



OPINION

By Dr Julie Hannan

My kids left home within two weeks of each other and it triggered a midlife crisis

The loss of my role as a mother hit me like a ton of bricks, but I found new purpose

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When my son went off to university and within a fortnight my daughter moved out, my longed-for 'me time' seemed like a curse (Photo: Ariel Skelley/Getty Images)

It's that time of year when children leave home and **head off to university**. I, like many parents, had dreamt about how finally I'd have time for me, a chance to read the paper uninterrupted, reclaim my weekends which had been swallowed whole by school sporting fixtures, and enjoy a full night's sleep without frantically tracking the kids to make sure they're still alive.

But when my son went off to university and within a fortnight my daughter moved out, my longed-for "me time" seemed like a curse. I was shocked at how impacted I felt by their departure.

My reaction didn't seem to make logical sense. I was delighted to see my kids making their way in the world, I had wanted more "me" time, so why did I feel bereft, bored, demotivated, lacking purpose and anxious?

It's not like I didn't know they would leave one day, but as a psychologist with good friends and a reasonable social life, I thought I'd got the emotional insight and support I needed to be okay.

What I now know is that their leaving triggered an identity crisis, **more familiarly known as a midlife crisis**, within me which over time led me to reassess my life, sell my home, pivot my career, go viral on social media and write a book supporting other empty nesters through this tricky time of life.

The term "midlife crisis" was first coined in 1965 by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques. It is a psychological crisis based around identity, as people typically aged 40 to 65 struggle to answer the question: who am I now?

I read everything I could get my hands on to work out what was happening to me. I knew it wasn't menopause as several dads I spoke to said they felt bereft too. The literature I found told me what an opportunity this time of life offered, so I waited impatiently for a spontaneous "awakening" that never arrived.

I realised I had experienced my children's departure as a profound loss which made me **question who I was**.

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A profound loss is the loss of anything you have heavily invested in with time, love, money or energy. We tend to think of big losses like the death of a loved one or the breakdown of a relationship, but other more subtle losses can have an enormous impact on identity, such as a loss of role, health, status, vitality, or youth.

For me, the loss of my role as a mother hit me like a ton of bricks and created an emotional chasm in my life that I didn't know how to fill.

Then I stumbled across a word that accurately described where I found myself: "liminality", a betwixt and between space between identities where an old identity (mother) no longer fits but a new one has yet to be formed. It was affirming to know that liminality existed and that this "in-betweenness" could be contributing towards my existential anxiety.

I researched theories of adult development and found Erik Erikson's theory of "Generativity vs Stagnation". This describes a critical period in midlife when people grapple with questions about the direction and purpose of their lives and either create a sense of generativity (contributing positively to society and future generations) or stagnate (an unwillingness to grow). I knew from my work that values underpin behaviour and drive motivation, so I set about reassessing mine and found that "contribution" was important to me. This meant the energy I had invested in my kids over the years needed a new home.

I wanted to make my newfound research and knowledge accessible to a wider audience and help other empty nesters who might be struggling too. I stepped outside of my comfort zone and into TikTok, creating a post about midlife crisis symptoms which immediately went viral. My sense of purpose started to resurface as I disseminated information helping people understand themselves and this time of life better.

I sold my house, downsized, took a sabbatical and wrote about everything I had learned. I published *The Midlife Crisis Handbook* in March 2023.

Empty nesting can create an opportunity to live life differently by reassessing your values and aligning your life in accordance with these up-to-date values. Generativity can lead to personal growth, fulfilment, and an increased sense of purpose as new hobbies, careers and relationships can invigorate you and steer you away from experiencing a sense of stagnation, regret and loss.

So, as you wave your kids off in the next week or so, turn your focus inward and actively explore what's important to you now. Filling the gap that a child's departure leaves can take time but meaning and purpose can be found in the strangest of places – even TikTok!