

Midlife Crises of Men at Age 50

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Thirty 50-year-old men were interviewed to elicit their feelings about reaching midlife. The top 10 themes that emerged from the interviews were ranked and discussed. The main issues are concern with physical health and well-being, mental health problems, concern about the health and dependency needs of elderly parents, problems with children, job and career issues, financial worries, issues of goal achievement in life, and apprehension about future security.

Much has been written about midlife crisis and its association with depression, the leading form of severe mental illness (Jamison, 1995; McNulty, 1995; Stritch, 1985). Physical, social, economic, sexual, and interpersonal factors have all been cited (Silverman & Green, 1990) as central to crises of midlife. Whereas the onset of midlife may occur earlier in some individuals and later in others, age 50 is a recognized turning point for most people. As 50 is the half-way point to the usually unattainable age of 100, people's lives begin a long downhill slope. Age 50 is a decade marker that has come to symbolize a new level of maturity. As Seldrake (1982) has observed, it elevates a person to the category of "older."

Upon gaining this status, one's existence is suddenly discovered by The American Association of Retired Persons. All kinds of catalogs advertising health aids ranging from jar openers to bedpans begin to clutter one's mailbox. Suddenly at age 50 people realize that TV commercials about hair dye, baldness, arthritis, dentures, urinary problems, laxatives, and energy restorers are pitched to them, and they begin to take them personally. Health insurers are more likely to reject 50-year-olds, and life insurers raise their premiums as one's life expectancy grows shorter. Medical problems

abound as the body begins to complain about its half-century of use and abuse (Aurelio, 1987).

The opportunity to be considered as a "wunderkind" in one's chosen field of endeavor is lost forever. In fact, employers begin to think of one as perhaps "a bit too long in the tooth for the job" (Carney, 1993, p. 74) and too old for retraining for some other occupation. Marital problems that have been festering for 10-15 years come to a head (Sanders, 1993). Problems with elderly parents, difficult children, large mortgages, and growing credit card debt all take their toll. As Liebowitz (1995) observed, anxiety and depression are exacerbated by the realization that, at age 50, the time left to smooth out the bed that was rumpled by the past half-century and to prepare for the uncertainties of the future is not as limitless as it may have seemed a decade earlier.

In the effort to anticipate problems and to provide professional guidance to clients who are approaching midlife, it is important to grasp the principal themes that are of greatest concern to them. This qualitative research aims to go directly to the source and to learn, first hand, what those concerns are.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 men who had attained the age of 50. Men who were included had had their 50th birthday no more

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NOTE: This is a fictional article to be used only for purposes of research education.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage
<i>Education</i>	
Graduate School	58
College Graduate	32
Some College	10
<i>Occupation</i>	
Professional-Managerial	32
Business Owner	33
Technical	21
Sales	4
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Single	11
Married	58
Divorced or Separated	31

Note. Participants' income range was \$39,000–\$150,000; the median was \$69,385.

than 11 months before their participation in the project. The participants consisted of a networking sample that was organized by the three investigators. Each investigator began with a few acquaintances who expressed willingness to participate. They asked these men to refer them to other men who were within the required age range. Each co-investigator recruited 10 men in this fashion. In addition to being 50 years of age, the participants had to be sufficiently articulate, introspective, and willing to disclose themselves to professional interviewers for research purposes. Confidentiality was assured to the participants, and all of them were offered a free counseling session in return for their participation. Demographic characteristics of the final study sample are shown in Table 1. This background information was obtained by means of a questionnaire that was filled out by the participants before the interviews.

Interviews

The three investigators conducted open-ended interviews with the volunteers that lasted at least 1 hr. None of them saw volunteers that they had recruited. The volunteers who had been recruited by R. M. were interviewed by M. T. Those recruited by M. T. were interviewed by J. A., and those recruited by J. A. were interviewed by R. M. The interviews were open-ended, and the interviewers followed the

responses that were generated as long as they were fruitful before moving to another topic. All of the interviewers asked the following standard questions when they could be smoothly inserted in the dialogue:

What does it feel like to turn 50?

Did turning 50 make you reflect on your life? If so, how?

In your experience, what major problems come up at age 50?

What are the major issues in your life now?

What is your outlook on the future now that you are 50?

What advice would you give to other men who are going to turn 50?

Each investigator conducted interviews with 10 volunteers. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were recorded. At the end of each interview, the investigator replayed the tape for the participant and asked him to identify what he thought were the major themes that surfaced during the interview. At the end of the session, anyone who felt a need to continue the discussion was offered an appointment. Fourteen participants decided to pursue further the issues that had been raised.

Judging of Themes

When all of the interviews had been completed, the tapes were transcribed verbatim. A 3-inch margin was retained on the right-hand side of each page. Copies of the transcriptions were given to each investigator in advance of the judging conferences. Prior to each conference, everyone had studied the transcripts of the cases to be discussed and had jotted down the themes in the right-hand margin. The one who had conducted the interview led that case discussion at the conference. The participant's own designation of themes was added to the mix, so that there were four sets of judgments involved. After the investigators reached agreement about the themes that predominated, they rank ordered them. When they did this for all participants, they averaged the major themes to attain an overall ranking of themes for the group.

Results

The 10 most prominent themes that emerged are listed below in rank order:

1. **Physical Health:** concern with physical health and well-being; includes a wide variety of existing ailments or ones that they were apprehensive about acquiring.
2. **Mental Health:** concerns about symptoms of anxiety and depression predominated, with some mention of a considerable range of disorders.
3. **Aging:** concern with getting older and losing one's youth, alteration of appearance, diminished physical prowess, and awareness of issues related to death and dying.
4. **Sex and Marriage:** problems with spouse, extramarital, or dating relationships; sexual concerns.
5. **Parents:** concern with health and/or dependency needs of elderly parents.
6. **Children:** problems associated with children growing up and separating.
7. **Job and Career:** concern with job productivity and job stability; misgivings about continued interest and motivation for the work.
8. **Financial:** Financial concerns and money problems.
9. **Achievement:** the extent to which the respondent feels that his life goals and status in life have been achieved or were no longer likely to be achieved.
10. **Security:** concern with future security in retirement years.

A variety of other themes were mentioned by individuals but did not come up frequently enough to merit ranking among the top 10.

Discussion

As shown by the ranking of these themes, the primary concern of people turning 50 is their physical health. The aggregation of small but nagging ills, and the presence of larger threats to well-being, apparently come to the fore at the age of 50. A surprising second concern is with

mental health. The stresses and strains of living, and the cumulative problems that are encountered, become an issue at 50. Judging from the number who sought further discussion of their individual problems, there is a growing recognition of the need for help at this stage of life. This theme is probably associated with all of the other themes on the list.

As expected, awareness of aging is one of the major concerns. Awareness of getting older, of losing one's youthful appearance, seeing one's hair start to turn gray, one's waistline expand, and one's strength and agility decline, is one of the foremost characteristics of those who have turned 50.

Problems of love, sex, and marriage, too, surface at age 50. Married participants averaged 20 years of marriage. Some 24% were already separated or divorced, and some were in their second or third marriages. Many of those who were not married were encountering relationship problems or difficulty finding suitable partners at this age. Sexual problems were associated with physical conditions and with marital relationships that were strained in other ways.

An unanticipated fifth-ranking theme was concern about elderly parents. It takes the form of concern regarding the illness or approaching death of parents and the responsibilities for satisfying the dependency needs of elderly parents. Some reported a strain on their marriage as a consequence. Some felt sandwiched between the dependency needs of their parents and their children. Many had children of college age, and concern with college tuition overlapped with the financial theme. Others were concerned with separation issues. A number of men expressed concern with their relationships with their children, with their children's behavior, their drug use, or their lack of achievement.

We thought that job and career would have occupied a more prominent place than it did, but it is nonetheless a theme of importance for those reaching 50. The primacy of this theme probably fluctuates with the occupations of the individuals and the economy of the times. Related to job and career, themes of financial well-being are present, but are not as predominant as we expected. Actually, the participants interviewed were fairly well-off financially.

Achievement of life goals is one of the lesser of the top-10 themes. Some thought that life had already passed them by, but the feeling was not widespread. Perhaps they felt that there was still time to get where they want to get in life after age 50. Lastly, security is a theme that we expect will increase decade by decade. Concern with security and retirement will move to the forefront at ages 60, 65, and 70.

We have found that themes that bother the participants in this study are commonly shared by other people of that age. Awareness of the top three concerns—physical health, mental health, and aging—highlights the need to begin to plan a comprehensive program for people in their 40s to prepare them to deal with the themes that they are likely to encounter a few years hence. A coordinated approach that deals with the physical and psychological aspects of aging is recommended.

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