

Career Women at Midlife: Sadder and Sicker

While women are securing greater power in the workplace, they are also growing less satisfied with their lives as they age

By [Michelle Conlin](#)

Kathy Caprino's life seemed the stuff of glossy-magazine perfection. The big deal marketing job, complete with roomy office, upbeat assistant, and lunchtime indulgences in retail therapy. The cool contemporary spread in Connecticut. The emotionally aware jazz percussionist husband frolicking with the two healthy kids.

What a photo spread: a *mise en scène* of Third Wave feminism, writ fabulous. Only as she powered through her prime earning years, notching promotions and amplifying her assets, Caprino began to ask herself why she felt lost and angry all of the time. She developed a chronic case of tracheitis. Life became about snapping at her husband, falling asleep around her kids, and loathing the deadened corporate machine she had become. At 38, Kathy Caprino had it all. She was also the unhappiest and unhealthiest she had ever been.

"The midlife crisis for women, you don't hear about it so much," says Caprino. "Life was becoming impossible and intolerable, and I had no idea why."

But to some researchers, Caprino's story makes perfect sense—and is all too common. Statistics from six recent major happiness studies reveal that as women grow older, they become, on average, sicker and sadder. This drop in happiness occurs regardless of whether women are married, have kids, are divorced, work incessantly, or live a life of leisure. Whether they are rich or poor. Gorgeous or average. Tall or short. American, Asian, or European. The trend holds true across the board, with the single exception that African American women report being happier than they were in 1972. (For men, the surveys show, the opposite is true: they grow more satisfied with life as they age.)

"Over the last 50 years, women have secured greater opportunity, greater achievement, greater influence, and more money. But over the same time period, they have become less happy, more anxious, more stressed, and, in ever-increasing numbers, they are medicating themselves for it," says management thinker and author Marcus Buckingham, who tackles the subject in his upcoming book, due out in September: *Find Your Strongest Life: What the Most Successful and Resilient Women Do Differently*. "Better education and job opportunities and freedoms have decreased life happiness for women."

FEELING ALL WRONG

At first it seems counterintuitive. But then one need only look to the legions of 40-ish women who are popping Ambiens and antidepressants, contending with chronic health issues, and feeling all wrong but not having a clue as to why. Sociologists are finding that once women hit their 40s, contemporary life becomes slippery. This is black ice few are talking about.

One of the many theories Buckingham offers is that women in midlife are running up against the forces of destructive interference. In scientific wave theory, destructive interference holds that two colliding waves that are out of sync (think of those two waves, say, as the role of mommy and the role of manager) do not come together to create a larger, more formidable wave. Rather, they cancel each other out. So mom in the weeds at work, worrying about sick child at home, equals a woman who doesn't feel fully effective in either domain.

Corporate policies like flexible work, telecommuting, and compressed schedules were supposed to solve these conundrums. So was the co-CEO/split-duty marriage, day care, and nannies. But things like flex time are the existential equivalent of duct tape and bubble gum. Women often end up feeling more inadequate by buying into the myth that [work-life balance](#) is actually achievable—if only you juggled better, faster, and prettier.

What a crock, as Kathy Caprino now likes to say. It took getting unceremoniously canned for Caprino to finally rouse herself from her trance. She spent the first month after her layoff supine, the second despondent, and the third pouring her heart out in a therapist's office. Like many women in midlife, Caprino realized the role that fit her so well in the first part of her career—ruthless negotiator, hard-charging boss, office "buzz saw"—now felt like a farce. Because she was the family breadwinner, she was afraid to admit to herself that she wanted a career change.

NEEDING A ROAD MAP

For Caprino, the answer was in a fearless and searching reevaluation of her life. She watched. She listened. She slowed down. Eventually, she went back to school to score a therapist's degree while her musician husband expanded his job portfolio. Today, Caprino runs an executive coaching consultancy. Her recent book, *Breakdown Breakthrough*, is a road map for women who crash into middle-age, dizzy with confusion.

Caprino believes part of the reason for the "sicker, sadde" syndrome is that women often take on the over-functioner role, being the person who cleans up for her cleaning lady, who is not familiar with the word no, and who triple checks in a corporate culture where most don't even deign to double-check—and besides, minions are hired to do that anyway.

There's also this: "Women could simply ask their husbands for more help," says Caprino. Indeed, the rise in women's labor force participation and earnings has not come with a concomitant rise in husbands doing more around the house. This holds true even for breadwinner wives, the 36%-and-growing cohort of women whose paychecks are fatter than their husbands, according to economist Heather Boushey. On the home front, the breadwinners still wind up doing 75% of the "domestic engineering." With more men losing their jobs than women in this recession, it will be interesting to see if this imbalance starts to even out.

The doing-it-all, all-at-the-same-time ethos so dominant in careerland has cast women as the new Sisyphus, forever pushing the rock up the hill. Of late, there has been some enlightenment around the fact that one human being cannot possibly maintain this charade without getting sick or going crazy. That's why accounting firms like [Deloitte & Touche](#) have implemented lattice structures whereby women and men can ramp up and down their work-life according to life stage. That's why companies such as [Best Buy \(BBY\)](#) and [IBM \(IBM\)](#) promote cultures where anybody can work anytime, anywhere.

Mostly, though, work remains modeled on the male body clock, an analog-era relic. As for the answers, and the way through all this black ice, experts are just starting to find solutions, or at least some suggestions. One thing Buckingham advocates is the positive inquiry approach: What would a happy, fulfilling life look like for a woman at 20, 30, 40, 50, and beyond? For one who is newly married and one who is recently divorced? For one with a brood and another who is child-free? What would these different pictures need to include? What would they need to leave out?

Here's the bright spot: In every measure, from educational test scores to graduate degrees, girls are trouncing boys. It's only a matter of time before their new Fempire begins to grapple with redoing the carapace that surrounds life and work.

In the meantime, there's the quiet and oft-ignored fact: Under the current industrial-age career framework, you can't have it all. At least not all at once.

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