

Navigating Midlife



A SERIES DESIGNED TO MEET THE CONCERNS AND NEEDS OF OUR AGING POPULATION

Midlife Crisis or Male Menopause?

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"Now that your toy has new tires, you should have that spare checked out!"

What's Your Mental Picture of the Male Midlife Crisis?

Like male menopause, it's often seen as a bit of a joke. It could be middle-aged men taking leave of their senses, their wives, their jobs, everything that they have worked for up to that point in their lives, and running off in search of new lives and loves.

What is Male Menopause/Midlife Crisis?

"Midlife is a critically important life stage in male development that is woefully ignored, misunderstood, and often trivialized in our materialistic and youth-oriented culture," according to Randal Collen, editor of a newsletter entitled *Man-aging*.

Andropause, the male equivalent of menopause, begins with hormonal, physiological, and chemical changes that occur in all men generally between the ages of 40 to 55. Numerous studies show that testosterone and other hormones gradually decline with age.

By contrast, a woman's hormones decline dramatically over a period of several years.

Researchers in Europe have been studying andropause for well over 10 years. The U.S. is now just beginning to catch up, and the medical community's understanding is beginning to shift dramatically. Before now, most physicians did not recognize it as a real physical condition and treated it with psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. (This is also how symptoms of menopause for women were treated years ago.) The fact that 76 million Baby Boomers will reach this age over the next few years has caused researchers to begin to take notice.

Psychological, Physical, Sexual Symptoms

Many men suffer needlessly because they don't have access to the information they need to understand their symptoms. Biological changes take place.

There can be a loss of physical energy, muscle tone and weight gain. Psychologically, a man may begin to view himself as less of a man because he is not as physically strong as he once was. To make the situation worse and build unrealistic expectations, the media sells the message "Youth is good, aging is bad."

What Men Can Do to Help Themselves

There are several things men can do to cope with the inevitable changes in midlife.

- *Eat right.* Use the food pyramid as a guide. Eat a variety of foods and limit fats.
- *Stay physically fit.* Engage in regular exercise that includes aerobic endurance, muscular strength and flexibility. One of the prime problems men have as they age is with their backs. Incorporating a few stretching exercises into a daily fitness regimen goes a long way toward strengthening weakened back muscles and improving flexibility. Regular moderate exercise (30 minutes) increases metabolism, lowers blood pressures and increases HDL (good) cholesterol. Reduced tension and improved sleep are additional benefits.

Nothing contributes more to optimal health than regular exercise.

- *Work more seriously on weight loss.* For middle-aged men, maintaining ideal weight is the route to a longer life. On the other hand, weight-cycling or yo-yo dieting is a hazard to health.
- *Get regular health checkups.* Regular health care visits and screenings are important contributors to men's health and longevity. Find health practitioners you trust and see them regularly.
- *Reduce stress and worry.* Stress is a major source of trouble for men in midlife. Reduce stress by living life in the present, letting go of control, dealing with negative emotions and learning to prepare for what is expected and unexpected.
- *Embrace a sexuality appropriate to the second half of life.* Young men are often focused on a kind of sexuality that is based on immediate attraction to people. In the second half of life, sexuality expands to include more emphasis on friendship, love, intimacy and spirituality.
- *Take on new challenges.* To keep a supply of freshness and excitement in your life consider going back to school, writing a book or a song or learning a brand new hobby.
- *Change the scenery occasionally.* A change of scenery improves one's spirit even if only for short periods of time. Attend an out-of-state conference, plan weekends of camping or boating, visit the ocean, hike in the mountains.
- *Rest and leisure are important.* A balance of work and relaxation is critical to one's physical and emotional well-being.
- *Talk more freely about you midlife anxieties.* Have conversations with those you're closest to about issues troubling you. While most men are unwilling to share with their wives or significant other what they really feel, over time, such conversations increase one's understanding and love for each other. So take a risk and open up!
- *Care for yourself psychologically.* Music and books play significant roles in helping you relax, reduce stress or express yourself.

What Women Can do to Help Their Men

In addition to being aware of how differently men and women deal with midlife changes, women need to recognize that andropause is an actual, factual situation. It's more than a midlife crisis. As we have already discussed, there are real physical and hormonal changes in a man's body. Women have made fun of male menopause for years, but now that we know that men experience symptoms similar to midlife women, we need to

quit joking about it. For the last 10 to 15 years women have been demanding that men be more understanding about menopause. Now it's women's turn to be empathetic.

Women can set an example by taking joy in their own midlife changes and encouraging men to do the same. Instead of anticipating happiness tomorrow (things will be better when the house is paid off; when the kids are grown; when I get my promotion; etc.) we need to find happiness in today. "Waiting until everything is perfect before making a move is like waiting to start a trip until all the traffic lights are green." (SOURCE: Ireland, Karin, *The Job Survival Instruction Book*.)

We all need reassurance. Because men feel loss during this time, they have extra need for being reassured that they are needed. Some men feel that this time is the beginning of the end. Their perceived losses include power, purpose, passion and potency. Women need to convince their men that sexual change is not the same as sexual dysfunction. Women need to let men know they are loved and appreciated just the way they are.

Encourage men to share their feelings. Get them to talk about their fears and desires. This may be uncomfortable for both of you. If exhausting demands of family and career have consumed all your time for each other you have to make special efforts to reconnect. Plan a nightly quicky! This is not sexual. Sit together for 15 minutes to read the paper or magazine or take a walk. Read a book, listen to a tape or CD together. Make a daily call if possible. Weekly, plan to watch a specific TV show on a specific night. Avoid couch potato zombie-ism. Make this an active effort to spend time together. Schedule a monthly date night out. It doesn't count if you take the kids.

Once you have the lines of communication reopened, ask men specific questions about what they are feeling and thinking. You won't learn much if you tell a man "we need to talk." He'll probably reply, "What do you want to talk about?"

Women benefit from social time spent with other women. Encourage men to become active in a men's group for support. By connecting with older men the midlife man can relate to others who have already experienced this stage of life and survived it. The informal mentoring that midlife men can provide for younger men strengthens the midlife man's self image. The midlife man maintains a connection with youthful energy while sharing knowledge and skills.



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