

Male mid-life crisis: causes, coping and meaning

[Commentary](#) / [Media](#) / [Masculinity](#)

Written By [John Barry](#)



A few months ago a journalist asked me some questions for [an article](#) about mid-life crisis in men. The following is my answers to the questions, with quotes used by the journalist in his article in italics.

Why do so many men struggle between the ages of 40 and 60? Is it psychological, or is there a physical component?

Although some people suggest 'male menopause' (properly called 'andropause') might contribute the stress experienced by middle-aged men, there is [limited evidence](#) for this. In fact some experts argue that there isn't really such thing as a male menopause: women's sex hormones decrease dramatically at around age 50, which causes sudden physiological and emotional changes. In contrast, male sex hormones decline much more gradually over time, in fact they are in slow decline from our 20s onwards, and only reach very low levels in a [small percentage](#)

[of elderly men](#). So it's difficult to compare the typical experiences of men and women, and men will generally only experience something like a sudden female menopause if their testosterone drops for some medically-related reason e.g. men who need to have their testosterone levels stopped as part of [prostate cancer therapy](#).

Why is that age group so vulnerable to suicide? Is that an age where some men start to feel lonely, and disconnected from family, friends, children?

At present the highest suicide rate in any demographic is among middle aged men. It's popular to say that men become more isolated as they get older, especially if they become [divorced](#). However it's not true to say that men necessarily become more depressed as they get older, or that middle aged men are more suicidal throughout history or in every culture.

As I said in the article: *"The key issue related to suicide in this age group in Western cultures today, as well as some non-Western cultures such as [Japan](#), seems to be family breakdown. Men who are divorced are at much higher risk of suicide than divorced women or other men. My own [research](#) has found that the key cause of distress to men after family breakdown is being prevented from having enough contact with their children. As long as they don't have contact, their emotional pain continues."* We sometimes blame men for being socially isolated, but in regards to seeing their children, it is often not their fault.

Is it an age where men realise whatever expectations they had in life would not be fulfilled?

There is something to the idea that a midlife crisis is related to a certain type of depression. The classic idea is that a man senses he is losing his youth and wants to recapture it or escape his current life course. However suicide isn't really explained by existential angst of this kind, unless a man's youth has been badly wasted, and old age looks destined to be defined by poor life choices or unlucky life circumstances, and increasingly poor health. There can be many reasons for a midlife crisis, including – increasingly these days – the stress of being responsible for one's children

and one's parents. Middle age is a difficult stage of life, but with goodwill and patience on both sides a couple can work through it together. However goodwill for men has been [on the wane](#) for some decades now, and in these days of 'no fault' divorces, it is all too easy for either partner – though it is usually the woman – to lose patience and initiate divorce.

What is the best way for men to cope with this stage of life? Does it get better?

The psychologist Erik Erikson famously talked about how people go through different stages of life, and if they can resolve the challenges at each stage, they pass to the next stage in good shape. As I said in the article: *"Indeed men in their 70s are often happier than men in their 40s."* This is something I have found repeatedly in my own research with thousands of men in the [US, UK](#) and [Germany](#). For men, being committed to being a good dad is a great way of getting through a midlife crisis, because this helps give life true meaning. This can be true even if you are prevented from seeing your children, if you can realise that it is important that you stay mentally and physically strong for your children if and when they eventually need you again in later life. This is true even in situations where the children have been [turned against you](#), because it's not uncommon for them to make up their own minds about you later as they get older, so it helps if you can keep yourself ready for that.

There are various ways that men cope with life stressors at this stage of life. One way I suggested in the article is to "take control of the problems being faced", for example, getting whatever legal or health support that you need. Another suggestion I made for the article was [dealing with the stressful feelings](#), which in later life can still be done with sports, but perhaps more "low-intensity activities such as walking in nature, playing 'walking football'." Some people try to escape very poor health with suicide, but conversely, exercise, especially team sports, can help improve men's physical and mental wellbeing. Other useful activities include joining a men's [talking group, or join a 'Men's Shed'](#) where men meet and engage in activities such as fixing furniture.

For problems that aren't helped by everyday activities, it's a good idea to get professional mental health support from someone who you can relate

to, especially if they have [relevant training](#) so that you don't, for example, find that your problems are being blamed on patriarchy or '[toxic masculinity](#)' etc. This [recent article](#) in Male Psychology magazine gives three case studies of how an existential-orientated therapy can help men can deal with problems related to a mid-life crisis by helping discover meaning in their lives.

Therapists are usually not trained to deal specifically with male-typical issues or communication styles related to men's mental health, which is why the [Centre for Male Psychology](#) website regularly features stories describing the first-hand experiences of men going through the kind of experiences typically related to [suicide](#), such as [family breakdown](#) and [parental alienation](#), as well as having designed [specialised training](#) and [webinars](#) that can be taken online by professional therapists or indeed anyone interested in understanding men's mental health.

Some [research](#) shows that mature men can support each other through difficult times by engaging in activities, such as chopping wood and motor biking, to get through difficult times. These seem to me to be valid activities, similar to Men's Sheds, even if some [academics](#) are cautious about recommending them because they are too traditionally masculine. *The Centre for Male Psychology* is much more [positive about masculinity](#), and sees it as a valuable resource. As Professor Miles Matisse put it, [mid-life is not an event, but a process](#), and if men can support each other through these times, it can be a fulfilling time of growth for all concerned.



Dr John Barry is a Psychologist, researcher, clinical hypnotherapist & co-founder of the Male Psychology Network, ***BPS Male Psychology Section***, and ***The Centre for Male Psychology***. Also co-editor of the ***Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology & Mental Health***, and co-author of the ***new book Perspectives in Male Psychology: An Introduction (Wiley)***.

Reference this article as: JA Barry (2024). 'Male mid-life crisis: causes, coping and meaning'. *Male Psychology*, 4 (3), 10-14. Available online at <https://www.centreformalepsychology.com/male-psychology-magazine-listings/male-mid-life-crisis-causes-coping-and-meaning?>

Disclaimer. *This article is for information purposes only and is not a substitute for therapy, legal advice, or other professional opinion. Never disregard such advice because of this article or anything else you have read from the Centre for Male Psychology. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of, or are endorsed by, The Centre for Male Psychology, and we cannot be held responsible for these views. Read our full disclaimer [here](#).*