# Quarterlife crisis: An Overview

**Dr. Oliver Robinson**
Dept of Psychology and Counselling
University of Greenwich
London, UK

**Reference**: Robinson, O.C. (2013). Quarterlife crisis: An overview. *Chinese Social Sciences, 6*, 6-7.

## What is a "quarter-life" crisis?

Traditionally, the period of midlife has been most strongly associated with having a crisis in adulthood, but it is now widely accepted that they are just as likely in the first decade of adult life. A quarter-life crisis is a period of stress, instability and major life change that occurs when a person is either in their twenties or early thirties. Such a period typically occurs when a person has entered a job, relationship or marriage, or has developed an adult lifestyle, which they then realise they no longer want because it is causing them distress or preventing their personal growth. The crisis period acts as a turning point during which old commitments are ended, new ones are begun, and many strong emotions are experienced. Crisis episodes are often reflected on as developmental important periods, during which much personality development and emotional development occurs.

My research investigated quarter-life crisis using questionnaires and interviews, and found it is quite a common phenomenon – about one third of British adults aged 30 and over reflect on having a crisis in their twenties.

## What are the reasons for the emergence of the 'quarter-life' crisis?

We have also found that quarter-life crisis is a more frequent recollection in those who are currently in their 30s than those who are 40 and over. This may be because it is more recent in the memory of this group, and so more likely to be recalled as a crisis, or because quarter-life crisis is actually becoming more common. We are not sure yet. It may be a mixture of both. But there are good arguments that the quarter-life crisis is more common now than in the past.

Firstly, adults in their twenties report higher levels of stress than any other adult age group. It is a time during which major decisions are made that shape the remaining decades of adult life – this is a source of pressure and anxiety and one that is increasingly complicated in the modern world as there are more kinds of job, more possible identities and a wider set of options for relationships.

An additional challenge for young adults is changing roles from being a dependent child who lives at home and is financially supported, to being an independent adult. This transition to adulthood can take many years to achieve in full due to longer periods studying and the high price of property. While age 18 is the commencement of legal adulthood in China and the UK (and many other countries), most young adults do not actually think of themselves as

adults for some years after that.  This is referred to as the stage of ‘emerging adulthood’ – when a young adult is neither fully adolescent nor fully adult.

In the past, the start of adult commitments such as marriage, parenthood and career occurred earlier, so by the age of 25 a young person would quickly be embedded in adult society through entering these social roles. Now, in the UK, the average age for first marriage is approximately 30, and parenthood also starts at this age on average. In urban China, the same effect has occurred – marriage is happening much later. In February, China Daily reported that the average age for marriage for women in Shanghai is now over 30. This delay of commitments means that a young person has more freedom to explore and be educated than ever before; it means that major life changes are more possible and manageable. For example, a career change is easier if the person does not have financial responsibilities towards children and so has the capacity to re-train for a period of their young adult life, while a relationship change is also easier if the relationship in non-marital and does not involve children.  These are the kinds of changes that make quarter-life crisis a more common phenomenon than in the past.

**What happens during a quarter-life crisis?**

A quarter-life crisis is an episode in life that typically lasts a year or two, and includes a number of recognisable features.  All episodes start with Phase 1, which involves a life situation that is causing the person stress, dissatisfaction, a deep sense that their development is not progressing healthy and optimally, and feeling trapped in a set of commitments that have been made but are no longer wanted.  This is often accompanied by not feeling in control– of being pushed around by circumstance and other people.  They also sometimes involve issues with alcohol or drugs that need to be resolved. The negative emotions that characterise Phase 1 are often held within, and not expressed outwardly.

Phase 2a brings with it a greater desire for change, and a belief that change can occur. During this phase, a person separates from a relationship, social group or job to search for a new path into adult life. This is a distressing period, for it brings a sense of loss, confusion and a sense of anxiety about the future.  Phase 2b is a time of questioning and self-examination. One of our participants said of this period: ‘‘I had to reflect, I had to see about the past and what went wrong, why things went wrong”. This emphasises the nature of this period – a time to reflect on why their life had led to a crisis and how to move forward. Rather than living with a routine and automatically, life in Phase 3 is experimental and spontaneous. New ideas, identities and commitments are then tried and a person looks at options available to them for the future. The aim of Phase 3 is to search for a career or relationship that is more closely aligned with their ‘core self’ - they values, aspirations and deep sense ‘who I am’ than before. Phase 4 is termed the ‘rebuilding phase’ and it involves active steps towards building a new adult ‘life structure’ – an integrated set of commitments that can stand the test of time and act as the foundation for the decades of adult life to come.

In the UK, men tend to report more quarter-life crises that revolve around transitions and problems at work, while women tend to report more crises that pertain to matters of relationship, break-up or divorce.

**You describe the phenomenon as a "total life make-over", and that it seems that this life overhaul is worth it. Can you explain more?**

I use Levinson's concept of the 'life structure' to refer to the way in which our roles, lifestyle and identity in adulthood have to work together as a singular whole. Thus a person must find a balance between career demands, working hours, time spent with family, money, leisure, residence, time spent getting to work and back, and so on. If one of these parts changes, it is likely that everything else will have to change too, as they are all dependent on each other to work. This means that we tend to avoid change, because we know that major change in one area leads to many other changes too, and that can be an overwhelming prospect. But during a quarter-life crisis, a person changes one aspect of their life and this then offers an opportunity to change other aspects too. So what often occurs in quarter-life crisis is that multiple changes occur together. A person may break up with a partner, change their lifestyle, their residence and their job all within a year.

There are positive effects to making all these changes to life. Typically, those who had been through a crisis described growing in ways that had made them feel stronger, more authentic and more emotionally balanced. An example of feeling stronger after the crisis is one of our participants, who split up from an abusive boyfriend and said: "In a real nutshell, it made me stronger, and I think it's made me less weak. I stand up for myself now. I am not ever going to let myself get into the position of being the victim again."

The interviews we conducted suggested that almost all early adult crises led to these positive changes. However, when we used a questionnaire that we gave out to over 1000 people, it was more mixed – half the respondents described positive change following the crisis, but half described either no change or negative change. Decreases in self-esteem tend to occur if there is a guilt about the separation or job loss and a person loses confidence after the crisis, particularly if they find themselves failing to get back into the job market or to start a new relationship.

**Your research received strong media coverage and readers' comments. How you comment on this?**

My view is that there is public interest because young people feel a lot of pressure and want to understand the challenges, transitions and emotions they experience. Nowadays in the UK, there are more young people than ever entering the workforce and unemployment is a big problem. For those that do get a job they may find that they are not making enough money to live independently for a while. So given how many challenges young adults in Britain are experiencing, it was no surprise that the British media were interested in the story. But I was interested to see that the story was run in countries with very different cultures, including India, Indonesia and Italy. They all seemed to relate to the idea of quarter-life crisis, so it has a connection to many places in the world. I hope to conduct more cross-cultural research in the future, including in China.

**How important it is for psychologists and clinicians as well as public to recognize "quarter-life" crisis.**

The applied potential of this research lies in using the model as a guide for therapeutic practitioners to help with clients who are developmental crisis. Were this model replicated and shown to be a general pattern, a therapist may be able to apply it when appraising a client in crisis, for many of those in crisis do seek therapeutic help. If a therapist upon talking to a client who was in their late twenties or thirties considered that they were in a developmental crisis, they would be able to apply the model to identify which phase the client was in, and by doing so might be able to provide stage-appropriate help to aid the person's negotiation through the transition. The main thing in my mind is that clinicians should always endeavour to understand distress in their client relative to the challenges of their particular life stage, and that is what this model does.

**What are your suggestions to people who are experiencing the quarter-life crisis.**

Firstly, it is helpful to know that if you are having a quarter-life crisis, they are not unusual or weird. It is pretty normal. They should be willing to explore alternatives and to find a career, relationship or lifestyle that is based on their own aspirations and values, not someone else's. It may seem that you are being a good person if you keep others happy (for example your parents) at the expense of yourself, but it doesn't work in the long term. You will end up being miserable, and so requiring help from others, if you don't keep yourself happy. Assertiveness is very helpful in moving through a quarter-life crisis or recovering from one, so assertiveness coaching can be helpful.

I recommend that a person in crisis should seek professional help if they feel that they need help, and lack sufficient support from friends and family.  Asking for help is not an expression of weakness. Many in our sample gained professional help and benefitted from it. It's part of the process of growing through difficulty, and in many ways is an expression of strength, because it shows you have the courage to tell others how you really feel.

The key benefit of a quarter-life crisis is developing a lifestyle and set of commitments that feels like it a reflection of your inner personality, rather than one that hides your inner self. This is very conducive to health - feeling like your inner and outer life are in harmony means you feel authentic and relaxed. Feeling like you don't fit in with your environment is stressful, and that tends to be some degree lessened during a quarter-life crisis, which is a step towards a healthy and happy adulthood in the long-term.