

# This Crazy, Beautiful Life

The girls' guide to successfully navigating a quarter-life crisis

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# Introduction

One evening, I was berating myself, as usual, for wasting too much time online instead of doing something useful. Then I think I probably saw a friend's Facebook status update about what a great day she'd had at work and how her boyfriend had cooked her 'the BEST dinner ever!!'

It quickly turned into a full-scale tirade - from 'Why aren't all your clothes folded yet? Why didn't you go to the gym today?' To 'Why aren't you married yet? Why don't you have a good job? WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?!' I crumpled. I sat on the floor, knees drawn up to my chest, sobbing and sobbing. I wanted to scream. I just couldn't work out where things had gone so wrong.

I couldn't possibly tell anyone how I felt, because everyone else had it so 'together'. With their jobs and boyfriends, husbands and children, travel plans and fantastic achievements. It also felt ridiculously pathetic: I had a roof over my head, a good education, enough money to get by, supportive friends and family. But being aware of all of that and yet still feeling horribly miserable only compounded my sense of failure.

Then I started researching and discovered that I was far from the only one feeling like they'd screwed up, like their life hadn't worked out at all how they'd planned. I was, in fact, one of many millions of young women experiencing a quarter-life crisis. When I finally got up the courage to talk to friends about it, I found that, despite outside appearances to the contrary, they shared many of those feelings too.

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Just learning that I wasn't the only one experiencing this was a huge help and took some of the pressure off. Then, by applying and practising much of the advice and many of the techniques you'll learn about in this book, my view of life began to change. I was moving from a quarter-life crisis into quarter-life contentment. Some of the areas of my life have changed quite a lot; other parts have stayed the same, but most importantly, the way I now respond and feel about everything has changed enormously. I also learned to be more open to opportunities, however small, and take them.

One big change was realising a dream - and when it happened, it happened fast. Within a few weeks, I went from being a desperately job-hunting, wannabe writer in London, to a full-time freelance writer. I also found the courage to apply for a Master's Course in Languages, where before I felt like I was being stupid and avoiding 'real life' by going back to university. That led me to travel through Portugal, to improve my Portuguese, and suddenly, I found I was was living a dream life.

Even then, it took a while for all the jitters and worries to stop. Through the months of going to job interviews for jobs I didn't want, scraping a living from supply teaching and the odd writing job, I told myself: "This is crazy. You left a secure career with good prospects for this. What are you going to do if you don't get more writing work?" When I was writing full-time and suddenly decided to apply for the Master's, again, I thought: "This is crazy! What are your parents going to say when you tell them you're doing another university course?" When I left my gorgeous London house and the best housemates I'd ever had to go running off to Portugal, alone and with somewhat limited Portuguese, I thought - you guessed it - "This is crazy. What if you don't like it? What if the work stops?"

But I did get enough writing work. My parents told me that whatever I chose to do, they would support me, and nothing was more important than finding the things in

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life which made me happy. I fell in love with Lisbon in the first minute I was there, and the work didn't stop. Yes, perhaps my life is a little crazy. But I catch the envious look in people's eyes when I tell them what it is I do for a living - and that I do it in the sunny Portuguese climes - it's a beautiful life, too. This crazy, beautiful life of mine is not for everybody - trust me! But there's a crazy, beautiful life out there for everyone, if you have the courage to create it.

Don't get me wrong - I'm not perfect at all of this. I still have worry days and moments of crisis - I think everybody does. But generally, I feel contented, and I know that I have the tools to cope now. I hope that you will discover a path to contentment too, and the tools to build your crazy, beautiful life, whatever that may be. If you are immediately worried because you don't know what it is - don't panic! We're going to look at that too.

The more I learned, researched and applied, the more strongly I felt that there needed to be more awareness of the quarter-life crisis as an issue, and that there needed to be practical resources in place for young women. There is a huge paradigm shift happening with young adulthood, particularly for women, and it needs to be addressed. Old wisdom and theories haven't kept up with the huge socioeconomic and technological changes that our generation is experiencing the full force of. It's time that we had the relevant resources and wisdom for our era.

We need a generation of happy, successful women, assertive in their choices, who have high self-esteem and who are active builders of their own destinies. I'd like you to be one of them.

# 1. What is a Quarter-Life Crisis?

*'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' - Mary Oliver*

- Are you still unsure about what you actually 'want to do with your life?'
- Is the reality of your young adulthood different to your expectations of it?
- Are you worried about your career, your relationship status, your ability to get on the housing ladder, or that life seems to be going by without you?

If you answered yes to any of those, then you're in the right place. If you answered 'no' to all of them, then please send your pearls of wisdom in on a postcard - you clearly have it sorted!

To some people, the term 'quarter-life crisis' can sound frivolous, the coinage of a naive, privileged demographic who have never known hardship. After all, as young women in the 21st century, we have more choices, better education and wider possibilities than ever before. How can we possibly be experiencing a 'crisis'?

A lot of it depends on how we define a 'crisis', which we will come to in a moment. But the evidence of something going wrong for many 20-somethings is growing - and concerning.

According to the Mental Health Foundation's Living With Anxiety Report (2014, p.22), almost one in five people feel anxious most or all of the time, and a majority

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of the respondents (59%) felt anxious at least some of the time. It also showed that more women experience anxiety than men do, with 22% of women experiencing anxiety all or most of the time, compared with 15% of men. This figure has almost doubled since the last survey in 2009, when only 12% of women said that they felt anxious all or most of the time.

This is compounded by the fact that 20% of women who admitted to feeling stressed or anxious also said that they did not tell anyone about their worries. That's an awful lot of pent-up anxiety which is going to release itself, somehow, sometime. This book is here to help you before all that worry and anxiety becomes too much to cope with.

I know how easy it is to become jittery around terms like 'Mental Health', 'Anxiety', 'Worry' and 'Depression'. In our society those terms have become big, scary, ominous words which suggest that something is wrong with us; that we are 'not normal'. The first thing to understand and trust is that even if you feel anxious and worried a lot of the time, you are normal. It can feel as though you are on your own, as you see other young women going about their seemingly perfect lives, but millions of them are in the same boat as you. Like swans, they may be gracefully gliding along on the surface, but they are paddling madly underneath to try and stay afloat.

The point is, you don't need to worry about being worried. It doesn't mean you have a problem or that something has gone wrong psychologically - as I hope you will see, much of it is a completely natural response to the situations in which you find yourself. What's important is having the tools to reach a state of happiness and confidence. You can't change the world, but you can change how you respond to it.

This book will explore some of the causes of a quarter-life crisis, so that you can understand your worries and anxieties better, and learn that they are actually things you don't need to fear. You will also find plenty of practical techniques, tips and advice from Life Coaches to take you from a worried twenty-something

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to a powerful young woman in charge of her own happiness and destiny. But first, we need to know what we're facing, by defining the idea of a quarter-life crisis.