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Midlife Crisis

The old expression 'life begins at 40' is in many ways the truth. Certainly the life that is the reflection and expression of one's own distinctive self begins around that age. Up until that time we live a life that is a reflection of our parents' upbringing, our education and society's expectations. Psychologist James Hollis calls this our 'transitional self'. Around 38 or 40 the inner self that has been largely hidden in the unconscious begins to assert itself. As it emerges into expression, the ways we have handled life's challenges no longer feel authentic to us. During a time of restlessness and confusion, what Hollis calls the 'genuine self' gradually surfaces. The clash between the outer, conditioned personality and the powerful inner self can be most disconcerting. This gives rise to what we have dismissively dubbed 'the midlife crisis'.

With advances in medicine, nutrition and lifestyle, in the First World the average life expectancy is 79 for men and 82 for women. It would be similar here in South Africa except for the ravages of AIDS. Now that the post-WWII population bulge — the 'boomers' as they are called in the North — are all between 40 and 60 and are as self-absorbed as they have been at each stage of their lives, many people are beginning to study this 20-year period not just as a continuation of adulthood, but as a distinct stage of life.

In tribal societies like those in southern Africa the significant transitions into new life stages are ritually supported in what social anthropologists call 'rites of passage'. The tribal elders train the initiates into their new role and status, and challenge them to confront and express their new selves. The elders' support and guidance helps the younger ones to handle the fear and insecurities that accompany deep inner change as well as the new roles that society expects of them.

In western oriented cultures these transitional times, unsupported as they are, are often experienced as crises. Remember what you felt as your voice changed or your breasts developed at puberty — the passage into adolescence. Or how you panicked as you moved from home, graduated from university, or walked down the aisle at your wedding — often the passages into the stage of adulthood.

So why are we so surprised when people in our society flounder during this transition into a new life stage? If these 40-year-olds handled their transition into adulthood unsupported, they probably repressed many aspects of their adolescent selves in order to function as society expected from them in adulthood. Now in the midlife transition, these submerged aspects are dredged up as the inner self emerges from the unconscious. Suddenly the loose ends of adolescence seek expression — perhaps in messy ways — and ultimately need resolution. We mock the messiness of the midlife transition and make jokes about the 'midlife crisis'. Yet how many people in their 50s or 60s are aware enough to offer support to those around 40 when their life as they knew it feels like it is falling apart?

The midlife crisis is characterised by restlessness and insecurity that gives rise to soul-searching. For women who suffered insecurities in their adolescence, there is often an urge to look inside themselves for 'what is going wrong with me'. When not supported in therapy or through effective self-help tools, this can lead to fruitless self-criticism, inaction and depression. For men, who often project their inner struggles outward, their confusion may be blamed on others, their discontent on their boss or their job, their fear may be expressed as anger, and their depression might be masked by impulsive and frivolous acting-out behaviours. Addictions and self-destructive actions increase in frequency among this age group.

Many people will change jobs, move homes, or change partners in their 40s as a way of dealing with their confusion and discontent. For some this is exactly the change that their newly experienced genuine self requires, for others it is a dysfunctional way to act out their uncertainty or mask their inner discomfort.

Many adolescent characteristics like frivolity, rebelliousness and wild self-adornment can be reclaimed and transformed in midlife into a new kind of spunky, colourful and genuine self-expression. The need to prove oneself may give way to the desire to express one's uniqueness. The sexual vitality of youth can be rediscovered in richer, deeper sexual encounters with one's partner. However, all of these aspects require conscious attention.

Many a spouse has been dumped for a newer sexier model only to be courted again when

the new lover proves to be a flash in the pan in comparison to the life partner and best friend left behind. And many addicts in successful recovery discover their inner self and experience a contentedness they never knew before. But all too often lives are wrecked by botched midlife transitions. How often are these calamities further results of the lack of effective initiation into adulthood?

Shifts in all areas of our lives — from career, parenting and relationship to self-image, spirituality, and leadership — characterise the 40s.

The natural urge and tendency of the psyche is to make conscious whatever has been hidden, denied or repressed in the unconscious. After the earnestness and focus on building our outer lives during adulthood, we enter into a dialogue with our inner selves during midlife. Our childhood complexes emerge into our awareness and can no longer be successfully projected onto our spouse or work colleagues. If our relationships are to develop out of the co-dependency of early adulthood, through power struggles and into effective partnerships that are truly supportive of our self-actualisation, then we need to confront our own internal demons and...grow up.

In our 40s we put our own stamp on the work we do, creating a career out of a series of jobs or projects. Management positions, notoriety in our specialties, and leadership are the hallmarks of this stage. Parents in their 40s require greater levels of maturity in order to handle the greater complexity of the issues their children often face in adolescence. And spiritual life in middle age can move from earnest religiosity to greater spiritual experience, if we are inclined, as we naturally turn inward. In other words, if we can successfully manage the midlife transition or crisis, our capacities develop and our roles expand.

As midlife continues into the 50s the inevitable hormonal transitions in both men and women create other changes sometimes even harder to deal with for some. I will discuss the challenges of this stage of midlife in my next article.

MARY OVENSTONE

Mary Ovenston is a Canadian-trained psychotherapist. She specializes in couples and individual counselling and executive coaching. E-mail: ovenmits@iafrica.com