

[BIG IN JAPAN](#)

Women in their 40s have it better than men

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

It was a shock and a disappointment to learn, courtesy of a survey released in August by the Dai-ichi Life Research Institute, that men in their 40s are the unhappiest people in Japan. Who are the happiest? This is even more surprising: men in their 80s. That gives younger men something to look forward to. But 40 years is a long wait.

What is poisoning the lives of men in their prime? Pressure? Responsibility? A gnawing feeling, precisely because it *is* the prime of life, that the restless hopes and dreams of adolescence are not coming true, never will come true, were doomed from the start not to come true because life simply isn't like that? And might that be a clue to the happiness of men in their 80s? Resignation is long in coming, but it does come at last.

Women, the survey shows, tend to peak in terms of happiness in their 60s, after floating on an even keel through their 30s, 40s and 50s. In general, their lot seems a more fortunate one. Of women, more in a moment. Men first.

They get no sympathy from the young. That's plain from an article *Spa!* magazine ran in July titled "The deterioration of company employees in their 40s." It's an office story, and highlights the utter contempt in which middle managers are held by their subordinates who, in earlier times, would have looked up to them as role models and embodiments of their own powerful and prosperous futures.

But the power and prosperity are missing now, two decades into an economic decline. They cut a sorry figure, these middle-aged company types. They seem not on the way up or perched confidently on the heights but already on the slippery slope down. "Junk bosses" is an expression frequently heard at the pubs where the junior staff gather after hours to drink away their frustrations. These are legion. The stagnant economy has shadowed the young generation's lives from childhood. Their elders at least grew up in prosperity and got jobs before the "Ice Age" turned job-hunting into the unremitting struggle it is today. To the young, the middle-aged are spoiled children with no idea what "real life" is. They toady to their bosses and bully their juniors. They hog credit and skirt blame. "When my section head visits clients he hands out his staff's business cards instead of his own, so if anything goes wrong it's the staff that'll take the flak," huffs a 29-year-

old of his 46-year-old boss.

And they can't use computers to save their lives, these overgrown babies from a vanished era. They lose documents, can't type legibly, cause no end of trouble, and when confronted fume, "These Macs are no damn good! Blame Steve Jobs, not me!"

That's the kind of thing Spa! gleans from its survey of 300 office men and women aged 22-32 — the young generation.

Well, subordinates *will* say that about their bosses — who, secure in their strength and experience, indulged it as grownups do children, if they deigned to notice it at all. But now that the old confidence is gone, experience in rapidly changing times counts for little, and being 40 these days is no joke. Was it ever? The October issue of the monthly Takarajima notes with alarm the high incidence of suicide among those aged 40-49 — 3,401 known cases in 2011 among a total exceeding, as it has every year since 1998, 30,000. The number itself may not seem strikingly large, compared to roughly 11,000 suicides among those aged 60 and up, and in fact it hasn't changed much since 1978, when jobs were assured, promotion was automatic, the economy was humming and the young by and large (healthy youthful derision aside) respected their elders. Still, it represents a lot of people in the prime of life concluding they have nothing to live for and are better off dead. Why?

Life's conspiracy to weigh down middle-aged men is not new. There are kids to see through expensive schooling, aged and infirm parents to care for, and one's own looming old age to think about. There's the job that has grown oppressive rather than challenging and the marriage that no longer excites. The joys are few and the trials are many, or so it can seem. Drink is a consolation but also a problem, and Takarajima in fact stresses alcoholism as a key factor in depression and suicide among the middle-aged.

What seems needed is not so much solutions to problems — which are either eternal or, if solved, mutate — as an infusion of joy. Easily said. Where is it to come from?

Maybe women know something here that men don't. What are women in their 40s up to? Many things, no doubt, but Takarajima focuses on one in particular: relationships with men young enough to be their sons. What's in it for the young man? A learning experience in which he needn't be ashamed of his inexperience. And for the woman?

"Single middle-aged women," former porn actress and current manga artist Nayuka Mine tells the magazine, "see their married friends sexless, bogged down caring for their husbands' infirm parents and so on, while they cavort worry-free with 20-something boyfriends. Once they were considered losers because they'd missed the marriage boat. Who's having the last laugh now?"

The Japan Times: Sunday, Oct. 14, 2012
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)