

Opinion: Gen Xers coping with midlife crisis

By Sara Scribner, Salon

In the 1993 movie "Falling Down," Michael Douglas plays an angry white man whose midlife crisis has him nearly foaming at the mouth. Appalled by a brutal traffic jam and disorienting changes in his world, he flips out in a Korean liquor store, tangles with the homeless and construction workers, amassing an arsenal as he tries to make his way across town. His breakdown leaves casualties, makes the news – everyone notices. An eloquent latter-day equivalent, Noah Baumbach's "Greenberg," shows a meltdown going differently: The protagonist's moment of crisis: Shrouded in an oversize ski vest, he wanders alone, quiet and pathetic, existentially lost on the edges of a party. Even his best friends don't notice.

Created nearly 20 years apart, the films illustrate two different generations hitting middle age. People heard it loud and clear when the baby boomers crossed over to midlife – you couldn't avoid it. Radio talk show hosts probed into the transition, newspapers described boomer women coping with crow's feet and men reclaiming their vitality in tribal drum circles. For the generation born after – in the '60s and '70s, raised by television like no previous generation and with the divorce rate skyrocketing during their childhood years – there is no media watch broadcasting their new trajectory. Few have even noticed that this small, notoriously rebellious clan – those born roughly between 1965 and 1980, which means about 46 million Xers versus 80 million boomers – has entered middle age. It's a transition that, until now, has been captured, mulled over and ridiculed for each generation for more than a half-century. But not this time.

The problem is, with adulthoods repeatedly shipwrecked by

economic disasters, Xers might have neglected to track the crossing over. Susan Gregory Thomas, author of the resonant memoir "In Spite of Everything," says that many Xers "are always living in a state of triage, always in a survivalist mode. We're not thinking long-term."

How is Generation X dealing with middle age? Celebration, turmoil, regret? Which issues are keeping Xers up at night? What happens when they wake up?

There's plenty to joke about when it comes to midlife – there's the stereotypical folly of the aging man grabbing his red Porsche and buxom young thing in order to stave off the fear of death. Crises are inherently filmic – and most of those films play midlife for laughs or shock value. Think of the musical-bed high jinks in "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice" or Peter Sellers getting high with nubile hippies in "I Love You, Alice B. Toklas!"

But whether the rest of the world notices or not, it's time for Xers – which, admittedly, is a broad, diverse bunch – to start assessing in a way that goes beyond punch lines.

Whether you believe, as Gail Sheehy stated in "Passages," the '70s pop-culture classic on human life stages, that middle age is psychologically hard-wired or, as Patricia Cohen recently asserted in the book "In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age," mostly a social and scientific construct, the pull of doing a full life assessment and inventory somewhere in your 40s has been historically difficult to resist.

This is true even when the inventory involves saying goodbye to youthful hopes. As Miranda July said about the inspiration for her film "The Future" in a 2011 *New York Times* magazine profile, "It's kind of about letting go of that feeling of my 20s, that feeling that I will do absolutely everything, I will have sex with everyone, I will go to every country," she says. "In your 30s, it's obvious that a finite amount of things will

happen.”

And then 40 – well, it’s all downhill from there. Right?

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