

# The myth of the midlife crisis

Maybe he's just a narcissistic jerk,  
says **RICHARD FRIEDMAN**

**W**ith the possible exception of "the dog ate my homework," there is no handier excuse for human misbehavior than the midlife crisis.

Popularly viewed as a unique developmental birthright of the human species, it supposedly strikes when most of us have finally figured ourselves out — only to discover that we have lost our youth and mortality is on the horizon.

No doubt about it, life in the middle ages can be challenging. Full disclosure: I'm 51.) What with the first signs of physical decline and the questions about one's personal and professional accomplishments, it is a wonder that most of us survive.

Not everyone is so lucky; some find themselves seized by a seemingly irresistible impulse to do something dramatic, even foolish. Everything, it appears, is fair game for a midlife crisis: one's job, spouse, lover — you name it.

I recently heard about a severe case from a patient whose husband of nearly 40 years abruptly told her that he "felt failed and not self-actualized" and began his search for self-knowledge in the arms of another woman.

It was not that her husband no longer loved her, she said he told her; he just did not find the relationship exciting any more.

"Maybe it's a midlife crisis," she said, then added derisively, "whatever that is." Outraged and curious, she followed him one afternoon and was shocked to discover that her husband's girlfriend was essentially a younger clone of herself,

the pinhead of his legal career, started an affair with an office colleague. "I love my wife," he said, "and I don't know what possessed me."

It didn't take long to find out. The first five years of his marriage were exciting. "It was like we were dating all the time," he recalled wistfully. But once they had a child, he felt an unwelcome sense of drudgery and responsibility creep into his life.

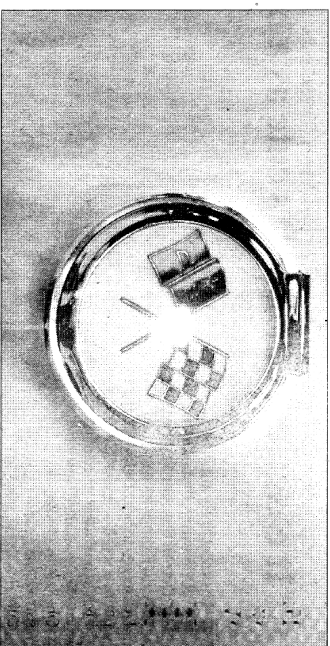
Being middle-aged had nothing to do with his predicament; it was just that it took him 49 years to reach a situation where he had to seriously take account of someone else's needs, namely those of his baby son. In all likelihood, the same thing would have happened if he had become a father at 25.

Why do we have to label a common reaction of the male species to one of life's challenges — the boredom of the routine — as a crisis? True, men are generally more novelty-seeking than women, but they certainly can decide what they do with their impulses.

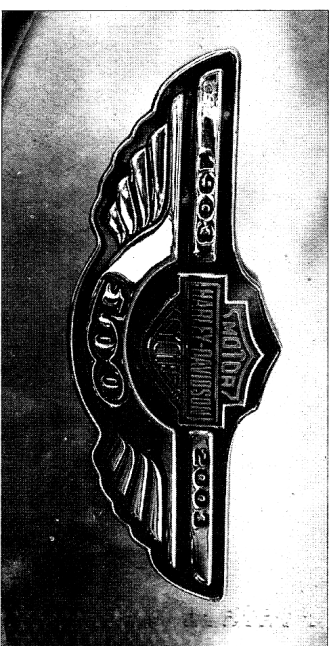
But surely someone has had a genuine midlife crisis. After all, don't people routinely struggle with questions like "What can I expect from the rest of my life?" or "Is this all there is?"

Of course. But it turns out that only a distinct minority think it constitutes a crisis. In 1999, the MacArthur Foundation study on middle development surveyed 9,000 Americans ages 25 to 74.

While everyone recognized the term "midlife crisis," only 25 percent of subjects reported having one. And only 8 percent viewed their crisis as something tied to the realization that they were



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**The Corvettes, the Harleys, the extramarital affairs. Being middle-aged usually has nothing to do with men behaving badly. Why do we have to label a common reaction of the male species to one of life's challenges — the boredom of the routine — as a crisis?**

aging; the remaining 15 percent felt the crisis resulted from specific life events. Strikingly, most people also reported an increased sense of well-being and contentment in middle age.

So what keeps the myth of the midlife crisis alive?

The main culprit, I think, is our youth-obsessed culture, which makes a virtue of the relentless pursuit of self-renewal. The news media abound with stories of people who seek to recapture their youth simply by shedding their spouses, quitting their jobs or leaving

their families. Who can resist?

Most middle-aged people, it turns out, if we are to believe the definitive survey,

Except, of course, for the few — mainly men, it seems — who find the midlife crisis a socially acceptable shorthand for what you do when you suddenly wake up and discover that you're not 20 anymore.

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