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LIFE & STYLE The Virtuous Midlife Crisis

Forget the sports car and new trophy spouse. For Generation X, it's yoga, meditation retreats and keto diets.



Susan Patil Swearingen, pictured during a trip to San Diego, quit her corporate job at 48. She became a yoga and mindfulness teacher and opened a women's clothing boutique. SUSAN SWEARINGEN

By [Andrea Petersen](#)

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Tom Finn, a 57-year-old baby boomer, celebrated his 50th birthday with a raucous trip to Las Vegas: He and his friends went ziplining, nightclubbing and played blackjack at swim-up tables in a pool at Caesars Palace. "I was a frat boy wanting to relive my college youth," he says.

But when his wife, Debbie Finn, a 50-year-old Generation Xer, hit the milestone birthday, she marked it by hiking four to six hours a day in Portugal and Spain. "I knew I wanted to be hiking and to be outside," she says. "I'm much more aware of my health now."

Generation Xers, who now range in age from about 40 to 55, are redefining the rules of the midlife reinvention. Forget the trappings of the stereotypical midlife crisis: the sports car, the new trophy spouse and general bad behavior. Now it's more likely to be yoga, meditation retreats and [keto diets](#).

Welcome to the virtuous midlife crisis.

Many people facing midlife now don't want to blow up their lives, just upgrade them. They tended to marry and have children later: In 1975, the median age at first marriage was 23.5 for men and 21.1 for women, according to the Census Bureau. In 2005, it was 27.1 and 25.3, respectively. Compared to earlier generations, people at midlife today are less likely to feel like they missed out on having fun. Instead, they are often more worried about staying healthy enough to see their children graduate high school.



Tom Finn, a 57-year-old baby boomer, celebrated his 50th birthday with a raucous trip to Las Vegas. PHOTO: DEBBIE FINN

Doctors, health resorts, meditation teachers and adventure travel companies say they are seeing growing numbers of people in their 40s and early 50s seeking to change their lives after having a midlife epiphany. The Virtuoso network of travel agencies has seen an uptick in people marking midlife with “carpe diem” trips to remote or physically challenging destinations like Antarctica or Machu Picchu, says Virtuoso spokeswoman Misty Belles.

Butterfield & Robinson, an operator of high-end biking and hiking trips, says that in the past five years it has seen a 20% increase in bookings by Gen Xers celebrating milestone birthdays or other special events. And 60% of Gen Xers who

said they are making New Year’s resolutions in 2020 plan to focus on “being more physically active,” according to a recent survey commissioned by [Planet Fitness](#), a chain of gyms.

Of course, behaviors don’t always follow rigid generational divisions. Plenty of midlifers now still act out in rebellious ways, and there have always been people who adopted healthier habits as they aged.

But there is a growing awareness of how lifestyle influences health that is shaping many midlifers’ decisions, doctors say. More research has shown how diet and exercise can play a role in the prevention of diseases such as cancer, heart disease and even dementia, information that may be spurring middle-aged patients to turbocharge efforts to improve their health, says Robert McLean, an internal medicine physician and rheumatologist at Northeast Medical Group of Yale New Haven Health and the president of the American College of Physicians.

According to a 2017 report from AARP, Gen Xers’ conception of the American Dream is focused on “well-being, to be healthy and not necessarily worry about the big expensive things and having all the money,” says Patty David, director, consumer insights at AARP and the lead author of the report. “Because they can’t have everything the boomers have, their American Dream isn’t necessarily going to be what the boomers’ American Dream was” at their age, which was more about “having the big house and the car,” she says.

Many people in their 40s and early 50s now simply can't afford an old-school midlife crisis. Their early working lives were defined by the recession of the early 1990s. Many were starting families and trying to buy homes when the 2008 economic downturn hit. Only about one-third of Gen Xers have greater wealth than their parents

did at the same age, according to a 2014 report from the Pew Charitable Trusts. And the typical Gen Xer has six times more debt.

"The midlife journey will be more difficult for a good chunk of them because of heightened problems of inequality," says Carol Ryff, director of the Institute on Aging at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and principal investigator of a large study on midlife in the U.S. She pointed to a recent rise in "[deaths of despair](#)" among middle-aged adults driven in part by drug overdoses, alcohol abuse and [suicide](#). Dr. Ryff notes that some millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, may face dire conditions when they hit middle age, partly because of high [student loan debt](#).

At the same time, Gen X's move into middle-age dovetails with the growth of the wellness industry that now encompasses everything from Botox and snack food to sleep apps. It is now a \$4.5 trillion business, according to the latest data from the Global Wellness Institute, a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

"Almost every woman I know is in the middle of trying something, a cleanse or a new mindfulness app on their phone or yoga or Pilates," says Ada Calhoun, the 43-year-old author of the new book "Why We Can't Sleep: Women's New Midlife Crisis." Ms. Calhoun argues that today's middle-aged women are exhausted and overwhelmed largely because of job insecurity, debt and unrealistic expectations around work and family life.

Ms. Finn, who did the 50th birthday hiking trip, which was organized by the travel company Backroads, says watching her own parents struggle with health problems as they age has pushed her to be more proactive with her own health. "I've watched how some of the choices they make impacts their mobility and their quality of life," she says.



Debbie Finn marked her 50th birthday with a hiking trip in Portugal and Spain with a group including her sisters.
PHOTO: DEBBIE FINN

Canyon Ranch, which operates destination spas that offer preventive health care services, says it is seeing more midlife clients who are beginning to feel the signs of aging. “There’s the general sense that I can’t get away with what I used to get away with. Or it’s the personal wake-up call. The cholesterol reading, the high blood pressure, the being overweight,” says Jim Eastburn, Canyon Ranch’s corporate director- transformational wellness. Middle-aged guests also have a “greater sense of urgency around [mindfulness](#),” he says. In response to demand, the company has added several new “spiritual wellness” services in the last couple of years, including one titled “Cultivating a life of purpose.”

A.J. Schneider can pinpoint the exact moment his virtuous midlife crisis began. It was two years ago, when he was 46, and he was attending the funeral of a high school classmate in his hometown of Buffalo, N.Y. “When somebody you know so well who is your age passes away, you get pretty introspective,” says Mr. Schneider, an executive vice president at Wheaton Van Lines in Indianapolis.

He considered his longtime diet of pizza and chicken wings—and the Lipitor he had already been taking for high cholesterol for a decade. He thought of his two daughters, then ages 12 and 15. “The last thing you want to imagine is them left without a parent,” he says.

He stopped eating most carbohydrates and refined sugar. He practiced intermittent fasting, only eating for a limited number of hours each day, and took up running. He’s lost 42 pounds and no longer has to take Lipitor, he says. Now, Mr. Schneider looks forward to celebrating his daughters’ high school graduations by “climbing a mountain or going skiing or something like that,” he says.



A.J. Schneider changed his diet and embraced exercise when he was 46. PHOTO: CHRIS BANGUIS

"Midlife is the age where people kind of sit back and say, 'Well, now that I'm all grown up, what do I really want to be?'" says Jerrold Lee Shapiro, a professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University and the author of "Finding Meaning, Facing Fears in the Autumn of Your Years."

People begin to rack up losses—of their parents, professional dreams, the ability to fit into their skinny jeans. Health problems can emerge and you become more aware that time is limited. This midlife re-evaluation is healthy and normal, Dr. Shapiro says. It becomes a full-on crisis when people "don't deal with the rebalancing very well," he says.

The stereotypical midlife crisis may be more of a pop culture myth anyway, says Dr. Ryff. She says that there's not much scientific evidence that an actual midlife crisis, where you "change the basic structure of your life and the people in it is to be an expected thing." That was true even when baby boomers were in their 40s and early 50s, she says.

Susan Patil Swearingen was 48, living in Chicago, and was 25 years into a corporate career when she fell into a depression. "I had a very full, successful life. I burned out," she says. Ms. Swearingen went to therapy and took a hard look at her life and what she wanted for its second half. "I wanted to be much more focused on meaning," she said.

With the support of her husband and college-aged children, she quit her job and trained to become a yoga teacher. After embarking on a week-long silent retreat, she trained as a meditation teacher, too. When a job opportunity opened up for her husband in Florida, the couple made the move. Ms. Swearingen now teaches yoga and mindfulness and has opened a women's clothing store, WildHeart Boutique, in St. Augustine, Fla.

On her 50th birthday, Kye Jackson started a life bucket list: Take a woodworking class, learn a good joke, read every book that won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and run marathons in all 50 states are among the entries. (She's already logged races in 32 states.) She keeps the list on her phone and checks it regularly. "I try to really stay focused" on the goals, says Ms. Jackson, now 51 and a stay-at-home mother in Austin, Texas.



Kye Jackson, 51, keeps a life bucket list on her phone. She ran a marathon in Alaska (pictured) and aims to run one in each of the 50 states.
PHOTO: KYE JACKSON

Ms. Jackson says her experience volunteering at a nursing home working with seniors with dementia has given her a sense of urgency. "It gives me some perspective that there is no guarantee of how we are going to end up or when it is going to happen. I really think time is short," she says. Her middle-aged list is markedly different from the one she wrote in high school and found recently titled "Things I want to do before I die." That one included learn Spanish (check) and meet Simon Le Bon, the lead singer of Duran Duran ("I never did," she says).

And her midlife goals have to fit into her life as a busy married mom with two children, ages 13 and 14, she says. "I can't leave my husband, not logistically," she jokes. "I can't go out and buy a two-seater car. I have to drive kids around."

The biggest goal on Ms. Jackson's list is to hike the entire 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail, something she plans to do when her younger child graduates high school. She's already picked out her trail name, the monikers hikers choose for themselves: Sweetwater.

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