

**Lifespan Initiative on Healthy Aging (LIHA)
Brandeis University**



THE TRUTH ABOUT AGING EVEN UNTO ITS INNERMOST PARTS

Brandeis Brief: The Truth About Aging Series

LIHA Brandeis Brief #1

**The Truth about the Midlife Crisis:
Dispelling the Myth of the Midlife Crisis
- SPRING 2012 -**

Coming Soon

LIHA Brandeis Brief #2: The Truth About Hearing Loss

Dispelling the Myth of the Midlife Crisis

It's time we stop portraying midlife as a time of crisis. At the 2011 Golden Globes, Colin Firth remarked that his best actor award for "The King's Speech" is all that stands between him and a Harley-Davidson. Motorcycles and sports cars, the cultural icons of middle-aged men trying to recapture their youth, may bring thrills, but they neither signify nor cure a midlife crisis.

Research shows that a crisis is not a typical midlife phenomenon. Certainly, some do have a crisis in midlife, with between 10 and 20 percent reporting one. About the same number experience crises at other points in life, so midlife is hardly special in that regard. Of those who say they have had a midlife crisis, about half say it involves inner turmoil or angst associated with getting older. For the rest, it is tied to events such as divorce, job loss, or health problems, which can occur at any age period. Those who do experience a crisis in midlife are usually those who have upheavals at other times in their lives, and these individuals seem to be driven more by a neurotic personality than advancing age. Indeed, just before he turned 50 last year, Mr. Firth remarked that he has been in a funk for 20 years.

The real crisis is that midlife is so widely associated with one. Perhaps it explains why most who are in midlife don't want to be there. In the national survey of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS), we asked those 30 to 60 years old what age they would most like to be. All age groups wished to be younger, with the average desired age no older than 39. Nevertheless, this youthful yearning does not signal a crisis.

Yes, those in the middle of life are faced with juggling multiple responsibilities and dealing with physical and cognitive signs of aging, and they may experience a good deal of stress trying to handle it all, especially if accompanied by financial difficulties. Yet, midlife can also be a peak time in many areas, including earnings, position at work, leadership in the family, decision-making abilities, self-confidence, and contributions to the community.

The well-being of those both younger and older at home, in the workplace, and society at large depends heavily on the stability of those in the middle years.

With more than one third of the U.S. population between the ages of 30 and 60, imagine the chaos if everyone were in crisis. But never underestimate the power of suggestion. The widely held expectation of a midlife crisis can fuel distress and dissatisfaction. Many young adults, including my bright college students, assume the midlife crisis is inevitable, and they dread growing older because they expect midlife to be a difficult time with insurmountable challenges. A midlife crisis is commonly used as an excuse for bad behavior and an explanation for changes in mood or goals. Some are so fed up at work they quit their jobs and call it a crisis, when a two-week vacation may be all they need. Assuming that a crisis is normal can lead to misdiagnosis, so that those who do suffer in midlife from depression or other health problems may forgo or not receive appropriate treatment.

Celebrities are not alone in promoting misconceptions about the midlife crisis. Results from two recent large surveys revealed that the lowest points of happiness in the life cycle were among those aged 30 to 60, and this was widely presented as evidence for the midlife crisis. Average happiness ratings tell us about relative age trends, but they do not reveal the variations within age groups or patterns over time. The findings from the MIDUS study show that a majority of middle-aged adults are happy and stay that way over a 10-year period. They also expect their future happiness to be even greater, and this optimism can motivate them to achieve their goals and strive for growth or improvement.

With so many in the midst of middle age, it's a good time to acknowledge that a midlife crisis is not an inevitable part of aging. Dispelling the myth of the midlife crisis can go a long way toward helping adults to recognize their strengths and realize their potential. Instead of crisis, think midlife competence.

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