

### **The potential catastrophe of late middle age and retirement for men.**

Retirement counts alongside bereavement, divorce, serious accident or illness, buying or selling a house and moving home as one of life's most stressful events. You may have spent the last few years wondering how you were going to disentangle yourself from working life and when the day arrives, if you haven't eased into it by gradually reducing your hours you will probably be unprepared for the profound shock of the change. We celebrate birth, teens, coming of age, marriage, children and all those early life events but there it stops; a few companies might send you on a retirement course so that they can tick the box saying you've been briefed but for most people retirement is marked by an awkward speech from the personnel manager, a bottle of fizz and a card from colleagues and maybe a cheque. Your wife drives you home without your laptop, company phone, credit card, office keys and car keys, all the rewards that you worked for years to achieve. A few associates have emailed to say goodbye but that's the end of you after fifty years or longer as a respected senior employee and representative of your company, which for some is their second family. Suddenly you are nobody at all, bereft, contributing nothing with no routine or responsibility and the loss of challenge, reward and satisfaction can send you into a downward spiral of depression.

Women are well served by help groups and associations but my experience is that men are generally not. Women are more inclined to sit down with a friend over a coffee and talk and analyse at length in a form of therapy and anybody who has undertaken therapy knows that it's the patient who does the talking, not the therapist, who merely prompts. Men on the other hand are inclined to withdraw into their own misery and many will not open up and talk frankly. Banter between men is often centred on the safe old subject of sport so men are poor at discussing personal issues and may be, in the fashionable term, emotionally inarticulate.

Physical and mental changes will already be causing you stress in several different ways. By the time you retire your brain and body will be declining in their powers - for men the biggest mental change is the loss of sharpness, energy, memory and skills. One sign of depression is risk-taking, whether while driving or taking part in sport so by the time you reach 60 you might already have had a brush with the Law or suffered an accident caused by your own recklessness, which can require time off work isolated at home while you recover from your injuries. You may be finding that you are less able to deal calmly with traffic situations so you may already have experienced a couple of episodes of road rage when somebody cut you up. You may be getting home and pouring a stiff drink before your evening meal, you may be feeling tired but sleeping badly and if you're a typical male you may have withdrawn from family and married life and settled into a state of near isolation at home, hoping miserably that things will improve when you retire.

The physical effects of middle age are equally hard to bear – as the hormone testosterone diminishes loss of muscle bulk and tone make you less strong and vigorous and you tire quickly. The remaining traces of the female hormone oestrogen, which are always naturally present in your body will begin to predominate and you will accumulate fat around your waist, stomach, hips and breast area. The fat around your throat makes you snore. Alcohol has a double whammy of further suppressing testosterone and containing a lot of calories. Losing muscle and gaining weight is a downward spiral and you'll need to work harder than you did as a young man to stay fit and strong and not grow fat. You might also have an enlarged prostate, meaning frequent trips to the bathroom, poor sleep and the tiredness, stress and worry that go with that.

At work you may have a growing feeling that you are increasingly redundant. The internet has made face-to-face meetings an old idea and when that younger colleague produces an impressive spreadsheet using software you never learned to use, you'll feel useless and frustrated. Younger

people grew up interacting with microchips from baby years meaning their brains grew familiar with microchip logic whereas people who are retiring now had to learn computing in their forties and were usually self-taught, finding computers irritating and unintuitive and having little vision of their capabilities. If you do your best work early in the day you might be feeling tired after lunch, even sneaking off for a quick nap somewhere quiet. As the downward spiral worsens an event or situation might push you into full-blown anxiety, which causes you to catastrophise constantly about negative things and spend huge amounts of time planning for disaster. This could be the arrival of new neighbours and your fear that your neighbourhood is going into decline, it could be the sale of your home, which has been your safe haven for years and the search for a new home in a distant place. At its worst you become so anxious that you cease to function normally and just retire to a corner of a room where you sit, heart racing and dire thoughts racing through your mind. The Covid pandemic caused widespread depression especially to middle-aged men who were more vulnerable and they are now amongst the nine million people of working age who are “not seeking work” in the UK despite the government pretending the number is only a couple of million.

How long has this state of affairs existed? Once you have recognised your depression you might realise that you have actually been depressed for years. This is a terrible state of affairs and it's the time when you need to seek medical help if changing your environment and lifestyle doesn't relieve your depression. Your GP may recommend an online course that teaches you to avoid negative thoughts or try you on antidepressants, which takes you down another path that's seldom satisfactory.

Ideally you would have already started doing something at weekends and evenings or part-time – driving for a hospital car scheme, coaching a sport, working in a store like B&Q, which values mature staff, volunteering at a care home, doing consultancy work or providing guidance as a role model for younger people - the possibilities are endless and although they may not make you wealthy they will provide the richest nourishment possible for the ageing brain: social contact. So on Monday morning after retirement you will be able to get up later, have breakfast and walk, cycle or drive off to do what you've already been enjoying with people you already know and whose company you enjoy. They will greet you, congratulate you and rib you gently but in their company the next phase of your life will begin, with the new challenge of building up that role but doing it in the way you know is right, rather than the way an employer thinks it should be done. If not, you will get up, switch on the telly, vegetate and endlessly mull over negative thoughts. The French call television “chewing gum for the eyes” and they're not wrong. Inactivity is disastrous for the body and even worse for the ageing brain.

Exercise is hugely beneficial and one of the many positive aspects of retirement is that you can pick and choose the good days when you go out walking, cycling, swimming or doing any other exercise because the key is to aim for quality not quantity. Look online or look at a map and plan a short but interesting walking or cycling route, perhaps end-to-end using the wind to help you and a train to get home, and be sure to include a couple of stops at places of interest with coffee and well-earned cake. Get your Railcard and bus pass and use them; public transport takes you to some great places and on a train journey you can read the paper and enjoy a cup of coffee with no worry about traffic and parking. The human brain is plastic into old age and can always learn new skills so learning new routes, navigating, negotiating hazards and remembering directions are good for brain health. Of equal mental benefit is the social contact from meeting people, chatting, joking, learning new things and making friends. Joining a club of like-minded people is excellent for this as membership will provide the peer pressure you might need to go out and do the activity. This may include joining a choir, learning an instrument or taking up a language course or wine-tasting or a motorcycling or car

club or countless other activities, which involve meeting like-minded folk. At least in retirement you can afford the toys and the time to play with them! Buy some new tools and get on with that hobby or do odd jobs for neighbours. Just buying the Ordnance Survey map for your area will reveal all kinds of points of interest you didn't know existed, within easy reach.

Potentially you could live another thirty years or more and a recent TV programme about people who live beyond 100 identified several common traits: they all live in hilly places so they walk up and down small hills all day, they all spend the mornings doing farm or allotment or workshop jobs then enjoy a relaxed sociable lunch eating the healthy produce they've grown with friends and neighbours. Then they have a nap and spend the rest of the day in social activities. Admittedly they all live in places with nice weather but if you've spent some money on decent outdoor clothing this is seldom actually an issue in Britain. Owning a dog is a great motivator for going out and will soon get you chatting with people you meet. Retirement should be the best time of your life as long as you have successfully removed yourself from your old working life and found activities that keep you busy and reward you.

Ben Reedy, April 2024.