

Midlife time to break out and be who you really are

By Ruth Ostrow

WHEN I recently admitted to having had a midlife crisis, my words attracted a lot of response from readers, including psychologist Robyn Vickers-Willis who has a new book out *Men Navigating Midlife* (Allen & Unwin).

As she is also the author of an earlier book *Navigating Midlife: Women Becoming Themselves*, we got into a wonderful discussion about what midlife meant to women.

Vickers-Willis says: "For women, a midlife crisis is typically about choosing to put her needs ahead of others.

"Women are traditionally conditioned not to rock the boat and they tend to hide their inner turmoil from loved ones, rather than take steps that will damage their primary relationships and upset those they love."

She says during a midlife crisis -- which can happen between 35 and 50 -- all this changes. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not only men who run off and have showy affairs, engage in strange acquisitions, manic exercise, overwork and other addictions in order to distract themselves from their inner pain.

But she says women are more likely to find ways to work through the pain of midlife by talking to each other or seeking therapy.

Men by comparison tend to emotionally withdraw from inner turmoil and the process can take considerably longer.

She says: "As women enter the seven to 10-year transition period that follows the initial crisis, they tend to take control of their lives. They find creative ways to earn a living, swear with gusto, assert themselves, especially in the bedroom, and explore a variety of ways to express their sensuality and sexuality.

"You find them dancing in the parks, attending universities, singing in a choirs, and becoming whole."

For me, midlife did mean coming into my power. I woke up one morning in my late 30s and realised that I hadn't been my real "self" for decades.

Vickers-Willis says renowned Swiss psychologist Carl Jung believed that in the first part of life we develop our personas and lifestyles based on what parents and other significant adults and peers expect of us.

"We learn that parts of us are not acceptable to society and these parts are repressed in our unconscious.

But in order for us to have healthy development in the second half of life, Jung believes we need to create a life based on who we truly are and to do this we need to find ways to go within to reclaim these repressed parts of ourselves."

True to Jung's sentiment, I suddenly realised I needed to be free to be creative, spend time with friends and loved ones, and be more in harmony with my body and nature, hence my move to Byron Bay.

But despite the proverbial Seachange, life didn't suddenly become smooth sailing -- because there are strong biological shifts behind the female midlife crisis.

Whereas Vickers-Willis sees midlife for women as a time of empowerment, a time that Jungians call a transition into the wise woman or "crone", it is also a time fraught with disruptive hormonal changes.

According to one well-respected GP in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, Dr Martin Hartmann, who sees many mature-aged women in his surgery each week, the phenomenon he calls "women-in-their-40s" is not to be underestimated.

"Women's bodies are going through the last hurrah before menopause and often they become hugely disgruntled, dissatisfied with their marriages and relationships," Hartmann says. But he cautions that this does not always mean there is something wrong with their relationship.

"Unlike men, women are unconsciously struggling to come to terms with the imminent loss of fertility.

"Many women I see go into a panic, and want to run off with the latest potent gorilla to swing into the jungle. This is not necessarily true love, just nature's way of enticing the female to procreate before fertility ends. If women and their confused partners can ride this period out, many more marriages could survive."

It seems that women are both empowered, and thrown by hormonal surges, during their midlife crises.

Hartmann says: "Whatever you do, don't do damage that is irreversible during this challenging time of transition.

"Be creative, not destructive. You don't have to totally deconstruct your life in order to reconstruct it. In terms of love, work and social structures, don't throw out the baby with bathwater because once the crisis dies down, there may be things you want to keep."

Vickers-Willis says there are signs that both men and women can look for that indicate they are experiencing a midlife crisis, including uncharacteristic feelings of being trapped and overburdened by responsibility, depression, boredom, loss of meaning, anxiety and dissatisfaction with work or partner.

She offers some tips for coping: "Take time to reflect on how you feel emotionally and physically. Be conscious of behaviour. Notice your dreams, daydreams, and doodles they can be your unconscious speaking to you. Have someone you can talk to."

Most importantly: "Find simple ways to bring play, passion and joy in to your life. It will make the transition easier."

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 22 MAY 2004