

Happiness Follows A U-Shaped Curve And The Mid-Life Crisis Is Real: Study
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A new study supports the idea of a midlife crisis with evidence of life satisfaction following a U-shape curve, reaching rock bottom around age 40. Michael Coghlan, CC by 2.0

Is the midlife crisis real or is it more pop-psychology hype? A new study suggests most of us are indeed unhappy with our lives somewhere in our early forties. Satisfaction follows a U-shape curve across the lifespan, reaching rock bottom somewhere around age 40, only to rise again thereafter, say the University of Melbourne researchers.

“This paper studies the lives of tens of thousands of randomly sampled individuals over some decades and for a number of nations,” wrote the authors. “We provide what appears to be the first longitudinal (fixed effects) multi-country evidence that there are scientific grounds to believe in a human nadir or midlife ‘crisis.’”

Theory and Criticism

The idea of a midlife crisis is attributed to Elliott Jaques, a psychoanalyst and management consultant. While studying the careers of Dante, Gauguin, and other artistic geniuses, Jaques discovered a common pattern of turmoil in their middle years. In 1965, he published “Death and the Midlife Crisis,” where he describes how men and women become aware, on a visceral level, of their mortality somewhere between the ages of 35 and 50. With death no longer far off but growing near, people begin to feel dissatisfied with their accomplishments and worry about their ability to complete their goals. Following the soap opera version of this script, middle-aged men, feeling unhappy and disillusioned, suddenly divorce their wives and buy sports car, while middle-aged women begin affairs with the pool boy.

However, since Jaques first proposed the theory, the midlife crisis has had its critics.

“Even the broadest definition of ‘midlife crisis’ predicts that middle-aged adults encounter more or age-specific psychological problems than those in other age groups, wrote University of Zurich psychologists in a 2009 paper. “The empirical evidence, however, does not support this hypothesis.”

Though many people do take stock of their lives in middle age, the Zurich psychologists argue this is an ongoing process people perform at all stages and ages. Also, there’s a lot of variability in how different people approach this life stage. In the end, they conclude a “lenient conceptualization of crisis” may still be “fruitful,” if only because it stimulates new research and motivates change. Others give more weight to the midlife crisis.

U Shape Curve

In defense of the midlife crisis, the current team of researchers decided to search for long-term evidence supporting the theory of human happiness forming a ‘U shape’ curve. To accomplish this, the team analyzed four different datasets from Australia, Britain, and Germany. These separate datasets had tracked tens of thousands of participants over time, measuring their happiness and wellbeing by way of questionnaires. For each wave of each survey, participants used a scale of 1 through 7 to answer the question, “How satisfied are you with your life overall?”

Assembling the data, the researchers calculated within-person changes in life satisfaction and plotted the findings. Their results revealed a U-shape in wellbeing. Noting their strict methodology, the researchers said the midlife dissatisfaction discovered stemmed only from changes in the quality of each individual's life and not a comparison to others.

"We document powerful support for a U-shape in unadjusted longitudinal data without the need for regression equations," wrote the authors.

Source: Cheng T, Powdthavee N, Oswald A. Longitudinal Evidence for a Midlife Nadir in Human Well-being: Results from Four Data Sets. *Economic Journal*. 2015.