

Excerpt from *Who Do You Want to Be When You Grow Old? The Path of Purposeful Aging*
by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro

We've all heard the inspirational quote, "There's a reason your windshield is bigger than your rearview mirror; where you're headed is more important than what you've left behind." But for many people in later life, it's all about that mirror.

Countless numbers of elders—and probably most of us at some time during later life—are way more focused on what's in the rear view than on what's ahead. This is not necessarily a problem, but if it prevents us from dealing with—or even really seeing—what's on the horizon, it can be a sign of what has come to be known as the *late-life crisis*.

The late-life crisis, like its more famous younger sibling, the midlife crisis, really is a thing. Recent research has found that as many as one in three people over the age of 60 will experience it in some form.

The late-life crisis is characterized by dissatisfaction, a loss of identity, an expectations gap, and the feeling that life has peaked, so it's all downhill from here.

Whereas the midlife crisis is typically about the loss of opportunities, the late-life crisis is more about the loss of relevance. Stereotypically, during the midlife crisis, you dye your hair and buy a sports car; during the late-life crisis, it feels pointless to even get out of your bathrobe.

Also, unlike the midlife crisis, which popular culture and the punchlines of late-night comedians tell us is mostly a guy thing, the late-life crisis is not gender-specific. Women and men seem equally likely to experience it.

The particulars of the crisis can be hard to pin down. Is it a time of massive change and reprioritization? A mysterious chasm between the past and the future? Or just a normal sad and panicky feeling of anxiety in response to the challenges of aging? In a word, yes to all of those.

Most of us go through periods in our lives when we feel like something's missing, when it seems like we're off course or lack direction. But the late-life crisis is different. In the late-life crisis, we feel the clock ticking.

One thing is certain, however: the degree to which we are able to admit being in the late-life crisis determines the degree to which we'll be able to move through it. Asking ourselves a series of questions, like those that follow, can help us to see whether we're experiencing a crisis.

1. Do you often find yourself looking in the mirror and thinking, "Who is this person?"
2. Do you feel reluctant to tell people your age?
3. Do you obsess about your appearance, trying to "antiage," to look younger?
4. Do you often compare yourself with others your age (and worry that you're not measuring up)?
5. Do you often find yourself thinking about your mortality?
6. Do you avoid discussing with your loved ones what you would like for them after you're gone?
7. Do you often question the value of your religious or spiritual beliefs?
8. Do you often feel down or empty for long periods of time?
9. Do you often feel detached from activities that once gave you pleasure?
10. Do you feel bored or stuck in your personal relationships?

You might relate to a few of these behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. But if you answered a definite “yes” to more of the questions than you answered “no,” it’s possible that you are in (or entering into) a late-life crisis.

So, what can you do if you know that you’re in a late-life crisis? How can you successfully move forward?

It is useful to frame the crisis in a new way. We’ve all heard that apparently apocryphal claim that the Chinese term for *crisis* is roughly translated as “danger plus opportunity.” While that may be linguistically in error, the message is absolutely on point.

The late-life crisis is an opportunity for us to reframe what it means to get old—to change our mindset from danger to opportunity, from living a default life to living a good life. This means choosing how to see a new image in the mirror.

Instead of looking back and lamenting our losses and what we never did, we can gaze in the rearview mirror and see the lessons we can learn from it. Reflection on the past can be an opportunity for growth—a chance to draw upon our past experiences in order to apply that insight to the future. Instead of living life in the rearview mirror, focused on “shoulds” (I should have worked harder, loved better, learned more, earned more), we can live for the windshield and practice more of the “coulds” (I could work harder, love better, learn more, and so on) from here on out.

The late-life crisis is an opportunity for us to acknowledge that we’re challenged with naturally arising emotions and complex choices that are common to aging, and that we need to have real conversation with family, friends, and others to meet those challenges. We need to be able to be honest with others about what we’re feeling.

Key to avoiding or managing a late-life crisis is to not go it alone; isolation is fatal.