

The New Midlife Crisis for Women

BY Ada Calhoun

Sometimes, I think I'm falling apart. Then, I talk to my friends. One spent a whole winter getting a babysitter for her toddler daughter in the middle of the day and then used the time to go to the movies and cry. I run into another and ask how it's going with her kids' father, whom, last I heard, she was fighting with. She fixes me with a blank stare. "I'd leave," she says, "if I had more money." A woman I used to work with tells me that she lets people believe her impressive LinkedIn profile is the truth, but that secretly she is underemployed and feels like a failure.

A friend of a friend tells me that she's having a rough time as a single mother since her husband left her. While working three jobs and raising two kids, she decided to cheer herself up and planned a trip for her and her 11-year-old son. The night before, she started packing at 10 p.m. With some luck, she could catch a few hours of sleep before their 5 a.m. departure. She told her son to start gathering his stuff; he didn't move. She asked again. Nothing. She told him, "If you don't help, I'm going to smash your iPad!" He didn't, and, as if possessed, she grabbed a metal hammer and whacked it to pieces.

I can't help but laugh.

"Yeah, my friends think it's a hilarious story too," she says, "but in reality, it was dark and awful." Her first thought as she stood over the broken glass: "I have to find a good therapist...right... now."

For a while, I thought it was just Type A strivers, but then I started hearing the same sort of thing even from my low-key friends. When I reached out to strangers for this story, I heard the same toxic brew of fear, anxiety and anger.

Not to mention sweatiness and insomnia.

As I cooked dinner the other night, I thought about the women I had been talking to. They're just entering, slogging through or just leaving their 40s. They belong to Generation X, born roughly during the [baby bust](#), from 1965 to 1984, the Title IX babies who were the first women in their families to go to college. Or go away to college. Or to live on their own, launch a career, marry in their late 20s (or never) or choose to stay home with their children. They're a Latina executive in California, a white stay-at-home mom in Virginia who grows her own organic vegetables, an African-American writer in Texas, an Indian-American corporate vice president who grew up in the suburbs of New York, and dozens more. They're smart. They're grateful for what they have. They're also exhausted. Some of them are terrified. A few of them are wondering what the point is.

An awful lot of middle-aged women are furious and overwhelmed. What we don't talk about enough is how the deck is stacked against their feeling any other way.

I called my best friend, a reporter a few years older than me who grew up in the Midwest. She has three children and lives on a quiet, leafy street in Washington, D.C., with her boyfriend. They recently adopted a dog.

"Hey," I said, happy to have caught her on a break from her job, "do you know anyone having a midlife crisis I could talk to?"

The phone was silent for a second.

Finally, she said, "I'm trying to think of any woman I know who's not."

*

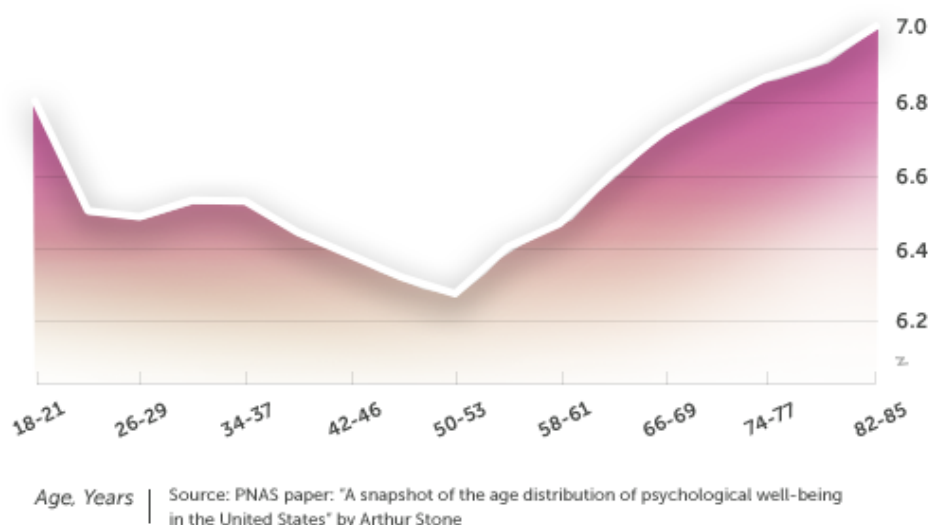
The complaints of well-educated, middle- and upper-middle class women are easy to dismiss as temporary, or not really a crisis, or #FirstWorldProblems. America, in the grand scheme of things, is still a rich, relatively safe country. (Syrian refugees do not have the luxury of waking up in the middle of the night worried about credit card bills.) Although many women are trying to make it on minimum-wage, split-shift jobs (and arguably don't have so much a midlife crisis as an ongoing crisis), women overall are closing the wage gap. Men do more at home. We deal with less sexism than our mothers and grandmothers, and have far more opportunities. Insert your Reason Why We Don't Deserve to Feel Lousy here.

Fine. Let's agree that this particular slice of Generation X women shouldn't feel bad. And yet, many do: Nearly 60 percent of Gen Xers [describe themselves](#) as stressed out. A 2009 analysis of General Social Survey data showed that women's happiness "[declined both absolutely and relative to men](#)" from the early '70s to the mid-2000s. [More than one in five women](#) are on antidepressants. An awful lot of middle-aged women are furious and overwhelmed. What we don't talk about enough is how the deck is stacked against them feeling any other way.

*

Part of the reason we don't know much about women's midlife experience is that the focus has often been on men. For them, the "midlife crisis" (a term coined by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in a 1965 journal article) usually involves busting stuff up—marriages, mostly—but also careers, norms, reputations. We all know the drill: Panic comes on once a man starts losing his hair, and results in a frenzy to reclaim lost youth and unearth college vinyl. Recommended treatment: regular application of scantily clad younger women and brightly colored motor vehicles. [In a 2014 article in *The Atlantic*](#), Jonathan Rauch described research on the "U-curve," a social science term referencing a dip in happiness that occurs in midlife around the world, even in apes. Other research suggests that women's happiness [bottoms out](#) around 40; men's, around 50. (Maybe that's another reason the female experience isn't much discussed: By the time men start thinking about these issues, women seem unaffected, but only because they've already been through it.)

The U-Bend: self-reported well-being, on a scale of 1-10



The good news is that happiness levels for both men and women then rise, so that by the time you're elderly, you should be as happy as you were as a frolicsome youth. But I hate hearing about the U-curve. That U-curve isn't necessarily a guarantee of future performance. What if ours is the first generation in history with no curve at all, just a diagonal line pointed straight to the lower right-hand corner?

Generation X has long been an outlier, after all. Wedged in between millennials and baby boomers, Gen Xers (ranging from 50 million to 65 million Americans, depending on which birth years you count, far smaller than the generations on either side) are, in the words of the Pew Research Center, ["America's neglected 'middle child' ... a low-slung, straight-line bridge between two noisy behemoths."](#)

Women our age sometimes romanticize the freedom we used to have as kids in the '70s or '80s, but sociologist Linda Waite, PhD, director of NORC at the University of Chicago's Center on Demography and Economics of Aging, has done extensive national surveys of middle-aged people, and she says Gen X was at a disadvantage from the start. Our parents' choices often led to instability at home. Four in 10 Gen X children were likely to have divorced parents (the divorce rate, which peaked in 1980, recently [hit a 36-year low](#)). The effect was both financial (when your father leaves, it's much less likely he'll pay for college) and psychological.

"If your parents are divorced," Waite says, "you see the world in a fundamentally different way. You see the world as unstable. That left people cautious."

If our childhood in the late '70s and early '80s was a time of massive changes—the first generation of latchkey kids, high crime rates in the headlines, missing children's pictures on milk cartons, the AIDS epidemic beginning—our transition to adulthood was equally rocky. Many of us started our job hunts in the early '90s recession, which was [followed by a "jobless recovery."](#) If you were born later into Generation X, you might have entered the workforce

around the 1999-ish stock market peak, but the tech bubble started to burst, landing us in the 2001 recession.

What if ours is the first generation in history with no U-curve at all, just a diagonal line pointed straight to the lower right-hand corner?

When it came time for many of us to start thinking about buying a house or a car, we slammed into the Great Recession, the worst economic crisis since the Depression, which hit Generation X hardest: According to a Pew Charitable Trust report we lost almost [half our wealth](#), compared with around a quarter for boomers. Gen X went from the most successful generation [in terms of home ownership](#) in 2004 to the least successful in 2015.

*

Is it any wonder that women our age possess a bone-deep, almost hallucinatory panic about money? It's not an idle worry. By some estimates, we carry [more debt](#) than any other age group ([about \\$37,000 more](#) than the national consumer debt average). We're some of the best-educated women in history, and yet we're [downwardly mobile](#); about two-thirds of us have less wealth than our parents did at the same age.

This isn't because we spent too much on Pearl Jam CDs. The cost of a home has [increased by more than 80 percent](#) from 1970 to 2000, the last year for which data is available. (Between 2000 and 2005 and since 2013, home prices have [outpaced salary growth](#).) In the late '70s annual tuition for a four-year college was less than \$11,000 in today's dollars, now it's [three times that](#). Which helps explain why 40-somethings haven't saved [nearly enough for retirement](#). More than half of unmarried Gen Xers have [less than \\$50,000 saved](#). When a woman takes time off to care for a sick relative—and it is usually the woman who takes time off—the potential cost in terms of lost wages and Social Security benefits averages \$324,000 over her lifetime. Women not only earn less than men but also invest less—and then they live longer. That, writes investment expert [Sallie Krawcheck](#), is "the gender gap that's really hurting us." Meanwhile, the safety net is vanishing; in [2040](#), the Social Security trust fund is due to run out—right as many of us hit retirement age.

"I call my midlife crisis Betty," says a 43-year-old filmmaker in Brooklyn, New York. "Betty is on me about being single and broke. Not having money reaches deep into you, and it creates a vicious and pernicious situation." In their 40s, our parents' generation could expect to own a house and to have money saved. In our 40s, we are often still scrambling like we did at age 25, and not just in creative fields, like filmmaking. [Fifty-six percent](#) of women still live paycheck to paycheck, and, according to a [2014 study on women and their money by Prudential](#), Gen X women are less confident in their ability to achieve their most important financial goals than either millennials or boomers.

Even women with cash in the bank—I had to work to find some—sound concerned. "I have a million dollars in my retirement account," says a 49-year-old New York City-based biotech executive, "and I'm still worried. Our kids are going to have to take out loans for school. Then, there are the retirement calculators on the internet. All of the information is: 'Lady, you better save money because no one else will take charge of your financial future!' I was incredibly frugal my whole life. I've been working my ass off. Since I was 10 years old, babysitting. And still I am stressed out about money."

*

Stress about money, of course, goes hand in hand with stress about work. If you've never lost a job or had to prove yourself in an industry that's changed massively in the few years you were away (and if this is you, I'm so *happy* for you!), then you might not realize how holding on in today's workforce, or trying to ascend, can feel like a feat of endurance. A [2011 report by the Center for Work-Life Policy \(now the Center for Talent Innovation\)](#), which described Gen X as the "wrong place, wrong time" generation, noted that "thwarted by boomers who can't afford to retire and threatened by the prospect of leap-frogging millennials...49 percent of Gen Xers feel stalled in their careers." Although the wage gap is now [82 cents on the dollar](#) (as of the last annual Bureau of Labor Statistics report) and far more women these days are out-earning their husbands (29 percent of the time when both have jobs), women are still underrepresented among top earners. [A report by PayScale](#) that compared 1.4 million salary profiles found that in 2016 "men are 85 percent more likely than women to be VPs or C-Suite execs by mid-career." That's now, when many Gen X women are mid-career. [New data from the BLS](#) shows that women's median weekly earnings are highest for women 35-44 and slightly less for women 45-54. Men's earnings, not surprisingly, are higher than women's in all age groups, including these Gen X-heavy cohorts, but it's notable that earnings for men 45-54 are higher than men 35-44—there's no plateau for them.

One bright light that's often noted in our post-Great Recession world, where many industries are convulsing, is that jobs in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math [are growing](#). But women [hold only 25 percent of STEM jobs](#). The result is that unlike the [job-hopping millennials](#), many women our age feel lucky to have steady work, even if it's not their dream job. But if there were a recipe for a midlife crisis, it could be showing up day after day for a job that's slowly corroding your soul.

"Sometimes, I have these moments of clarity, usually during lengthy conference calls," says Lori, 41, a contracts analyst in Charlotte, North Carolina. "This voice in my head suddenly starts shouting: *What are you doing? This is pointless and boring! Why aren't you out there doing something you love? Name one thing you love! Cheese? Okay, great. Let's get some goats and start making cheese, and we can sell it from a truck. We'll call it something clever.* And then, I spend the rest of the conference call thinking up names for my imaginary cheese truck: *Hmm, some pun on a wheel? Fromage on a Wheel?*"

So why doesn't she become the Fromage on a Wheel lady?

"I have friends who have told me over the years, 'Just quit your job and be a baker or be a cheesemaker,'" she says. "I've never had that option. Especially now, we have a child. You want to provide security and safety and health insurance. Those things overrule your own personal preferences. What if something really bad happens? Or if we lose a job?" She shudders.

For many women these days, a layoff means joining the gig economy. The [majority of freelancers are women](#), and some people predict that [half the workforce](#) will be freelance by 2020. But for those who like going to an office, or having decent health insurance, or who thought their hustling days were behind them, it can feel like a demotion—and it can make a full-time position more elusive. A résumé gap is still seen as a liability, even though some [30 to 40 percent of highly qualified women](#) take time off at some point.

If you are in the corporate world, and everyone in management now seems to be in their thirties, and you're in your forties and not there yet, what do you do?

Jennifer, 45, was living in Seattle with three kids, ranging from ages 4 to 15, and working part time when her breadwinner husband had what she describes as "a good old-fashioned nervous breakdown."

"He lost his job," Jennifer says, "and unbeknownst to me, he had siphoned off my retirement account. We talked to some financial planners, and it was so far gone, they were like, 'Really, the only way to solve this is to do bankruptcy and foreclosure.'"

She had to look for a job after years out of the full-time workforce. And getting into the corporate world as a middle-aged woman was rougher than she had anticipated: "It's like, 'Well, you didn't work, so you don't have the credentials, but you're not fresh out of college, so you don't have the I'm-young-I-can-learn-quick.'"

In addition, just as Gen Xers are showing up for senior-level jobs, many are being eliminated as companies [opt to flatten corporate hierarchies](#). The "[think leader, think male](#)" mind-set is still prevalent when filling those ever-fewer positions, according to Catalyst, an advocacy group that conducts research on women and the workplace. [Catalyst reports](#) that women hold just 5.8 percent of the CEO positions at S&P 500 companies.

The [average age of CEOs is also falling](#), so if that's your dream, you're likely to see your opportunity window closing more rapidly. This trickles down: If you are in the corporate world, and everyone in management now seems to be in their 30s, and you're in your 40s and not there yet, what do you do?

Add to that [a Goldman Sachs report that says we're in the third-longest economic expansion since 1854](#), and that means there will be another so-called correction (read: bust) coming soon. The idea of being unemployed as you're approaching 50, without enough savings, may feel more terrifying than it did at, say, age 38. Maybe you've survived downsizing or scrambled back into the workforce, taken on more responsibilities for less money and less respect because you feel you can't say no. Or because you need the health benefits. Or because you don't know where else you would go. It all leads to a particularly virulent form of stuckness—being in a job you no longer like, in a career you can't remember exactly why you chose, with skills that you don't think will be useful anywhere else. Headlines seem only to confirm your worst suspicions: *Harvard Business Review's* ["Older Women Are Being Forced Out of the Workforce."](#)

PBS NewsHour's ["Why Women over 50 Can't Find Jobs"](#) ([half](#) of women over 50 who are unemployed are now unemployed long term), *The New York Times's* ["For Women in Midlife, Career Gains Slip Away."](#)

In an analysis of Gen X women's career paths, one researcher summarized the takeaway with this slogan: ["Never presume success."](#)

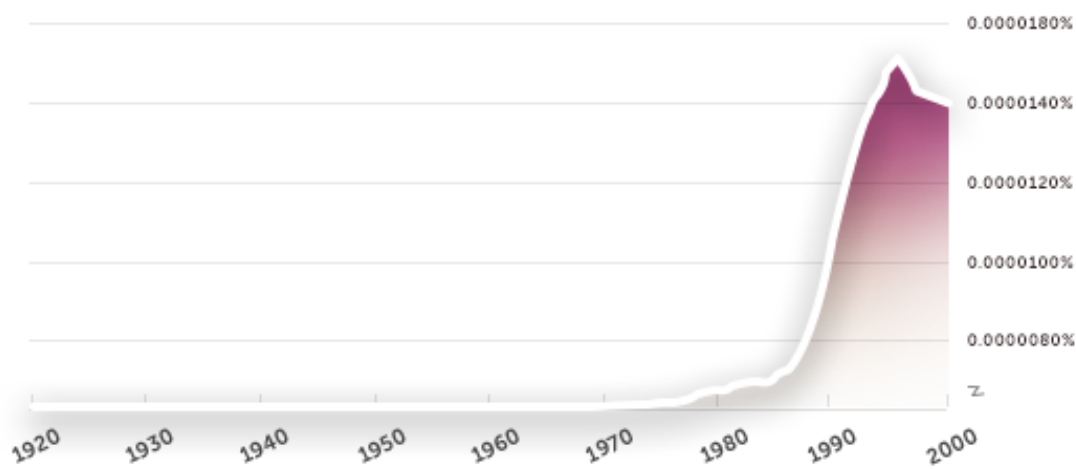
*

But back to the sweatiness and insomnia. Ours is the first generation to have gynecologists sit us down as early as our late 30s and tell us that signs like weepiness, hot flashes or irregular

periods could indicate that we have begun "perimenopause," a term no one used 20 years ago but that now is [everywhere](#). (A transgender friend of mine jokes that he's going to take Perry Menopause as his DJ name.)

"Women will say, 'Why do I feel like crying,' or 'Why do I feel like screaming if I'm still having my periods?'" says JoAnn Pinkerton, MD, executive director of the North American Menopause Society. "But if your levels of both estrogen and progesterone have fluctuated, in any given cycle you might have too much or too little of either or both of them." Perimenopausal women have also been found to have an [increased susceptibility to depression](#) compared to younger women. Other symptoms are no less crummy: trouble sleeping, fat starting to gather around the midsection. Stacy Tessler Lindau, MD, director of the Program in Integrative Sexual Medicine at the University of Chicago, says that some 10 to 30 percent of the 40-to-55-year-old women she sees will describe having had sexual function problems in the last year. In other words, the perimenopausal body is a Thunderdome.

Tracking the popularity of "perimenopause" in books over time



Year | Source: Google Ngram Viewer

"You know," Dr. Pinkerton says, "we tell people who are grieving not to make major changes for a year. I don't think anybody's ever said, 'Don't make a major decision when you're perimenopausal.'"

Good idea, I think. We can just take it easy until perimenopause ends.

"How long is that, anyway?" I ask Dr. Pinkerton. A year, I thought she'd say. Maybe two.

"Anywhere from a few months to 10 to 13 years," Dr. Pinkerton says.

"Ten to 13 years?"

The [Study of Women's Health Across the Nation](#) confirms that the average white woman's experience of perimenopause is nearly seven years; Asian women, about five years; African-American women, about 10; and Hispanic women, nine.

Menopause, defined as a full year with no period, still hits around age 51, just like it did when the last word on the subject was Gail Sheehy's *The Silent Passage*. Our mothers and grandmothers weathered the same symptoms, but heading into their 40s, they tended to think menopause was something you had to worry about closer to 50.

Women today are learning they may have to reckon with these changes a decade sooner. More than one gynecologist I spoke with said that Gen X women might also be having a particularly rough go of perimenopause because:

(1) We are under a profound amount of stress, which can make symptoms worse. The cycle is vicious: Our stress makes our symptoms worse, which makes our stress worse, which makes

And (2) we reject hormone replacement therapy (HRT). In 2002, alarming reports surfaced about increased risks of breast cancer, strokes and heart disease in women on HRT. After that news, many women of our generation didn't even consider the treatment, but in June 2017, the North American Menopause Society announced that more recent research shows that [hormone therapy is generally safe for women under 60](#). Word still isn't completely out, though, and so women haven't yet returned in huge numbers to doctor-administered hormone treatment. Instead, we've gone rogue, and that is perhaps why Goop can get away with selling us \$66 [jade eggs](#) to stick up our yonis.

Jacqueline Thielen, MD, of the Women's Health Clinic at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, says that life for a woman in 2017 is "just much more complicated," and worries that overwhelmed women often turn to controversial things like subcutaneous hormone pellet therapy or pricey "vaginal rejuvenation," which can cost several thousand dollars and involve [shooting lasers into your vagina](#) (one more thing I guarantee you our mothers did not have on their to-do lists).

"By the way," Dr. Thielen says playfully at the end of our call, "how long do you think perimenopause lasts? Do you know?"

"Yeah," I say. "I heard."

*

Perimenopause can be particularly wrenching for women who wanted but haven't had children. Certainly, a lot of Gen X women make a conscious decision not to be parents, and members of the Child-Free by Choice movement make a strong case for living life without kids: the freedom to work as much as you'd like, to travel, to live in a bad school district. Other Gen X women went ahead and had [a child on their own](#). But plenty of women I spoke to thought they would have kids one day, and then just...didn't. They threw themselves into a career and white-knuckled through the recessions. They married at the right time but to the wrong guy, and wound up single again, just with better appliances. They dated like Olympians for decades. They thought about sperm donors but looked at their no-maternity-

leave job, their no-second-bedroom housing and their no-viable-companion love life and waited. They married just under the wire—or so they thought.

But no matter their path, suddenly it was too late.

"Having kids was the thing I wanted my whole life," says Karen, 42, a psychotherapist in Arizona. She pauses. "I had to turn off the Facebook feature with 'Six years ago...whatever.' I was torturing myself with it: *If only I'd done things differently then, I'd have a baby now.*"

"One thing that's a little different for this generation," says Margie Lachman, PhD, professor of psychology at Brandeis University, "is there have been some medical breakthroughs around fertility—things like storing eggs or IVF. You see movie stars having babies in their 40s." And yet, she says, "I don't think it eases the dread."

It also doesn't always solve the problem, as a few couples I know learned after several rough, expensive years ([the rate of success](#) for the most common IVF treatment for women at age 38 is 28 percent and drops to 3 percent by age 45).

One single 49-year-old woman I know explained that she'd comforted a married friend through a miscarriage. For months after, her friend felt stalked by pregnant women—wherever she looked, there they were, plump and radiant. The pain was overwhelming, but then her friend got pregnant again and had a healthy baby. "I was happy for her, truly," the single woman said, "but sometimes I want her to imagine what it's like to live in that world, surrounded by glowy pregnant women—but to do it *forever*. And to be utterly alone while doing it."

"You're not going to get an email from God that says you're never going to have a partner... and it's really hard to live in hope that is not met."

I wanted to reassure her that someone would show up. But later that night, as I scrolled through my phone, I realized that every single man our age that I know either wants kids the old-fashioned way or doesn't want any more kids, or doesn't want to be tied down, or is insane. For her, and for so many others, that someone may not show up.

According to [Gallup](#), 16 percent of Gen Xers are single or never married, compared to 10 percent of boomers and 4 percent of our grandparents' generation. Most of these people say they still want to get married but just [haven't found the right person](#). Many are experiencing what psychologists call ambiguous loss.

"Ambiguous losses are a particular type of loss that lack a definition and lack closure," says Kelly Maxwell Haer, PhD, of the Boone Center for the Family at Pepperdine University, in California. "The ambiguous loss of singleness is particularly challenging to navigate. The person could be found in five minutes. Or never. You're not going to get an email from God that says you're never going to have a partner. That hope lingers on, and it's really hard to live in hope that is not met, but there's no end. Humans don't do uncertainty well."

*

Other humans have a problem with certainty: specifically, the certainty that they will be married to one person until they die. Part of it is the problem we've all heard about—the

pressures of a sandwich generation, which is turbocharged for us. Our generation's delay in childbearing means that many of us find ourselves either struggling with fertility or raising little kids in our 40s, at the moment when we're supposed to be leaning in. Also, some [63 percent](#) of us have both parents alive, and they're living longer than ever before, often needing help with chronic conditions. "The average [age of a family caregiver is 49](#)," says AARP's family and caregiving expert Amy Goyer, who notes that many of our aging parents are divorced, and because birthrates were low in our generation, we are less likely to have multiple siblings who can help out.

Simply raising our kids has also become more challenging. Autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia and other special-needs diagnoses have surged, which means a higher likelihood that parents of our generation will be caring for a child with an intellectual disability or developmental delay.

Even the so-called easy parenting isn't easy. As one Gen X woman tells me, her boomer mother comes to visit and is mystified. "Why do you *play* with them?" her mother asks. "We never played with you." That's likely true. In his new book, [The All-or-Nothing Marriage](#), Eli Finkel points to research that spouses are doing almost three times as much shared parenting as they did in 1975.

For all the [increased childcare done by men](#), however, working women still spend an average of 1.1 hours taking physical care of small children each workday. Men? [Twenty-six minutes](#). That doesn't account for the invisible ["mental load"](#) that many women commiserate about: the holiday gifts and grocery lists and travel plans and all the other "little things" that are invisible but that can eat your brain.

In midlife, women often look at their husbands and see an obstacle, or a co-worker at Parenting HQ, or a distant, shadowy figure, rather than as someone they'd like to have sex with. Many women I spoke with said things like, "I do it all. What is he even here for?" Or: "I could really use his closet space." Or they feel that he's changed, or they've changed, and they lack hope that either one of them will change again in a way that will make things better. They're not sure how to fix things. "When all your choices have led you here to this place," one tells me, "how can you trust yourself to make a right choice now?" Some decide to divorce. (Fun fact: [69](#) of divorces are initiated by women.) Others go outside the marriage. A [2013 NORC report](#) found that the number of women who reported having affairs rose nearly 40 percent in the prior two decades, while the number of men remained the same.

"You are literally seeing red and you want to throw your phone against the wall. So now on top of everything else, it's also like, 'Did you meditate?'"

One Midwestern woman in her early 40s told me that when she got a new job, she developed a powerful crush: "He was different. He was Spanish and sexy, and he noticed me." She found herself sneaking down to the basement of her family home to have furtive conversations with him on her cell phone while her kids played upstairs—and then met him in hotels. After her affair was discovered, her couples therapist looked at her husband and literally said, "Run!" She sank into a depression and developed an eating disorder: "I ate to stanch the guilt I felt, so no man would even take a second glance at me."

Frequently, women find quieter ways to act out, fitting breakdowns around school drop-offs and business meetings. "[Middle-aged women] are smoking in their bedrooms out the window the way they did when they were 16," says Elizabeth Earnshaw, a marriage and family therapist in Philadelphia. They're flirting with old boyfriends via email or compulsively shopping online. They're driving too fast, or they're drinking too much, or they're popping Xanax.

And 24/7 they're on their smartphones (which, remember, have only been around for 10 years), flooded with friends' Instagram-tastic vacation photos and Twitter posts by frenemies bragging about promotions. They're watching breaking news alerts of nuclear threat escalations, end-times weather catastrophes, terrifying mass violence. They're waking up to see what else has gone wrong and wondering how to help. They're fielding long 10 p.m. emails from bosses that end with "Thoughts?" The cumulative effect is the feeling that they will never catch up, on any level, ever.

"I just had breakfast with a friend last week who runs a very successful law firm," says Yvette, an executive with an L.A. gaming company. "One of the things we were talking about is rage. We're getting frustrated and overwhelmed. You are literally seeing red, and you want to throw your phone against the wall. So now, on top of everything else, it's also like, 'Did you meditate?'"

*

Meditation. Pilates. Hiking. A ton of research demonstrably proves how beneficial [exercising regularly](#), [quieting your mind](#) and [spending time in nature can be](#). Obviously, Oprah.com is a proponent of figuring out what you want in life and finding the tools that will help you get there. Taken to an extreme, though, even the most strategic and useful self-help can wind up feeling as oppressive as the problems it was meant to soothe. The flood of advice can send the message that if you're unhappy, it's your own fault.

"Around the turn of the millennium, the focus on discovering oneself shifted to perfecting oneself," writes University of Ghent professor and psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe, PhD, in his book [What About Me?](#) ("I'm not looking for inner peace," a friend quipped when I asked her about why she skipped the resting stage of shavasana at the end of a yoga class. "I'm looking for outer hotness.") "Nowadays, we must all go to the gym for the latest fad," writes Verhaeghe. "If that doesn't work, there's always Botox and cosmetic surgery."

Or microdermabrasion. Or [freezing off your fat](#).

Recently, on vacation, I was chatting with a dewy, size-0 millennial. Behind her ringleted head, I spotted my reflection in a window. When I had left the house, I had thought I looked—dare I say it—cute. Now, though, next to her fresh, unlined vibrancy, I looked haggard, puffy, frazzled. All I can say is that it was a good thing there was no facelift sign-up booth at that dinner party.

The average age for a facelift has historically been over 50. Now, with the introduction of cosmetic [procedures that are less invasive and cheaper](#), more than [7.5 million treatments](#) were performed last year on women ages 40 to 54. This means that if you're not getting anything done, you could look older than not just your younger colleagues but also a lot of

people your own age. Said another way: If you're dating after divorce or a lifetime of singleness, you might find yourself on an app only to discover that 50-year-old men who still wear *Star Wars* T-shirts are searching for 28-year-old women. (A rep for OkCupid tells me it's not in our heads: The older men get, the younger the women they message relative to their age.)

*

You come to this place, midlife," writes novelist Hilary Mantel. "You don't know how you got here, but suddenly you're staring 50 in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been."

I feel this daily. At age 41, I wake up in the middle of nearly every night. I think of all the things I really should do, or absolutely should not have done, until either I've cycled through my full list of regrets or it's time to get up. I try to remind myself that there are great things about being middle-aged: Sometimes, I look back on my 20-something self and think, *What a dope*. After 17 years with my husband, I'm no longer as surprised or alarmed by conflict. My 11-year-old doesn't need as much hands-on care as he did when he was a baby.

And yet...

Yesterday, my best friend called while she packed to go to Miami to cover a recent hurricane for her news organization. As I walked to pick my son up from school, I told her I had just seen another freelance gig evaporate that morning. I feel, if anything, better at my job than ever, but it seems like a regular occurrence that I don't get something I thought I was perfect for, or a job gets delayed and delayed and then vanishes, or I'm let go from a project that seemed to be going so well.

"You were so smart to take an office job when you did," I told her, "to get out of freelancing and find some stability."

She laughed loudly. "Did you hear the first part of our call?" she said. "My boss is sending me to Florida to *die in a hurricane*."

There is no perfect solution. You find some security but are sent into a hurricane, or you have some freedom but you don't know where the next check is coming from. You have the ambiguous loss of singleness and childlessness, or you have the unambiguous stress of marriage and parenting.

When I asked Chrystal Evans Hurst, 45, of Dallas, author of [She's Still There](#), if one moment summed up midlife for her, she described a recent morning when she felt unable to get out of bed. "It felt as though if I got up and did one thing," she said, "then I was failing with all the other things. Because there was absolutely no way to get through the checklist. I had to get out of bed. But no matter what I did that day, I was going to be a failure."

Maybe the reason Generation X is having such a particularly hard time is that we had such high hopes for ourselves. We were going to do better, be better than our parents and grandparents.

"The message Gen X women got was 'You can have it all.' ... That came with better blueprints and also bigger expectations," says Deborah Luepnitz, PhD, a psychotherapist in Philadelphia, a boomer and author of [Schopenhauer's Porcupines](#). "In midlife, what I see in my Gen X patients is total exhaustion. That's what brings them to treatment. They feel guilty for complaining because it's wonderful to have had choices that our mothers didn't have, but choices don't make life easier. Possibilities create pressure."

Possibilities. We still have them in midlife, but they can start to seem so abstract. Yes, I could go get a doctorate, but where would I find the graduate school tuition? I could switch careers—therapist? Zamboni driver?—but at this stage of life, do I really want to start from the bottom, surrounded by 20-year-olds? If I went on an *Eat, Pray, Love* walkabout, who would pick up the kid from school?

Midlife is when we need to take care of everyone else while we are our most tired, to trust ourselves when we're most filled with doubt. What makes it worse is that many of our midlife fears are well founded. We may, in fact, die alone. Our marriages may never improve. We may never get the number of kids we hoped for. We may never save enough money to make the retirement calculators stop screaming. We may never do a fraction of what we thought we would do in our career.

At 4 a.m., this is the loop in my head. Then, I remind myself (again) of how insanely lucky I am. It could be so, so much worse. And I think of what my friend who grew up in Mexico once told me: "The 30s are the adolescence of your adulthood," she said, "and when you reach 50, it's a restart—*empieza de nuevo*—a second chance."

Tomorrow, perhaps, the rise of that U-curve will come for us at last.