

Your Early Midlife Crisis

Why are more men in their 20s and 30s feeling disillusioned and misdirected?

BY ALDEN CASS

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My psychology and performance-coaching practice has recently revealed something fascinating about my male clients from the financial world: Younger and younger men seem to be suffering from an early midlife crisis.

According to a special 2005 report issued from the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics, a child born in the U.S. should expect to live to 77.9 years of age. The life expectancy for women is 5.2 years more than for men in 2005, the smallest gap since 1946. In essence, we shouldn't be expecting to have midlife crises until our late 30s and early 40s.

So the question is, why have we encountered so many more disillusioned, misdirected and apathetic male clients in their 20s and 30s than in years past?

Reality Check

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Many men experience a debilitating sense of behavioral paralysis and purposelessness in their work or personal lives at different times in their lives. They often report that, "My work is just not fulfilling, I don't feel like I am helping anyone," and "I am not interested in working as hard as I used to."

They also battle with the fact that they have not met their expected goals and objectives by the time they had reached 30. When individuals' expectations are not validated by their reality, they may develop a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that's often associated with this developmental milestone in their lives. These are individuals who really believe that they have let themselves or their families down by not reaching their goals as planned. In essence, these are perfectionist personality types.

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Cass is a performance enhancement coach and clinical psychologist for Catalyst Strategies Group (www.catsg.com) who specializes in working directly with individual and teams of senior investment executives, including high-profile CEOs, top hedge fund and prop traders, investors, and financial advisors to help them achieve their financial and personal goals. He works to modify behaviors that are hampering their performance and to give them the mental edge within competitive work environments. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and an expert on the use of psychology in the financial services industry. He has conducted behavioral healthcare studies on retail stockbrokers that indicated that 23 percent of the group measured met criteria for major depression. His research has been presented at both national and international conferences (APA, ICPP). He is a major contributor to columns in On Wall Street Magazine and Traderdaily.com. Cass has also conducted workshops with the Securities Industry Association, Money Management Institute, Trader Monthly Magazine's Peak Performance Workshop, The

Wall Street Branch Managers Meeting at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the London Bullion Market Association, the Silver & Zinc Association, the Investment Management Consultants Association (IMCA), and the Investment Products Association (IPA).

He has appeared in the following media: The Today Show, Fox News Live, New York Magazine, Businessweek, Lou Dobbs Moneyline CNN, CNN money.com, CNBC London, Financial Times, London Financial Weekly, Washington Post Radio, NY Newsday, On Wall Street Magazine, E-Trade "On Air," BBC Radio, Reuter's Business Newswire, New York Times, Boston Globe, Absolute Return Magazine.

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A midlife crisis may also occur in marriage, as many men start to question their choice of mate and may also start to yearn for the days before kids and responsibilities around the house. Many men describe feeling angry more often and may start to regress toward a younger, more self-indulgent version of themselves to avoid these painful feelings. (Some may skip work to play golf, buy an exorbitant sports car or purchase a new expensive wardrobe, regardless of the consequences to their business or family.)

In other cases, men can withdraw from social activities and isolate themselves from those who realize that they are not happy with their stake in life. They may begin to harbor resentments against their families for having "distracted" them from reaching their financial goals or career status.

Why Now?

It is likely that many men who entered into the financial services industry in the late 1990s were enticed into believing that they could become millionaires overnight. At that time, 23-year-olds were pulling in six-figure incomes, and 40-year-olds were planning for early retirements. Early on in the new millennium, 30- and 35-year-olds were becoming all-star hedge-fund traders and were living the good life.

Things have changed drastically over the past seven years. It is much harder to become filthy rich at a young age. Thus, many men who once had the passion and motivation to fight for the easy money feel as if they were sold on nothing but a dream. Never before did they think that they would be faced with so much red tape and compliance as part of their job description.

It can be a scary moment to realize that you are not happy with your career and don't know what your options are at age 35, when you have children or a family who rely on you.

The Prescription

My message to all of the 20- and 30-something men in my audience is that this early onset

of midlife crisis is fairly common. You are not alone.

It is a normal part of our developmental cycle, and if it's resolved successfully, it will allow you to really enjoy your golden years. It is important to remember that all people change rather drastically during their 30s and 40s. The things that motivated you early on after college may no longer fuel your fire by the time that you are bouncing your firstborn child on your knee.

In many cases, people either grow out of their jobs or marriages to some degree, or the job or marriage changes so much that it matures away from us.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, it is time to take inventory of your life and what is important to you.

I find that it is important to re-evaluate your life goals and ambitions at this benchmark in your life. Be brutally honest with yourself and others about what you need and want for your future, because holding in your feelings can lead to impairment in your social and occupational functioning.

Take this opportunity to look within yourself, at your core values, beliefs and aspirations. Be realistic and engage others whom you trust to help you live out your dreams.

Expect to work hard to get what you want in life and remind yourself every day that you can script your own future. Start writing that script today.

Please write to the Stock Doc with your trading, emotional, or investing dilemmas. Dr. Cass always welcomes comments and stories, for which he'll try to offer solutions in later columns.

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