

Men face a change of life at 40

From Raymond Kerrison in New York

When a man enters middle life, around the age of 40, he is likely to undergo a traumatic emotional upheaval.

He will become moody, depressed, impatient, unstable, threatening both his marriage and career.

In short, he will undergo a change of life with marked similarity to the psychological storms that afflict women in their menopause.

These are some of the preliminary findings of a team of psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists who are now half way through a four-year study of men between the ages of 35 and 45.

The researchers, all in their 40s, have been interviewing men from all walks of life in their age group.

"The basic assumption of our study," said Professor Daniel J. Levinson, "is that the 35-45 decade represents a strategic turning point in life for men.

Pot bellies sign of bodily decline

"We have found so far that most men go through a period of considerable inner turmoil where they have fundamental doubts about aspects of their life—their work, family, goals.

"They also frequently have a sense of bodily decline. Maybe, the loss of hair, a pot belly, and tire easier.

"Our study so far indicates strongly that men as well as women go through a change of life."

Prof. Levinson said the emotional stress hits men at a crucial period in their lives, when their responsibilities grow rapidly, their work load increases and their financial burdens mount with children about to enter higher education.

"We have also found that the death of a man's father at this time has special significance," the professor said. "It affects the man's ideas about paternity.

"It means that in some ways, he has become more fully himself. With his father gone, all he has of him is what he has made a part of himself."

Generally, the professor said, there is no one particular event that triggers the man's mid-life transition. It might be gradual or swift, confined or diverse.

He said: "A man at 40 reviews his life, asking himself where he stands, how far he has come, where does he want to go, what doors are left open.

"Nagging self-doubt takes a hold and it is likely to explode at home."

The man suddenly finds his marriage unsatisfactory. He may thrash around with drink and extra-marital affairs, in some cases leading to divorce.

In an attempt to disengage from the "old," he will marry a much younger woman and start a new family to try to gain new youth.



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He may turn his life inside out by seeking another job in a new field, explaining why so many men in their 40s suddenly launch into "second careers."

The researchers found that men are frequently unaware of the changes overtaking them.

They are only vaguely conscious of their grumpiness, perhaps their inability to make decisions, their emotional depression.

"The trouble," said Prof. Levinson, "is that men, unlike women, have no physical symptoms of their change of life. They are all psychological, thus they are harder to pinpoint."

How can a man cope with the critical battle of the middle years?

"Each man must find his own course," said Prof. Levinson.

"He must come to terms with himself. His special task is to continue to develop, to grow up.

"The degree to which a man has accepted himself is important.

"The man who has accepted his faults as wisely as his strengths will find the going easier. If he has ridden out other storms, the going will be less painful.

"Those unable to deal with frustration and anxiety will attempt to run away in some form, alcohol, drugs, promiscuity."

Relationships with family improve

Many men, however, will undergo a re-birth.

"Their relationships with wife, children and friends will become deeper," the professor said.

"They will become more judicious in considering problems and exercise authority with greater wisdom.

"Things that once were important are no longer that way. If a man understands what is happening to him and faces it with maturity, the result can lead to immense inner peace.

EIGHTEEN months after US Senate hearings publicised the side effects of the contraceptive pill, most American women are back on it.

During the hearings in 1970, it was estimated that eight million American women used the pill.

The total then dropped to seven million. Today, it's estimated that more than 10 million women are using it.