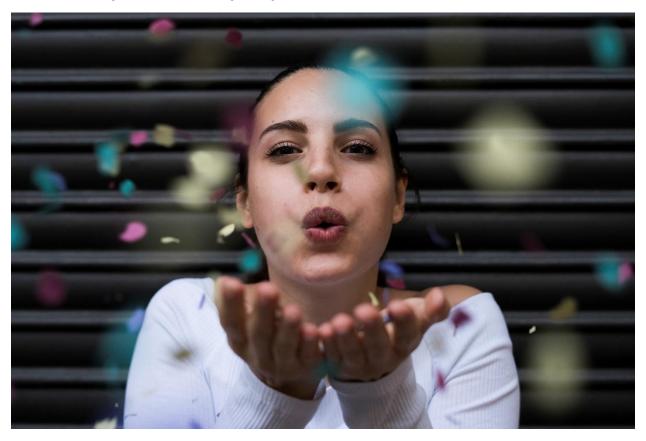# 8 Life Lessons I've Learned at 40-Something That I Wish I'd Known at 20-Something

Some of the things that come with age are great. Awareness is one of them.

My 40s are a lot different than I thought they'd be when I was still in my 20s. On the one hand, I have a much deeper understanding of why my dad liked naps so much when I was a kid. I've learned not to *ever* fall asleep in an awkward position if I want to be able to walk the next day. I can't just eat whatever I want anymore if I don't want to suffer the horrible consequences either.

However, I'm also a lot more aware and secure in myself than I thought I'd be at this age. I'm calmer. I don't sweat the small stuff nearly as much. And I've learned a thing or three about life that I wish I'd understood a lot earlier on. Here are some of the more important ones. Do yourself a favor and get this stuff straight *now* so you don't have to do what I did and learn the hard way.

1. There's no such thing as too late or too old

When I was younger, I was super concerned about whether or not I was keeping up with other people my age when it came to the big milestones in life. I was never what you'd call an overachiever back then, so I didn't care whether I was the *first* of my friends to get married or land my dream job. I just knew I wasn't cool with being the last.

That meant I jumped headfirst into things that deserved a lot more thought and consideration. I rushed into marriage in my mid-20s and wound up divorced by 29. I pushed myself to take on

huge responsibilities I wasn't ready for way too soon in life and I wound up with bad credit it took me my entire 30s to fix. Now I couldn't even tell you why I did those things or what the big rush even was.

There's no set age by which you have to find your ultimate bliss in life, own a home, choose a life partner, or anything else major. For some people—myself included—that ideal time *is* a little later in life. For others, it's never, because they get older, gain some perspective, and realize they don't even want those things. So don't waste your 20s rushing to become your parents. You'll look back one day and regret simply being young when you had the chance to be.

2. Who you were as a child is more important than you think

One of the dumbest things I've ever been led to believe was that children don't know themselves—that *I* didn't know myself. It eventually turned out that I knew myself better as a child than I have at any other point in my life. It's just that it's so darned easy to lose sight of yourself once society starts telling you how wrong you are for liking what you like and being whoever it is that you are.

For instance, I knew I wanted to make my life about creating things when I was a kid, as well as that a typical 9 to 5 job probably wasn't for me. My parents, on the other hand, had their hearts set on my working in animal care for some reason and eventually managed to convince me that's what I wanted too.

They did such a good job of it that when I eventually found myself working ridiculous hours as a vet tech at a local animal clinic, I couldn't understand why I hated it so much. These days, I'm a full-time professional writer who works out of her home according to a flexible schedule of my choosing—a much better fit.

The thing is it's fine to want to make your family proud, but if their dreams for you differ from your dreams for yourself, you'll be a lot happier if you listen to yourself. No one knows you as well as you know yourself and you knew yourself without limits or shame when you were a kid.

Hold onto the things you loved and longed for then. They turn out to be pretty important, especially when you inevitably find yourself wondering what to do with your life next. Chances are the answer is connected to something that made you come alive as a child.

3. It's better to make memories than collect things

My mother has this huge beef with people who spend money on stuff like concert tickets, vacations, or special dinners at restaurants. She reasoned that once you've gone to that concert, it's over and you have nothing tangible to show for it, meaning the tickets were a huge waste of money. If you *had* to spend money on fun, you bought *things* instead… objects. Unlike the concert tickets, you'll have the *things* you buy potentially forever, especially if you take care of them.

That's the approach to disposable income and leisure time that I grew up with and lived by for years. And as with that vet tech job I never truly wanted, I couldn't figure out why all this crap I was buying wasn't making me as happy as it was supposed to.

Part of it had to do with the hard truth that most "stuff" becomes pretty useless sooner or later. If it doesn't break or wear out, it becomes obsolete—like the massive cassette collection that was my world when I was in my teens. Same for all the knickknacks I spent my 20s collecting.

Memories are a different story though. Most of the physical objects I spent so much money on when I was younger hit a landfill years ago. But I still remember the concerts I went to, the vacations I took, and the festivals I attended like they were yesterday. Those memories and the way I felt when I was creating them are as shiny and precious to me today as they were back then. So are the ways some of those experiences changed me as a person.

These days, I never think back on the past and regret not buying some trendy piece of clothing that I probably wouldn't even have worn or yet another statue to sit on my bookshelf collecting dust. I think about that trip to Romania I had the opportunity to take in college but ultimately passed on. I think about the time I went to Mexico on a cruise and let my stick-in-the-mud ex talk me out of riding a burro up a dirt trail while I was there.

It makes me sad that I don't have those memories to look back on, especially since I may never have those same opportunities again. But the good news is I learned to just go ahead and do the things I want to do in life, even if it means doing them alone. The memories and cool stories last a lifetime.

4. The little things are the big things

Speaking of memories, I've learned that it's not always obvious when you're creating one that's going to mean a lot to you one day. Everyone knows their wedding day or the day their child is born is a big deal and that they'll remember that for the rest of their life. Some of my favorite memories are the ones that kind of snuck up on me at the time though.

I'm talking about the time my husband and I drove out to our favorite barbecue spot on Memorial Day one year and spent the whole day there, even though it got super cold and started to snow unexpectedly. I mean the day I was walking by the beach with my friends as a teenager in the fog, saw a seal, and thought for a split second that it was a mermaid.

There's the time I signed up for an online film appreciation class on a whim and realized I still love learning as an adult. And the week a random frog lived underneath my bedroom window and made me happy every night with all his little frog noises. Those are some of the moments and occurrences that turned out to mean the most to me over the years.

I couldn't even tell you why, but there's something magical about them—something that suggests they're what life is truly all about. They were little things that became big because they had meaning, especially if they were also shared with someone I loved.

5. Taking care of yourself physically is every bit as important as people tell you it is

Ignore that piece of advice and you'll eventually wish you hadn't, I assure you. I'm not sure how things are for young people these days, but I wasn't taught about fitness in much detail when I was young. Sure, I was taught it was important, but I was never properly schooled on *why* or told

what exactly would happen to you if you chose not to bother. I certainly wasn't given any practical advice on how to turn fitness and proper self-care into permanent habits.

Luckily for me, years of working on my feet and having friends who preferred physical pastimes to simply sitting around all the time meant I spent most of my life "accidentally fit". The problem came when I got older, had more choices, and started making a bunch that meant I wasn't very active anymore. That quickly led to the swift and blinding development of numerous health problems and this horrible feeling that I had no control over my life anymore.

These days, I'm doing much better in that department. I've gone out of my way to educate myself on how to take care of my body, as well as to establish a healthy routine that's realistic for *me*. The "realistic for you" part is critical because, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter how effective a given fitness regimen is. If you hate it with the fire of a thousand suns, you're *not* going to stick with it, and you can't benefit from exercise you're not doing.

Don't do what I did and wait until you're 40 and your metabolism is slowing down to get your act together. Do it while you're still young and stick with it. Find a way to love being active and make it a *daily* part of your routine. Get so used to taking care of yourself that doing otherwise feels unbearably weird.

You'll be glad you did one day, because seriously. If I could change just one thing about how I ran my life when I was younger, this would be the thing.

6. The best time to make your dreams come true is now

Not in 10 years when you've figured out what your one true career path is. Not in a few months when you've finally lost that stubborn 20 pounds. Not tomorrow when the weather's better and not "someday" when your life's finally the big, perfect bowl of peach cobbler you hope it eventually will be. It's *now*… today!

The unshakeable optimism that comes with being young is amazing and I remember it fondly. I figured my whole life was still ahead of me and took it for granted that everything would simply work out in my favor one day all by itself, so why force things?

I wanted to travel, but I thought the experience would be better "someday" when I had tons of money and a perfect job that didn't feel as soul-sucking as the one I had at the time did. I wanted to speak multiple languages, but I wanted to learn in the perfect house I thought I'd own someday while sitting in the perfect combination office/study I also planned on having. I wanted to teach myself how to do genuinely awesome makeup, but I wanted a flawless life and a circle of brag-worthy friends to show it off to first.

Well, guess what. That perfect life never materializes because it doesn't exist. Even if you're crazy successful one day, you'll forever have constraints on your time or your resources. There will always be something going on that stops circumstances from being ideal, so start working on the things you want to do, be, and experience *now*. Then you can spend middle age building on what you've already learned, not starting from scratch.

7. Nobody's coming to save you from yourself or your life

Like a lot of very shy young girls, I spent a lot more time reading books and watching movies than I did having real-life experiences and meaningful interactions with other people. That gave me the impression that my life was eventually going to play out like the stories I loved so much and that I wouldn't have to do anything special to help it happen.

My life was legitimately hard for me when I was young for lots of reasons, but it never occurred to me to try to rise above it so I'd be able to build myself a better one eventually. Instead, I fantasized about the day someone else would love me enough to do it for me.

I thought one day my emotionally unavailable parents would suddenly become different people and want to help me out in life the way my friends' parents helped them. Or that whenever that perfect partner finally materialized *he'd* take care of me and provide for me. That way I'd never have to step out of my comfort zone, try anything scary or new, or figure out life for myself.

Well, life doesn't work like that, so if you think this way, it's to your benefit to get it sorted now while you're still young. "Princess-in-a-tower disease" isn't a good look on someone who's in their 30s and it's an even worse one on someone middle-aged or older. Don't be fooled, either. You don't have to have been a young girl who enjoyed Disney princess movies a little bit too much to have this issue, so it's worth asking yourself some questions.

Are you an aspiring creative who's banking so hard on "being discovered" one day that you're not actively seeking out and seizing opportunities? Are you coasting through life because you assume you'll eventually inherit money or property when your parents pass? Are you a parent who thinks your kids are going to grow up one day and undo all your mistakes for you?

If so, it's time to grow up. No one is out there champing at the bit to save you from your apathy and lack of gumption. And if you do luck out one day and meet someone who'd love to give you an awesome life just because you're you, trust that they're going to expect you to pitch in and help on one level or another. People get tired of being the only horse on the team who's actively working to pull the wagon. *Always* do your share and pull your weight, even if no one asked you to.

8. No one is entitled to a relationship with you (and vice versa)

I've touched here and there on the fact that my home life was pretty dysfunctional when I was growing up. It was that low-key type of dysfunction that sneaks up on you, though. No one hit me or put lit cigarettes out on my arms, but there was a lot of emotional abuse and gaslighting going on. There still is.

Eventually, I concluded that it was better to end my relationships with some of the most toxic people in my family and put up extremely strict boundaries with others. I've made similar decisions with other people in the past, especially ex-partners and false friends who took so much more than they gave. Learning to say no to harmful relationships with toxic people changed my life overnight.

No one is entitled to a relationship with you for any reason, especially if they're unwilling to treat you with basic human decency—not even family. People who care about you don't kick

you while you're down or try to destroy your joy in the things you love. They don't tell you you're worthless, mock your appearance, and delight in being cruel to you. If you have people like this in your life, you are absolutely within your rights to cut them off, protect yourself, and move on. Even if they're family.

People also have the right to decide the same when it comes to you, so learning how to gracefully let others exit your life is also worthwhile. Healthy relationships that are two-way streets are much too good to miss out on, but you need to make room for them in your life. There won't be any if you're clinging to people who don't value their relationships with you to the extent that they should.

I'm not a huge believer in regret as far as life goes. I *do* believe strongly in learning as much as you can from your experiences. That's a process that won't ever stop for me, as I've learned to enjoy the challenge of growing and evolving over the years. Whatever age you are now, please do the same. It keeps life meaningful, colorful, and worthwhile.