

# Men and midlife crisis: coping with trauma, causes and treatment



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## **Introduction**

The debate on “ mid-life crisis” is hot and unending, no individual in a relationship likes to hear of this “ jargon”. There are different opinions as to what the term “ Mid-life-crisis” stands for, when it begins, its causes and how to better handle it. Many however agree that “ mid-life-crisis” is a “ normal developmental phase” in one’s life. This generally means that we all/or will experience it-both men and women. It usually falls between ages 35-65 years. Today, mid-life-crisis is actually regarded as any other period in life, just like adolescent, where important transitions, body adjustments and personal awareness occur. Mid-life-crisis could have adverse effects on one’s life or relationship. It may lead to depression, anxiety, stress and trauma. This article focuses on Trauma as one of the possible consequences of mid-life-crisis. It looks at the general nature and causes of Trauma, one specific type of trauma, its causes and the possible ways of successfully coping with it. Attempts will also be made to examine some of the theoretical and practical ways of treating Trauma. Credible academic and spiritual sources will be consulted and cited.

## **Trauma: Its Nature and Causes**

Mid-life is a stage in life characterized by several factors; first, a review of life; what have I achieved personally, career wise, in my family, socially and what have I not achieved that I feel I should have? Second, search for a meaning; what is my place in life, what matters to me versus societal expectations, thirdly, awareness of ageing; what goals should I set or achieve at old age?, and fourthly, the physical changes; graying hair,

hormonal changes for women, can I age gracefully? These great changes make people confront life leading to depressions and trauma.

Trauma generally refers to the continual or persistent negative impacts of experiencing enormously stressful events. These negative impacts may include; depressions, psychiatric disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders and personal psychological problems such as resentment and distrust (Allen, 2001). Traumatic events may be objective (an event such as one watching a gun pointed at you) or subjective experiences (such as, feeling helpless and being terrified that you are about to be killed). People are used to hearing traumatic events such as the September 11 attacks, Iraq war or the Tsunami. Traumatic events are not necessarily as a result of disasters. Being involved in a minor car accident, experiencing stressful life events within a short period of time could lead to an individual suffering from all the signs and symptoms of trauma (Allen, 2005; Pearlman et al., 1995).

Other social factors that can cause trauma are war/political violence; which is severe, prolonged, repeated or unpredictable. Also witnessing life threatening events or executing violence to others and securing the identity of a killer can be traumatizing, human rights violations such as kidnapping or torture, criminal violence, rape; the biggest cause of Posttraumatic Disorders (PTSD), Domestic violence; the major cause of trauma in marriages, child abuse; beating, kicking, slapping and rape and sexual abuse. Research shows that sexual violence is a major cause of PTSD (Giller, 1999; Allen, 2001; Pearlman et al., 1995).

Trauma may have a severe effect on one's emotions. Avoiding emotional distress naturally is possible, but it can backfire, but blocking emotions can be blindsided by internal an intense emotional upheavals. So it is better to cultivate one's emotions and reflect on them and regulate them before they get out of hand. Emotions such as fear, anxiety and panic play a major role in trauma. Cultivating awareness of these emotions enables you to execute defense mechanisms before they escalate (Allen, 2005; Fahrion 1990). It is also important to understand the signs related to trauma. Every individual reacts differently to trauma. It can fuel and stir up emotions such as anger, fear, guilty or denial-and it may also have destructive effects on a person's life, such withdrawing from friends or people, obsessive or compulsive acts and drug abuse.

It is possible to spot a person under trauma if aware of the common signs. These are normally classified into physical, behavioral, emotional and cognitive signs or responses (Heraman, 1992; McMahon). Physical responses include; aches, pains, fatigue, low energy, tension, insomnia/lack of sleep and increased or reduced appetite. These signs appear regardless of whether you were physically injured or not. Emotional signs brought about by trauma include; depression, fear and anxiety, guilt, sadness/grief, shock and disbelief. These responses make a victim feel overwhelmed. Emotional stress in the aftermath of a trauma may alter your behavior and how you relate with people. You may find yourself; isolating or withdrawing from others, increase drug abuse, easily started by noise/unexpected touch or action, being distrustful and disrespecting others. The way one thinks may be altered after a traumatic event. The cognitive signs include; decreased

concentration rate, confusion, forgetfulness, difficulty in making decisions, heightened or lowered alertness. These signs may occur immediately or after hours of a traumatic event. It may take time, months or even years to recover completely from a traumatic event and revert to the “ original one-self”.

## **Psychological Trauma**

We have so far seen that trauma is the product of overwhelmingly stressful occurrences and events that leave an individual with haunting unbearable memories. Trauma makes you feel lonely, helpless and takes away your feeling of safety and security. Any action or event that may not be physically injurious but leaves you frightened mentally is really traumatic.

Dissatisfaction with life; as in the case of mid-life crisis, death of a beloved one, plane crash, floods, emotional distress, earthquake, relentless stress and depression are some of the events that can lead to psychological trauma. Wellbeing Bolton (2008) of the wellbeing clinic classifies trauma into six categories, namely Physical Trauma, Blunt force Trauma, Penetrating trauma, Post-cult trauma, childhood trauma and psychological trauma. This article will focus on the nature and dynamics of psychological trauma.

Psychological trauma is caused by extremely stressful negative events and occurrences that leave you in a feeling of helplessness, insecurity and lonely. This makes you feel vulnerable in a dangerous world. If this state continues, you are likely to change your behavior, for instance engage in drug abuse, isolate friends, and become disrespectful, among other things. Traumatic occurrences often involve a threat to life, safety and security, but any event that is likely to make you feel overwhelmed and alone is traumatic even if it <https://assignbuster.com/men-and-midlife-crisis-coping-with-trauma-causes-and-treatment/>

doesn't involve physical injury. It is not the objective aspects of an event that determine whether it is traumatic or not, but the subjective emotional experiences of the occurrence. The more insecure and helpless you feel, the higher the chances that you will be traumatized. A stressful occurrence will be traumatic if; it occurred unexpectedly, you were unprepared for it, you were powerless to avert it, may be it occurred repeatedly, someone was cruel (intentionally) or it occurred in childhood.

Psychological trauma can be caused by a single incident; a horrible accident, a violent attack, a natural disaster, relentless stress or struggling with a difficult ailment like cancer, mid-life crisis or a broken relationship can cause psychological and emotional trauma. Depending with an individual, not all traumatic experiences lead to a prolonged psychological trauma. Some people recover quickly from even some of the most traumatic experiences. Others are overwhelmed by experiences that may appear less traumatizing on the surface (Blackeney & Creson, 2010). A person is likely to be traumatized by a negative experience if such a person is under another heavy stress load or suffered from successive losses. Research also shows that a person who experienced a traumatizing event before; may be at childhood, is more vulnerable to new experiences. Some of the symptoms of psychological trauma are; anger, mood swings, irritability, shock, denial, shame, guilt, self-blame, a feel of sadness, hopeless, anxiety, fear and feeling disconnected.

Researchers and psychologists also argue that traumatic experiences at childhood are likely to have a severe-long-life effect that can transit to adulthood. Children who were traumatized at early ages view the world as

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unfriendly, unsecure, dangerous and frightening (Eth, 1994; Terr, 1991). If this experience is not resolved, it transits to adulthood, multiplying and setting the conditions for future trauma. This can precipitate the experiences of a mid-life-crisis. Separations from a parent, bullying, sexual abuse or neglect are some of the experiences that can lead to psychological trauma.

The symptoms of psychological trauma may fade away within days or months after the experience. Nevertheless, it is possible to experience problems of painful memories or emotions triggered by an anniversary, images, sound, or situations that remind one of the traumatic experiences. Grieving is the most common and natural way people respond to traumatic experiences. Survivors go through this process of grieving and it is better to turn to others for comfort and sharing of experiences.

### **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

This is one of the most severe forms of psychological and emotional trauma. PTSD develops after (post)a traumatic experience. The highlight of PTSD is re-experiencing trauma in response reminders of the experiences. PTSD symptoms include memories, flashbacks and nightmares. PTSD usually adds “insults to injury”. Reminders of anything that can cause fear, insecurity and a feeling of helplessness can evoke strong and unbearable responses (Rose, 1993; Wellbeing, 2008). Learning to separate the present from the past experiences is a big issue in coping with trauma. Avoiding events that could fuel past painful memories is natural. One might try not to remember, think about or avoid situations that remind you of the past.

## **Coping With Trauma; Factors to Consider**

People instill meaning into their lives, into the occurrences they experience and into their life choices via the stories they make and tell about themselves. The life story is not just a format for telling others or (one self) about one's life but it is also a means by which a person's identity takes form (Giddens, 1991). The construction of one's story is mediated by several factors which may be psychological (e. g. one's personality), culture (personal norms and values) or situational (e. g., to whom the story is being told). It is therefore to consider these cognitive factors for effective coping.

The capacity to maintain continuity and coherence at a general level of life and at a concrete/specific trauma level is considered a better sign of recovery (Bruner, 1990; Wigren, 1994). This ability should manifest itself and be visible to the survivor who narrates his/her story.

Creating a life meaning is also another important factor in coping with trauma. Effective coping process involves a deeper search for a life meaning on the side of the survivor. Questions like why now? What have I achieved? What have I learned from the event? What can I achieve now? These are some of the examples for search of a meaning for a survivor (Crossley, 2000; Frankl, 1984).

Evaluating oneself has also been regarded as a better way to cope with trauma. Different ways of evaluating oneself related to the traumatic experience is one better way of coping effectively or maintaining a sense of control for one-self. Feeling responsible, guilty, active or passive are some of



what transpires (Stephens, 2000). These factors emerge most of the time when coping starts.

Psychologists and spiritual leaders propose that one should undertake one or more of the following steps to effectively cope with trauma;

Taking care of your body; whether the event was physically injurious or not, eat regular and nutritious meals, exercise regularly and get a good and enough sleep. Physical activities such as jogging could help release mood-enhancing endorphins that can help lift your heart rate and spirits.

Mobilization of your support system; make rapport and connect with others sharing the same experiences. Talking about it may help you understand your emotions and point out the ones requiring immediate action.

Maintain a normal schedule; don't isolate yourself or withdraw from your daily activities. Return to social activities, exercise, and work. This makes you re-establish your routine and sense of order for your life. Avoid big life changes.

Enjoy yourself; fun, creative events like; cooking, painting, gardening or singing. This restores joy in your life.

Getting help and assistance; it is better to seek for assistance from a professional; may be a psychiatrist, a counseling expert, church pastor or any other person who can provide the required support.

Mediation and Prayer; this is usually encouraged by spiritual leaders such as pastors and priests. Seeking spiritual interpretation to your answers could help you understand and find answers to your questions.

Avoiding drugs; under stressful situations, it is possible for an individual to engage in drug abuse, e. g. excessive alcohol. It may be interesting and appealing to take drugs, but drugs can interfere with your ability to cope. They could just help you “postpone” the trauma.

Relaxation; take a break from your activities, walk around the park, take a warm and soothing bath, listen to music and clear your thoughts and moods.

Spend time with your loved ones; play with children, take a meal with friends, these social interactions infuse new perspectives and energy back into your life. Laughter and humor can restore a sense of relaxation, take out fear and restore peace of mind.

Whether it is a mid-life-crisis, or any other type of trauma, these activities can help you re-evaluate yourself and set the stage for healing.

## **Spiritual and Practical Approaches For Trauma Treatment**

As discussed above, trauma involves both a psychological and emotional changes. An effective means of treating trauma is that capable of restoring the peace of mind and meaning of life to the survivor. Both spiritual and practical approaches in treating trauma are proposed.

Spiritual leaders encourage believers to take depression and trauma seriously. They assure us that with prayer, all things are possible, but trauma

may require additional attention. Christians believe that trauma can be spiritually induced by feeling guilty of having hurt or wronged others or a sense feeling to have lived out the will of God can bring up depression. Also the fear of death can also be traumatic. In such case meditation on the scripture (Psalms of David, for instance), prayer and other spiritual things can bring up “ the balm of Gilead” that can heal the sin or sick soul (Jeremiah 8; 22). Reference is also made to scriptures such as 2nd Corinthians 7: 6, “ God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” Spiritually we are encouraged to accept discouragement and frustration, not to get “ down.” As problems and temptations come when “ we are down and out”, when in desperation, and believing that there is no possible way out of the situation (2nd Corinthians 4: 8). Confessing sins that make us guilty is a way out of depression and trauma (1st John 1: 9). There is a lot of justification for spiritual healing of depression, but leaders in this territory encourage their flock to take life more practically and seek treatment from other experts.

## **Trauma Treatment Options**

It is good to face the heavy memories that you have till now avoided in order to escape the adverse effects of trauma. Treating trauma loads off troubled emotions and thoughts that lie heavily on your mind. It is a good decision and nicer option to heal from trauma. It may be potentially re-traumatizing to treat a trauma, hence a good decision to consult a trauma specialist to avoid this possibility. You should seek a professional when;

You are having troubles working

You're experiencing severe anxiety, dissatisfaction, or depression

Unable to form satisfying relationships

Experiencing nightmares and terrifying memories

Avoiding things that remind you of the trauma

Using drugs to feel better

It is also important to choose a trauma specialist you feel comfortable with. If you don't feel understood or comfortable, choose another one there should be a sense of warmth between the two of you. Trauma treatment and healing should involve;

Processing trauma-related feelings and memories

Discharging of pent-up "fight-or-flight" energy

Effective learning on regulating strong emotions

Developing and re-building the confidence to trust other people

## **Trauma Therapy: Treatment Approaches**

The below approaches are commonly used in treating psychological and emotional trauma; (Pearlman et al, 1995; Allen, 2005)

Somatic experiencing; this uses the bodies' capacity to heal itself. Attention is on body sensations rather than memories or thoughts that caused the trauma this helps you concentrate on your body and release trauma related

energy and tensions. A natural survival strategy take over and safely releases the pent-up energy. .

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR); this combines cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movement or other stimulations. Focus is on traumatic emotions, memories while tracking your therapist's finger movements using your eyes. These eye movements are believed to unfreeze the negative memories and giving you a chance to solve them.

Cognitive-Behavior -Therapy (CBT); this is made to help you evaluate and process your feelings and thoughts. this may not treat the psychological effect but it can be helpful when added to body therapy such as EMDR

## Conclusion

The field of trauma is quite large; there could be different views as to what causes it, its classification, symptoms, best ways to cope with it or the different spiritual and practical ways of effectively treating or coping with it. This article has presented a compilation of both spiritual and practical resources that gives us a guide on how to understand, cope with and treat trauma. It has presented a general as well as specific effort of dealing with the complications. Regardless of the cause or type of trauma the above data is applicable in any case.