

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 27:

Transformation in mid-life

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to talking therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the Editor in Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Change can be hard, but sometimes it's necessary and in this episode, we will be discussing midlife transition to find out how we can come to terms with a new way of being.

Melissa:

People want to be more authentic, and they want to be true to themselves. And being in a non-judgmental space where you can explore those things with somebody is so helpful.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Melissa Cliffe. Melissa began her career in the marketing and events industry before qualifying in 2008 as a psychotherapist, and has continued training in a range of psychotherapeutic disciplines. Melissa has a particular interest in issues relating to midlife, running a regular women's conversational group, as well as providing specialised training. She sat down with Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UKCP, to discuss midlife and to find out if it really does lead to crisis.

Sarah:

Melissa, what causes people to start re-evaluating in midlife?

Melissa:

I think there are multiple reasons why somebody might start re-evaluating things in midlife, and I think it may be anything from external pressures, it might be existential questions, it might be the fact that our bodies change quite a lot at this time, or it may be that we get to a point where we have a sense of stagnation. So, if you think about external pressures, just about anybody you meet who's in midlife is probably juggling multiple responsibilities. We're all familiar with terms like the sandwich generation, and empty nest syndrome. It's also a time when you may be at the peak of your career. So you may also have a lot of pressures in terms of delivering, providing financial security. So it's probably the time in our life where we have more responsibility than any other point. I also think that when we get to midlife, it's actually a really perfect place from which to evaluate because it's at this point where you can look back and you can look forward. So I think that looking back can start a line of questioning like how has it gone, so far, what has worked, what hasn't, and things like the un-lived life can come to the fore. So you might be saying, 'well hang on a minute, I didn't write that book I thought I was going to write,' or 'I thought I was gonna live in this kind of house, and this isn't the house I was expecting.' So I think a lot of those regrets can start to come up. But it's also I think, looking forward and saying, 'okay, hopefully we've got another half of my life to live. I don't want to waste my time, I want to make this count.' And so I think there can start a real analysis of 'what do I actually want?'

And that's a pretty big question to start to entertain and think about. If you look at the conventional markers of life and the things that we are expected or told that we should be doing in life, I mean, of course, not everybody does this, but there's a sense that we finish our education, we find a good relationship, we have a family, we get a house, we get a good job. Maybe we have an aspiration to be at a certain point in our career, and you might have got there in midlife and then you have a really big question of, 'okay, so I've done it. What does it mean? Is this enough?'

Sarah:

'I'm feeling fulfilled' Yeah.

Melissa:

Exactly. And then you really have to ask yourself, 'what is fulfilment for me? What is going to give me meaning?' And maybe you'll get there you go, 'well yeah, this is what I want, and this is all working,' but you might decide 'I want something more.' Because I think we're pulled towards growth rather than stagnation. And I think we want to step out of stagnation into, okay, the roadmap isn't there anymore. That's quite exciting as well, but it also can be a bit unnerving when you're not quite sure which direction to head in. So I think it's a lot of reasons really.

Sarah:

When we think of midlife, there's always this kind of cliché about men going through a midlife crisis, and buying their first motorbike or whatever. All of those kind of stereotypical views. But surely women must face crisis at this stage in life?

Melissa:

Yeah, yeah, they do. And actually, I'm always a little unsure about the term crisis. For me, I quite like to think of it as a transition. Because I think your crisis is often triggered by maybe some kind of event, maybe a bereavement or job loss or something, maybe an empty nest. But I think it's more of a period of transition and changing from, you're not young anymore and you're not old yet, you're somewhere in this weird middle ground. But I think for women, the other thing that you can't ignore is that most women in midlife are also going to go through the menopause. We know that some women can go through this stage with very few symptoms, and it's, really not too much of a problem. But we also know that some women have a really difficult time and sometimes symptoms are quite severe, but they're having to develop a new understanding of their bodies. There's a kind of loss of fertility of menstruation, this monthly cycle that they've been in. Plus for, perimenopause, there's all sorts of changes that can go on, and I think it can really throw up some questions. Let's say you've always felt quite fit and active and good about yourself and then you start waking up and thinking 'hang on a minute, I feel like I'm 100 years old, my joints ache, I'm lacking in energy.' And suddenly you have a new set of physical limitations to deal with. So I think that can really throw a lot of women. I think that's quite difficult to adjust to. And we know obviously, that's temporary, it's not forever, but while you're in it, that can be really a bit scary. Is it harder to deal with changes as we get older?

Sarah:

Is it harder to deal with changes as we get older?

Melissa:

I think it's yes and no. So yes, in that, by the time you're midlife, you probably have a well established identity, you have a well established status, people take for granted that you're going to show up in a fairly consistent way, and I think to suddenly change those things, has a ripple effect.

Let's say you're the person in your organisation who always saves the day when things start to go wrong, and let's say you always do that, you're probably going to find that people will expect that from you. Whenever you do that people might be grateful to you, they may start taking you for granted. But you get a certain amount of positive reinforcement for that behaviour. But internally, you might be thinking, 'oh, god, this takes a lot out of me to come up with creative solutions all the time and to save the day and be there for everybody,' and internally, you might be thinking, 'I don't want to do this anymore, I've had enough of this.' But to make that change means that you lose something in the eyes of everybody else. I think that can be difficult. But in other ways, I think that there's a lot that we can draw on at this stage too. So something that I hear a lot is people saying that they care much less about what other people think. They're more willing to say no. It's almost like there's a lack of patience. And the other emotion that comes up a lot around this time is anger. Sometimes it's rage. But we can really use that anger in order to help us know where to set our boundaries. And the anger gives us a sort of energy and an impetus and helps us to mobilise, to take those steps that we need. But these emotions, and these feelings and thoughts that we're having often do get quite uncomfortable at this period of life. And although that may seem difficult, it is often the start of a new way of doing things.

Sarah:

So if someone's listening to this, Melissa, and they're thinking, 'I want my life to change.' How would you even know where to start?

Melissa:

It has to start with having a good relationship with yourself. It really helps to see this as transition. It doesn't have to be turning your life upside down, overnight. It really doesn't. I mean, for some people may feel like that's what's necessary. But for most of us, probably it won't be. One of the things we can use is curiosity. So it's getting really interested in what are we drawn to? What are we repelled by? What kind of things give us satisfaction? and noticing how am I feeling in these situations? What is making me angry? I think this is going to be quite British as well actually, that we, we minimise our anger, we say, 'oh, no, I shouldn't be angry. I shouldn't be this kind of person. I don't like conflict,' or whatever. And so sometimes we miss that vital information that, our anger or our emotions tell us. Our anger might be saying, 'I'm sick of being talked to you like this or I'm sick of being taken for granted.' So it's really listening so that you get the information about what needs to change. So I think you'd have to start by becoming aware and paying attention and then once you get a picture and you get a feel for what you would like to be different, then you can start by thinking, 'okay, so what would be a manageable change?' And it may mean you're going to put yourself out of your comfort zone a little bit, do something simple to begin with, even small steps can have a really profound impact.

Sarah:

That's hugely reassuring, and actually very inspiring. Because I would imagine that people might be listening to this and thinking, 'this is what my life is now.' And even contemplating any kind of change is pointless once you reach a certain age, but, you've just given one example of how you can do something tiny that could actually be hugely changing and positive. Is it ever too late to think to make a change?

Melissa:

Never, no, I really don't think it is. We also know about neuroplasticity these days, that our brain is really good at making new neural connections. We just have to do it consciously, if we choose to do it we can. When we do make changes, it's really natural as well that we make a few changes. It feels uncomfortable, and at first, we might feel really good and think, 'yeah, well, yeah, we're making progress.' And then you have a wobble. And you go back a bit and you revert to your old ways of doing things. And then you can feel a bit like a failure and go 'ugh, you know, I really let myself down, what's the point', but it's really normal. It's really natural that we go forward a bit, and then we go back a little bit and we go forward a bit and get back a little bit. And ultimately, if the direction is in the right direction, I would say, just be kind, don't worry about it. Just say, 'okay, I wobbled, I went back a bit, that's okay, and I can pick up again, this is, you know, a new day, a new moment. I can reset and refocus on what I want, at any time.'

Sarah:

How can working with a therapist help someone to come to terms with change?

Melissa:

I think it can be really helpful. A lot of the things we can do on our own, but some of the things that may be more difficult is spotting patterns that we get stuck in. And having somebody else to help us identify how we get stuck, or what's not quite working for us can be really helpful. Sometimes when we're resistant to change, there's something else that needs attention first. There's nothing wrong with that. And I think a therapist can really help you look at that and understand that in a way that's compassionate, and understanding, and not judging, but also helping to challenge you to think about those things. When we're changing, it can be difficult. And when we change, it has an effect on everybody around us. So I think that if you have support during that, and I think a good therapist can do that and give you the emotional support and help you to take some of those uncomfortable steps. One of the things I hear a lot and seems to really come through at this point is, people want to be more authentic and they want to be true to themselves and being in a non-judgmental space where you can explore those things with somebody is so helpful. And there are other things that can help like journaling and so forth. But I really think that having somebody with you to help and facilitate you through that process who isn't going to interject.

Sarah:

Yeah, in what other part of our life would we have someone who would sit there being completely present non-judgmental for a whole hour. And as you say, if it does impact relationships with those closest to use, then it's vital that you've got somebody there, who can hold you through that and ask you the questions and help you to find the solutions within you.

Melissa:

I think that women are very good at supporting each other and showing up for each other and there's a lot that we can do to help. But one thing I do notice, and I see this even in my own friendship groups, that somebody will come with a problem, everybody will want to help and say something useful and a lot of advice gets shared.

And while it's very well meant, it's not necessarily what somebody needs or wants. The care is there and that's absolutely vital and important, but it can almost be more confusing when you get a lot of advice. And a therapist will really help you to connect with your needs, your truth, your authenticity, it has to come from that place. It can't come from what everybody else thinks you ought to be doing.

Sarah:

Now, I wanted to ask you about something else which relates to this topic, because I know that you're interviewing women across all ages, to find out how they feel about their appearance.

Melissa:

Some of the things that have come up so far that I think might be helpful is that clearly at this point in life our appearance does start to change. We stop looking as young as we once were, wrinkles show up our weight may change, all sorts of things happen. And it seems important that we can at least acknowledge that that's changing. It seems helpful for women to be able to accept that there is some kind of loss, that there may have been advantages to looking a particular way or to getting a certain kind of attention. And, you know, people will talk about things like being served quickly at the bar, that kind of thing. It seems to be a point where women can reinvent themselves. A lot of the younger women I've talked to are very afraid of looking older. And then a lot of the older women are saying, 'do you know what, I just feel better than I ever did, I'm comfortable in my skin' or 'I'm okay with my wrinkles because they're a sign of my experience.' It's recognising that something different is going to come and grow from this. You may come across with more gravitas, that's not a word that's often apply to younger people. It's such a shame that as women we are never going to please everybody because we'll either be letting ourselves go being too sexy at the wrong age. So this is hard to do. But we're not going to win everybody's approval, we have to go back inside and say, 'what do we want for us?' And really check in with this confidence that can grow at this point.

Sarah:

Melissa, this has been such an empowering and inspiring and very comforting interview because what you have done is take away a lot of the fear of change. And I think that instead of us now, seeing change as something that's incredibly dramatic, and you can't go back and that negative self talk, you've actually broken it down into something that's actually very positive. You've completely removed the stigma of middle age and re-framed the language of crisis into something that is opportunity, that's transition. And the other message I really got from what you said is freedom to be ourselves and the more that we can, whether through therapy or whether through sitting with ourselves and getting to know ourselves and our changing cells /self?, how we can actually release a lot of untapped potential. It's a really exciting message to hear.

Melissa :

I hope so there's so much good that can come from this point in life. It's an invitation to grow. And I really think that as humans, we want to grow and we want to expand in ourselves and I think this is the perfect time to do it.

Sarah:

I love your words, and I will hold on to these and I think hopefully all of our listeners will the celebration of uniqueness and that invitation to grow. I think that's wonderful. So whether you're seven or you're 75, hold that close to your heart.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Melissa Cliffe speaking to Sara Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find a Therapist tab. We'll also be discussing midlife transition in Psychologies magazine this month or you can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find this too. So join us again next month, till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>