

Lee: This is Episode Number 193 of Stay Happily Married: Managing Mid-life Together.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Does your spouse's mid-life crisis mean the end of your marriage? A motorcycle, a bright, red convertible or maybe, a new young girlfriend, all of these just scream mid-life crisis. We seem to be able to recognize the obvious signs of a mid-life crisis, but how do we handle a situation like this? In a marriage, a mid-life crisis is never a stage that affects only one person.

Dr. Dave Aspenson is with us today. He holds a doctorate in counseling psychology from UNC Chapel Hill. His natural gift for guiding others led to a position as a clinical assistant of behavioral medicine at UNC Chapel Hill. After practicing and training in a variety of counseling, medical and psychiatric settings, Dave opened his own office in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, back in 1999. He's now available for private consultation and counseling. Today, he's going to help us figure out how to deal with mid-life crises.

Welcome to the show, Dave. I'm so glad you could join us.

Dave: Thank you! I'm glad to be here.

Lee: I'm curious. A "mid-life crisis", that is a term that we hear all the time. How do you define the term "mid-life crisis"?

Dave: Well, Lee, you gave some voice to the typical definition of mid-life crisis in, what I call, the "mid-life cliché". Typically, a man chasing after the young girlfriend or the bright, red convertible or motorcycle but clichés don't come out of nothing. So, I think there is some meaning to some of those events. But the popular understanding, I think, doesn't really do justice to some of the real gifts of what I call "the mid-life critical juncture".

A crisis is considered something to be avoided, right, in most of our minds, but, really, the technical dictionary definition of a crisis is just a critical juncture, a turning point. So, around this really extended time that could be characterized as mid-life, there are certain things, I think, that come up in a developmental sense that are crucial to what I would consider a well-lived or vital life.

Lee: Can a mid-life crisis be something, if it's not the divorce your wife and buy the Corvette, can it be something more minor than that, than what we're sort of thinking of as the classic definition?

Dave: Absolutely. Around anything like this, there are dimensions of levels so, yeah, I mean, a full-blown mid-life critical juncture may have some fairly dramatic forms of some kind. There may be a sense in which a long-term marriage is at stake or a long-term career, but there are also quieter versions of this place that are less dramatic that may just

be reflected more in a kind of a quiet sense that there's something else in life that's needed but it's not quite clear what that is. It's not such a dramatic movement. It's just more of a sense that it's time for a change in some way around business as usual.

Lee: Right, right. What is mid-life? What's the age range where this whole change takes place? I feel like the definition of the middle keeps moving. Where are we now with when should you expect your mid-life crisis, if you're going to have one?

Dave: Well, my basic answer to that would be who knows? Mid-life, technically, for any individual, who knows when their mid-life is? We don't know until we actually die. We can't identify the mid-point of our life, right?

Lee: Right.

Dave: So mid-life, for me, is just more of a metaphor that describes this kind of passage that could, I think, come up anywhere from a person as young as in their early 30s. My wife says her first mid-life passage was around 30-something. Or I've talked to folks that really are further down the road that we aren't going to call them senior citizens, but they're beyond the 50s in some way. So, there's a big range of possibilities in there, but I think the mid-life passage, in a sense, is distinctive.

I think there's three basic critical times in life. I say there's an early-life crisis when a young person is starting out, and they're faced with this infinite set of possibilities and they're making choices and setting out on a certain path in their life, deciding what that path is going to be. For some people in the early-life, as you know, it can well be a crisis, right? I see this all the time now as I talk to a lot of parents with their young adult people really having a difficult time navigating that particular crisis.

Then, there's more of what I consider a late-life crisis, which is a whole other animal. It's more around, here's someone toward the end of the journey who is in some ways working on making their peace with the life that they lived. Someone told me recently that their mother, late in her life, found out that she had an illness that she was not going to recover from and she just paused and said, "Well, this is it?" I think that was kind of a beautiful and honest sort of expression of that stage of life. "How do I make sense of all this?"

The mid-life part, I think, is a different part of the journey. It's that time when, I think, in some ways it kind of characterizes the mid-life is that some life has been lived, there's some life that's been established, but oftentimes that's actually quite a good life on many levels. It could be a good marriage, a good productive career. But to be the arena of the mid-life, we just say it requires living of some clock years so that you've in some ways have done some things that have established a direction.

Lee: Right. That all makes a lot of sense. Now, you said something interesting. You referenced your wife's first mid-life crisis, and I think most of us associate mid-life crises with men. Is this something that you see happening across genders for both men and women?

Dave: Well, absolutely. But I think there's distinctive ways that men and women do navigate this passage and when I say "different ways", let me be clear I'm not saying that men just do it this way or women just do it this way, I'm just kind of talking about some tendencies, not just like, literally, men just do this or women just do this. But I think there are some differences in that men are, I think, by nature and training, somewhat more inclined to, as we say in my field, technically act out, to do stuff, to give some expression to the tension that emerges around this mid-life passage.

I think that's where some of the clichés come to play. In fact, for men, the Harley Davidson Motorcycle Company says, "We can identify the exact year of a male mid-life crisis," and I actually saw the graphic and it was interesting because they track the age of their customers and they tend to be men, of course. As one motorcycle guy told me, "Harley Davidson is our expensive costume jewelry for men." Anyway, as they track the age of men, they found that their spike in the age of men that buy Harley Davidson motorcycles occurs right at 49 years of age. It's quite dramatic. You see the graph go along on the bottom and it shoots up at 49 and goes back down. So, men are more inclined, I think, to do something.

Whereas a woman absolutely is going to oftentimes have the exact same things come up, which is the basic question of, "What's the meaning of my life now?" A woman, as she meets that, is probably going to be less inclined to just go do something, to chase after a new relationship or to buy something, but may be more inclined to kind of drive some of that tension underground, to hold it more quietly. It might take the form of what we technically consider depression. They'll go to the family doctor with that but it may reflect kind of an inner, more quiet desperation around, "I should be happy with this life because of all the reasons that a person would be, but I'm not," and that "not" part, for a woman, is sometimes harder to entertain.

Women tend, in our world anyway, to be more cultured to be outward-looking, to support the other, and this mid-life calling isn't really about that. It really is a personal matter. It really is about what's vital for that woman. So, it requires sometimes a new, what I call "enlightened selfishness", some real, true consideration like, "What do I want?"

Years ago, there was a "middle-aged" woman who I was pressing around this issue, "What do you want? What do you want, really?" She finally looked at me and said, "Dave, if you go around asking middle-aged women what do they want, you're just going to drive us all crazy."

Lee: Well, that's a good point. It makes me wonder, what really is at stake in a mid-life crisis? What is the deal here? What are we looking for?

Dave: Well, this is my view of that and since you're interviewing me, I get to tell you what my view is, right?

Lee: Right.

Dave: So, here's my view. I think the poet said it best, the poet, another David, David White. In one of his poems he said, "There are a thousand lives that you can call by any name that you choose, but only one life that you can call your own." I think that says it just about as good as it can be said.

Lee: Right. OK. That works. That really does work. What starts this thing? What triggers it? What is it that's prompting a mid-life crisis for people that are going through it?

Dave: That's a good question. I think the answer to that is like there's infinite possibilities around that. The general categories I'd say, the prompt could feel external in some ways, like something happens in the environment, like something dramatic, like a loss of your health in some significant way where you really feel that threat of your mortality in some distinctive new way because of a real threat, or from another front, a loss of a job or being laid off from a job.

A long-term marriage has its own mid-life crisis, typically, so it could take the form of a lot of new eruption of marital dissatisfaction. In a relationship that has maybe come along OK for some period of time, looking after the family, but oftentimes, as the kids are launched and the couple are left with one another in a new way, it poses quite a new challenge and, of course, opportunity to really have a chance to revitalize. That could be another manifestation on the surface and just a lot of conflict in a marriage or a quieter dissatisfaction in the sense that we're just going through the motions here in some way.

Lee: With the economy being the way that it is right now and everybody's under a fair amount of financial pressure, it's harder to go out and buy that brand-new Corvette. I think a Corvette is now almost \$70,000.

Dave: Yeah, that's out of my range.

Lee: Yeah. But how has that affected this whole phenomenon? Does the economy impact the mid-life crisis situation?

Dave: I think so. I wouldn't say in that way, in the sense of, "Yeah, I just can't go out and buy a toy," but more in the sense of that there's oftentimes distinctive new economic pressure. One of the things that oftentimes happens around this mid-life passage is that the basic economics come into play in a sense of, "This is the way I make my living." Sometimes that can be a really good living but maybe there's something about the way I'm doing that or have done that that something in me knows, it's just like, "I don't want to do it anymore." That's not an unusual thing to come up, but that job could be a kind of golden handcuff, in one sense. "Yeah, but I can't stop doing that. I've already accrued the stuff and it has to be paid for still. There's still notes attached to it all."

On the other side though, someone meets that pressure and actually loses that job, especially for men, there's some distinctive ways, again, this isn't just true for men, but I

think there's some distinctive ways in which our identity is so tied up in our work that a threat on that front can be a very deep threat. I've seen and talked to young men who have been in a place of extended unemployment who land themselves in a kind of suicidal depression around that event and I was thinking, "What's that about really?" Because it's probably, even without his job, it's probably not really about his survival, in our culture.

I met a friend from Haiti. He said, "You people, you can't starve here if you want to because we do still have some nets. There's places to be fed and sheltered." So I don't think it's really about that. That person, it's like in some ways, their basic sense of who they are as a self-sufficient man that can provide is at stake. So, there's a lot in this place of more economic pressure. It puts more heat, in a sense, around these kinds of issues and can help accentuate one of the hallmark forms that this passage takes and that's the inner sense that, "I'm in a trap."

In this economic climate, if there's something, if it's showing up in your work in some ways, like oftentimes, on the other end of this passage, it may well be a whole new work life. It may be doing something that you've never done before. It may be a dramatic shift in income, all kinds of things that could potentially come out of that, but if you're in a place in this climate where it feels like even to think about that would be foolhardy, "I'm just freaking lucky to have any job." So, that's just part of the way that this particular climate can work on us.

Lee: Right. That's very interesting and I'm sure a lot of people can relate to that. How does this experience, you're going through this, how does your spouse respond to it? How do they react to it if they're not having their mid-life crisis when you are?

Dave: Well, if your partner is going through this passage then, in some ways, you are having a crisis too, by definition. You're in it together. You're going to feel it as a partner in the same way as you're going to feel that sense of deep threat.

I was just talking to someone recently who has a lovely family, a great life, everything is going great in many ways, fundamentally, but her husband has taken up running in a very earnest way. There's something about the way he's doing that that's stirring up some concern in her, something about that that feels threatening because he's devoting a lot of time and energy and attention to it out of a busy professional practice, the sense of, her sense is, "Well, maybe, this means he's leaving me," in some ways. I think that really captures that kind of a partner's response to this.

When that happens, I think there are some really important things that are needed. One, it's important for the partner to really be clear around what their limits are around what their partner's up to. If you're in a relationship with somebody and their crisis is, in fact, taking the turn of them saying, "Yeah, I'm really having some interest in exploring this other relationship," well, if you're the partner, I think it's a perfectly legitimate thing to say, "Well, now you've stepped outside the bounds of what's acceptable to me and if you continue on that path, you're going to have your crisis by yourself."

Lee: Yeah.

Dave: You have to be very clear about your limits. I think it's important for the partner to sort of recognize, "Yeah, I am having a crisis, too," to sort of accept that that's a deeply unsettling time, to be very clear with their partner about what their limits are. "I'm here to support you as you figure this out," I think that's important, "But I'm also not going to sacrifice myself to keep this relationship going because I don't think anybody should do that." A relationship that's kept going under those terms is eventually going to be in trouble.

Lee: Yeah. That's helpful. You have to draw those lines and impose those limits, but you also said you've got to be supportive.

Dave: That's the other side is to find a way to recognize, "Well, my partner is going through something here. Within those limits, I'm going to look for a way to kind of support and make room for this place of not knowing. They don't really know what's up. I don't really know what's up, but I'm willing to make a space for them. I'm not going to be hammering you."

A mid-life crisis, what I think about, by definition, means that a person is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Both of the horns are important and it's tempting for a partner to kind of vote for one side and say, "OK. I feel your tension but here's what needs to be happening. Go do this." That advice might be helpful at the right juncture but there's another place where it's better to step back and say, "There's some fundamental way, you need to figure this out for yourself and I'm here with you, as your partner, to help hold this space for that."

That means more listening, more talking and encouraging your partner, if need be, to get help. That's a fair thing to say, "You're navigating this in a way that doesn't look very effective so get some support to help you manage it more effectively."

Lee: Right. Good advice. So you're in this state, you're in this transition and you've got all this stuff going on in your head and you feel like you've got to make some changes because you're not satisfied with the way things are going. Do you really have to make a change in order to feel better? Is that a requirement of going through this passage or this transition?

Dave: That's a really good question, Lee. I would say in response to that, my answer would be, first, no, then, maybe. First, no, then, maybe. I say first, no, because to navigate this territory well, to really mine it, to really use it as an opportunity to really move into, in some ways, a life that really just feels like this is more my life, it's important to not make sudden moves. That's one of the great temptations. That's where the clichés come from is the temptation to feel the tension between the horns of this dilemma and just go do something, whether that means dump your relationship, dump your career and just go for it.

Well, for a first path, I'd say that's a bad idea because, chances are good, you're going to be chasing after something but you don't really know what you're chasing after, that's the real hazard. So, no, you don't want to make a dramatic move first. Now that's not to say that there may well be a place for a dramatic move. I mean, that could be called for, not necessarily. And it may be on the end of this, something outside your life may look exactly the same. That can be a perfectly beautiful, legitimate outcome of all of this, but, for some, there are some places where what this means is that for me to continue to live my life means it is going to have to take some dramatic, new direction.

If you say the no first, then you have the opportunity to really have your wits about yourself when you make that move so it comes from a place of more need knowing, like, "This is really what this is about. This is the risk that I'm taking but I know what I'm doing. I'm conscious about that."

Lee: Right.

Dave: "I'm not taking kind of unconscious risk," which is one of the real hazards of this place is just taking semi or unconscious risks. And they are real risks; it can have real cost for both your life at home, your family and your work if you don't say no first before contemplating a dramatic move. But, again, for some people, not making a dramatic move, ultimately, could be, in a sense, the death in them.

Lee: Yeah. No, I hear you. Some people just have to do it. But let's say you make some sort of dramatic move and it impacts the relationship with your spouse negatively, and it was probably the wrong thing to do. In your experience, is there a way to recover? Can you get back to where you started on the relationship?

Dave: Well, I think that really depends. It depends on what's transpired. It depends on what's happened along the way, what particular kind of damage has been done. I think it mostly depends on the intention of the two people. I get two people really discovered that's what they want to do, I'm still after all these years of being a marriage therapist and going through my own life and a divorce, I'd still say I'm an incurable optimist. I think if two people want to do that, their intention is to do that, then there's nothing that can stop them.

Lee: Well, good. Optimism is good. We need some of that out there, so that is helpful. It sounds at some level like a mid-life crisis. It almost sounds like it could last forever, that you could sort of dull it down and put it under the surface, park it somewhere, but it's still kind of lingering there. Is there really a solution to this? Is there a way to sort of move on, and can you work on it with your spouse and get through it and hit the reset button?

Dave: Well, I think what you describe, for me, is a kind of one of my nightmares almost, to live out in that way. You just sort of settle into something like that that doesn't, in some way, kind of make a space for this crisis in its helpful forms. I think some people do exactly what you just described because we don't have a choice in the matter. I think that's an option.

I know when someone in my family died some years ago who I recognized was really a deeply unhappy person. It kind of startled me because they were gone. I sort of recognized that's the whole story. Nothing changes. It's not like TV or the movies where it all just works out. Sometimes, it doesn't actually work out. There's ways to go astray, without a doubt. But I think under those conditions that, for me, my way of feeling about this is that life is just life, and it's always looking for a way to live. So, even under those conditions, there's something still alive and that's when I think the crisis oftentimes comes.

Sometimes, people, under those conditions, without really realizing it, it's like our unconscious mind will engineer that crisis for us. It may feel like it's being done to us, like, "Look what's happening to me," but it's really, in some fundamental way, coming from within, that kind of eternal sense that life is meant to be lived, take some shape.

That shape, for a time, may just look and feel awful on the surface of what can constitute a crisis. On the other hand, this is just my feeling, there's no evidence for this whatsoever, but I've known people who, mostly men, who have just died right in the middle, or what we consider the middle years, died, typically, from something like a sudden heart attack.

In some of those cases, I think what that was, was actually a response to this whole thing we're talking about, inability to find the way. It's like living in a place where it just seems like life is not really here but there's nothing else to do, there's no other choices and that the body just gives out and that's like a very dramatic end of that story, outcome, but I actually think that happens.

Lee: Wow, wow. Well, I feel like you've opened up my thinking on this topic in a way that I've never really thought about it before. It's a much broader topic. It really isn't about the red convertible and the girl in the bikini riding along next to you. It's a much bigger story to tell.

Dave: That's certainly my view.

Lee: Yeah. We could talk about it all day, I'm sure, but we've got to wrap up. Are there any sort of last words of wisdom you would pass along to folks that are dealing with this or worrying about this?

Dave: Well, I would say, in principle, my encouragement for folks is to recognize that the tension that comes up in this place is not a bad thing in and of itself. But the really creative move is to stay in that tension, to not let go of either horn of the dilemma but to just stay in it. That's why we were saying I'm so glad you asked about dramatic moves. That's how we don't want to make a dramatic move. A dramatic move is just a way to escape the tension.

You have to understand, we don't like the tension. We don't like tension. If you naturally want to reduce tension, one would experience, but there's this creative life and energy in

this tension so you want to just stay there. Practically speaking, that means finding ways to support yourself in the midst of it, not making dramatic moves, to find ways to listen deeply to whatever it is that actually is coming up.

If you really think about it, before you went out and bought a sports car, if you pause and really thought deeply about it, you might recognize that there's something about that impulse that's actually quite beautiful and that you want to support and invite into your life. Maybe, when you do that, you could literally go buy a sports car, that's OK. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. That's perfectly fine. But if you really want to know what that's about, you have to just pause and just find your own ways of reflection.

If you're the partner, practically speaking, you want to keep your own wits about yourself, learn to calm your own anxiety, support your partner where you can and figure out where your limits are and be clear about those and don't be shy about sharing your feelings about it.

Lee: Fantastic advice. Dave, thank you so much for being with us on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Dave: It's my pleasure. I just stumbled across stayhappilymarried.com some time ago, and there's a wealth of resources there so I'm very happy to be a part of it.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Dave Aspenson, you can visit his website at daveaspenson.com. Well, it's actually davidaspenson.com. It's D-A-V-I-D-A-S-P-E-N-S-O-N.com. I'll put a link to it in the show notes. You can also reach his office at 919-402-9212. To get information on how to survive a mid-life crisis, you can visit Dave's website at helpformidlifecrisis.com. I'll also put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Thank you so much for joining in today. I hope that we've been helpful to you. If you have any feedback about this show or any of our episodes, we'd love to hear from you on our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can reach us by e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.