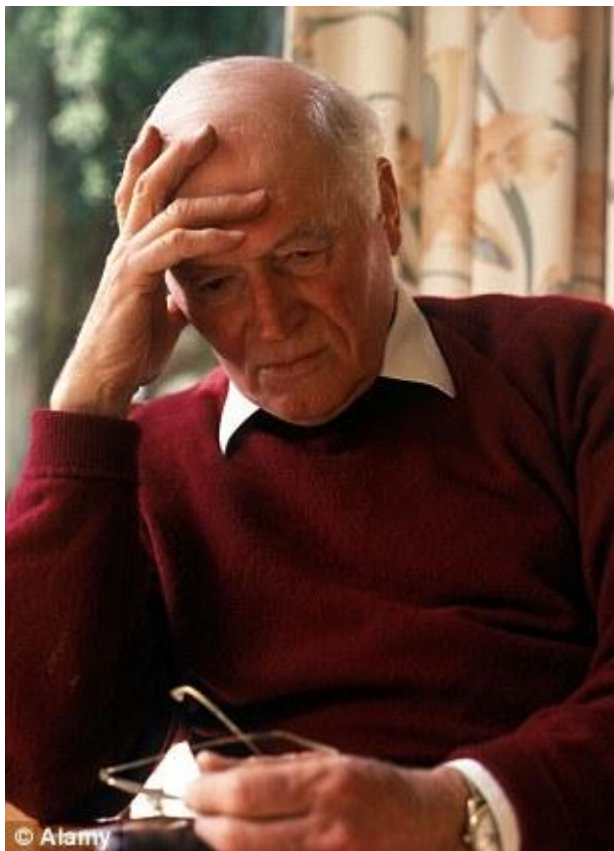


One in three over-60s are hit by a 'later life' crisis about the meaning of life

- **Crisis is often triggered by two or more episodes of loss or bereavement**
- **Experts say it differs from mid-life crisis where people take stock of career**
- **It may lead to a decline in sufferers physical and mental abilities**

By Jenny Hope



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A third of people in their 60s undergo a 'later life' crisis during which they question the meaning of life, claim researchers.

The crisis is often triggered by two or more episodes of loss, such as a bereavement or life-threatening illness suffered by a loved one or themselves.

Psychologists say it differs from a mid-life crisis in which middle-aged people take stock of their career or life achievements.

Some over-60s manage to overcome the later life crisis and may even enjoy life more than they did in the past. But for a third, it may lead to a decline in their physical and mental abilities, with some 'retreating from the world'. Dr Oliver Robinson, from the University of Greenwich, who led the research, said it was important for people in their 60s to recognise the signs and for some to seek help.

He said: 'If you handle it badly it can accelerate your decline. People should not be ashamed of having these experiences – it's very common – or about seeking help.'

A total of 282 people aged 60 and over took part in an online survey designed to assess the nature and number of crisis episodes they had gone through in recent years.

It found that 32 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women reported having had a crisis since the age of 60. The most frequent type was bereavement, followed by illness or injury to themselves or close relatives, and caring for an ill or disabled loved one.

Findings from the survey and a series of interviews revealed that crisis episodes all involved two or more stressful life events.

These featured a sense of loss and one event which raised awareness of mortality such as a major illness or bereavement of someone close to them.

This led to the person being more conscious about frailty and death, and reappraising their own goals, Dr Robinson told the British Psychological Society conference in Harrogate yesterday.

Between 40 and 50 per cent of older people going through a later life crisis emerged feeling more positive about life, he said.

They set new goals to achieve, appreciating every day they have and endeavour to enjoy life more than they did. One in five people said their views on life were unchanged, but one in three appeared to head into a downward spiral, avoiding making plans to avoid being disappointed.

Dr Robinson said a later life crisis often led to a big change in lifestyle, which had little to do with the changes linked to retirement or children flying the nest.



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It was more serious than a mid-life crisis because people in their 40s did not usually become withdrawn from the world.

He said 'A later life crisis is when multiple loss-inducing events and the emotions surrounding them precipitate usually a couple of years of struggling to find meaning in life, questioning yourself and your identity, and experiencing a turning point in your life, in terms of your approach to setting goals and making plans.' He said it tended to occur mostly between the ages of 60 and 65.

'It seems that when loss-inducing events occur together or in close proximity in time, a person's capacity to cope in their 60s is overwhelmed. Some retreat from the world as a result and become increasingly isolated. 'It's a real phenomenon but it's difficult to predict who will be affected' he added. Dr Robinson said many over-60s had good support networks that could help them through a senior crisis. But people who didn't might benefit from professional help, he said. 'Psychologists are well placed to understand mental health problems in this age group.

'People who find meaning in the crisis events they have gone through are most likely to be able to successfully adapt afterwards.'