The Female Midlife Crisis

More Women Than Men Now Report Upheaval by Age 50; The ATV Tipping Point

By Sue Shellenbarger, Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

The "midlife crisis" has long been thought of as something that afflicts men and often involves expensive toys and second wives.

Like most people, I had never taken the notion of midlife crisis seriously. I thought of it as a fleeting, laughable period of adolescent regression that leads middle-aged men to buy red sports cars and take trophy wives. Typing with my arm in a sling after a thrill-seeking ATV adventure ended in a crash, I attempted to make light of the subject in my "Work & Family" column in The Wall Street Journal. Lampooning myself for having one of the stupidest accidents of my life, I wrote, "The midlife crisis is a cliche -- until you have one."

I quickly learned I wasn't alone.

The column drew one of the biggest reader responses I had received in 12 years as a columnist. While some readers of both sexes were startled by the notion that a female could even have a midlife crisis ("I had no idea that women got this, too," wrote a Texas man), a far larger number of women readers experienced a shock of self-recognition.

Dozens told heartfelt tales of pain, upheaval, rebirth and transformation in middle age, and said they had no idea other women were experiencing the same thing. My comic tale had touched a hidden nerve. Clearly, millions of midlife women had reached a crisis stage -- a time when old values and goals no longer made sense to them.

I began gathering more stories. Through newspaper ads, networking and e-mail, I identified 50 women who had undergone midlife turmoil, each of whom generously agreed to share her life experience. In 30 years as a journalist, I haven't experienced interviews as moving as these.

A startlingly high number of women have experienced what they consider a midlife crisis, broadly defined as a stressful or turbulent psychological transition.
that occurs most often in the late 40s and early 50s.

By age 50, even more women than men are reporting a turbulent midlife transition -- 36.1% of women, compared with 34% of men -- according to research by Elaine Wethington, a Cornell University associate professor, based on a subset of the giant 6,432-person MacArthur Foundation "Midlife in the United States" study of Americans' well-being at midlife.

This pattern of female midlife crisis is emerging now because, to put it simply, women are different today. For the first time in history, women not only face more of the kind of stresses that tend to bring on midlife crises, but they also have the financial muscle, the skills and the confidence to act out their frustrations and resolve them. In a sense, women are having midlife crises now because they can.

The income of middle-aged women has posted powerful gains in comparison with men's, by many measures. Women's inflation-adjusted full-time earnings have risen 16.8% in the past 15 years, government statistics show, giving them the financial strength needed to act on midlife rebelliousness. Men's comparable earnings have declined 1.7% for the same period. Nearly one-third of wives now out earn their husbands, and the proportion of women earning more than $100,000 tripled in the past decade. All this gives women a sense of freedom at midlife. "My successful, satisfying career allowed me to be very independent, with a ****y attitude" that sparked to a full-blown midlife crisis, says a California saleswoman in my study.

Women also have the skills and resources to make career changes or start their dream businesses at midlife if they wish. The proportion of professional jobs held by women, from engineering, law, medicine and architecture to teaching, writing and computer science, has grown to 54.7% from 51.1% in 1990, the Bureau of Labor Statistics says. Women hold nearly half, or 45.9%, of all executive, managerial and administrative jobs, from CEO slots to food-service management, up from 40.1% in 1990. Women today are better-educated than men, too, earning 58% of all college degrees granted, including 59% of the master's degrees, says the National Center for Education Statistics.

Real differences are emerging in how women and men experience midlife crisis. A
variety of studies suggest that women not only undergo bigger changes than men in middle age, but they also by some measures have a more positive attitude about their prospects in life.

Women experience a more dramatic rebound in personal fulfillment at midlife, on the heels of a deeper dip than men in their child-rearing years. A study of MacArthur Foundation data by Dr. Wethington, Ronald Kessler of the Harvard Medical School, and Joy Pixley of the University of California at Irvine found that only 24% of women ages 35 through 49 said they had "fulfilled a special dream" in the past five years, such as acquiring money or property, accomplishing something noteworthy, finding a partner, or getting married. For adult women, this was the lowest ebb of fulfillment in their entire adult lives. By contrast, 40% of the men in the same age group reported dream fulfillment.

But the pattern quickly reverses over the age of 50. The study shows 36% of women ages 50 through 64 report reaching some fulfilling goal in the preceding five years, suggesting midlife can be a time of powerful renewal for women. In contrast, men's dream fulfillment goes downhill from their mid-30s on, sinking to 28% from ages 50 to 64, and 27% after that.

The triggers of midlife crisis reflect sex differences, too. Women's midlife crises are more likely than men's to begin with family events or problems, Dr. Wethington says, from a divorce or a parent's death to an extramarital affair, to the realization you haven't met your own standards or goals as a parent. Whereas male midlife crisis is more likely to be driven by work or career issues, women's turmoil is more likely to be driven by introspection. Women are more likely to attribute their midlife crises to some new insight into themselves through religion, therapy or reflection. Women are more likely to cite personal health problems as the cause of their midlife crises. This can include worries about slowing down or about losing one's attractiveness, based on the MacArthur Foundation research.

Perhaps most significant for the culture, women are innately more likely than men to talk with others about their inner turmoil, to openly seek solutions, and to look for remedies in community and society. That suggests their midlife transitions will send increasingly visible ripple effects through society.
Midlife women are turning old sex roles upside down. They are dating and having affairs with younger mates -- a luxury that used to be regarded as the exclusive province of men. And increasingly, they are enjoying vital, active sex lives over the age of 45.

A rising number of women are having extramarital affairs. In 1991, research showed married men cheated a lot more often, with about one in five admitting to having affairs, compared with one in 10 women. But a 3,000-person study from the National Opinion Research Center in 2002 suggests that the overall rate of extramarital cheating for women is rising rapidly and is approaching that of men, with nearly one in six married women saying they have had affairs. The middle-aged group appears to be leading that trend. In a look at 1994 data from the National Opinion Research Center, Michael Wiederman found a spike in the rate of cheating reported by women ages 30 to 50, and lower rates among women born before the baby boom. Mr. Wiederman, an associate professor of psychology at Columbia College in South Carolina, believes that extramarital sex is simply easier and more acceptable to today's middle-aged women than it was in the past. "There's been a change in attitudes and mores. There are more women out there in the working world, and they have greater independence, which you need to have an affair."

The midlife search for meaning drives women into other pursuits. Many change careers to pursue work that is more altruistic or fulfilling. Others return to college to pursue a new interest. Part-time college enrollment among women 35 and over grew 10.5% in the past decade, nearly twice the overall rate of growth in part-time students, the National Center for Education Statistics says.

Midlife women also are changing the face of sports and travel. Participation in such adventurous pursuits as wilderness camping, wall-climbing, kayaking and snow-shoeing has risen significantly since 1997 among women ages 38 through 55, according to a study by Leisure Trends Group, Boulder, Colo.

To capture a few complete stories of midlife crisis, viewed through the clarifying lens of hindsight, I sought out several older women in their late 50s, 60s and 70s who had experienced midlife crises a decade or more ago. I asked them how their midlife decisions had shaped their experience in old age, and what they would do differently if they could.
Without exception, the women who made big midlife changes said that if given the chance to do it all again, they would embrace new undertakings even more wholeheartedly. Every one of the women who entered fully into midlife crisis, taking risks and exploring new opportunities, was enthusiastically glad that she had. Their only regrets were in failing to start sooner or to take more chances.