

survive a quarter-life crisis

Our mid-20s to 30s is prime time for an identity meltdown. If (or, let's be honest, when) it happens, don't flip out—you can come out of it even happier. By Jessica Girdwain

The postcollege years tend to be all about survival—finding a job, a roommate who doesn't eat your food or steal your clothes, a solid boyfriend. Then, just as you begin to feel as if you've got things under control, it happens: a "Holy-crap-I-have-no-idea-what-I'm-doing-with-my-life!" freak-out.

If you're in the 25-to-35 age range and this is resonating, congrats: You're officially having a quarter-life crisis, something two thirds of young adults experience. Experts describe a QLC as a sense of panic that your life—career, relationships, etc.—isn't where you want it to be. (There's good reason that Hannah, Lena Dunham's character from HBO's *Girls*, is so damn relatable.)

QLCs can be a bitch, as you may have already discovered. But as many as 80 percent of survivors say they feel happier and more satisfied with their life post-crisis, according to interviews conducted by Oliver Robinson, Ph.D., of the University of Greenwich in London, an expert in QLCs. He discovered that QLCs have four distinct phases; ride 'em out and the odds are good that you'll emerge on the other side feeling more awesome. It's time to power through.

Stage 1 You feel trapped

Maybe you've been working at the same dead-end job for three years. Or

you're still with your college boyfriend but feel he's coming to the end of his shelf life. Whatever has you tangled up, you want *out*—but you also fear that changing course now (quitting the job, dumping the guy) would pretty much be A. Total. Mess.

Move on If you've been unhappy for a year or longer, it's time to bite the bullet and take action despite the chaos it may cause, says Meg Jay, Ph.D., author of *The Defining Decade*. But you need to think long-term payoff here: "Don't just cut and run," Robinson warns. Rush big changes and you risk making the same mistakes. Instead, start with a test run to figure out what you really want, advises Samantha Henig, coauthor

(with her mom, Robin Marantz Henig) of *Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?*

If it's your love life that feels claustrophobic, think back to see if you can pinpoint when you started to feel dissatisfied—*before* you dump him, says psychiatrist and SELF contributing expert Catherine Birndorf, M.D. Once you can ID what's irking you, you need to actually talk to your guy about it. (Otherwise, how will he know that you're unhappy and something's gotta change?) If things with the BF don't start to improve after several talks, or if you're just not into him anymore, it's time to update your relationship status.

Along the same lines, if your job is





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the problem, resist the urge to peace out. Hey, you still have to cover the rent and bills. Take six to eight weeks to think things through and make some small initial changes. Try to determine what other fields might interest you, and then dabble in them. Request new and different responsibilities at work (brainstorm a killer marketing plan if you're in sales) or sign up for a class at a local college.

Figuring out where your true interests lie might take a while, but doing it now will make you way less susceptible to the infamous midlife crisis, which, according to Jay, is a helluva lot harder to get through than a QLC. (By then, you'll likely have kids and even more bills to worry about.)

Stage 2 You're mourning your past life

After much soul searching, you've quit (your job, or man, or both). And now your stomach feels like it's sinking into the bottom of your Frye boots. Given the uncertainty about what your future holds, you're experiencing some mega anxiety and missing simpler, more familiar times, Robinson says.

Move on "Even if you initiated it, change can bring about a sense of loss," Dr. Birndorf says. Take a weekend to let it all out, sister. Curl up

on the couch in your pj's and pout about dumping a perfectly nice guy or berate yourself for having stayed in a going-nowhere job for way too long. Don't try to distract yourself or drown your sorrows in vodka sodas—just wallow. "It's potentially painful,

but taking this break to self-reflect lets you process what happened and move forward," Dr. Birndorf notes. That said, about 15 percent of people in a QLC do develop a more serious mental health problem, according to Robinson. Get some help from a pro if the sadness becomes life-disrupting or simply sticks around for too long.

Stage 3 You're second-guessing yourself

Hello, roller coaster of emotions. You've upended your life and are exploring new passions, whether in the bedroom or the work world. One day your mood's on the upswing, and the next you're listening to Bon Iver on loop, feeling despondent ("What the hell was I thinking?!").

Move on Don't worry if something you thought you'd like turns out to be a major drag (e.g., after a month of apprenticing at a bakery, fresh bread smells rancid to you). If career love takes a while to find, fear not—quarter lifers leave jobs faster than any other age group, government data shows. So keep sampling—that's normal.

"You'll get through this stage by staying focused on how you're feeling as you strive toward your goal,"

Marantz Henig says. Be sure to appreciate the process so you can enjoy little victories without stressing too much about the endgame. You're on Pinterest 24/7 anyway, so while you're there, create a vision board to help you stay motivated and remind you of your passions. And every week, pinpoint one thing you'll do to achieve your goals, such as joining an online-dating site or upgrading your résumé—and then do it. "This will keep up your momentum, so you don't fall back into old habits," Jay says.

After your QLC, you'll have a higher 'happiness IQ'—your radar for when something in life doesn't feel quite right.

Stage 4 You're back, baby!

It may take months or even a year (or more), but when your QLC is over, you'll know. You'll feel relieved, settled and, yes, happy, Jay says. New job? Check. Better guy? Thank you, OkCupid. And although you'll probably always have some doubts, Jay notes, your life won't feel bogged down by indecision and glumness.

Move on But wait, you just kicked a QLC to the curb—shouldn't you settle in to stage 4 and enjoy? Sorry, but no go. "It's important to keep taking time to make sure that you're happy," Robinson says. Luckily, after your QLC is over, you'll have a higher "happiness IQ"—your radar for when something in life doesn't feel quite right. "You'll recognize it and be able to make tiny tweaks to fix the problem before things start to get out of control again," Marantz Henig says.

Finally, each day, take one minute after waking up or before going to bed to be grateful for what you have and where you are. These quick, reflective hits help remind you of all the things going right in your life, Robinson says, and you'll be less likely to let the little things get to you in the future. ■