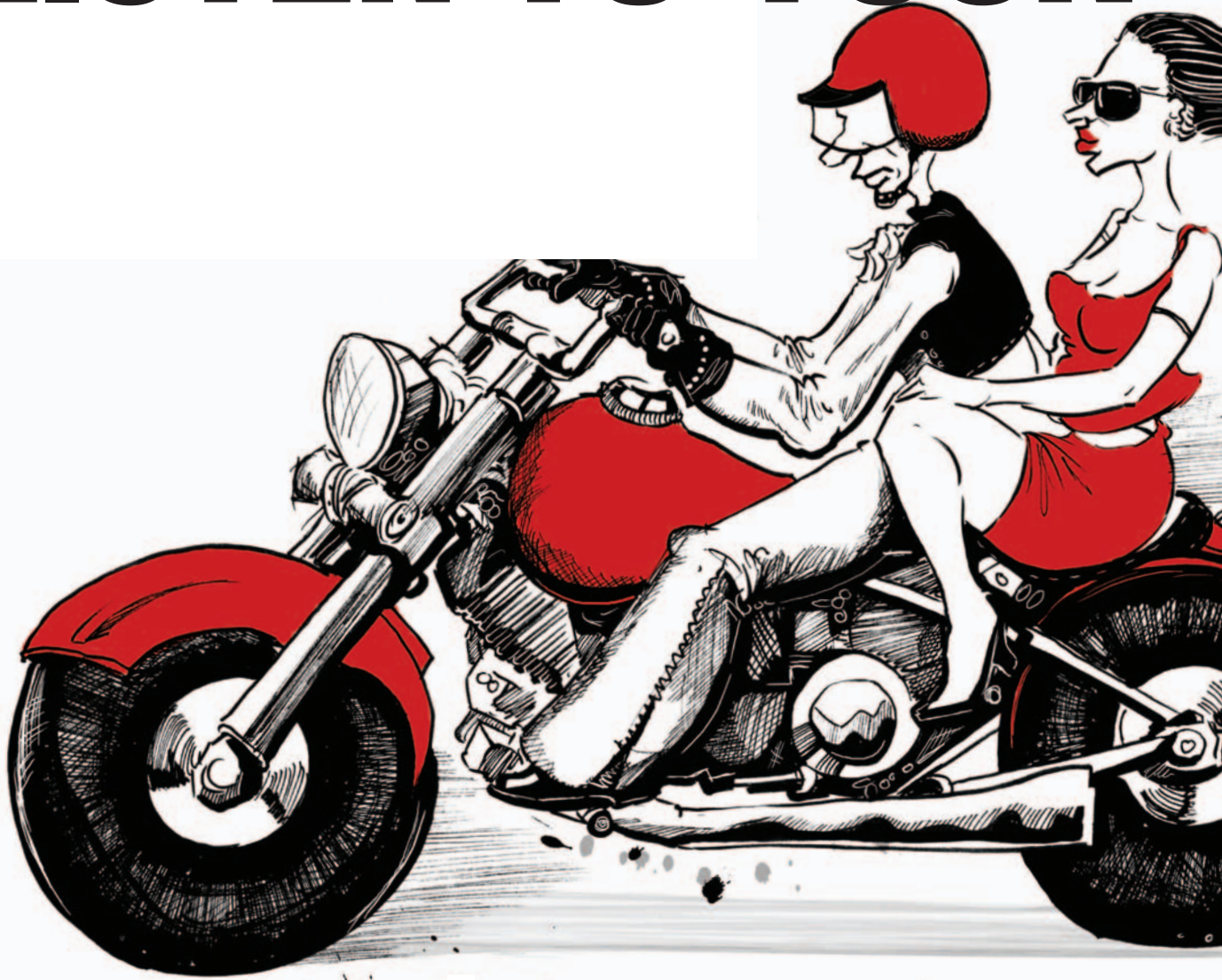


# LISTEN TO YOUR



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 indeed an uncomprehending corporate working world - andropausal businessmen have just two options in South Africa - either to bury their feelings, or to drop out and 'go consulting'!

Even though the first studies on

andropause were reported in medical literature in the 1940s, it was only recently that tests were developed to measure bioavailable - functional - testosterone. 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 percent 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. While all men experience this hormonal shift, at least half of them will experience a pattern of specific associated symptoms

that we might more accurately label as andropause.

As neuroscientist and author of *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel*, Dr Candace Pert attests, 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, and because of this andropause gives rise to substantial and inevitable changes in the psyche.

Recent medical research shows that the well-documented psychotropic effects of testosterone (affects on the psyche) in relation to sexuality, aggression,

# HORMONES

(THEY'RE SENDING YOU A BUSINESS MESSAGE)

**YES 'BUSINESS-MAN',  
YOU READ IT CORRECTLY.**

Didn't you know that men go through their own version of menopause, more appropriately called andropause? If you

didn't, you're not the only one; there is little general understanding of biological and accompanying emotional transitions from one life stage to another, and how such transitions effect men's performance in the workplace. So when their hormonal changes reach noticeable intensity in midlife - and we have no way of understanding them - we just crack midlife crisis jokes.

performance, cognition and emotion are affected as testosterone levels are gradually and significantly lowered during middle age. According to Jed Diamond, author of the popular *Male Menopause*, men make a terrible mistake by ignoring or denying hormonal changes or their affects. The effects of such changes on relationships, career and general wellbeing 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 man to man, they commonly include lowering of libido (sometimes accompanied by erectile dysfunction),

general tiredness, decreased muscle mass and loss of strength, mood changes (irritability, nervousness, even depression), an increase in cardiovascular risk factors, sometimes night sweats, memory loss, and palpitations. In addition, these changes may cause a man to become irritable, impatient, restless, hypersensitive and moody. Problematically, men tend to blame others around them for their feelings; they isolate themselves from others or act out their feelings towards others, and they may self-medicate 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. But one thing is certain: eventually hormonal change catches up with all men. Men can be so sensitive about their sexual performance that they may deny symptoms associated with it. Medical practitioners are apt to treat the various symptoms discretely, rather than seeing them as part of an over-all pattern related to underlying hormonal change. In addition, some of the symptoms overlap with other conditions including clinical depression, hypothyroidism, diabetes and fibromyalgia, for instance. By treating the symptoms separately rather than as a syndrome, medication such as antidepressants - prescribed as a treatment for mood changes - can exacerbate the loss of libido. ...▶





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 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 in this age group. Many men will change jobs, move homes, or change partners in midlife as a way of dealing with their confusion and discontent.

On the other hand, what we joke about 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 writes about the experience of the midlife crisis as the displacement of the 'transitional self' (the outer personality that was formed in youth) by the 'authentic self' - the self that gradually emerges in midlife. It therefore may be true to say that life - one's own life - does begin at 40.

During the 40s, adolescent characteristics repressed when entering adulthood in the 20s - characteristics 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. The sexual vitality of youth can be rediscovered in richer, deeper sexual encounters with a partner. However, all of these aspects require conscious attention. It may be a time for a few good counseling sessions with a therapist who understands midlife and (or) the support of a coach for the transformation of work style and the challenge of workplace issues.



**...as a man successfully navigates his 50s, he is likely to put more emphasis on his inner being, on the depth of his relationships, and on mentoring his younger colleagues at work.**



Then, as a man successfully navigates his 50s, he is likely to put more emphasis on his inner being, on the depth of his relationships, and on mentoring his younger colleagues at work. If he has 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 feel he wants to get out of the rat race where his destiny has been dependent on others. He may well begin to work for himself, either starting his own business or working as a consultant but - in this instance - from an inner sense of total conviction. He may prefer to spend time with his old friends in regular games of golf or tennis, rather than going out to meet new people. He is either 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 relate to each other in their 50s? With the normal decline in testosterone, men experience an unmasking of their female hormones, and of the affects 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 re-assured that they are 'entitled' to such feelings, and that these feelings are the manifestation of a newly emerging identity that 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 at 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, unsentimental, and self-centred.

In my relationship counseling, 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, the husband's leaving her now for his younger personal assistant. 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 creating

an understanding of what is happening to each of them at this time of life, and helping them communicate their genuine feelings with each other, and form realistic expectations of each other, can transform relationships, and achieve deeper more fulfilling partnerships, having the spiritual and emotional dimensions lacking in youth.

Most people in positions of leadership in the corporate world are between 40 and 60 (some a couple of years younger or older). If they understood themselves in the first place, and led the way in understanding and therefore in accommodating men and women going through midlife in the workplace, they could transform corporate culture.

So mister top performing executive: why didn't you know about 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 men, popular thinking still associates the irritability-anxiety-depression syndrome with female menopause. This popular belief is sustained because the changes in women are more physically evident, accompanied as they are by the rapid decline in oestrogen and the cessation of menses. Medical research has been slower in studying andropause than menopause because men have been so reluctant to admit to the effects of the gradual loss of their testosterone, the hormone so closely aligned with the image they nurture of their manhood.

Furthermore, consider this: little attention has been paid to midlife as a distinct life stage, because - until modern medicine had such a decisive impact on public health it was only experienced by a small proportion of the world's population! For example, there has been an increase in European and American life expectancy by 30 years since 1900 - from approximately 49 in 1900 to 79 in 2006 - an increase greater than all of the previous gains over the past 5 000 years. Up until the mid-1940s, when antibiotics were developed, men on average still expected to die in their 60s. In South Africa, life expectancy figures have been negatively affected by the ravages of HIV/Aids, dropping back down to 49 years, but for those not contracting the virus, the life expectancy figures will be similar to the Northern Hemisphere.

So as recently as 70 years ago, a person didn't know if she or he could expect to live through midlife and into what was then called 'old age'. Even if a person made it, their spouse would be unlikely to survive as well. Even more significantly, until very recently our South African societal institutions, including corporate business practices, were imported from the First World, where they were established decades ago to accommodate the needs of the average European or North American, who anticipated a work life that ended in the 60s. The mandatory retirement age in the USA for Social Security purposes was established to accommodate those who made it to 65 years old in 1935 and it is now up for review as so many people wish to work longer.

The institutions of Europe are undergoing the strains of an aging population and are seeking solutions. American business is recognising and utilising the inherent skills of women as managers. However, here in South Africa we are further confusing age and gender issues by adding into the mix the pressures of affirmative action. In the rush to equalise opportunities, we show very little intelligent consideration for cultural differences, let alone for differences of gender, age or life stage.

In my practice as an executive coach I find that it is not uncommon in South African corporate and governmental institutions for black women in their late 30s to be forced to compete for leadership positions with 55-year-old white men, with no consideration being given to their comparative energy levels, the relative value of recent education versus acquired wisdom, or the needs and perspective of gender difference and life-stage transformation. With the right internal mentoring programmes and on-going support from external executive coaches, these new anomalies can be dealt with optimally, and an effective hybrid South African corporate culture can be forged.

It really is time for the South African corporate culture to recognise that its workforce can integrate on a complementary basis so much more effectively when male and female values are harmonised, and the qualities and strengths of the different cultures and life stages are profitably accommodated. **TP**