

I got a midlife crisis haircut at 53 – and I don't regret it

Empowerment, self-consciousness, fear: lobbing off a good 12in of hair triggered a range of emotions, but now I'm embracing my new identity



314

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From initial regret, writer Helen Down is slowly learning to love her new hairstyle Credit: Andrew Crowley for The Telegraph

Helen Down

Published 05 May 2026 1:00pm BST

From getting divorced and [dating younger men](#) to attending a [magic mushroom](#) retreat, there are many ways for a 2020s woman to have a [midlife crisis](#). And I've covered most of them. But when I went to the hairdressers and asked to have the left side of my head shaved, I found a whole new way to have an identity meltdown.

I've long admired the "undercut". A buzz cut down one side, with feminine long locks on the other. A couple of months ago, I found myself googling pictures of my dream barnet and boring my nearest and dearest with them. With one shocked exception, the collective response was a resounding "yes". So I strutted into my hairdressers feeling pretty confident. This confidence was short-lived.

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My heavily tattooed stylist, Maisie, must've predicted that an oldie like me would have a post-cut wobble. Before she got the clippers out, she checked – multiple times – that I *really* wanted to go through with this. "Yes," I said, "before I change my mind!" As a good 12in of my hair (aka two years' worth of growth) dropped to the floor, I saw my old identity fall away, ready to be swept into the bin with all the other rubbish. More disconcertingly, I briefly saw my teen self staring back at me in the mirror. Aged 15, I did a Britney and shaved off most of my hair. I expect that angry girl would dismiss the 53-year-old me as tragic.



Helen as a teenager

Regardless, I leapt out of the chair feeling empowered. Yet when I got outside, my fantasy haircut collided with reality and that momentary empowerment became excruciating self-consciousness. Regret started seeping in. Were

strangers being less smiley with me? And what about that restaurant – the one with the smart dress code – I needed to review as a journalist? And that business-critical meeting with someone I'd never met before? Could I ever again leave the house without wearing a hat? Most terrifying of all, what was my 17-year-old going to say?

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I suddenly feared that the world saw me – judged me – not as friendly Helen with the Barbie-like ponytail that had been a feature for more than 25 years, but as scary Helen. Or, worse still, try-hard Helen. What the hell had driven this madness?



Pre-chop: 'friendly Helen with the Barbie-like ponytail' Credit: Paul Grover for the Telegraph

“It’s very common for women at [midlife](#) to make visible changes to hair, clothes, work, relationships or lifestyle,” says Dr Julie Hannan, a chartered counselling psychologist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. “Shaving your hair may be an attempt to create the external sense of movement, renewal or aliveness that you feel internally.”

Dr Hannan has me bang to rights. I triggered my own midlife crisis six years ago when I decided to get divorced. A natural-born thrill seeker, I spent the first half of this bonkers period feasting off the excitement that came from dating, partying and travelling. But I eventually realised that I was drowning in a sea of drama-induced dopamine that was neither sustainable nor responsible. I’m in a new relationship now, one so settled and healthy that it’s putting an end to my midlife crisis. I’m slowly learning to make peace with a quieter – and more age-appropriate? – pace of life.

Case in point: last weekend, my partner and I had grand plans to go raving but ended up watching David Attenborough’s *Secret Garden*. So I’ve reached a crossroads where I’m trying to take a calmer path but can’t quite bury the younger thrill-seeker within.

Dr Hannan sums-up this conflict as “liminality”. “Midlife,” she says, “often brings a sense that the old self no longer fits, but a new identity has yet to be established. You enter a state called liminality where you’re between identities. It’s an uncomfortable space, so people often resort to drastic measures – a bold haircut, an affair or quitting work – as an attempt to make an external change before the internal shift is fully understood.”



Journalist Down sports her new undercut style Credit: Andrew Crowley

Two weeks on, regret for my big chop is slowly turning into love. It helps that reactions from friends and family have been largely positive. At my parents' 60th wedding anniversary, comments ranged from "Why have you gone all New Romantic?" to "You look like Swampy's girlfriend". Mostly, though, people – including my 80-something parents – did a quick double-take and then said: "Oh, I like it. It's cool." Even my son's friend approved. And as for people no longer smiling at me, I now realise that it was mere paranoia.

Turns out, the only person not quite prepared for my midlife crisis haircut was me. But by working on aligning my inner and outer selves, I'm hopeful that my new identity will grow quicker than my hair.

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