

“you and the quarter-life” crisis

If you're in your 20s or early 30s, chances are you're more than a little overwhelmed by the choices you have to make. Career, relationships, travel, buying property... JOANNE JOWELL'S new book offers guidance

Joanne Jowell woke up to her own quarter-life crisis at the age of 27 – on the eve of her wedding, “...about to start a life with a wonderful man, all the stars apparently in alignment... and I had absolutely no idea where my life was going. I had no inkling of what tomorrow would hold.”

The crisis, she believes, is born at least partly, of multiple possibilities: too many career options, too many different places to live, too many potential identities. “It’s a crisis that bites as we leave a flippant young-adulthood behind and venture into the wilds of being a ‘proper’ grown-up. It’s a crisis that makes us consider big issues when we’d really rather not.

“It’s a crisis inspired by the technological boom which has turned some of our peers into success stories by an age at which they might have been turned away at nightclubs for being too young. It’s a crisis too few realise they are going through, leaving them feeling alone, inept and frustrated!”

Joanne has been (as she puts it) “bulldozing” her way down the quarter-life path for some time, muddling through career choices, deciding whether she and husband Richard will live abroad or settle in Cape Town, and worrying about failure and others’ expectations.

“Truth be told there are no hard and fast rules, so what I hope to do is extend solidarity through my own story and share some of the insights and solutions that I’ve



found to be useful." Because what is a certainty, is that there are thousands of quarter-lifers out there, experiencing the same turmoil. Here are some of the solutions Joanne has found worked for her:

Quarterlife is a process...

There's no getting away from the changes that age forces on you. So part of dealing with a quarter-life crisis is a simple acceptance of its manifestation. It's not about being defeatist or pessimistic, but rather about assuming the mantle of your generation and seeing it through. "Before my extensive travels, and before the full onset of my quarter-life crisis, I lauded structure and routine above all else. I still value those elements and attempt to insert them in my life as far as possible, but I've also learnt that there is something to be said for going with the flow."

Some parts of the crisis are simply a necessary migration through the years and phases of natural life, and are likely to stay with you as you make that journey. They are the inevitabilities; you will have to make some serious decisions; you will have to choose jobs, careers or general life pursuits; you will have to make changes as you get older.

The issues raised in the quarter-life crisis are seldom candidates for a "quick fix" and often require slow and steady processing, so you'll save yourself some headaches if you reconcile yourself with that process and decide to bend with its twists and turns.

It's all relative

The crisis the quarterlifer faces are distressing to the individual and should not be diminished just because they aren't centred on threats to physical sustenance or saving the planet. Nevertheless, it may help the quarterlifer who feels that the crisis is insurmountable, to take a look around and appreciate the possibility of having a choice at all.



Crisis is born of multiple possibilities: too many career options, places to live, potential identities

Downtime

One of the best opportunities to take a look around and initiate some decision-making, is during a period of "downtime". "In my case, this came in a form of an unexpected operation which had me house-ridden for a while.

"My downtime gave me the unbidden opportunity to contemplate my career, passion and location options, and even provided the opportunity to experiment with some practical realities.

"This was when I started to filter the true location options from the mass of unreal imaginings that were stressing me out. This was when I started to ask myself the hard-hitting, essential life

questions that I had been eagerly trying to avoid. I didn't rush; I just initiated the process."

Certainly, taking (or being handed) some time can be the most useful for reflecting and projecting. Identify your issues, prioritise them and their components, sift reality from unreality, and test the hypotheses of your solutions.

Downtime does not necessarily have to be days, weeks or even months; it can be snatched moments or long weekends. The idea is to use the time productively to create space in your head and room to manoeuvre in and around your own quarter-life issues.

Put pen to paper

One of the best weapons of defence you have is clarity. So instead of letting your crisis issues clog up your insides, get them out into the open where you can see them and confront them.

Put pen to paper and list your options, questions and concerns. Writing helps extract the issues from your mind, and gets them out into the physical space where you can see them for what they are, allowing you to be more objective about them, and assessing their merit.

Once you've articulated your issues and written them down, you can even quantify the options by assigning rankings or priority positions to reflect their relative importance and impact value.



The results are certainly worthwhile: not only does it help to have your issues in written, tangible form, where you can physically juggle with them, but the actual thought processes you will have to go through to get them onto paper are valuable stepping stones on the road to resolution. The act of prioritisation will help you form a hierarchy of sorts, so that you know where to concentrate your efforts.

Attempts at permanence

The quarter-life crisis sits on a platform of transience: nothing feels solid or reliable. Life is changing, and you are unsure of what the future holds, of what defines you, and of how to find the answers to your myriad questions. So it may help to insert a sense of permanence in your life.

Especially for a 20–35er, making choices and going with them is probably more meaningful than agonising over those choices ad nauseum: you are still young enough to make a change if the choice turns out to be wrong. Unless the decision is, for some reason, irreversible, then you are probably better off making a decision, going for it, and taking a realistic timeframe to evaluate it.

The value of inserting some permanence into your life – even if it's in the smallest measure, like buying a couch or highlighting your hair – is that it sets the ball rolling for resolution and begins to part quarterlife's curtains of opacity.

Time will tell

Give yourself time to get used to it. Sometimes decisions take a while to play themselves out.

Take the example of a new job. It's unlikely that you'll know on day one that this is the job for you; you'll need time to get to know the place, the system, the processes, the people. Give your choices a chance. Use that technique of setting ultimatums to outline an acceptable timeframe.

Make sure that the timeframe is realistic, that it balances the adequate measures of head and heart, rationale and emotion.

No pain, no gain

No matter how effective your decision-making strategies, or how resourceful your anti-crisis tactics, one thing is for sure: success, at whatever you are tackling, is unlikely to come without a good dose of hard work.

Life's reality is this: even the "perfect" job has its down moments; even the "perfect" partner has a habit you would prefer to change. You are likely to be most successful at your career if you actively manage it.

You are likely to have a successful relationship with a partner if you actively cultivate and nurture it. Solutions – and success – will seldom fall in your lap without your own awareness and efforts.


Rather than letting the quarter-life crisis wash over you in great waves and dump you on the shore, realise that it is your reaction that will help you overcome it; that the "perfect" outcomes are of your own making; and that "close to perfect" is good too.

Positive reinforcement

Since the quarter-life crisis can be overwhelming, it is often difficult to remain objective about your situation.

Congratulate yourself on the parts of your life that you feel are going well and encourage yourself to actively manage the parts that may need some help.

The trials of quarter-life can deplete your confidence resources, so you may need to forcefully rebuild them. Try and look at your own situation and choices independently, and reward that which is reward-worthy.

A technique that writer Anne Schuster has developed in her writing courses to gain perspective on a personal situation, is quite useful here, too: write/talk/think about a circumstance as if you are living it in the moment. Then stand back and provide some background for that circumstance, using an insider's access to information to provide contextual detail. Then stand back even further and evaluate the circumstance as an outsider. This layering effect will help you distance yourself from the emotions of quarter-life that can cloud your judgment or overwhelm you, and will help outline the positive elements of your situation that should sustain and support you. 



WIN THE BOOK

We have three copies of *Managing the Quarterlife Crisis* by Joanne Jowell, (Struik) to give away. See p167 for details of how to enter to win one.