



The VICE Guide to Getting Through a Mid-Twenties Crisis

By Hannah Ewens with quotes from [Karin Peeters – Life Coach](#)

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You're on holiday, staring at a menu, and slip into an existential abyss. Fries or sweet potato fries? Which do you like more? And ultimately, what does it even matter? Both are starchy bits of sustenance that only cost £3.50. But actually, shouldn't you care more about money? What if you're too splash-happy to ever provide for children? And, at 26, you're past the prime of your fertility anyway, right? You've seen a line chart and it's not looking good. So you'll probably have to adopt, and that's if you're even a kids sort of person (who are you?), so if that's going to be happening soon, shouldn't you break up with your boyfriend and spend the next four years having sex with everyone you can?

Then you tell your boyfriend that you'll have the normal fries. And they turn up cold.

It's the first day back at work after your holiday and you feel strange, and then you realise that strange feeling is "actually just feeling chill". Nafisa asks how your holiday was and you say it was great, and then James asks and you say it was brilliant – a world outside productivity and feeling like a disenfranchised, underpaid, disposable cog in the machine, with 2,000+ emails to answer at all times. Then you go to the loo to sit on your phone and start googling MA degrees.

Intense self-doubt, feeling trapped in a job or a relationship and feeling disillusioned about what "real life" is? Fairly sure you're having a mid-twenties crisis, mate.

Dr Oliver Robinson is a man who had his own mid-twenties crisis, left various parts of his life behind and began a career as an academic studying the mid-twenties crisis as a phenomenon. "A quarter-life crisis is a double edged sword," he told me on the phone. "It's a time of instability and stress, but also a time of intense development and potential for growth."

These crises have never been more prevalent among young people, because alongside the world currently being a terrifying place to live, what we traditionally did in our twenties has been pushed back a decade: people are getting married and having kids later into their thirties. "The good side of that is that it gives people a chance to have fun experiences before they settle down into a routine, but the other side is that it makes a quarter-life crisis more likely because there is more instability and stress around that age range," says Dr Robinson.

He adds that there are two types of mid-twenties crises: the locked-in crisis and the locked-out crisis. "In the locked-out crisis, the young person feels that no matter what their efforts, they're unable to get into adult society," he explains. "In the locked-in crisis, a young person finds themselves on a path they don't want to be on and will make big decisions about what they want to do, which can be a long and painful process."

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way; if you're lucky, you could be experiencing an exciting mix of the two!

Because you don't want to be told to start meditating or make a mood board (my mum's idea) as a way out of confusion-paralysis, here are some other ideas from life coaches, psychologists and people who have experience crawling their way through a mid-twenties crisis of their own, as to what you should do to make things a little more manageable.

RECOGNISE YOUR RIDICULOUS BUT VERY NORMAL RESPONSE TO YOUR CRISIS

According to [Karin Peeters](#), life coach and psychologist, a mid-twenties crisis is essentially being held in the grips of prolonged decision-making stress. "Some people respond by freezing and being unable to take action; others respond with flight, AKA just leaving the job, leaving the partner or the city," she says. "And the third response is fight, or 'I'm going to work harder, and go to the gym and do everything I can to achieve something, anything.'"

Recognise your response. Mine is somewhere between a) pinned-to-the-wall paralysis, unable to make a simple decision about what I'm going to eat for lunch, and b) irrationally sprinting away from a set of circumstances. Wouldn't recommend either, but if you want to analyse your behaviour and work with those impulses rather than blindly making snap decisions, trying to be more self-aware is helpful.

CHANGE YOUR CONCEPT OF TIME

Let's take a painfully cliched mid-twenties crisis dilemma: "Should I stay in my mediocre job when, actually, I want to travel at some point and am currently just inching closer and more surely towards death rather than planning an off-the-beaten track route through Central America?"

This anxiety is heightened by the fact you're thinking in the immediate and on a very short timescale. Should I do these things now, now, now? Life coach [Natalie Dee](#) suggests expanding your idea of time: "Plan longer-term," she says. "Think: in my twenties, at some point, I'd like to travel for a bit. That's a big grand plan but it gives you more time to achieve it. In my thirties I really want to be on the ladder of a career that I like. In my forties I'd like to really establish myself. You can say, in those ten years, if I want a family, I'm open to the possibility of meeting somebody."

I.E: Quit worrying about immediately spending three months in Thailand and realise that you're already half a decade older than everyone else at the full moon parties, so a couple more years won't hurt. Bonus: you can apply this type of less neurotic planning to every other aspect of your life.

STOP SEEING MARRIAGE AND STUFF THAT COMES WITH IT AS A FOCAL POINT OF YOUR EARLY ADULT LIFE

"I don't know why I've fixated on this age, but I think it's really cool to be 37 and single," says [Bertie Brandes](#), co-creator of the magazine *Mushpit*, which just released its "Crisis Issue" – which is basically all about having a mid-twenties crisis. "I think you have to reevaluate the whole idea of marriage being the focal point of your early-ish adult life, which then continues on until you die, and start realising that every single year of your life is a precious year. It's a pressure we've put on ourselves. I have single friends who are older, and although they're not fucking thrilled about it, they realise they're not a pathetic disaster and they're fine."

The extension of this invisible timeline is having kids. This affects people with wombs more than men, which is why – Peeters believes – so many more female clients come to her in their mid-twenties, while men generally want help later in life. You can't argue with biology, but equally there's only so much pressure you can put on yourself. Besides, if it's the marriage bit you're worried about, as an ex-colleague once reassured me, when things don't work out by the age of 40, you'll be hot, aloof and readily picking up the first round of divorcees. So there's that.

STOP TOYING WITH THE IDEA OF GOING BACK TO UNI

If you have the money, why not. If you desperately want to retrain and change careers, go for it. But throwing yourself back into a degree in order to sustain adolescence, which will just get you into more debt than you're already in, is a terrible idea. You're not Van Wilder, and god knows you don't want to be. Press on with adulthood; don't take out a loan to do an MA in Creative Entrepreneurship at Goldsmiths.

TRUST IN YOUR CRISIS-MOTIVATED BREAK-UPS

If you break up with someone in the midst of a frantic mid-twenties crisis, it's hard not to wonder if you're simply doing it because of the whole crisis thing; if you'll look back in a couple of years and realise you made a terrible mistake. "They're not an accidental symptom," says Bertie. "You get to a point in your life where you realise a person is fit but actually they're an arsehole and I'm done with it. It's a very selfish age and you just have to obsess about yourself for a bit."

By being selfish, you're learning about yourself and what you need from another half so you don't end up with a boring dickhead.

DON'T STOP HAVING SEMI-REGULAR SEX

This is scientific, so don't question it. A patch of not sleeping with anyone is often a golden era of productivity and self-development, but also you can find yourself becoming so fussy and separatist that it's almost like you're testing yourself for how long you can not have sex for. If it's been six months, what's another three years, hey!

No. "Try to have sex at least once every four months. At least," advises Bertie. "Otherwise you become terrified of intimacy and you become really obsessed about your career, or your non-career, or what you look like in pictures, and you stalk your own Instagram even more than you stalk your ex's exes. You forget what it's like to interact with other people in that way."

AND DON'T MAKE YOUR ROOM A HOLY SPACE

"If you make your room like a weird shrine where nothing can be out of place, you'll start to think that you can never share your space or bed with another person. You make a second womb," says Bertie.

SPLIT YOUR STRESSES INTO DESIRE VS NEED

We went to school, we went to college, we got a job or went to uni – we followed the route prescribed to us unquestioningly, so it's no wonder that much of many people's mid-twenties crises are fuelled by the fact we're suddenly left to pasture, looking around at the dispersing herd.

Life coach Natalie reckons now is the time to seriously divide what you want from what you feel you should have. "A 'need' is something that's put on you, possibly by society, your friends, your colleagues. That's got a different energy to it than desire," she says. "It's almost like a must, and it puts a lot of pressure on you. Desire is a move towards something – you're the one pushing for it."

BE CAREFUL NOT TO JUST BLAME ONE SPECIFIC AREA OF YOUR LIFE

It's easy to start thinking if you had a decent job you'd be a whole different person and everything else would just slide into focus. "I fixate on the idea that I can't be single any more, but it's nothing to do with the fact I need or want a relationship; it's more because I'm confused about what I'm doing with the rest of my life," says Bertie. "Which is dangerous, because if you fixate on your job as the one thing that's making you unhappy and it's not, and then you quit and realise, you'll be in trouble."

PROTECT YOUR RIGHT TO BE EXHAUSTED

It's taken me 25 years to not feel incredibly guilty about "not being productive enough" if I decide to sit in bed and watch Netflix all weekend when I'm emotionally or physically exhausted. I'd think of months or years "wasted" to mental illness, during which I wasn't performing to capacity. But if you feel like having periods of downtime, don't punish yourself for it.

"I went through a phase last year of feeling depressed, and just sat in bed obsessing over YouTube vlogs; I couldn't go without watching them," says Bertie. "I felt like I was wasting my fucking life, and three months later I wrote this one piece about it that drew on everything I'd been feeling and it made sense. Every single experience you have, even if it's five days in bed, is going to be useful to you in some way. It just doesn't feel it at the time. We're so conditioned to think we should be performing all the time that we've completely lost respect for time-wasting. Time-wasting is when so many good things happen, or stupid ideas that turn into amazing ideas. Rest is useful. If you're in bed, your body is resting, even if your mind is going crazy."

This culture of constantly having to be "on" and fully living in every single area of our lives all the time is cut comes has the same origin as mid-life crises. As Robinson tells me, you're more likely to make the right decision from a place of calm anyway than you are from a place of stress, so allow yourself downtime wherever you can.

FUCK ANYONE (FIGURATIVELY, NOT LITERALLY) WHO DISMISSES YOUR FEELINGS AS ENTITLEMENT

"Many young adults worry that others will view their 'crisis' as whining or complaining," says Robinson. "And some people – particularly older people, or those who never had this period

of self-doubt – may do just that. Remember that whatever you are feeling is valid, even if others don't seem to think so."

So the next time someone reminds you that your twenties are the best time of your life, tell them that an expert in the field of generational crises said: "The amount of huge decisions you have to make creates arguably the most difficult part of the life span in terms of stress and mental health."

ULTIMATELY, JUST DO SOMETHING; ANYTHING

Take solace in the fact that no matter how much you fuck up your immediate life, it probably won't be that bad in the long run. Just do it. Or don't, and sit here with this bookmarked on your work computer, ordering cold chips and dating someone you're lukewarm about.