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Midlife brings women chance to stop deferring dreams

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They were the generation of women who burned their bras, took the pill and broke down the barriers to traditionally male professions.

They were told they could have it all and, in some cases, they did.

Now these 40 million female baby boomers are hitting middle age and many are facing confusion about everything from their relationships to their careers.

"This definitely is not our mothers' midlife," says Amy Lynch, 48, editor and publisher of the recently launched *Ourselves: The Newsletter for Women at the Center of Life*.

"We've all read 'The Silent Passage,' Gail Sheehy's book about menopause, and most of us assumed we had this life stage figured out," Lynch says. "But it's clear that we all go through a cycle of self-doubt and questioning. It's universal, no matter how liberated you've been or how accomplished you are."

Even women who are relatively happy in their jobs often feel pressures in other areas of their lives, Lynch says. In many cases, they are taking care of three generations -- their parents, their children and themselves. They are carrying more responsibility in the workplace at the same time they are continuing to do more housework than their spouses or partners.

Lynch's Nashville-based newsletter will provide advice from women who have successfully navigated this life passage. She says she started the publication as a resource for women like herself who were struggling with issues common to the sandwich generation -- having to take care of their children, their spouses and their aging parents.

"This generation in general does not just want happiness," Lynch says, "they want fulfillment. They may be very successful in the traditional sense, but they want more meaning in their lives. That's why so many women are leaving the corporate world in droves."

Atlantan Cathy Luce is one example of someone who had climbed the corporate ladder and didn't care for the view.

"I was traveling four-and-a-half days a week as a technology consultant and I was really miserable," says Luce, 40. "When I started trying to figure out

what I wanted to do, I went to a life coach [a professional who advises clients about improving their business or personal lives] and began taking this class. Eventually I decided that I would become a personal chef."

Switching gears

Luce's decision to quit her job and take a \$70,000 pay cut caused quite a stir in her success-oriented family. "I had a father who was a very successful golf pro and a brother who was an investment banker. My father measured success by how much money you made."

But as Luce learned, her father actually had taken a similar route right after World War II when he quit the job his father had gotten him at Southwestern Bell to become a golf pro.

"He had two young children and he took this huge risk," Luce says. "My father had forgotten that part."

As owner of Magical Meals, Luce cooks and packages several weeks' worth of meals for families as well as trains people to become personal chefs. "I'm doing what I love and getting paid for it."

Luce's life coach, Stacey Mayo, went through a similar reassessment of her career. Although she had just been promoted to vice president of her company with a six-figure salary, she was not satisfied.

"My parents were happy, but I realized I was doing it more for them than myself," says Mayo, 45. "Women in particular in the workplace try to emulate male success. More of them are realizing corporate success is not working for them and are finding things that do work for them."

Quitting to become a life coach, Mayo counsels others who want to make changes in their careers or their relationships. "A lot of people say I want something fulfilling, but I need to make this amount of money. Others want to spend more time with their family. I tell them they have to come up with a must-have list. Then I work up a plan to get them from where they are to where they want to go."

Finding your passion

When Margot Swann became one of Mayo's clients eight years ago, she had just gone through a divorce and was unhappy with her job as a travel agent.

"She asked questions and listened," says Swann, 57. "Finally, she said, 'You know, Margot, you always seem to be gravitating to the underdog in every situation. Who do you consider the underdogs in our society?' Well, I said, 'There are orphans and widows, the elderly and the abused and divorcing women.' "

After further discussions, Swann decided she really wanted to find a job that helped women who were going through divorces. She went on to launch Visions Anew Institute, a nonprofit organization that provides resources and

advice for divorcing women and holds retreats with legal, financial and psychological experts.

"I had watched so many women do so many counterproductive things as they went through divorces, I knew that this kind of service was needed. I had no idea that I could do this, but I have found my passion."

Finding ways to ease such transitions is one of the purposes of the Ourselves newsletter, Lynch says. In addition, she and the staff have developed a supplementary booklet, "Midlife's Path," that is designed to help lead women through the five distinct, often overlapping stages that make up this cycle of change: Wake Up, Loss, Stilling, Knowing and Embracing.

"Wake Up is an event that makes us realize that time is limited. Loss is just what it sounds like -- endings. We feel disillusioned, anxious and betrayed. Stilling takes us inside where we reconnect with our essential selves. We retreat and reflect. In Knowing we find courage. We emerge with a renewed sense of self. Embracing is a time of taking action, of committing to something bigger than before."

Rearranging priorities

The problem that many women have to overcome is the feeling that it's their job to take care of everyone but themselves. Shirley Mogan, 59, felt that way until she went through a divorce, job burnout and a two-year period of caring for her dying mother.

"While I was in Providence looking after her, I read an article in Money magazine about life coaching. It sounded like something I would be interested in, so I called a couple of coaching schools. I had to work with a coach myself in order to be one."

The first thing the life coach asked Mogan was, "How can I help you?" No one had ever asked her that question before.

"That's how a lot of women feel. They're so used to being the caregiver, they don't know what it means to be taken care of," says Mogan, who now works as a life coach in Atlanta.

"Now I tell my clients to remember the instructions the flight attendants give you when you get on an airplane. If there's trouble and the oxygen mask drops down, put yours on before you put it on your child. You can't help your child if you don't help yourself first."

Photo: Personal chef Cathy Luce, preparing meals at a client's home, took a \$70,000 pay cut and left her job as a technology consultant to follow her dream. "I'm doing what I love and getting paid for it," says Luce. / JOEY IVANSCO / Staff

Graphic: RESOURCES

For more information on Midlife's Path's OurSelves newsletter, go to www.ourselves.com. To find a life coach, go to the International Coach Federation at www.coachfederation.org or for the Georgia chapter, www.gacoaches.com.