

Upfront

INSIDE

EXAMINER: GOLF LINKS
IN MASSACHUSETTS P. 11

MISS CONDUCT: TEENAGE
THIRD WHEEL P. 14

DINNER WITH CUPID:
PLACE YOUR BETS P. 17

"I THINK WE NEED TO GO TO COUPLES THERAPY: PANIC BUTTON HIT." — LOVE LETTERS P. 10



PERSPECTIVE

Getting Past My Fear of Turning 40

BY JACI CONRY

I remember when my father turned 40. Someone gave him a mug with that snarky saying: “Over the Hill.” To my 9-year-old-self, 40 seemed positively ancient. My dad got glasses that year; he wore gray suits and carried a bursting briefcase every day. He and my mom talked about bills, real estate, and town politics. I decided then that there was nothing fun about 40.

I’ve been fortunate to look and feel youthful most of my adult life. Yet I struggled as I faced turning 40 this year. I felt depressed and tired. I obsessively scrutinized the lines on my forehead and started finding workouts tougher. People in their 20s and early 30s seemed impossibly young to me. For the first time, I felt old.

Though I am blessed to have a husband and children I adore, I found myself missing my youth, regretting opportunities not taken, and wondering if I should be doing something different with my life. Recently, I had coffee with a childhood friend also on the verge of 40. I was prepared to commiserate about the angst surrounding the occasion, but she surprised me. She’d just returned from an exotic trip with her college roommates to celebrate turning 40. “I’m OK with it,” she said. “I feel like if this is forty, bring it on. I’m excited to see what comes next.”

After our conversation, I wondered what I was so afraid of. I started to realize that, rather than facing 40 with dread, I could approach the beginning of my next decade as a milestone to

embrace. Several studies in the past 10 years or so have found that the start of middle age—40 and beyond—is often when people are the least happy, with the lowest levels of life satisfaction and highest levels of anxiety. Researchers attribute this to the fact that during the middle years, adults are often faced with the pressures of raising children and looking after aging parents while simultaneously dealing with mounting financial and career pressures. One study, by researchers at England's University of Warwick and Dartmouth College, noted that women in the United States on average are most miserable at age 40. (Men tend to be at their lowest when they hit 50.)

Turning 40 can be traumatic for women due to real physical changes: Hormone levels shift, metabolism slows down, and the onset of menopause isn't far off, notes Clara Young, a psychologist and director of The Health and Happiness Center in California. "There are also emotional issues brought on by societal perspective that a woman is no longer youthful and beautiful over 40," she says. In addition, we begin to be more aware of our mortality. "After 40, our body starts to show signs of aging. And death, which has been distant, is lurking around, making us question our life and its meaning."

Questioning where you are going and even who you are can be uncomfortable, but it generally isn't catastrophic. Consider your restlessness an opportunity for self-exploration. "Women who have reached 40 tend to be more confident and settled," says Robin Deutsch, a psychologist and associate professor at William James College in Newton. "They are enjoying life without as much of the insecurity and self-doubt that existed in their 20s and 30s." That resonates with me: As a younger adult, I obsessed over what people thought of me and exhaustively tried to hold crumbling relationships together. Conflict paralyzed

I'M STRUCK
BY THE NOTION
THAT I SHOULD
TAKE MORE
RISKS, WHICH
FEELS BOTH
TERRIFYING AND
INVIGORATING.

me. My priorities are much different now. I focus on surrounding myself with friends and family with whom I can be my true self.

Deutsch tells women approaching middle age that they have developed the wisdom to make good choices. "Now is the time to make new decisions and choices that work for who they are today, putting aside old expectations," she says.

The good news is that almost all the research shows well-being increases as people age, since we usually develop coping abilities that allow us to deal with hardship and negative circumstances more effectively than our younger selves.

Looking back on the obstacles I've faced and the losses I've dealt with, I realize I've developed resiliency; experience has taught me valuable lessons. I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the security of my family and for my health, because I now know—in ways I never grasped as a younger adult—that life can change in an instant.

Carl Jung once said: "Life really does begin at 40. Up until then you are just doing research." There's plenty of support for that theory. Vera Wang embarked on her career as a fashion designer at 40; Robin Chase started Zipcar at 42; and Julia Child didn't publish her first cookbook until she was nearly 50.

Lately, my mind has been whirling with ideas: I'm looking into classes that may influence my career direction, considering new hobbies, and pushing beyond my comfort zone athletically. As someone who has always played it safe, I'm struck by the notion that I should take more risks, which feels both terrifying and invigorating. It's possible that little will change in my life during my 40s, and I think I'll be OK with that. But, for now, I'm focused on finding new paths to forge.

Jaci Conroy is a regular contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.