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THE BURDEN OF GREATNESS

Unique challenges of high-achieving women

By Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, MCC



One night 20 years into my career, I was sitting in the dark in my living room. I didn't have enough energy to turn on a light. I was 40 years old. I owned a beautiful home plus two cars in the garage. I had plaques and pictures demonstrating my global achievements. In the dark, none of that was visible. There was something missing that kept me from enjoying my life. I was tired, emotionally numb and had no idea who I was.

The night I sat in my living room in the dark, I thought I was alone. I didn't know there were a growing number of women just like me – confident, passionate and successful, yet disillusioned, exhausted and confused. With the best of intentions, our parents raised us to excel and society persuaded us to achieve. Being ordinary was not an option.

That's when I decided to do my doctoral dissertation on goal-driven women in the workplace, specifically looking at

what personal factors serve or frustrate the aspirations of women who desire to achieve big things at work.

I was right. Many of today's women represent the growing number of us who were told they could accomplish anything they put their mind to. They could experience greatness. Though they were warned the roads would not be easy, they were told the possibilities were limitless.

The problem with having the goal of being 'great' is that it's a constantly moving target. As a result, many women feel restless, sensing there is something more for them to do in this life. They get excited by new goals and projects, but at some point feel disappointed or just sense that it's time to move on. I call this phenomenon "the burden of greatness."

For smart, goal-driven women, a mid-life crisis isn't about recovering lost youth. It's about discovering the application of their greatness.

Women working their way up the ladder in the workplace today are likely to have multiple college degrees and feel more confident in their abilities than their mother's generation. They love being busy and hate feeling bored. They don't worry about being found out that they are not competent enough for the job. They are irritated by not being challenged enough, recognized enough and included in making important decisions. They were told they should accomplish amazing things. They detest that there are still so many roadblocks to doing great work.

As a result, they wander from job to job, career to career and sometimes even relationship to relationship. If they don't physically wander, they seek to renew their work and their lives as often as they can in their current situation. If they can't do this, their frustration and anger hurts both themselves and those around them.

I also found these women feel like they are the only ones who work so

hard and care so much at work. Since I released the book with my research, *Wander Woman: How High-Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction*, I received emails from women around the world thanking me for articulating what they have been struggling with mentally. Again, they had no idea so many women deal with the same angst they feel.

FEMALE MID-LIFE CRISIS

By the age of 40, many smart, goal-driven women sit in the dark like I did, wondering who they are. They focused so much on external achievement at work and home, they begin to have what I call a *Mid-Life Crisis of Identity*.¹

Women now enter the workplace with high expectations of career

advancement. Many in their 20s say, "I want to be CEO" and then face the reality of having to live in the trenches for a while before they can rise up.

As they enter their 30s with more clarity about their careers, they seek meaningful and challenging work, saying, "I want to prove my value and make a significant difference." As they cope with the ongoing inequality in the workplace, their disappointments of dreams unmet and continually feeling misunderstood and mismanaged, they begin to drop off the corporate ladder. The conflict of their personal values and corporate values may become irreconcilable.²

By the time they enter their 40s, many lose their taste for proving themselves in the workplace. I have met many top performers who feel they can accomplish more working on their own. Others take lateral moves to keep their minds challenged and their lives in balance. Some drop off the grid to discover themselves.

STRESSORS OF SMART, GOAL-DRIVEN WOMEN

In my research, I found some common stress-related behaviors of smart, goal-driven women that are provoked by their strengths. The following assumptions exacerbate their stress:

ASSUMPTION #1

There is a right answer and it is mine

You are often the best and the one who knows. Can you let other people be right sometimes too?

ASSUMPTION #2

No one can do the work as well as I do

You take on too many projects and overwork the ones you have. Can you develop someone to share the load and allow others to learn from their mistakes?

ASSUMPTION #3

I am disappointed, again

You start out excited about the possibilities, then you focus on what's wrong. Can you focus instead on what is right and possible?

ASSUMPTION #4

I don't need help

You can figure it out on your own. Can you let others help you? Asking for help is more efficient, builds relationships, and you look stronger as a leader.

ASSUMPTION #5

I have to be great at everything I do

When one project is complete, you quickly search for the next great thing to conquer. Can you stop and enjoy your achievements before moving on to accomplish something else?

Smart, strong women can be ambitious. They can accomplish amazing things and have what they desire. And, they can enjoy the journey. Coach them to face their assumptions so they can choose to chill out, ask for help, and let life get messy. There is so much to enjoy in the moments they are missing.

A woman from my research went from being a celebrated marine biologist to an international sales executive to a global consultant, and then quit to raise her daughter while contemplating her next career move. She told me she was taught to always raise her hand. Now in her 40s, she is questioning what she is raising her hand for.

These women are facing a mid-life quest for identity.

This quest might even endure into their 50s and 60s as circumstances change and desires surface. They continue to feel a restless craving to realize their potential.

For smart, goal-driven women, a mid-life crisis isn't about recovering lost youth. It's about discovering the application of their greatness. The problem is they still can't define what 'greatness' looks like, so the quest has no specific destination.

I often get female executive coaching clients who want to explore what is next for their career, and possibly, their life. They can't talk to family and friends who tell them they should appreciate the great position they have right now. A coach might be the only place they can safely show up as themselves.

Many times, my female clients already have one foot out the door. I advise them to choose what is next, not just leave because they don't like what they have. I always ask them if they would stay a little longer in their position so we can figure out how their next chapter should read.

Here are some questions you might explore with your clients:

- What do you feel you should have done by this time in your life?
- Is there something more important and fulfilling you want to focus on now?
- What do you want more of?

- What have you imprisoned that is crying to be free?
- What *shoulds* are getting in the way of what you really want to do?

Let them know it is okay to lose their equilibrium when others think their life should be smooth sailing. It is okay to say, "I don't know who I am," even when they have a successful career.

Sometimes you have to lose yourself to find yourself. Some call this a mid-life crisis; I call it the Heroine's Journey. •

NOTES:

¹Gersick, C. and Kram, K. *High-Achieving Women at Midlife: An Exploratory Study*. Journal of Management Inquiry, Vol. 11 No. 2. June, 2002 104-127.

²Reynolds, M. *Wander Woman: How High-Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010.



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