



# IN A CRISIS

You may experience feeling lost and like a failure when going through a midlife crisis. But there are things you can do to get through this difficult time

**W**INTER is coming. The days are getting shorter (and darker – thanks, Eskom!), the cost of living is punishing and petrol prices just keep going up. No wonder many of us are feeling a bit... meh.

It's certainly a time of year many of us go into self-reflection. But if you're 40-plus and you find yourself constantly wondering whether your life is on track

and "is this really all there is?!" you may be on the brink of a midlife crisis.

In her new book, *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*, psychologist Dr Julie Hannan offers a guide for handling this period of your life meaningfully, providing tools and tips to cope with the confusion, conflict and fear you may be feeling.

So how do you know if you're having a midlife crisis and what can you do about it?

In this extract she offers sensible and sensitive advice that can help you navigate this challenging time.

**B**ETWEEN the ages of 40 and 60, people become increasingly aware of the limitations of the second half of their life. They may develop a sense of time running out and of bodily decline, as well as mourning the loss of youthful adventures and creative ideas as it becomes increasingly challenging to hang on to their sense of self.

Many people can feel a sense of malaise, hopelessness, entrapment, dissatisfaction and disappointment. There



Consider setting boundaries if you find yourself struggling to get up in the morning to go to work.

self-awareness, adjustment and action).

True contentment and happiness in midlife can come from living the second half of life differently to the first, by making conscious choices. Conscious choices are made by people with full awareness of the motivation behind their choices.

The first half of your life has been about fitting into the world – the second half is about creating a world that fits around you.

Here's advice to help you recalibrate this area of your life towards greater happiness.

It's a psychologically challenging time when you're unsure about who you are or who you want to be, with an overriding feeling that the current you is no longer a good fit for the life you're living – it's not fit for purpose.

Transitioning successfully through midlife isn't achieved by taking pills, though that might help some people with the anxiety or depression that might accompany a midlife crisis.

Instead, you must live a meaningful life, and this often involves living the second half of your life differently from the first half. You have to work out how you want to live in the present and implement the changes required.

The good news is that you already have what you need to traverse this life transition and create a fulfilling new life for yourself. It doesn't require any large expenses because the mid-life journey to a meaningful life worth living is an inward, not an outward one.

Although a bigger car, a holiday home or an affair might create a bit of excitement or distraction and stave off a sense of underachievement felt by many midlifers, big purchases and flings will only satisfy you for a short time.

What you need to make this meaningful change will come from within and this means drawing on inner strengths and resources which you already have (for example, reflection,

## WORK

The last thing anyone needs when they have financial commitments is a sense that their job is unfulfilling, starting to drain them and it's becoming increasingly difficult to raise the energy to get out of bed each morning to go to work and be polite to your colleagues or the boss.

If you can't quit your job there are other ways to make your working life better. Here are some action points to consider:

**Choose your colleagues carefully** Positive people with a healthy work ethic who are supportive and understanding of each other and your situation can help you to feel more motivated. If there are people who drain you, it's okay to separate yourself.

**Set boundaries outside of work** Do you notice issues with your boundaries at work that are causing you unhappiness? You can tighten up your work boundaries by leaving on time and not discussing work once you leave the premises.

Turning off notifications on your phone or email outside of set hours can give you defined quality time away from the organisation.

**Specialise** Becoming an expert in this one aspect of your job might help you to maintain interest and enthusiasm for the job and boost your self-esteem as you support others with your knowledge.

**Request reasonable adjustments** Throughout the world there are employment laws that oblige employers to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate requests for changed working conditions.

You could consider asking for a flexible working schedule, at least temporary- ➤

## MANY MIDLIFERS HAVE A SENSE OF...

- Feeling lost
- Life lacking meaning
- No passion or joy in life
- Hardly recognising themselves
- "Is this all there is?"
- Feeling like a failure
- Being trapped and stuck
- Feeling bored beyond belief
- Feeling desperate to run away
- Underachievement
- Feeling totally unfulfilled
- "How did I get here?"

may be a sense that, if you could just change the one thing that's holding you back, then all would be well. The trouble is you can't work out what the thing is. Even if you could put your finger on it, you're not really sure how it needs to change anyway.

Yet a midlife crisis is more than all of the above: it's a crisis related to our identity and about understanding ourselves at our very core.

ily while you make changes to your life. **Develop yourself** Speak to human resources and see if you can go on any courses to enhance assertiveness, time management or wellbeing, or see if you can have a mentor or coach.

**Develop a side hustle** This is a part-time business or freelance work that you do in addition to your full-time work or alongside other part-time work to bring in additional income. That way the bills still get paid and you have developed a new source of vitality and income in your life while still honouring your commitments.

## SOCIAL

People start to lose friends from around the age of 25 and, particularly in midlife, a person's social network begins to shrink. A consolidation process starts in these middle years as people choose to spend time with family members and familiar people they feel emotionally attached to, rather than new people.

**Don't be afraid to cull** There's a world of difference between a person who can't hold on to friends and one who outgrows their friendships and acquires new friends due to life taking on a different direction and existing friends not understanding or supporting their changes.


If your life is changing, for example, you've decided you're no longer going to put up with your job or your relationship, any new changes can unsettle existing friends, especially if you've always empathised with each other about how rubbish work was or how disappointing partners are. But unlike you, they aren't going to do anything about it.

You're taking action and that changes things – maybe it wasn't the friendship they signed up for, perhaps you discover you have less in common now things have changed, or it feels shameful for them to acknowledge what they haven't changed.

**Take the initiative** Suggest meeting friends for a coffee more regularly, going for a walk or trying out new restaurants. That way you can get away from the more formal structure of a class or a club and just hang out.

**Get into the right mind frame** Many people find it difficult to ask for help and support, but I always say, "If you knew a good friend was lonely and they asked you out for a walk, would you go?" The answer is usually, "Yes, of course." People like to help other people.

**Don't be afraid to reach out** If you're un-



Reach out to old friends and suggest meeting up, or make regular coffee dates with current friends.

comfortable phoning friends, then text so they have time to consider your invite to get together. Try and put a date in the text to meet rather than leave it open-ended – it also gives them the chance to suggest a better date which works for them.

**Get to know your friends' friends** When your friends are going out in a group you don't know, ask if you can go along – chances are you'll meet another friend within the group who has the same qualities as you.

**Reconnect with an old friend** They were your friend for a reason but maybe you just haven't seen them for a while. If you don't ask the question, you'll never know. A simple text like, "Haven't seen you for ages – do you fancy catching up over coffee next week?" What's the worst that can happen?


## MENTAL HEALTH

Depression, anxiety and other mental-health challenges can adversely impact the quality of home life, create difficulties in your work life and impact social activities. Here are some action points to consider:

**Connect with people** This will help to give you a sense of belonging and enjoyment, and provide you with emotional support.

**Increase your physical activity** Regular exercise is good for the mind because it releases chemicals called endorphins.

**Learn something new** Learning a new skill gets those brain neurons firing up – it can be good for feelings of achievement, self-worth, enjoyment and more.



Your doctor will be able to assist with managing any hormonal changes.

**Work on your self-esteem** Creating a positive sense of how you feel about yourself can really enhance the quality of your life. **Choose meaningful activities** Do fewer of those activities that drain you and make you feel miserable.

**Don't be a mind reader** Don't try to control what people think of you. Everyone will give their opinion on whether you're doing things right or wrong. All you need to be sure about is your path forward.

Rather than waste energy trying to convince others, spend that energy on yourself and concentrate on the things in life that you can change.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

Living with health issues, pain or illness can be very challenging, but here are some actions you can take to improve



Don't underestimate the little things, like the joy you get from listening to your favourite song.

**'ANXIETY AND OTHER MENTAL-HEALTH CHALLENGES CAN ADVERSELY IMPACT THE QUALITY OF HOME LIFE'**

## READ THE SIGNS

If any (or all) of the following statements resonate with you, you might be in the early or middle stages of a midlife crisis:

- I know I need a change, but I'm unsure how
- I feel stuck in my life
- My duties and responsibilities make me feel trapped
- I hardly recognise myself
- I know what I'd like to do but I can't get myself to do it
- I feel like I'm just killing time till retirement

- I want to feel passion and joy again
- I feel my relationship has passed its sell-by date
- I feel like I'm at a crossroads, unsure of which way to turn
- I need something different but don't want to upset anyone
- I feel angry and frustrated
- I need a change but the thought of it scares me
- I'm scared of making the wrong choices and making things worse

- I often think, "What's the point?"
- I'm selfish if I try to make time for myself
- I feel like I'm on automatic pilot a lot of the time
- I feel like I've lost my mojo
- I feel like my life lacks meaning
- I avoid people, situations and my feelings by drinking or eating
- I feel guilty that I feel so unhappy when everything looks okay on the surface.

the quality of your physical health:

**Follow advice** Take care to follow any medical and health professional advice you receive about taking care of yourself, daily rehab exercises or medication regimes.

**Keep your body supple** Take up yoga to help with joint flexibility and improve cardio and circulatory health.

**Eat healthily** Increase proteins such as poultry, lean meats, tofu, fish and eggs; and wholegrains such as brown rice and oats. Eat more fresh or frozen fruit and veggies and healthy fats such as nuts and avocados.

**Work out regularly** You could

buy some dumbbells and begin to work out at home. There are lots of brilliant online dance classes, fitness apps and workout videos you can follow if you choose to do this from the comfort of your own home.

**Manage hormone fluctuations** With midlife comes reduced hormones. Speak to your doctor for advice on the best way for you to manage reduced hormone levels.

### JOY

You don't have to wait for life to be perfect to be able to find joy. To increase the amount of joy in your life, try some of the following action points:

**Practise gratitude** Take time out daily to reflect on the things you're grateful for. This might be friends; a pet; a warm, safe, cosy bed; a loving partner or peace of mind.

**Notice joy in the small moments** A rainbow on a rainy day, a baby's smile, the smell of baking bread, your favourite table being free at your favourite coffee shop or an unexpected lie-in.

**Spend time with people who love you** Loving human connection can be a source of support and fulfilment in life and can increase emotional support and reduce loneliness.

**Set goals** Achieving goals and then celebrating them can be a great source of contentment and joy in your home and working life. Set goals that are achievable over time, large or small, which you can then feel proud of achieving. □

THE MIDLIFE CRISIS HANDBOOK



FINDING DIRECTION IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

DR JULIE HANNAN

EXTRACTED FROM THE MIDLIFE CRISIS HANDBOOK BY DR JULIE HANNAN