

A man with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark jeans with rolled-up cuffs, is sitting on a wooden deck. He is leaning against a large, weathered log. His right hand is pressed against his forehead, and his eyes are closed, suggesting a state of stress or exhaustion. The background is a bright, overexposed outdoor setting.

# CURB THE CRISIS

Feeling disillusioned with your job/life/relationship? **David Goding** investigates the male midlife crisis and easy ways to navigate it.

Photo: Photoliberty



**O**n the surface of it, Malcolm Ormond's life was idyllic. He was happily married with two healthy children, lived in Sydney's beautiful eastern suburbs and had a successful career in IT. Shortly after his 41st birthday, however, Malcolm found himself becoming increasingly unhappy and dissatisfied with the direction his life had taken. "Suddenly, it just wasn't working for me anymore," he recalls. "I'd been so focused on being successful and providing a good future for the family, that I'd forgotten to look up. When I did, I realised my life wasn't making me happy and I hadn't explored so many of the things I wanted to. I'd somehow lost my way."

Without realising it, Malcolm was experiencing a midlife crisis. According to psychologist Dr Elizabeth Celi, this midlife hump is a form of identity crisis that causes many people going through it to question their life and start looking for ways to change it. Traditionally occurring between the ages of 40 and 50, it can have dramatic

repercussions on a person's health and happiness – and the happiness of their loved ones. Although it can be overwhelming at first, realising that you want to change things can also be enormously positive. Here's why.

### Discover the trigger for your unhappiness

The catalyst for a midlife crisis can vary dramatically. "It may be a simple age-related issue of turning 40 or 50 or 60, which has you questioning and evaluating where you're at. It may be that there are other, greater shifts in your life or perhaps the very opposite – no movement at all," explains Dr Anne Hollonds, CEO of Relationships Australia. "People often face a sense of disillusionment if the things they've worked for and aspired to be are not bringing them the happiness they were hoping for, whether that's a career, relationship or another aspect of life."

### How to deal with it, minus the sports car

Although television and cinema would have us believe that the first sign of a man experiencing a midlife crisis is trading in a Volvo for a Ferrari (or trading in his wife for a 20-something mistress), the symptoms are usually far more low key. "The first signs are lack of motivation and withdrawal, both mentally or physically, irritability and not finding the same satisfaction with things that used to make you happy," explains Dr Celi. Men don't have a monopoly on the midlife crisis, but it does tend to be more pronounced in men than in women, she adds, with symptoms including irritability, agitation, social withdrawal and risk-taking behaviours. "He might be easily distracted, experience sadness, uncertainty, frustration and agitation. He may feel socially distant. He might be physically available, but mentally or

## TOUGH QUESTIONS

The experts weigh in on two common scenarios.

### "I'VE HAD THE SAME JOB FOR 20 YEARS AND I DON'T FEEL FULFILLED BY IT ANYMORE"

"Ask yourself, 'What is it exactly that I no longer find fulfilling and what do I still like about it,'" says psychologist Dr Elizabeth Celi. "Brainstorm how you could transition the strengths you have already and apply them in other scenarios. This helps you realise you still have power over the situation. If you feel mortgaged to the hilt or tied down by finances – working long hours with no balance – discuss it with your partner and identify ways to adjust your priorities."

emotionally withdrawn," she explains. "This signals a period of self-evaluation – and that can often be quite painful."

### Ditch the dark cloud & create a new future

One of the most important things to remember about a midlife crisis is that it isn't permanent. Once you've overcome the initial effects, Dr Hollonds recommends using it to re-evaluate your life, look at why you feel the way you do and take positive steps towards change. "Anticipate that it's not necessarily going to be easy or quick. Slowly, step by step, you can build towards a new way of living that encompasses both physical and emotional wellbeing, building on relationships and interests that will continue into your advancing years."

Malcolm Ormond solved his crisis after taking 12 months to think about what he really wanted. He eventually enrolled in an Arts/Psychology degree while continuing to work part-time. "I plan eventually to change careers entirely, but for the moment I'm just enjoying pursuing new interests and having a lot more freedom. It's really invigorated my life in a lot of ways." [www](#)

### "MY CHILDREN ARE ADULTS NOW AND I'M SENSING A REAL DISCONNECT FROM THEM"

"When children grow up and move out of home, it can take some adjusting to the 'empty nest,'" explains Dr Celi. "You've spent a large part of your life raising them and it's only natural there'll be a change of role.

Talk about it with your partner and see it as a time to renew your relationship." Also, just because the kids have moved out doesn't mean you'll never see them again – consider organising monthly lunches or making weekly phone calls so you stay in touch with their lives and don't feel distant from them.