



## Who's Afraid of Middle Age?

*Unfortunately many people are — and they react with panic at the thought that life is passing them by, and that old age and death are fast approaching. What can be done about the "mid-life crisis"? First of all, people should see their middle years as a time of expansion and renewal. They could be the best years of your life . . .*

□ Dictionaries are of little use in defining middle age. The Oxford merely calls it the period of life between youth and old age, which leads to a treble conundrum of three vague terms instead of one. The lexicographers may be forgiven their shortcomings in this case, however, because middle age is well-nigh indefinable. For more than anything else, it is that mysterious condition, a state of mind.

The one sure thing about the term is that it is a misnomer. If you took the average life expectancy of modern Canadians and split it down the middle, a woman would be middle-aged at 37½ and a man at 35. This hardly coincides with our common understanding of what constitutes middle age; modern western people are not considered to be middle-aged until they are at least 40, and most 40-year-olds would deny they reach the plateau of life that early. The state of middle age can be better understood if we abandon the chronological yardstick and look for more imaginative ways of explaining what it is.

"Middle age is when you've met so many people that every new person you meet reminds you of somebody else," Ogden Nash wrote. It's a time when policemen start looking young to you, and you find yourself in the midst of a party wishing you were home in bed. It's when you can't recall the name of a girl or boy you once loved madly, and when you meet young grown-ups you knew as

babies. It's when you conclude, like George Bernard Shaw, that youth is wasted on the young.

"Age will not be defied," wrote Francis Bacon in his *Regimen of Health*. Certainly not — but if Bacon were 50 today, he would probably be a much more youthful physical specimen than he was in his own time 450 years ago. Modern methods of nutrition and preventative medicine, plus an awareness of techniques to foster fitness, have dramatically slowed down the aging process. People in North America today live, on average, a full decade longer than their counterparts at the turn of the century. And they retain the physical attributes of youth much longer as well.

Thus in the past few decades middle age has become less of a physical, and more of a psychological, phenomenon. To a large extent, it sets in when you don't *feel* like being young any more. That day comes to all well-adjusted adults, and it should be anything but unwelcome. "Though age from folly could not give me freedom, it does from childishness," says Shakespeare's Cleopatra to Antony. If nothing else, middle age is a relief from the inevitable trials and errors of being young.

"There is no such thing as a young man, for he is not a man until he is middle-aged," wrote Anthony Trollope. That, of course, is a statement with which no male under the age of 40-odd would agree. But — whether they are being subcon-



sciously defensive or not — the majority of middle-aged people polled in surveys state emphatically that they have no wish to be young again. A man quoted in *Strip Jack Naked*, a fine collection of writings on the aspects of middle age published by Gentry Books, London, put it this way: "There is difference between wanting to *feel* young and *be* young. Of course, it would be pleasant to maintain the vigour and appearance of youth; but I would not trade these things for the authority and autonomy I feel — no, nor for the ease of interpersonal relationships nor the self-confidence that comes from experience."

Reaching the mental state of middle age is an achievement which some people never enjoy; there is something desperately forlorn about a person in his forties or fifties who still has a juvenile mentality. On the other hand, there is a splendour to the flowering of maturity — of knowing who and what you are, and where you stand. There is exhilaration in flexing the powers of judgment acquired through years of living, and deep satisfaction in the exercise of well-polished skills.

It should not be overlooked that most of the great achievements in history, in philosophy, statecraft, science and the arts, have been by people from the ages of 40 to 70. This makes it puzzling that middle age should so often be regarded as a period of mental, as well as physical, decline. The best available scientific evidence on the functioning of the human brain suggests that what middle-aged people lack in intellectual adaptability they make up in knowledge and understanding. A British researcher recently investigated the productivity of deceased artists, scientists and scholars in 16 different fields of endeavour. The most productive ages were from 40 to 50 in almost all these groups. In only one field, chamber music, did the greatest productivity come earlier. Not until the age of 60 did the mathematicians included in the study hit their productive peak.

Yet it is understandable that the physical slowing-down that takes place in middle age should be equated with a similar slowing-down in the mental processes. A heavy, ponderous man

or woman simply does not look as bright and sharp as a lean, agile youth. Middle-aged people themselves might conclude that their minds are slipping along with their waistlines. This is sometimes justified: if they are out of shape, they tire more easily, and fatigue can retard the workings of the mind.

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The physical changes themselves can be disconcerting. Grey hairs and wrinkles show up in the mirror in the morning; clothes seem to grow tight. The menopause, with all its attendant discomforts, serves notice on women that they will never be the same again in that they may no longer bear children. Men, too, undergo natural physiological changes which are often mistaken for a diminution of sexual powers.

We have been aging all our lives, of course, but it is in middle age that we really start to notice it. The inexorable march of age, coupled with the wear and tear of living, makes us more susceptible to illness than we were before. We become more likely to spend time in the hospital for one reason or another. Our physicians tell us to curtail activities that might be harmful to us — smoking, drinking, working too hard, etc. For our own part, we come to feel, rather than think, that a little more self-discipline might not go amiss.

"Since we cannot promise our selves constant Health, let us endeavour at such a Temper as may be our best support in the Decay of it" — this from Sir Richard Steele more than 250 years ago. Clearly we should become reconciled to a more vulnerable state of health in our middle years, and compensate for it by cultivating peace of mind. But nowadays, most of us have the time, means and knowledge to do something practical about it. Temperate habits and exercise not only help to safeguard our health, but have the added advantage of making us feel good.

"If you compare a naked man of 25 — the age of peak physical perfection — with a naked man of 45, there need be very little external physical



difference," writes Dr. Hugh Pentney in *Strip Jack Naked*. "If our man of 45 has taken care of his body he will almost certainly be as well equipped to cope with every normal physical activity — apart from supreme feats of athleticism — as a man of 25. And he can stay that way for years, for it is not our bodies that are faulty but we who make them so. We do this through a combination of strain and abuse which is frequently the product of our own folly, both in the environment of our work and in our private lives."

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### *A heightened awareness of what inevitably is at the end of it all*

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Nevertheless, middle age brings with it a heightened awareness of what inevitably is at the end of it all. There cannot be a person past 40 who has not experienced the loss of a close relative or friend. We all know we have to die sometime, but in our middle years we are conscious that that "sometime" might not be too distant. We find ourselves at funerals, pondering the capriciousness of the grim reaper. It could be anybody lying there in that coffin. It could be you.

The frequency of death and illness among one's circle of acquaintances in middle age is a reminder of how quickly time passes. It has never been satisfactorily explained why a year seems half again as long at 20 as it does at 30, and twice as long as at 40; which may be why it is impossible to convey to a young person how soon he or she will be middle-aged. It is this sense of time speeding up that sets middle-aged people brooding over their "wasted years" — about what might have been if only they had followed this or that course of action. It is also a factor in the malaise which London psychiatrist Elliot Jaques calls "the mid-life crisis", which stems basically from a feeling that time is running out and life has passed you by.

"Ask yourself if you are happy, and you will soon cease to be so," John Stuart Mill wrote in his

autobiography. People in mid-life cannot help asking that question, and sure enough, unhappiness often follows in its train. It is doubtful if any sane person is wholly satisfied with his or her performance up to middle age. We have all done things we wish we had done differently. In a society that glorifies success (whatever that means) the greatest danger in our middle-aged self-examination is disappointment. The balanced person knows how to deal with it, even to laugh at it. "The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or perchance, a palace or temple on earth, and, at length, the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed of them," Henry David Thoreau lightly wrote.

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### *The perils of trying to get out of a rut should be recognized*

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But in some cases disappointment can lead to disaster as people struggle against their circumstances. An American psychologist tells of a man who suddenly took up motor cycling in his forties in an attempt to recapture his youth; he crashed and was killed. Most of the tragedies of mid-life are less spectacular: the nagging depression, the alcoholism, the broken marriages. What can be done about them? Some of the prophets of the mid-life crisis recommend a sharp change in lifestyle, and it sometimes works, as when a long-sequestered housewife takes a job or goes to school or university. But the perils of trying to "get out of your rut" should be recognized. Many attempts to change one's life result in more unhappiness than ever, especially divorce, with the loneliness and grief it can bring.

"The mid-life crisis is not a single event that can be isolated from the rest of a person's life. Its symptoms generally occur slowly and may not be noticed until they are well-developed," Dr. Homer R. Figler writes in *Across the Board*, the magazine of the National Conference Board. These symptoms, he says, "may include insecurity, depression, indecision, feelings of impending disaster, feelings of conflict between what a person knows he is and what he wants to be, nervousness, restlessness, a feeling of being 'trapped', and an obsession with death, illness and old age."



Middle-aged people of both sexes are subject to the feeling that their lives have ceased to be relevant. A mother no longer needed by her children may have difficulty adjusting to the changed relationship; a father may miss his dominant position as king of the castle when his children come of age.

At work, middle-aged people come to feel overlooked and unwanted as their younger associates rise to more senior positions. They may react with hostility or timorousness. Sufferers from the mid-life crisis on the job become inconsistent, bitter, resentful, defensive, and faltering in leadership. They sometimes retreat into "playing it safe" on every decision, which only makes their position worse.

"The problem of middle age is flatness," writes Professor Michael Fogarty of the Centre for Students in Social Policy in Great Britain. "... It is the case of the worker who is stuck in the same rut for 20 years; the marriage which loses its vitality out of sheer familiarity or boredom; or the middle-aged couple, with their family grown up and more time and money on their hands than they ever knew before, who could break out into a whole new range of interests, but all too commonly fail to do so."

At the same time, as C. S. Lewis remarked in his *Screwtape Papers*, the "long, dull, monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity and middle-aged adversity" make excellent campaigning grounds for the devil. People who fear middle age are prone to bad judgment at a time of life when the very reverse should be true. Their panic at the approach of old age may propel them into extramarital affairs which frequently end in heart-break. Or the seeming hopelessness of their lives may make them turn to the bottle, which can come to rule — and ruin — their lives.

Professor Fogarty points out that there is no "rite of passage" to mark the start of mid-life as

there is with marriage, the birth of a first child, or retirement. So the first step in dealing with the problems of middle age, he says, is to "get people to recognize it: to see the opportunities of the mid-life turning point and to think constructively about them."

This is doubtless the best way of looking at middle age: as a time of opportunity rather than the dead end for which it is too often mistaken. When a couple's offspring leave home, for instance, it opens up both a new, potentially satisfying parental relationship and a lot of free time which can be used for constructive purposes. If a person feels in a rut at home or at work, there are new and different things to be learned and experienced. And a willingness to expand one's horizons and cultivate new interests can do much to relieve the boredom that makes marriages stale.

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The opportunities for renewal and expansion for people in their middle years have never been broader — opportunities to learn, take part in fresh activities, see new places, meet new people. A person grown tired of his job these days can find many other restorative interests outside of his work.

The best part of being middle-aged is, of course, the solid background that one can bring to fresh experiments or challenges to one's abilities. People in mid-life possess a degree of wisdom and discernment that can only be acquired with age.

What we make of middle age is up to us; it is the time of our lives when we are most on our own, and least reliant on others outside of our families. It is a road we must travel by ourselves, and it is not without its pitfalls, dead ends and false turnings. But if we find the way, it is the high road to fulfilment. It is nothing to be afraid of if we come to it prepared.