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The three classic stages of a midlife crisis – and how to get through them

Feeling directionless and lacking enthusiasm for a job I once loved, I knew something had to give

By Lauren Libbert

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My crisis didn't crash calamitously into my life overnight nor was it linked to a big trauma. It was slow and insidious, creeping into my psyche like rainfall in a blocked gutter, taking months for the seep-

seep pressure of water to build and the building to eventually crack.

It was a steady erosion of self and status that centred mainly around my work and hit hardest on a Monday morning when I'd have to physically drag myself to my computer, shoulders sagging in anticipation of another day spent in frustration or boredom, doing a job – to coin the phrase of author Marie Kondo – that no longer sparked joy.

I had no idea what had changed or even when it happened, but I felt discombobulated, directionless and lacking in enthusiasm and energy.

For the best part of 25 years, journalism had been a dream career and one of which I was immensely proud. I entered it at 27, abandoning the dry, uncreative world of law to do what I loved – writing, researching, interviewing, listening to people's stories and writing them up.

But Covid and remote working changed my landscape and it became increasingly competitive and cutthroat. Instead of jumping on the social media bandwagon to trumpet my work, I instinctively felt the urge to retreat. Something just no longer fitted. I no longer fitted.



'I felt discombobulated, directionless and lacking in enthusiasm and energy,' says Libbert | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

As my enthusiasm for the hustle waned, I watched my bank balance decline and felt existential panic. What could I do now? Who was I if I wasn't a journalist? How would I earn money to support my two teenage sons?

For weeks, I sat at my desk, feeling stuck. I moved through the days as if wading through treacle, my thoughts laden with doubt as to how best to move forward. I thought about training to be a psychotherapist as friends always praised my ability to listen and support but the fees ran into the thousands and three years of studying felt far too impractical and indulgent.

I tried to keep just enough work coming in while I figured out my next steps. I signed up for an online copywriting course but found it dull and uninspiring. Then I wondered if freelancing was the problem and my enthusiasm for journalism would be re-ignited if I was part of a team. I started applying for corporate editing jobs but felt panic each time I passed the first interview stage and relief when I didn't get the job.

Back at square one, I felt more disheartened than ever.

In an effort to clear the fog, I spoke to psychologist Dr Julie Hannan, author of [The Midlife Crisis Handbook](#), who listened patiently to my outpouring of existential angst then explained, quite matter-of-factly, that what I'd been going through were the three classic stages of a midlife crisis.

Stage one

"The first stage is, 'How did I get here? Why is this happening to me?' Suddenly, you realise the values and scripts of who you were meant to be for the first half of your life and fitting into the world are no longer appropriate," she explained.

"In your 40s or 50s, you may have been in your career for 20 or 30 years and when you decided to get into that career you were in your late teens or early 20s and had a different value-based system which might have been about recognition, success, power or money. But what you want later in life is different and might be more about flexibility, freedom or even contributing back into the world."

Put simply, Dr Hannan says we spend the first half of life fitting into the world and the second half of life should be about creating a world that fits around us. "It's time to reassess your values and think about what's important to you now," she added.

Changing course: finding a way forward

by Dr Julie Hannan

Discover what areas of your life are misaligned and need to change. Rate on a scale of 1-10 how you feel in these 14 areas of your life: work, social, family, sex and intimacy, comfort in life, finances, parenting, health, joy, relaxation, play, spirituality, relationships and self-esteem. Once you've given a rating in each area, try to consider why your lower scores are so low, how you feel in each role and why you might not find satisfaction with each role.

Know there are three choices to every midlife crisis

Relive your youth, which might temporarily provide a great distraction but you'll end up back where you started. Stay as you are and make a conscious decision to remain comfortable in the "known" rather than the "unknown" or choose liminality and recalibration, living the second half of your life differently to your first.

Let go of old life-limiting core beliefs and scripts

In order to get out of the stuckness, you have to let go of anything that keeps you trapped in your own identity. For example, thinking, "I can't go down in salary at this age" or "I don't deserve to be treated better in a relationship." Take a calculated risk and confront your belief, however small, and see if you can produce a different result. If you think you're unlovable, ask someone you are close with if they love you. Or study and sit an exam to overcome a core belief that you're stupid.

Change your mindset about time

In midlife, people begin to focus on the limitations of the second half of their life – realising that life isn't forever, and often a sense that time is running out can begin to develop. But you have time to make the changes you need to make.

If we feel that time is running out and our future is limited, this can reduce our choices, making us reluctant to start new projects or to see through an idea that might lead to something fulfilling. If you can broaden your perspective on time, it will help negate the potential trade-off you might make if you rush to change things quickly.

Stage two

Oddly, the weeks and months of sitting at my desk feeling stuck were, according to Dr Hannan, a crucial second stage of a midlife crisis known as "liminality" and offered a way to navigate out of it successfully.

"This stuckness when you don't know what you want to do is known as the liminal space, where you're stuck between identities, and is essential for self-reflection and self-awareness," she explained.

“You can’t go back to your old identity as that doesn’t fit anymore so you have to sit in the liminal space, trying to understand how and why you got here, weighing up the areas of your life that no longer work for you and contemplating what values are important to you now.”

While my crisis was centred around my career, the same would apply if the trigger was a dissatisfaction with a relationship, friendships, home environment or way of life.

“You have to align your life going forward with your new values,” said Dr Hannan. “For women around menopause at an age where things are already changing hormonally, or with kids leaving home, living an authentic life and holding on to your integrity and status from within can become more important than, say, earning big money or remaining at your level on the career ladder. You can dig down to find your energy, but you can’t fake it.”



Libbert says a crisis of nine or so months brought her to a fulfilling new job | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

Stage three

After sitting in the liminal space, the next stage of a crisis is “active experimentation”, trying different things and seeing how you like – or don’t like –them. By applying for jobs, considering training as a therapist and enrolling on a course, Dr Hannan revealed I had reached this stage and interrogated me on my learnings.

I explained I didn't want to work for a corporate in editing or copywriting (the relief at not getting the editing jobs showed me that), nor did I want to junk all my skills and start again in something new (psychotherapy).

What I wanted was intellectual stimulation, interaction with people, a feeling of usefulness and the desire to put something good and important into the world, using the skills I already had.

I was happy to take a salary cut, too, preferring a regular secure income over an erratic, freelance one.

You could call it serendipity or a coincidence – as a religious person, I'd even say there may have been a spiritual hand in it – but it wasn't long after my enlightening conversation with Dr Hannan that my sister mentioned a job going at a social care organisation on a project called My Voice that involved telling the complete life stories of Holocaust survivors in beautiful coffee-table style books. I got in touch with the project manager, submitted an application – and a few months later the job was mine.

I've been doing it for two months now and to say it's a perfect fit is an understatement. Every day, I wake up fuelled with purpose, energy and direction. The job is challenging and involves recruiting and mentoring volunteers, matching them with survivors, overseeing the editing process and making sure the final book is a true testimony of these remarkable people's lives.

To be part of it feels an honour and a privilege and I haven't felt so happy or fulfilled career-wise in years. And it was my crisis of nine or so months that brought me to it.

“A midlife crisis can feel terrifying but it's actually a time when you can move your life forward, with everything up for grabs and negotiation,” says Dr Hannan.

“The whole point is to go through the different stages slowly so you don't end up making sudden changes, like having an affair for example, and blowing up your life. It's a time to re-examine your core beliefs and values and to tackle the underlying issues and find out what's truly going to make you happy.”

Have you or somebody you know gone through a midlife crisis? Let us know in the comments

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