



Log in

Subscribe

Home UK World Comment Money Life & Style Business Sport Culture Travel Obitua

What nearly dying at 56 taught me about how I should live

A freak road accident pushed the psychologist Julie Hannan to make big changes in midlife that she hadn't had the courage to do before



Dr Julie Hannan: "There's nothing like lying in a hospital bed to prompt a careful review of your life"

CARMEL KING FOR THE TIMES. HAIR AND MAKE UP BY KAREN HAYCOCK/OAK AND RUTHERFORD

Julie Hannan

Tuesday January 20 2026, 11.00pm, The Times

A couple of months ago, on holiday in California near the vineyards of Paso Robles, I nearly died. Sitting behind my husband on the back of a Harley bike on Highway 46, it all happened in seconds. If the speeding car that hit us had been one of those huge SUVs that dominate American roads, we would both be dead.

We didn't see the car coming but I'll never forget the thud of the impact. My husband went over the car's bonnet and I was thrown in the opposite direction. Other drivers stopped, rushed over to help, called an ambulance, comforted us until the sheriff arrived and stayed until we were taken to a trauma hospital. As a 56-year-old psychologist who helps people to reshape their lives during midlife, nothing makes that work feel more real than facing a moment that could end your own life.

In the emergency room my husband was rushed into surgery to save his shattered leg. I underwent back-to-back operations for a crushed foot and a broken collarbone. I had bruising from my head down to my toes on my left side. My ribs were agonisingly painful on the right. In the immediate aftermath I was overwhelmed by my own helplessness and shocked by my fragility. I was unable to sit up, walk to the loo or even brush my hair, tasks I had done without thought only hours earlier.

- [What I learned from my near-death experience](#)

Twelve days later we were heading to LAX airport, bound for Heathrow. We'd managed only a tiny shuffle down the hospital corridor on our Zimmer frames and now we faced a 20-hour journey home. It was daunting. We're each facing a year of rehabilitation with possible continued chronic pain.

At home life has had to be reorganised around pain. My days are shaped by medication, gentle physiotherapy and careful pacing to avoid foot flare-ups. Sleep is longed for but rarely comfortable. Concentration is thinner so during my working hours I now need to build in breaks to prevent burnout and overwhelm. Even small tasks require planning, patience and negotiation with a body that no longer does what I ask.

My life is unrecognisable in many ways. Luckily I lift weights several times a week, eat protein and don't drink or smoke, a good starting point for recovery, doing all the things midlifers are told to do. But here's the part that often gets overlooked: even when you're attempting to live mindfully it's easy to slip into autopilot, continuing outdated routines and responsibilities long after they've stopped serving you. And there's nothing like lying in a hospital bed to prompt a careful review of your life.

I began to see how I'd allowed work to quietly take over — not in a dramatic way but by gradually edging out other parts of my life. I had ensnared myself as hobbies that once mattered — solo travel, upholstery, even socialising — had been deprioritised. Much of my emotional energy was going into supporting my adult children as they found their footing in their careers and relationships, staying fully present for my clients. I also spent a lot of time worrying about how my parents' sudden health changes might affect their quality of life, while still respecting their need for autonomy.

- [How a near-death experience turned me into a thriller writer](#)

And somewhere in all of this I stopped giving myself permission to be alone and instead began to take the time and space I needed to think and create. My desire to write another book — and to finally complete the film script I'd started years earlier — hadn't vanished but it had quietly stalled.

As I lay on that hospital bed I suddenly recognised myself in the patterns I see every day in my midlife clients — sandwiched between teenagers and ageing parents, trying to stay relevant professionally, absorbing the emotional needs of others and worrying about their pension. It's an exhausting load. I see midlifers longing for change: outwardly successful yet quietly unfulfilled, living by other people's expectations, watching their own dreams fade as they become disconnected from the person they long to be.

What the accident reminded me is that you don't "fix" your life at 50 and then coast into old age. You have to keep updating it, recalibrating it, adjusting. Somewhere along the way, even with all my professional awareness, in the busyness of life, I had taken my eye off the ball.

For decades a large house acted as a marker of success and stability but for me it had become another tie, something that took energy rather than gave it. I didn't need an identity tied to square footage, I wanted freedom. So what did I do? I put the house on the market as soon as we got home from California. We'd toyed with the idea of downsizing before the holiday but the accident shifted us into action. We plan to move into an apartment in Malvern, a lively spa town, with no garden to manage, making it easier to lock up and leave.

Psychologists have long recognised that a key task of midlife is generativity — the desire to contribute something meaningful to others. Research shows that people who channel this energy into purposeful projects experience better wellbeing, a stronger sense of identity and vitality.

Two years ago I went viral on TikTok after posting a short video listing five signs of a midlife crisis — not clichés about sports cars and affairs but the psychological impact shaped by identity collapse and lack of meaning. I continued posting on themes of change and purpose but felt disillusioned. Thirty-second videos could only skim the surface. And the public perception of a midlife crisis as impulsive or self-indulgent proved challenging to shift in such a compressed format.

I knew I wanted to use my research and clinical experience in a more helpful way. So I have launched the Midlife Academy. The accident highlighted my need to create a space to help people navigate midlife with greater depth and clarity. Now, instead of quick fixes that tell part of the story, I've developed online courses on empty nesting and career change. I've produced longer-form YouTube videos on loss of meaning, identity, attractiveness, marriage and status.

• [The new midlife crisis – are you having one?](#)

My grandson, Ronnie, was six weeks old at the time of the crash. Arriving home I felt more than ever that I wanted to make space for him and support my daughter Martha. I had always been involved but the way my work was structured left me unable to commit to regular support. I kept telling myself I'd have time and more flexibility later. My previous husband – Martha's father – and I now have a shared arrangement in place, taking turns caring for Ronnie every week.

My son Freddie, 24, is moving to Australia and I want to spend extended periods with him. To make that possible I've condensed my working hours. I feel relieved. I'm earning less but the trade-off feels right.

After my first marriage, I'd been a single mother for years, always working hard, flipping family homes to cover school fees and holidays and finance a decade-long career change in my forties to become a psychologist. What had been missing was not productivity but permission to honour my creative needs that "being responsible" had repeatedly flattened.

Where am I now? As my foot slowly learns to bear weight again, so does my life. Each small step – writing, downsizing, holding my grandson and choosing what matters to me – is its own kind of rehabilitation.

Dr Julie Hannan is a psychologist, the founder of [the Midlife Academy](#) and the author of [The Midlife Crisis Handbook](#)

[^BACK TO TOP](#)

THE  TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES

[Get in touch](#)

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place an announcement](#)

[Clas](#)