Is the midlife crisis just an excuse?

WORKING LIVES

Emma Jacobs

The malaise seems to be hitting employees earlier and is even demonstrated by primates—though minus the sports car.

Elizabeth has had enough of life as a City lawyer. Now, in her mid-thirties, she has decided to change careers. "Life is short," she says, winning at the cliché. As the first person in her family to make it to university, Elizabeth—who does not want to use her real name—had felt obliged to follow through with a sensible profession. Her twenties were consumed by office life, nights finding her way and proving herself. When she hit her thirties, while the hours continued to be punishing, she felt able to lift her nose from the grindstone and evaluate her career. "I am not as engaged in my work as my peers," she reflects. To make partner she would have to crank up her commitment—and she just cannot bear to do that. So in her spare time she studies psychology, in anticipation of switching professional tracks.

She admitsthat feeling that border on depression but views them as a "productive indication" that she no longer wants to be a lawyer and desires a job with "more meaning." A "midlife crisis" is how she sees it.

"Midlife crisis" is not a clinical disorder. However, Dr. Michael Sinclair, a consultant psychologist based in the City, has observed increasing numbers of thirtysomethings experiencing profound anxiety about their career choices and lives. "These are problems more commonly associated with people in their mid-forties thinking about mortality. They are coming out of recession, a period of being single-parented. They are burnt out and asking 'What's the point of work?'

Louise Matthews, a work and lifestyle blogger and former personal assistant in recruitment and insurance, believes that the "midlife crisis is beginning earlier these days." She suggests it could be because "we have too much choice and information coming"—which can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction but also paralysis. "It can be pretty overwhelming." The notion of a midlife crisis, in contention. Cited in 1998 by Elliott Jaques, a psychologist, he described it as "the adult encounter with the conception of life to be lived in the setting of an approaching second death." In popular mythology it is generally characterised by forty-something men swapping families and jobs for sports cars, hair plugs and young girlfriends—all rather silly. However, research published earlier this year found an average midlife dip in happiness of 12% subjective wellbeing, as it is described by economists—happened between 40 and 42. Professor Nattavudh Powdthavee, co-author of the longitudinal research across three countries, says this confirms previous studies that show a U-shaped relationship between the age and the use of antidepressants. It builds on research published in 2012, that found disparities and orang-utans also experience a U-shape of happiness (as reported by observers rather than the apes themselves). Prof Powdthavee says this suggests there could be biological explanations behind the midlife nadir. He sees this as reason to be optimistic. "When you know this, you can go through the period thinking at some point it will get better."

Mid-life crises can manifest themselves in different ways. "It is a transitory phase," says Dr. Derek Milne, a psychologist from Newcastle University and author of Crash: How To Handle A Mid-Life Crisis. "It can be intermittent or express itself in ways described as depression."

Dr. Elizabeth H. A. W. Phipps, a professor at the University believes midlife, unlike infancy and old age, is under-researched. Last year, she published research focused on "unmet expectations." It found the young are optimistic—perhaps even "over-optimistic"—whereas those in their forties and fifties feel regret, regret making their choice in older age. "Perhaps people in middle age can learn from the elderly who feel less regret and have adapted," he suggests. The fall-out from midlife malaise might make people less productive, notes Dr. Schumann. Employers might therefore want to take note. "It could improve people's wellbeing if we acknowledged the problem," he says.

Jodie Rogers, a careers coach, says work is a source of crisis for her middle-aged clients. "They ask themselves what legacy they are leaving behind. They start to feel bad about feeling discontented. They have a job and pay cheque, they don't know if they have the right to seek more. There is a real tug of war between the feeling they should be satisfied with their life and wanting to do something new, something different."

Paul Dolan, professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics, and author of Happiness by Design, believes we need a mix of purpose and pleasure in order to feel truly happy. In his forthcoming paper, he argues that much of the economic literature on midlife crises focusses on our evaluations of what makes us happy rather than our actual experiences. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves about what makes us happy—that a prestigious job is good—even in our day-to-day experience of the work makes us miserable.

Experts, however, dismiss any connection between age and crisis. Suzanne Krauss Whitbourne, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, sees age as a "social construct, highly dependent on the individual." The attraction of seeing midlife as a period prone to crises, she says, is akin to homeopathy: "It gives you a certain sense of an excuse and an expectation."

She does, however, think that today, more people want to express their true sense of self in their job.

Elizabeth agrees: she says her parents are baffled by her career dissatisfaction. "They say it is a luxury of my generation. They never thought of enjoying their careers—they just got on with it.

Many people, says Prof Whitbourne, fantasise about dramatically quitting their jobs. But, she says, "it is better to make baby steps towards a change."

Dr Sinclair agrees: "People can be too goal-focused. They have ticked off making money and career goals, and wonder what next?" He helps them to understand that is not about ticking off their goals but living by their values. Rather than resign, they may find that making small changes in their jobs, for example collaborating with colleagues or mentoring a junior employee, can make work feel more meaningful.

Exhibit Blogger

Louise Matthews infuses too much choice