

Middle-Age Couples Face Particular Challenges



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INTIMACY, SEX
& RELATIONSHIP

Tim, the retired owner of an electrical supply company, just celebrated his 60th birthday. He bought himself a Porsche Carrera convertible, hired a personal trainer and dyed

his thinning hair an odd reddish-orange color. Although he hasn't made love to his 62-year-old wife, Marianne, in more than a year, he's cultivated a secretive, yet fairly robust, online relationship with one particularly "intriguing" woman.

"The reason I'm here," he cautiously reveals during our initial session, "is that I'm thinking about doing the 'real thing' — and I'm not talking about Coca-Cola," he says, attempting a bit of levity. "Her name is Debby," referring to his online obsession. "She's 39 years old. She's funny, smart and has an incredible body. ... We've exchanged photos. The one I sent her is about 10 years old, but I don't think she'll be disappointed. I don't look too bad for a guy my age," he says, as he proudly pats his abdomen. "If only Marianne was a little more adventuresome in bed and more attentive, maybe I'd be happier."

So, why would a successful retirement-age male disrupt his entire life — risk his home, family, grandchildren, financial stability and more — for someone he

barely knows? Some men need evidence, at whatever the cost, that they're still virile and desirable. They may not feel their biological clocks ticking in the same way as women, but they begin to feel their life ticking away nonetheless.

Any combination of events may trigger what has been referred to as the male "midlife crisis" — a sudden heart attack, being passed over for a promotion at work, a nagging awareness of shrinking muscles (along with other vital parts), or perhaps its waking several times a night to urinate. Whatever it is, there are a number of middle-age men who awaken to their mortality and find themselves doing things they might not ordinarily do, like perusing the personal ads, checking out photos of women on match.com or watching the Hair Club for Men infomercials (and actually thinking about giving them a call). Desperate for one more fling before the candle goes out. Like the Dylan Thomas poem, they will not "go gentle into that good night ... [and] rage, rage against the dying of the light."

For years I believed in the myth that men have an easier time aging — that gray hair looks distinguished on a guy but makes women look like their mothers. I'm not so sure anymore. There's no doubt that society has much more tolerance for physical imperfection in men, pot bellies and all.

But it's not so easy being a mid-

dle-age male. Based on the dozens of men I've seen rushing out of their marriages to experience some fantasized romantic fling, many men have an especially difficult time making peace with their physical and social maturity, especially if there's a corresponding decline in their income and power. To make matters worse, studies show that men who drink heavily, to cope with feelings of anxiety or depression, may inhibit their testosterone production and experience symptoms of "feminization."

Being "over-the-hill" isn't joyfully proclaimed by either sex, in spite of the "60-is-the-new-50" propaganda. Let's be honest. How many romantic fairy tales are written about the balding prince or the princess with hot flashes?

But when it comes to arriving at that age, it seems that women are better prepared. I'm not suggesting that it's any easier for women to age gracefully, whatever that is, but we have the benefit of a wealth of information about everything from hot flashes to face lifts. It's difficult to pick up a magazine without reading something about the pros and cons of hormone replacement therapy or a myriad of anti-aging creams and other youth-enhancing products on the market. We have countless books, like Nora Ephron's best-seller "I Feel Bad About My Neck," that hilariously and poignantly empathize with the difficulties facing women of a "certain age." Women talk, share

and have an abundance of practice worrying about their appearance — years before the discovery of the first wrinkle.

Men have a different set of challenges and a different approach to aging. Although there are some books, blogs and support groups for middle-age men, you have to hunt for them. Most men aren't known for their ability to share

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feelings, and it would surprise me if the 19th-hole conversation included talk about their waning sex drive or career decline. Instead, they tend to conceal their fears, comb over their receding hairlines and up their Viagra. Even today, when the sensitive man is so highly touted, many are ambivalent, at best, about self-disclosure and the expression of vulnerability. And speaking of Viagra, it is actually a mixed blessing. Along with its obvious benefits comes the unspoken expectation of constant potency. There are no excuses for slacking off, ever.

So what's a woman to do as her partner "finds himself?" Hope he'll come to his senses? Fantasize about the pool boy? Wait it out? Leave him? Of course, each situation is unique, but I can tell

you that you need to find a way to understand him and learn what he really needs and, while you're at it, don't blame yourself.

But do take a long hard look at the quality of your relationship. Does he long for more affection because you ignore him sexually? Is your relationship more like a partnership than a marriage? Is criticism your daily mantra? If you've let yourself go physically, and your love life has become stale and unimaginative, take your part of the responsibility. On the other hand, if he longs for the feel of much younger flesh and the reaffirmation of his potency through a new conquest, all the weight training and tummy tucks in the world can't turn a fifty-something body into a thirty-something body.

And what happens to the men who leave their partners for the sizzle? Do they live happily ever after? Not according to my experience. I often hear from the same men years later — a bit wiser and sometimes a bit regretful. We know the lusty feelings last between 12 months and 18 months and don't continue for the long run.

As we age, the challenge for men is to face their softer side and for women to solidify their strength and confidence. The trick is to do this cooperatively in ways that deepen love, respect and sexual passion.

What keeps marriages strong, among other things, is the willingness to support one another

through all of our developmental ages and stages. Gail Sheehy in "Understanding Men's Passages" writes that "the years after 40 offer men a 'second adulthood' to reinvent themselves — but first they must shift from competing to connecting."

In the second half of life, many of us come to an understanding that our bodies and hormones don't define us. We discover that the spiritual and emotional aspects of intimacy have value beyond measure. At the end of the road, we inevitably come face-to-face with ourselves. As the saying goes, "Wherever you go, there you are."

So who has it tougher in middle age — men or women? I'd say it's a draw. We each have our unique challenges. Neither of us does it better, just differently.

This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here are composites and not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.

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