

Can We Make Middle Age Less Miserable?

by Alison Beard

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Summary. Four new books and a podcast offer insights and advice: *Hags*, by Victoria Smith; *Revoltin' Women*, by Lucy Ryan; *Wiser Than Me*, hosted by Julia Louis-Dreyfus; *Learning to Love Midlife*, by Chip Conley; and *Radiant Rebellion*, by Karen Walrond.

Today is my 47th birthday. This morning I got up at 6:45, made oatmeal for my 15-year-old, located my 13-year-old's skating bag, cleared my husband's wet towel from the banister, folded one load of laundry and started another. My parents called and asked the

same question they'd posed the past few times we'd talked: How would I celebrate? My (unchanged) answer: A day of work, three hours of kid chauffeuring, and back-to-school night. Happy birthday to me!



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As you can perhaps tell, I'm at the nadir of what sociologists call the U curve of happiness—absent the high energy and expectations of youth, mired in serious job and family responsibilities, and awaiting the upswing of joyful appreciation for life that apparently comes with old age. All my friends are in the same spot. And why wouldn't this season of life make us sad? Our faces wrinkle and sag. Our bodies jiggle and ache. Our careers plateau. Our marriages settle, go stale, or fail. Our kids grow up and leave. Our elders deteriorate and pass away.

But does midlife have to be so miserable? Several new books and a podcast acknowledge all the reasons it can be—particularly for women, who typically play caregiving roles and face increasingly unrealistic beauty standards. And yet these works also offer plentiful advice on how to improve the experience. So I decided to read and listen and then write this article to share what I learned.

Two titles caught my eye because they hit on exactly how middle-aged ladies like me are often made to feel. *Hags*, by the UK-based writer Victoria Smith, investigates how our cohort is usually ignored but also vilified. *Revolting Women*, by the leadership coach Lucy Ryan, surprised me by focusing not on how unappealing we're deemed to be at a certain age (assuming no

fillers or crazy workouts) but on how professional women over 50 are fighting back against a corporate system that undervalues them.

Both books call out those who hold ill-informed views about how women can or should act in midlife. But they also call *on us* to stand up for ourselves. We “do not have to represent, include, or step aside for every other person before we claim space,” Smith writes.

The podcast *Wiser Than Me*, hosted by the always funny Julia Louis-Dreyfus, addresses similar themes in a lighter, more personal way. “Why the hell don’t we hear more from older women?” was the question that prompted her to launch the show and the problem that she wanted to rectify. She interviewed 10 famous, fabulous women, from Jane Fonda on the three “acts” of her career to the author Amy Tan on apologies.

It’s a fun and inspiring listen; and *Hags* and *Revolting Women* offer compelling arguments and useful recommendations, especially for organizational leaders keen to do a better job at making the most of experienced female talent. But all three ignore one key thing about middle age: Men struggle mightily with it too.

Take it from Chip Conley. A hotel industry entrepreneur and later an adviser to Airbnb, he not only endured his own midlife crisis (as his romantic partnership and business faltered) but also lost five men friends in their forties or fifties to suicide. That’s partly why he founded the Modern Elder Academy—an institution that helps people embrace and plan for midlife transitions—and wrote *Learning to Love Midlife*.

While the book presents a jumble of mixed metaphors (in just the introduction middle age is described as a chrysalis where we transition from consumptive caterpillar to pollinating butterfly,

“a bridge over troubled water,” and an atrium addition to the house of life that changes its blueprint), Conley offers some sharp insights. For example, the busyness of managing teenage kids, aging parents, and big jobs isn’t our only problem. Rather, he writes, “midlife is when we begin to worry that life isn’t turning out the way we expected.”

We need a mindset shift, he argues. Yes, we’ve chosen certain paths, so others are no longer accessible. (Sorry for a fourth metaphor.) But many more are still open to us. Yes, we’re swamped, but it’s often with people and activities we value. Yes, our muscle tone, eyesight, and recall for details are diminished. But we’re becoming “wiser, less reactive, more generous.” We’re “masters at pattern recognition” and “more self-aware.” We have higher-quality friendships, and “our capacity for empathy soars.” He notes that Aristotle believed the body was perfect at age 35, the soul at 49.



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Conley now sees middle age as a time for honing, or making peace with, our physical, emotional, mental, vocational, and spiritual selves. He set out 10 commitments to ensure that he would both enjoy this time of life and become a better person through it. The first you’ve no doubt heard a version of before, but it bears repeating: “I commit to living a life more focused on my eventual eulogy than my current résumé.” My personal favorite? “Show up [so that] people will notice my energy more than my wrinkles.” But perhaps the most pertinent for HBR readers is this: Stop believing you are what you do (achievement), what others say

about you (image), what you have (status), and what you control (power). Instead, ask, “What do you stand for, who have you helped, what seeds have you planted, and how do you want to be remembered?” And then, for the long second half of your life, invest your time and energy accordingly.

Karen Walrond is another crusader for better middle age. In *Radiant Rebellion*, the lawyer, leadership coach, and activist recounts the “bizarre disquiet” she felt as she approached her 55th birthday, 20th wedding anniversary, and daughter’s departure for college. However, rather than wallow, she joined “the fight against ageism” (and the \$37 billion global antiaging industry) and vowed to move forward more “gratefully, soulfully, and purposefully.”


Like Conley, she wants midlife to be a time of “evolution,” not “impending decline.” She, too, emphasizes the importance of connecting with oneself and a community, echoing Conley’s notes on emotional truth and the long-term benefits of meaningful relationships. Finally, she suggests envisioning the future you want with a “spark statement.” Hers ends with “May I model living an expansive life, by accepting all opportunities for cultivating growth, play, and...adventure.”

She concludes the book with another metaphor, borrowed from a friend: “I love the idea of a kaleidoscope as a symbol for the way we...age:...experimenting with slight adjustments, fully expecting a new revelation of a beautiful image.”

This project has indeed left me feeling more hopeful about finding delight in the days and decades to come. Kaleidoscope or chrysalis, second act or atrium, bridge or winding path, maybe middle age isn’t so bad after all?

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Alison Beard is an executive editor at Harvard Business Review and previously worked as a reporter and editor at the Financial Times. A mom of two, she tries—and sometimes succeeds—to apply management best practices to her household.

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