

30... and OVER IT

MARRIAGE. KIDS. MORTGAGE. IT'S THE TRIFECTA MANY WOMEN THINK THEY'LL HAVE SORTED BY THE TIME THEY TURN 30. NICE IN THEORY, BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LIFE HAS OTHER PLANS? JOANNE HAWKINS DISCOVERS THAT FOR MANY THIRTYSOMETHING WOMEN THE PRESSURE OF THESE UNREALISTIC AND OUTDATED EXPECTATIONS IS ENOUGH TO SEND THEIR SANITY INTO FREE-FALL



ANJALI RAO

WHEN Kasey Edwards was 32, she woke one morning and realised she didn't want to go to work. "And not just on that day, it was like I didn't want to go ever again," she remembers.

For Edwards, a high-flying management consultant, who had worked her "butt off" climbing the corporate ladder, the realisation she hated her job — despite the six-figure salary that went with it — was devastating. "It was shocking because I had done everything I was supposed to do to make me happy and one day I realised that I wasn't," Edwards says. "And I felt an incredible guilt about it. It was like, 'What is wrong with me?' How dare I be unhappy when I have everything I thought I always wanted."

Edwards was suffering from what some psychologists have dubbed the quarter-life crisis. That's right. Forget the mid-life crisis that traditionally happens about the age of 45. These days Gen Y are having a crisis a good 15 years earlier, as they grapple with the feeling that their lives haven't turned out quite as they envisaged. Or that the life they thought they wanted isn't so appealing after all.

For women, in particular, there's also an expectation that by 30 they should have nixed the career/marriage/kids trifecta. And if they haven't, some start to get anxious because things haven't gone to plan.

Melbourne counsellor and psychotherapist Paul Cullen first noticed the phenomenon when he realised that about 70 per cent of his clients were aged from 28 to 32 and "a remarkable number were weeks either side of their 30th birthday."

"They come to me and say I'm not sure why I'm here, but I'm just unhappy," Cullen says. "So I started to look at core themes shared between my clients. These are people who have pushed their way up in their chosen careers but are now wondering what it is all about. They are asking questions like, 'Am I happy doing what I'm doing? Is my life meaningful and fulfilling?'"

It's a feeling Edwards knows only too well. She says she suddenly realised her job wasn't fulfilling her. "So, I had to find the thing I cared about, the thing I could invest in and grow and that would give me a reason to get out of bed," she says.

Anjali Rao tried to ignore doubts about her job as an anchor for CNN's prime-time evening news show for a long time before she faced up to it. "I was breaking massive stories and interviewing some of the most famous people in the world," remembers Rao, then based in Hong Kong.

"Professionally, things couldn't have been better, or at least that's the way it looked from the outside." But in truth, Rao was "bored and burnt out. I was this globally known news anchor, which is what I thought I'd always wanted. But the self-doubt began to creep in and I realised it wasn't actually what I wanted at all. But, by then I felt like I was trapped."

So Rao continued to go through the motions, especially because she felt she had "worked too hard to trash it all". But her crisis was not going to go away. On November 12, 2006 ("I still remember the exact day it happened"), the then 32-year-old woke up and everything was black. "I'd never suffered with any sort of depression or eating disorder before, so it was strange that the way my dissatisfaction manifested itself was that my appetite vanished. And for 2½ years, I could not eat," she says.

Rao eventually lost a staggering 30kg and at her lightest looked desperately thin.

"I was constantly told I looked sick," she remembers. "And things start happening to your body when you lose that amount of weight so quickly, but even that wasn't enough to pull me out of my spiral. I was completely overwrought about the way my life was going."

She was lucky she had her husband, Brett, even if she kept a lot of what was bothering her bottled up ("Mostly I ran away from conversations about it because I didn't want to let on how distressed I was.") But for some women, it's actually the fact that they haven't yet found their life partner, rather than their career, that can trigger a quarter-life crisis.

Janice Boynes loves her job as an account manager for Philip Morris. But when she turned 30 in June, she



JANICE BOYNES

started to contemplate what she had — or more to the point, hadn't — achieved.

"Turning 30 was a trigger for this invisible list to appear in my head," she says. "I started to tick things off mentally and realised I hadn't achieved as much as I would have liked to by now."

"When I was growing up, I thought I was going to be married by the time I was about 22. I also thought I would have bought a house by now, yet I'm still sharing a rented flat. And since turning 30, I've been thinking more about children. When you don't have the luxury of time, it becomes more of a priority."

Sarah Jackson*, now 32, is in a similar position.

"I basically woke on my 30th birthday and I was single. I had no savings and I wasn't sure if I was in the right job. I felt like a failure. Thirty is such a milestone and I'd thought that by the time I got to that age, I would have my life sorted out and be financially mature. But nothing had changed (from when I was younger) and I felt really bad because of that."

"I've always been independent and happy to be single, but I thought I'd get married around the age of 28. And when it didn't happen, I was like, 'Sh—, is it ever going to happen?'," Jackson says. "There was a while there where I thought I was going to be single for the rest of my life. And that I might not have a child, either."

It's something Cullen sees a lot. "I see people wanting to have relationships, but they are finding it really hard (to meet someone). These are people who are not unattractive, they are intelligent, they are successful and you marvel at how it is that they can't find a partner."

"But I think that some of these people are so stressed and wound up with work and all of this stuff that they can't actually relax into forming deep relationships. Everything is a goal to be achieved, even having children is. Their lives are like large to-do lists, rather than something pleasurable."

While Cullen thinks there's going to be an explosion in the number of people suffering a quarter-life crisis ("It's obviously something resonating with the spirit of our times", he says), it's not all bad news.

Unlike the mid-life crisis where people are generally looking back at their lives with regret about what they haven't done, Cullen says the quarter-life crisis "is a fork in the road" where we can stop to evaluate what matters to us and whether we need to change direction.

"When I see people going through this crisis, usually two things happen," he says.

"One is that they resolve to place more emphasis on relationships, and not just with romantic partners, but with friends, colleagues and family. They often realise



KASEY EDWARDS

that this is what has been missing from their lives.

"And secondly, they actually look at their jobs and question whether it's what they really want to do. Some people then go back to university or take a pay cut to do a different job that is more aligned to their values."

While Boynes is still in the same job ("I actually love going to work," she says), she's realised she needs to prioritise her life-work balance more. She's cut back her hours to "start to live a life... my sister had a baby this year and spending time with her and my first niece is important and really exciting."

After breaking up with her boyfriend of nine years two years ago, she's also recently started dating a new guy. And while she doesn't want to "put too much pressure on it yet", she's determined that she'll prioritise this relationship more than the last.

"I've realised I spent most of my previous relationship focused more on my work than the relationship," she muses.

"I'm not sure if the outcome would have been any different, but coming home and jumping straight on to the computer every night to continue working probably didn't help matters."

Rao and Edwards went on to quit the high-pressure jobs that were causing them so much angst. Rao had a son, Isambard, now 3, moved to Melbourne and is now a regular panellist on Ten's *The Project*, which she says suits her personality better.

"If my meltdown was to teach me anything at all it was that I had to leave the thing — in my case, the daily hard news grind — that was making me so unhappy," says Rao, now 38.

Edwards, now 36, also had a daughter Violet, 3, and went on to turn her experiences of what she prefers to call her "30-crisis" into a new career as an author, writing books *30-Something and Over It* and *30-Something and the Clock is Ticking* (both published by Ebury Australia).

"Writing was like therapy," she says. And as for Jackson, well, despite changing her job to another, less-stressful part of the media, she's still searching for a job that is going to make her happy. "I've always been career-orientated, so when you lose your passion for a career that you were previously into, it can really stuff you up. You start to wonder what you are going to be passionate about again," she says.

"My new job isn't perfect, but it's given me the mind space to sit down and think about what I want to do next. Even, if I don't have that answer yet."

*Name has been changed

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— SARAH