

# How the Midlife Crisis Came to Be

Over the course of a few years in the 20th century, the midlife crisis went from an obscure psychological theory to a ubiquitous phenomenon.



Daniel LeClair / Reuters

**PAMELA DRUCKERMAN** | MAY 29, 2018 | FAMILY

The midlife crisis was invented in London in 1957. That's when a 40-year-old Canadian named Elliott Jaques stood before a meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society and read aloud from a paper he'd written.

Addressing about a hundred attendees, Jaques claimed that people in their mid-30s typically experience a depressive period lasting several years. Jaques (pronounced "Jacks")—a physician and psychoanalyst—said he'd identified this phenomenon by studying the lives of great artists, in whom it takes an extreme form. In ordinary people symptoms could include religious

awakenings, promiscuity, a sudden inability to enjoy life, “hypochondriacal concern over health and appearance,” and “compulsive attempts” to remain young.

This period is sparked by the realization that their lives are halfway over, and that death isn't just something that happens to someone else: It will happen to them, too.

He described a depressed 36-year-old patient who told his therapist, “Up till now, life has seemed an endless upward slope, with nothing but the distant horizon in view. Now suddenly I seem to have reached the crest of the hill, and there stretching ahead is the downward slope with the end of the road in sight—far enough away, it's true—but there is death observably present at the end.”

Jaques didn't claim to be the first to detect this midlife change. He pointed out that, in the 14th century, Dante Alighieri's protagonist in *The Divine Comedy*—who scholars say is 35—famously declares at the beginning of the book, “Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark / For the straightforward pathway had been lost.”

But Jaques offered a modern, clinical explanation, and—crucially—he gave the experience a name: the “mid life crisis.”

As he addressed the meeting in London, Jaques was nervous. Many of the leading psychoanalysts of the day were sitting in the audience, including the society's president, Donald Winnicott, renowned for his theory of transitional objects, and Jaques' own mentor, the famed child psychologist Melanie Klein.

It was an acrimonious group, which had split into competing factions. Attendees were known to pounce on presenters during the questioning period. And Jaques wasn't just presenting an abstract theory: He later told an interviewer that the depressed 36-year-old patient he described in the paper

was himself.

When he finished reading the paper, titled “The Mid Life Crisis,” Jaques paused and waited to be attacked. Instead, after a very brief discussion, “there was dead silence,” he recalled later. “Which was very, very embarrassing, nobody got up to speak. This was new, this is absolutely rare.” The next day, Melanie Klein tried to cheer him up, saying, “If there’s one thing the Psychoanalytic Society cannot cope with, it’s the theme of death.”

Chastened, Jaques put “The Mid Life Crisis” aside. He went on to write about far less personal topics, including a theory of time and work. “I was certainly utterly convinced that the paper was a complete failure,” he recalled.

But he didn’t forget how it felt to be that troubled man standing on the crest of the hill. About six years later, he submitted the paper to *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, which **published** it in its October 1965 issue under the title “Death and the Mid-life Crisis.”

This time, instead of silence, there was an enormous appetite for Jaques’ theory. The midlife crisis was now aligned with the zeitgeist.

If you were a man born in 1900, you had only about a 50 percent chance of living to age 60. The average life expectancy for men was around 52. It was fair to think of age 40 as the beginning of the end.

But life spans in rich countries were increasing by about 2.3 years per decade. Someone born in the 1930s had nearly an 80 percent chance of living until age 60. That gave age 40 a new vitality. *Life Begins at Forty* was the best-selling American nonfiction book of 1933. Walter Pitkin, the journalist who wrote it, explained that “before the Machine Age, men wore out at forty.” But thanks to industrialization, new medicines, and electric dishwashers, “men and women alike turn from the ancient task of making a living to the strange new task of living.”

By the time Elliott Jaques published “Death and the Mid-life Crisis” in 1965, the average life expectancy in Western countries had climbed to about 70. It made sense to change your life in your 30s or 40s, because you could expect to live long enough to enjoy your new career or your new spouse.

And it was getting easier to change your life. Women were going to work in record numbers, giving them more financial independence. Middle-class professionals were entering psychotherapy and couples counseling in record numbers and trying to understand themselves. People were starting to treat marriage not just as a romantic institution, but as the source of their self-actualization. Divorce rules were loosening, and the divorce rate was about to surge. And there was dramatic social upheaval, from the civil-rights movement to the birth-control pill. It wasn't just individuals who had midlife crises. The whole society seemed to be having one, too.

The idea that a midlife crisis is inevitable soon jumped from Jaques' academic paper to popular culture. And according to the new conventional wisdom, the 40s were the prime time for it to occur. In her 1967 [book](#), *The Middle-Age Crisis*, the writer Barbara Fried claimed the crisis is “a normal aspect of growth, as natural for those in their 40s as teething is for a younger age group.”

The midlife crisis, which had scarcely existed five or six years earlier, was suddenly treated like a biological inevitability that could possess and even kill you. “A person in the throes ... does not even know that something is happening inside his body, a physical change that is affecting his emotions,” a 1971 *New York Times* [article](#) explained. “Yet he is plagued with indecision, restlessness, boredom, a ‘what's the use’ outlook and a feeling of being fenced in.”

The crisis soon expanded from Jaques' original definition to include

practically any inner strife. You could have one because you'd achieved everything you'd intended to, but couldn't see the point of it all. Or you could have one because you hadn't achieved enough.

Management theorists urged companies to be sensitive to their crisis-stricken workers. In 1972, a U.S. government task force **warned** that midlife crises may be causing an uptick in the death rate of men aged 35 to 40. "A general feeling of obsolescence appears to overtake middle managers when they reach their late thirties. Their careers appear to have reached a plateau, and they realize that life from here on will be a long and inevitable decline."

Despite some biological claims, the midlife crisis was mainly viewed as a middle- and upper-class affliction. Classic sufferers were white, professional, and male, with the leisure time to ruminate on their personal development and the means to afford sports cars and mistresses. People who were working-class or black weren't supposed to self-actualize. Women were assumed to be on a separate schedule set by marriage, menopause, and when their children left home.

But women soon realized that the midlife crisis contained a kind of liberation story, in tune with the nascent women's movement: If you hated your life, you could change it. This idea found a perfect messenger in the journalist Gail Sheehy. Sheehy was the daughter of a Westchester advertising executive. She had obediently studied home economics, married a doctor, and had a baby. But that life didn't suit her. By the early 1970s, she was divorced and working as a journalist.

In January 1972, Sheehy was on an assignment in Northern Ireland when the young Catholic protester she was interviewing got shot in the face. The shock of this experience soon combined with the shock of entering her mid-30s. "Some intruder shook me by the psyche and shouted: Take stock! Half your life has been spent."

Researchers she spoke to explained that panicking at 35 is normal, since adults go through developmental periods just like children do. Sheehy traveled around America interviewing educated middle-class men and women, ages 18 to 55, about their lives. In the summer of 1976 she published a nearly 400-page book called *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*. By that August, it was the *New York Times*' number one nonfiction bestseller, and it remained in the top 10 for over a year.

Sheehy had gone hunting for midlife crises in America, and she'd found them. "A sense of stagnation, disequilibrium, and depression is predictable as we enter the passage to midlife," she writes in *Passages*. People can expect to feel "sometimes momentous changes of perspective, often mysterious dissatisfactions with the course they had been pursuing with enthusiasm only a few years before." Ages 37 to 42 are "peak years of anxiety for practically everyone." She said these crises happen to women, too.

With Sheehy's book, an idea that had been gathering force for a decade simply became a fact of life. Soon there were midlife crisis mugs, T-shirts, and a board game that challenged players—Can You Survive Your Mid-Life Crisis Without Cracking Up, Breaking Up, or Going Broke?

But were midlife crises actually happening? The anthropologist Stanley Brandes had his doubts. In the 1980s, as he approached age 40 himself, he noticed that many self-help books in his local bookshop, in Berkeley, warned that he was about to experience a major life upheaval.

Brandes thought about Margaret Mead's classic 1928 book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, in which Mead argues that Americans expect teenage girls to have an adolescent crisis, and many of them do. But Samoans don't expect the teenage years to be filled with emotional upheaval, and in Samoa they aren't.

Brandes reasoned that the midlife crisis might be a cultural construct, too. "It

was kind of a trick that my culture was playing on me, and I didn't have to feel that way," he decided, laying out his theory in the 1985 book *Forty: The Age and the Symbol*.

Brandes didn't have much data to go on, but soon researchers were analyzing findings from studies including a massive one called "Midlife in the United States," or **MIDUS**, that began in 1995. What did all this reveal about the midlife crisis?

"Most people don't have a crisis," says Margie Lachman of Brandeis University, a member of the original MIDUS team. Lachman says midlifers are typically healthy, have busy social lives, and are at the earnings peaks of their careers, so "people are pretty satisfied."

Some of those who report having a midlife crisis are "crisis prone" or highly neurotic, Lachman says. They have crises throughout their lives, not just in midlife. And about half of those who have midlife crises say it's related to a life event like a health problem, a job loss, or a divorce, not to aging per se.

Just 10 to 20 percent of Americans have an experience that qualifies as a midlife crisis, according to MIDUS and other studies.

As this data rolled in, most scientists abandoned the idea that the midlife crisis is biological. They regarded it mostly as a cultural construct. The same mass media that had once heralded the midlife crisis began trying to debunk it, in dozens of news stories with variations on the headline "Myth of the Midlife Crisis."

But the idea was too delicious to be debunked. It had become part of the Western middle-class narrative, offering a fresh, self-actualizing story about how life is supposed to go.

Another reason for the idea's success, Lachman says, is that people like

attaching names to life stages, such as the “terrible twos” for toddlers, whereas “most people I know say their two-year-olds are delightful.” The midlife crisis persists, in part, because it has a very catchy name.

Elliott Jaques watched with amazement at the avalanche that his paper caused. Requests for reprints of “Death and the Midlife Crisis” came in from around the world.

Jaques had long since moved on to other topics. He became a specialist in workplace relations, and devised a way to measure workers according to the amount of time they’re given to complete tasks. He consulted for the U.S. Army and the Church of England about their organizational structures, and wrote more than 20 books. He never wrote about the midlife crisis again.

Jaques died in 2003. His second wife, Kathryn Cason, who co-founded an organization dedicated to propagating Jaques’s ideas about the workplace, told me that the midlife crisis was “a tiny little early piece of work that he did” and something Jaques “didn’t want who to talk about after 20 or 30 years.” She urged me to read his later writings.

I have to admit that I never did. Jaques had lots of big ideas, but the whole world was mostly interested in his small one. The headline of his [obituary](#) in the New York Times read “Elliott Jaques, 86, Scientist Who Coined ‘Midlife Crisis.’”

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*This article has been adapted from [There Are No Grown-ups: A Midlife Coming-of-Age Story](#).*

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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