

Accentuating the positive in midlife transitions: Understanding the andropausal businessman

By Mary Ovenstone

Introduction

The global and South African petroleum industry is largely characterised by an ageing workforce. White male senior managers in particular are either faced with the prospect of retirement in the medium term or staring it in the face. Many of these men are in their 50s, with the attendant biological, emotional and psychological characteristics we call andropause. This is a reality the industry, but one that can be turned into a positive advantage. All those years of accumulated knowledge, expertise and acquired wisdom must not be allowed to go to waste as they gradually exit their current positions and the industry. Sooner rather than later, a collective, sustained strategy must be put in place to ensure that their knowledge and experience is captured and passed down to the younger generation.

How better can we women relate with this corps of andropausal males? And what might we need to consider and understand about midlife males in the workplace? *The Petroleum Professional* turned to executive coach Mary Ovenstone for her insights into how best to understand and approach the dramatis personae in this handover process. Here's her take, the first of a series of regular articles she will write for us in our brand new column on *Gender Relations in the Workplace*.

Until recently, no one made much of an effort to find out what men experience in midlife. Male midlife patterns of moodiness, restlessness and irritability readily manifest in the workplace, yet there is little effort made to understand why this should be the case, nor to re-examine the structure and the culture of the corporate environment accordingly. So, faced with an unsympathetic or uncomprehending corporate working world, andropausal businessmen in South Africa

have had just two options – either to bury their feelings or to drop out and ‘go consulting’! Which is good neither for them nor for organisations.

Although ‘andropause’ has been in the medical literature since the 1940s, only recently has there been a way to measure *functional* testosterone in men. According to an internationally recognised World Health Organisation (WHO) report, ‘male androgens progressively decline with age’. The WHO study found that at age 70 androgen levels in males are only 10 per cent of what they are at age 25. While significant hormone loss will have already occurred by age 40, by 55 most men will have lost enough testosterone to begin showing the signs we have until now simplistically associated with ageing. Although all men will experience this hormonal loss, at least half of them will experience a pattern of specific associated symptoms in their 50s that we might more accurately label as ‘andropause’.

As Dr Candace Pert, neuroscientist and author of *Molecules of emotion: Why you feel the way you feel affirms*, our genes, brain chemistry and hormones all interrelate to contribute to our emotional life experience. Hormonal decline therefore significantly affects the entire body/mind entity, so andropause gives rise to substantial and inevitable changes in the psyche.

Impact of andropause on men's health

Recent medical research shows that the well-documented effects of testosterone on the psyche in relation to aggression, performance, cognition and emotion are affected as testosterone levels gradually but significantly reduce during middle age. According to Jed Diamond, author of the popular book *Male menopause*, men make a terrible mistake by ignoring or denying hormonal changes or their emotional affects. The consequences of such changes on relationships, career and general well-being can be dramatic. He cites studies that link the lowering of testosterone levels to stress, depression, anxiety and decreased self-esteem.



In my research I have found that while the symptoms of andropause may vary from one man to another, they commonly include tiredness, lowering of libido, decreased muscle mass and loss of strength, mood changes (irritability, nervousness, even depression), an increase in cardiovascular risk factors, and memory loss. Sometimes the symptoms are accompanied by erectile dysfunction. In addition, these changes may cause a man to become irritable, impatient, restless, hypersensitive and moody. Problematically, male responses to these changes can include blaming others around them for their feelings; isolating themselves from others or self-medicating in self-destructive ways.

Because the hormonal decline is gradual, men often adapt well to the physiology and psychology, but the entire pattern can be missed until such time as the symptoms become pronounced and challenging. One thing is certain, though: eventually hormonal change catches up with all men.

Men may also be so sensitive about their sexual performance that they may deny symptoms associated with hormonal change. It doesn't help men when medical practitioners treat the various symptoms in isolation, rather than seeing them as part of an overall pattern related to underlying hormonal change. For example, doctors may prescribe medication such

as antidepressants for the treatment for mood changes that can in turn exacerbate other symptoms such as loss of libido.

Meaning behind 'life begins at 40'

In my work with men in midlife (roughly 40 to 60 years old), I find that they often project their inner struggles outwardly: their confusion may be blamed on others, their discontent on their boss or their job, their fears expressed as anger, and their depression may be masked by impulsive and frivolous acting-out behaviours. Addictions and self-destructive activities tend to increase in frequency in this age group. Many men will change jobs, move home or change partners in midlife as a way of dealing with their confusion and discontent.

On the other hand, what we treat lightly as 'a midlife crisis' can be confronted and experienced as a positive life change. In his book *The middle passage: From misery to meaning in mid-life*, Dr James Hollis views the experience of the midlife crisis as the 'transitional self' (the outer personality that was formed in youth) being displaced by the 'authentic self' (the inner self that gradually emerges in midlife). It may therefore be true to say that life – one's own life – does begin at 40.

During the 40s, adolescent characteristics repressed when a person entered adulthood in the 20s (such as frivolity, rebelliousness and wild self-adornment) can be reclaimed and transformed into a new kind of spunky, colourful and genuine self-expressiveness. The need to prove oneself may give way to the desire to express one's uniqueness. However, all of these aspects require conscious attention. It may be a time for a few good counselling sessions with a therapist who understands midlife and/or the support of a coach to help with transforming a work style and facing related workplace issues.

Then, as a man successfully navigates his 50s, he is likely to put more emphasis on his inner being, the depth of his relationships, and take seriously mentoring his younger colleagues at work. Having survived the impulsiveness and restlessness of his midlife crisis in his 40s, he is now in a position to face himself honestly and to live mindfully. His years of experience give rise to working better, not harder. He may well begin to opt out and work for himself, either starting his own independent business or working as a consultant. But he will do so in this instance from an inner sense of total conviction.

Gender and family relations in the 50s

He may also prefer to spend time with his old friends in regular games of golf or tennis, rather than going out to meet new people. Either he is in a position to take his long-term relationship or marriage to a deeper more mature stage, or he will find the woman with whom he wishes to spend the rest of his life.

So how do men and women in their 50s relate to one another? With the normal decline in testosterone, men experience an unmasking of their female hormones, and of

the effects of those feminine hormones. They often report feeling more home-oriented, more interested in family relationships, more emotionally and spiritually sensitive. They need to be reassured that they are 'entitled' to such feelings, and that those feelings are the manifestation of a newly emerging identity they should welcome.

Conversely, after menopause, women's androgen levels are relatively higher than their oestrogen levels and they become more forthright, assertive and focused outside the home. David Gutmann, Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Chicago, says in his book, *Reclaimed powers: Toward a new psychology of men and women in later life*, that a significant sex-role reversal takes place as men begin to own, as a part of themselves, the qualities he describes as follows:

'Sensuality, affiliation, and maternal tendencies – in effect, the "femininity" that was previously repressed in the service of productivity and lived out vicariously through the wife. By the same token, across societies, we see the opposite effect in women. They generally become more domineering, independent, un sentimental, and self-centred.'

In relationship counselling sessions, I have often heard women complain of feeling frustrated that when the children grow up and money is finally available for holidays and travel their husbands would rather play golf or come home from work and sit and watch TV. Or even worse: after all the personal sacrifices they have made through the years of raising children and holding down a job, their husband is leaving them for a younger woman. And I hear men complain that their wives push them to do something new, or neglect them while starting their own new projects or businesses. All of these problems could be avoided or dealt with differently through better education about midlife.

Lack of understanding of this time of life leads to hurt and frustration between partners, and often results in marriage stagnation or breakdown. In working with couples in midlife, I find that helping them communicate their genuine feelings with each other, and forming realistic expectations of each other, can transform relationships into deeper more fulfilling partnerships, having the spiritual and emotional dimensions lacking in youth.

Andropausal captains as transformers of corporate culture

Most people in positions of leadership in the corporate world are between 40 and 60. If they were to understand *themselves* in the first place, were to lead the way in accommodating other men and women going through midlife in the workplace, and together would mentor young leaders they would be able to transform corporate culture.

So, why don't corporate executives know about all of this? Well, think about it. While medical research now shows that the significant hormonal changes in midlife result in corresponding behavioural changes in both women and