



## Mid-Life Crisis by Arlen Keith Leight, Ph.D.

Everyone gets a chuckle out of saying, “He’s going through a mid-life crisis” as if it is some childish phase creating an excuse for extra-marital affairs, buying a Harley and bungee jumping. The fact is midlife course correction is an integral part of adult individuation, the process of becoming a complete and wholly unique individual.

Behavioural scientists understand that while individuation is a lifelong process, there are 3 major phases of individuation. The first occurs at 18 to 24 months of life when the infant-toddler begins to move away from mother and understands that mother is still available even when not visible. The second phase occurs in adolescence characterized by a movement away from home and the family of origin. This phase paves the way for the young adult to establish his/her own home, partner and family and career. The final phase is the so-called mid-life crisis. This period is not so much a crisis as an opportunity, but it can be catastrophic for those who are close to the middle aged person going through “the change”.

The midlife experience in our social structure today usually takes place between 40 and 50 but can be as early as 35 or as late as 55. The period is characterized by a re-evaluation of the life decisions made as a teenager or in the 20’s during the adolescent individuation phase. By mid-life there is often a realization through life experience that those early decisions were made for external reasons rather than internal drive. The decisions regarding career, home and even life partner are often made to satisfy parental, church and/or societal expectation or those of other persons of influence. For example, a gay person may choose to marry someone of the opposite sex because that is the expectation of parents and the society-at-large.

The realization that one is entrenched in a life that does not allow for full individual expression of self can be very frightening and confusing. There comes a tipping point at which time the individual realizes that to grow into him/her-self change will be necessary. This is the “crisis” as we have come to understand it. Discovery that a relationship is not working after 15 years despite its comfort, realizing that the lucrative career brings no passionate joy, and/or looking around at one’s environment to see that it does not reflect the person one has become (or wishes to be) can be devastating.

Many folks choose to go into therapy at this time as a tool for sorting out the feelings of confusion, loss and fear. Driven by a will to thrive not merely survive many will risk everything and choose to change all aspects of life in an effort to come to terms with the self. Others will choose to stay at the job or in the marriage and attempt to bring more of themselves into their current situation. Still others will simply accept stagnation often living in despair and depression frequently accompanied by substance and/or alcohol abuse.

The argument is made that leaving a relationship or job or other situation is unfair and selfish adversely affecting other people’s lives. There is no question the result can be traumatic to friends, partners, family, co-workers and others of significance, hence the term “crisis”. An important question to ask is how fair is it to these same people for the unfulfilled individual to stay with the status quo and live with regret and resentment. I often ask clients struggling with coming out in mid-life and struggling with the prospect of leaving their families, what advice they would give their own children should they be facing this same dilemma? And, what example would they like to set for their children? Would they like to see their children follow their hearts, be fully themselves, live their passions and go after their dreams or would it be better

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for them to stay in relationships or careers or some other life situations that are not working and not allowing them to be all they can be?

The question arises, do all mid-lifers go through a crisis? It appears most adults who have met the basic needs of life, (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, health care) find themselves asking if life is all it can be. Often precipitated by seeing others live out a dream, surviving the death of a loved one or losing a job or relationship, mid-lifers may ask the questions: "Is this all there is for me? Have I made my life all it can be? Do I live my life honestly and completely in alignment with an authentic sense of self?" Many, if not most of us, push aside any thoughts of change realizing the risks, fearing the response of others, putting the needs of others (as we see them) first or simply feeling comfort is more important than entering the unknown world of possible self-actualization. Whatever the life choice, it must be respected and honoured as the path of unique choosing for each individual.

Consider Confidence, Self-Esteem and Personal Empowerment