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Aging Gracefully

Sub-Title

Avoiding mid-life madness by being 'good selfish'

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Content

If you're over 45, odds are you've had a conversation that goes something like this:

Jane: "Did you hear Joe left his wife, bought a Ferrari, and got hair implants?"

Sarah: "You're kidding! Did you know Mary quit her job, became a belly dancer, and took up with a man half her age?"

Well, maybe you haven't had a conversation *quite* like this. But now that I'm in mid-life, tales of friends, family, and co-workers seemingly diving off the deep end are becoming more frequent.

The existence of the mid-life crisis has been hotly debated since the term was first coined in 1965 by Canadian psychologist Elliot Jaques. In 2006, two economics professors undertook the first in-depth review of data to determine whether happiness in mid-life really does drop. Their report, "Is Well-being U-Shaped over the Life Cycle?" concluded that indeed, "mental distress tends to reach a maximum in middle age."

This mental distress (and accompanying unhappiness) can trigger the need to make great changes. Julia James, a certified life coach, sees this situation regularly. According to James, mid-life is when many of us face the largest number of stress factors: we've got kids and all the financial, emotional, and time challenges of raising a family; we have aging parents who need more and more from us; and we're in the busiest time of our careers.

“When people are being pulled in all directions, the first thing they drop is quality time for themselves—time to recharge and rejuvenate,” she says. “People begin to operate like robots, falling out of touch with their humanity, with what matters to them, with their core values.”

To avoid this situation, James recommends taking the time to engage in things that are meaningful to you. “Be ‘good selfish,’” she says, “by putting yourself and your needs first to do things that bring you joy.”

To be clear, although they may elicit something that feels like joy, having an affair, buying a sports car, and going all Gucci are the wrong kind of selfish acts. This type of selfish is based on feeding addictions and often represents a distraction from one’s pain. The ultimate outcome of “bad selfish” will typically be feelings of regret—not of joy.

James offers a question to help mid-life crisis sufferers get in touch with their deeper selves: “If time and resources were of no concern, what would you most want to do with your life?”

James suggests recapturing one activity you love—even if it’s just for a few minutes a day. If dancing used to bring you joy, put on your favourite CD and boogie to the music in your living room. If you always wanted to write a book, take 30 minutes each day to put your story ideas on paper. If you love travelling, start planning weekends away.

Dr. Gayle Way, a registered psychologist and co-founder of Energetic Self-Manifestation (ESM)—a philosophy of life and treatment process involving talk therapy and energy work—agrees that engaging in acts that bring you true joy is key to avoiding the mid-life blues.

But Way says the mid-life crisis is no different from any other life crisis people face when they operate from a place of fear rather than a place of wisdom.

“We can either create our life from a place of innate wholeness—from our spiritual/energetic/quantum core of wisdom and love—or we can create from a place of our fears, which represent self-limiting beliefs,” she explains. “When we eliminate our negative beliefs (‘I’m a screw-up,’ ‘I’m too old to change,’ ‘the best part of my life is behind me’), we can move on to life-enhancing beliefs to create the life we want with joy.”

Way advises people to stop beating themselves up and to release any feelings they have of shame and blame.

“Acknowledge and allow the feelings of regret to live in you as you move towards acceptance of what was and what is. Then you’re ready for the process of rediscovering and reacquainting yourself with your own truth.”

With this advice, I hope to avoid the humiliation that would come from trying to revisit the happy, head-

shaved punk-rocker I was in my 20s. Instead, I'm trying to be "good" selfish and balance how much I give of myself to work and family with how much I keep for myself.

This way, the water-cooler talk will never turn to: "Did you hear that Donna got a full-body tattoo and is belly dancing on Granville?"

Driving north on the Sea-to-Sky Highway every Friday afternoon brings Donna Barker great joy.



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