a dream option when work is getting you down, and recent research showed that more than two fifths of 55 to 65-year-olds have chosen to quit work prematurely since the start of the pandemic. But retirement comes with its own challenges and Hannan describes it as a “major life transition that is grossly underestimated”.

The ending of a career or the finishing of a meaningful job can trigger a big identity shake-up. “Having a lot of unstructured time on your hands all of a sudden is a classic trigger for a crisis due to the absence of identity and meaningful work,” Hannan says. “As one client said to me recently, ‘I went from hero to zero overnight and lost sense of who I was when I retired.’ ”

Before leaving work, consider what your days are going to be like when you won't be at your desk. “Where possible, create a plan and be ready for how you intend to spend your days,” Hannan says. “Make sure you find things that fulfil you and boost your self-esteem and are meaningful for you.”

A sense of loss is normal

Most people who enter a midlife crisis have experienced a profound loss for something that has contributed to their identity until now. For some, it will be very obvious — bereavement, divorce, bankruptcy, redundancy — but for others it might be more subtle but no less impactful and include loss of status at home or work, loss of youth and looks, loss of a role as a parent, lover or partner.

Shifting values are also a contributory factor. “In most cases our underlying values are set when we are in our teens and not updated,” Hannan says. “As a 22-year-old you might value ambition, money and success very highly, but your values at 52 will likely be completely different.”

If you are still in the same job, doing the same type of role, you might not be connecting to what's important to you at this point in your life.

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***The Midlife Crisis Handbook* by Dr Julie Hannan (Morency; £10.88 from Amazon)**