





An alarming number of personal issues hit many men in middle age. Joining other men in the context of a personal development group can provide a safe space to weather the midlife transition

By Jim Holloway. Illustration by Jason Ford

Moving men at midlife

When a man tells you, 'I think I'm having a midlife crisis', look for the brief smile crossing his face. I expect many counsellors are familiar with this incongruent smile when listening to middle-aged clients speak about their current misery, confusion and despair, or whatever has brought them to therapy. I might be biased, being a middle-aged man myself, but I often notice how a male client will follow it by a sudden direct look, a moment of closer eye contact that is unmistakably serious and deep. For although he knows that a bloke going through a 'midlife crisis' is stereotypically a ludicrous figure, he is also aware that something profoundly unfunny is happening to him.

Scenes of midlife angst as portrayed by brilliant comic creations like Basil Fawlty or Homer Simpson are undeniably funny. Even minor stock comedy characters, such as the portly executive in a trendy little sports car or the lecherous uncle at a wedding reception, still get a laugh in popular sitcoms and television ads. The unfortunate truth is we never have to look far in mainstream UK culture for images of men aged around 40 being inept, embarrassing and ridiculous. Male stereotypes can be amusing, but the humour obscures the peculiar pain experienced by many real men in the midlife transition.

It is clear that not all men go through an agonising ordeal in middle age. In fact, sociological studies¹ into the phenomenon we refer to normatively

as 'midlife crisis' provide little evidence to support its reality, and it has been convincingly argued by one researcher² that the patterns and categories identified by midlife theorists are rarely clear or distinctive across populations. My aim in this article is neither to prove nor disprove the validity of the term 'midlife crisis' but to outline some ways in which middle-aged men can benefit from getting alongside each other for a while as they make the often troubling move into second adulthood.

Safety in small numbers

Despite their differing social backgrounds and orientations, the men who hear about the personal development course I run once a year called Moving Through Midlife Changes have a clear reason in common for deciding to join it: a recognition that the time is right to take a long hard look deep within themselves and get serious about what they find there. Each man who commits to the 10-week course also seems to have an intuition about the rightness and naturalness of doing this bold self-exploration in the company of other men. That does not mean he feels relaxed about it! When they meet with me individually to discuss joining the five-man group, nearly all of them say something about leaving their 'comfort zone' when they imagine themselves sitting round with a bunch of unknown guys in their late 30s to early 50s talking about personal issues. I often remind myself how cagey I was when I first joined a men's group in the 1980s. For any

man well versed in the standard homophobic fictions about what it means when men drop their guard and honestly open up to each other, joining a confidential men's group is not only a big step but also an initiatory move into an unexpectedly rich realm of masculine thought and feeling.³ It surprises many of my male clients to find that moving closer to other men in this way turns out to be so reassuring, invigorating, and safe.

What is unsafe for men is our ability to live as if we require little or no emotional support from others while we tackle the complex tasks of life, as if not trusting our relational needs and never revealing our deepest doubts and fears is the *only* manly thing to do. That ideal of invulnerable manhood is perpetuated by the imperatives of 'hegemonic masculinity',⁴ a powerful psychosocial construct previously scrutinised in this journal⁵ in the context of men seeking therapeutic help. Such a rigidly prescriptive model of masculinity is less than helpful when a man arrives at the ending of his first adulthood, for it is very often at this particular transitional phase in his life when he senses something is wrong with the story he has been given about being a man. This is usually gut level sensing and hard to verbalise. Reading about masculinities theory⁶ might assist his thinking, but the inarticulate ache inside him is not assuaged by intellect or ideology alone. Something else is needed.

Satisfying men's hunger

I believe this indefinable 'something else' is to be found within the masculine energy field created by a small group of men meeting together to tell their true stories of living a man's life. Although men create male only clusters and enclaves in many kinds of settings, they seldom talk and listen in private confidence with one another as equals, and hardly ever at a profoundly personal level. On the course, this collaborative (not competition-driven), sober (not alcohol-assisted), and reflective (not problem-solving) dynamic feels strange to nearly all the men at first. But as we start to explore the course content – an evolving, eclectic mix of facts, tales, analogies and developmental models I have borrowed mainly from biology, psychotherapy, mythology and secular spirituality – the awkwardness soon falls away.

When I reflect on this process, I wonder if a great number of middle-aged men in my part of the world are starved of some kind of psychological nutrition. Perhaps our present society, despite its apparent

wealth of opportunities for many men, serves up a discourse of midlife maleness so grey, unshaped and jaded, a lot of us have forgotten our appetite for 'soul food' – for anything that stirs us to deepen ourselves with unusual knowledge and untamed ideas, or whatever anti-grumpy matter it takes to awaken our authentic desires and benignly burning passions.

Men seem to love the image of a fire in the belly.⁷ When it comes to male *passion*, a word which in some contexts still bears its original meaning of *suffering*, we must take great care. At midlife, the faintly flickering flames in a man need a specific kind of feeding and tending – the right fuel in the right balance – or he runs the risk of burning up (by developing a costly infatuation or obsession, for example) or burning out (through becoming addicted to work) or burning something down (like destroying a marriage with an affair).

On the course, when I introduce metaphors like these and the men start to talk poignantly about the personal associations they evoke, I get a strong sense of the group's hunger for heartfelt, man-to-man storytelling, for speaking and listening without the usual blokey bullshit and banter. This is not to say the group sessions are always straight-faced – far from it! – but the men realise something solid and sincere is available to them in this deliberately different male space. As we talk about past and present relationships, family life and the world of work, I invite them to build experimentally on the spontaneous metaphors they use in ordinary speech. Before long the men are invoking timeless symbolic images – mountains, wild animals, castles, caves, desert islands, rivers, rafts – and the group begins to shift into a fertile landscape of masculine imaginings, both sombre and zany, where mundane and mythical dimensions of life are curiously blended. Things start to happen when blokes get poetic together.

Nourishing the power of imagination in this shared way helps to unlock 'the prison of loneliness, compulsive competition and lifelong emotional timidity'⁸ in which so many of us tend to dwell. Male clients in counselling almost invariably describe their feelings as locked down or buried.⁹ To liberate and integrate his deepest emotions is a healing challenge a man might choose to take in transformative or 'initiatory'¹⁰ therapy at the midpoint of his life – although probably he reckons he is facing more than enough challenges already. An alarming number of personal issues do appear to hit many men with considerable force at midlife.

'The group begins to shift into a fertile landscape of masculine imaginings. Things start to happen when blokes get poetic together'

Heroic depression

What are these issues exactly? Many are easily identifiable and clearly affect women too. Untimely but not unusual combinations of events and situations can lead to prolonged and potentially harmful stress for men in all socioeconomic groups:

- death of partner
- separation and divorce
- difficult relationships with children or stepchildren of all ages
- caring for parents
- enforced change of career or trade
- passing a professional peak or no longer achieving 'personal bests'
- sexual dissatisfaction or reduced virility
- loss of male friendship previously based around sports and hobbies
- long-term financial strain
- acquired sensory impairment
- unresolved conflict with adult siblings
- family bereavements
- decline in fitness and stamina.

The list could go on. In diverse cultural contexts, men navigating the midlife transition respond to multiple challenges like these to the best of their abilities every day.

There are two important things to note here. Firstly, a man can deal with these life-stage changes courageously and capably as an 'ordinary hero',¹¹ but still feel mysteriously discontent and ill at ease, often becoming withdrawn and angry for no apparent reason.¹² Secondly, regardless of how positively or negatively men cope with the demanding tasks of midlife, very few seek help in looking after their mental health.^{13,14} Although it appears from talking with colleagues that the ratio of men to women seeking counselling is currently closer to 1:1 than previous estimates of 1:2, current research indicates that male depression is widespread and under-diagnosed.¹⁵ It is also relevant that what has been called 'covert depression'¹⁶ in middle-aged men regularly shows up – in my experience – during anger management sessions.

When a man's anger is ill-tempered due to chronic stress, and when this angering is revealed through counselling or compassionate self-enquiry to be an expression of profound hurt and deep discouragement in disguise, then his healing task is to embrace and *know* that hurtful wound manfully inside himself instead of continuing to hurt and wound others with it. A middle-aged man's persistent irritability¹² is a milder version of this dynamic: his mistake is to look only to the outside world to provide an explanation or cure for his disillusionment, when in truth he must first seek it within.

Growing by grieving

One of the signposts at the crossroads of midlife points to the necessity of an inner journey or passage.¹⁷ This is usually visualised by the men I work with as a movement downwards into a shadowy area, a murky region of the mind where you come into contact with your hidden reservoir of sorrows and grief. A hard place to get to on your own, perhaps. But in a trusted group of men who act as 'sudden brothers', some steps on this soul-making descent can certainly be taken. We devise a mourning ritual in which each man narrates what he has lost and what he misses in his life. Men have described this collectively witnessed acknowledgment of private losses and yearnings of all kinds as 'letting the old me die down', 'catching up with what I have really become', or simply 'clearing out the cellar'. To mark these movements solemnly in a group of fellow men is to honour in each of us the adolescent who did his best and who must now graciously step back, if we are to get out of 'middlescence'¹⁸ and move on to becoming elders.

For most men the figure of a father emerges vividly along this path to the soulful interior, sometimes easing the way as a mentor or representing an obstacle or false trail.¹⁹ Many a man at the middle

stage of his life is still slogging away on a mission to live up to paternal expectations, or seeking some kind of blessing from his father, or holding himself back through fear of surpassing him. These are ancient themes in male development, and the tone of the group grows especially rich as the men give voice to their feelings about fathers. Many of us also lament the lack of mature older males in our lives – and maybe within our society as a whole – as we embark on maturing ourselves. We do not grow up merely by getting older.

The quest continues

I think most men at midlife intuitively 'get' the concept of an internal journey or personal quest the instant they come across it, yet in the next moment many probably assess themselves as under-equipped for the voyage. Two core aims of the brief groups I run is to remind men of their personal strengths and abilities, and to point them towards other resources they can call on to replenish themselves and enhance their relationships as they meet the challenges of moving into second adulthood. The 10-week course has been likened to a launch pad or a temporary base camp, and is clearly not the only influence on each participant's unique trajectory.

In a midlife men's group, a setting where questions about masculinity and maturation are consciously foregrounded, a man has a chance to reconfigure some of his perceptions and goals while enjoying the companionship of other men doing the same. Mutual support works beautifully in these conditions. The men move each other, and it gives me great satisfaction when some of them choose to continue this movement after the course ends, by getting together and forming a men's group of their own. ■

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