

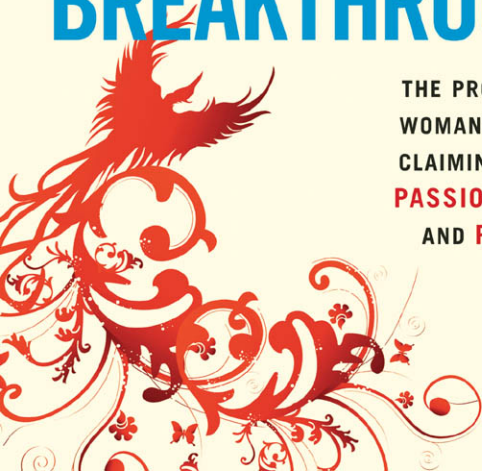
KATHY CAPRINO

"Finally, a book written specifically for women stuck in professional crisis. Caprino provides warm, intelligent, and much-needed guidance, plus a sound methodology, for breaking free and gaining lasting personal and professional satisfaction."

JULIE JANSEN, author of *I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This*

Breakdown, **BREAKTHROUGH**

**THE PROFESSIONAL
WOMAN'S GUIDE TO
CLAIMING A LIFE OF
PASSION, POWER,
AND PURPOSE**



an excerpt from

***Breakdown, Breakthrough:
The Professional Woman's Guide to Claiming a Life of
Passion, Power, and Purpose***

by Kathy Caprino

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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PREFACE

*yes is a world
& in this world of
yes live
(skilfully curled)
all worlds*

E. E. CUMMINGS

After sixteen years in the workforce, I had achieved what many professional women dream of, but I was miserable. A corporate vice president with a lucrative and high-powered job, I was blessed with what seemed like a great career, a loving husband, two beautiful children, and a charming house in a quaint New England town. I had all the signs and symbols of “success” in life. I had it all. Or so it appeared, until I awakened suddenly at age 38 to a burning question. I asked myself over and over, “*Why am I so unhappy?*”

My family life had always been fulfilling and satisfying to me. I loved being a mother and wife, and I experienced these roles as enriching, filling life with meaning, joy, and satisfaction. But personal fulfillment has never been enough for me, for reasons that are deeply rooted in my experiences as a child and teen. Since I was 16, I have known that being an accomplished professional was something I deeply wanted, and having others view me this way was also important. I believed then (and still do) that developing the “chops” of working—building professional proficiency and forging the necessary skills, strengths, and talents to rise to new challenges and succeed in the workplace—adds a vital dimension to my life. I thought, too, that a career would guarantee that I could

have something all my own to shape and mold—something no one could ever take away from me.

But in midlife all professional joy and satisfaction withered away, and my traumas at work began to “bleed” into my personal world. Strange, unsettling things were happening. My husband one day broke down in tears out of the blue and said, “I’m not sure I can take this anymore. You’re just so angry and hostile all the time.” I was shocked and hurt but realized, suddenly, that he was right. I had become addicted to taking out my intense work frustration and resentment on him.

I’d been suffering, too, from a serious chronic illness—a condition called tracheitis—which for four years hit me every four months or so without fail. It was debilitating, painful, frightening, and, in some inexplicable way, infuriating to me. I’d lose my voice completely and suffer from sharp, burning pain in the throat and chest. Fever would consume me, along with aches and exhaustion. Doctors couldn’t find a cause or a cure. Due to all this sickness, I was constantly angry and resentful, and I felt depleted all the time. Functioning on every level became a chore. I knew something was very wrong, but I hadn’t fully realized that things were truly falling apart and a “breakdown” was emerging.

I began to grapple with the all-important question I read somewhere, “*When I am 90 years old and looking back, what do I want to have accomplished, experienced, and given in this lifetime?*” My contemplation made me recognize I hadn’t a clue what I wanted my life to stand for, or even the type of individual I would hold up as a role model. I did know, however, that I was drowning in a sea of wasted opportunities, and time was running out. I urgently longed to step away from feeling hurt at work, and hurting others. I looked everywhere for guidance—books, assessment tests, consultants, career coaches, mentors, colleagues, friends. But despite my many efforts, I remained stuck, unable to move forward in a meaningful way.

At the suggestion of a friend, I sought psychotherapy to help me get to the bottom of why I was so unhappy. Therapy helped me face the harsh reality that I disliked my work intensely, and that it held no positive meaning for me. In stepping back, I saw that I’d had burning fantasies for years about exciting new fields I wanted to be part of (the film industry, for one), but I hadn’t taken any real steps toward transitioning to those fields. I’d been paralyzed by fear that I’d lose too much, or more precisely, that I’d lose what little power and self-esteem I’d derived from my money and title. I’d let my dreams die, chalking them up to childish longings that served no purpose. The worst blow yet was recognizing that I no longer liked or respected myself as a professional. I felt as if

I'd emerged from a twenty-year trance to the awareness that I'd always "done the right thing" for money, security, and safety, and this blind commitment to the right thing had stolen my life away.

The Breakdown Comes

After years of dissatisfaction and feeling inauthentic every day at work, the final straw-breaking blow came. Right after 9/11, I was laid off from my high-level position in a way that was brutal to my ego. It left me shattered and disillusioned. This devastation came only one month after moving to a larger house farther away from New York City, which meant more financial demands and less accessibility to other comparable jobs. My wake-up call had arrived.

Cast out from my job, I lost my corporate identity and self-worth. My sense of security was gone, and I felt depressed, disoriented, and alone. The experience felt like a sort of death, and with that "death" came denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. As I later learned, these are the same stages of grief and loss identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her groundbreaking work on death and dying. This type of crisis affects the whole self—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. No single approach or technique is "the answer" when it comes to moving through breakdown to breakthrough.

A Breakthrough Emerges

Thanks to therapy, I chose to look at this crisis as a chance to turn my life around. I took a hard look at what led me into professional hell and became a student of life, relationships, work identity, and change. I jumped into earning a master's degree in marriage and family therapy, received coaching training, and became a psychotherapist and coach. I also studied hundreds of books, research studies, articles—anything I could get my hands on—about concepts of life change, professional crisis, transition, midlife staging, women's development, spirituality, health, family dynamics, communication and systems theory, theories of personality, and more.

Along the way, I was startled by the number of women I met who felt as overwhelmed and miserable as I had. I noticed, too, that while some people experience sudden and dramatic change as a crisis and suffer through it, some do not. I needed to understand why.

To learn more, I conducted a national research study on *Women Overcoming Professional Crisis: Finding New Meaning in Life and Work*, co-sponsored by the Esteemed Woman Foundation. Within the first thirty minutes of announcing my study via email, I received twenty responses from women across the country and outside the United States *asking* to participate. This work had hit a nerve! The research confirmed something quite amazing: in epidemic proportions, professional women are feeling disempowered and deeply dissatisfied in their professional lives, which in turn leads to other life crises. Ultimately, this dissatisfaction is about a breakdown in the relationships we forge and develop in four key areas: with ourselves, with others, with the world, and with our higher selves. New avenues for help must be found, and this book offers a solid start.

The Power of Stepping Back, Letting Go, and Saying Yes! to Yourself

Amid the thousands of women who are suffering from a lack of professional empowerment, many have taken courageous steps to face and let go of their limitations and fears, choosing a new path that leads to a life of passion, power, and purpose—in short, success and joy *on their terms*. *Breakdown, Breakthrough* presents their compelling and inspiring stories and offers accounts of professional women who have lived through the breakdown of feeling powerless and have overcome their challenges to reinvent themselves in creative, expansive, and meaningful ways from which we all can learn. They share their insights and lessons learned from stepping back to gain a new, widened perspective of their situation, shedding what holds them back and saying yes! to their power to make their life visions a reality.

What's Ahead

Breakdown, Breakthrough presents a coaching, behavioral, and spiritual framework for examining the patterns that contribute to the disempowerment women face today. This book explains how you can navigate successfully through these breakdown crises, or bypass them altogether, to achieve a more powerful, passionate, and purposeful life.

The introduction, “The Power of Yes!,” explains what crisis and breakdown is, then describes the many benefits of walking away from disempowerment crises and saying

yes! to yourself. You'll learn how these crises impact women, and you'll understand what it means to feel powerful in life and work.

Chapter 1, "Breakdown in Professional Women—Why Now?," explores the disempowerment phenomenon midlife professional women are facing. It presents key developmental issues and compelling data that reveal why professional women so often (and understandably) experience "breakdown" and wish to reevaluate their current path.

Chapter 2, "Recognizing When You're in Professional Crisis," will help you identify whether you are experiencing a disempowerment crisis or simply having "a tough time." It outlines the four areas of disempowerment that women typically face in midlife and helps you assess which are problematic for you.

In chapter 3, "A New Model for Empowered Living," we'll explore what full empowerment in life and work looks like. The chapter then provides a guide to understanding the root causes of the twelve disempowerment crises, along with the necessary shifts in thinking and action to overcome them. You'll learn about the power of stepping back, letting go, and saying yes! as key steps toward change.

Each of chapters 4 through 15 examines one of the twelve crises that constitute the full "I Can't Do This" phenomenon women are facing today. Chapter 4, "Resolving Chronic Health Problems," presents steps for understanding potential messages behind chronic illness as related to professional malaise.

In chapter 5, the crisis of "Overcoming Loss" reveals how losses in life often lead individuals to rethink their entire existence and focus on new life priorities that create a shift in their professional trajectory. Steps to help heal the emotions concerning loss, and to bring forward parts of yourself in the process, are offered.

Chapter 6, "Achieving Self-Love," examines ways women relinquish their authentic selves for success. It presents steps for understanding your authentic values, expressing your priorities, and reestablishing integrity and self-respect.

Chapter 7, "Speaking Up with Power," discusses how women are often unable to advocate for themselves, challenge the status quo, or speak up without fearing or experiencing punishment, criticism, or suppression. Approaches are given to help you understand ways that previous patterns and traumatic incidents of suppression in your life are still being reenacted.

Chapter 8, "Breaking Cycles of Mistreatment," provides tools for women to address abuse, diminishment, or disrespect. It offers steps to strengthen your boundaries, receive advocacy and support, and protect yourself from systems of mistreatment.

Have you awakened to the realization that continuing to compete, and doing what it takes to remain on top, is simply too difficult or no longer worthwhile? Chapter 9, “Shifting from Competition to Collaboration,” presents steps for shedding the ego-based judgments and crushing competition that lead women to make the wrong choices for themselves. It offers approaches for taking a new life direction away from competition toward authentic values-based living.

Feeling completely stuck—in dissatisfying jobs, in restricting relationships—is a common phenomenon for women, and many see their paralysis as the result of financial constraints. Chapter 10, “Escaping Financial Traps,” explains how to gain strength by revising negative beliefs and actions around money, power, and self-reliance.

Chapter 11, “Using Real Talents in Life and Work,” looks at feeling powerless in your ability to use your gifts, talents, and abilities. It explains the importance of stepping up to use your talents and offers tools for helping you honor and express what you value.

Awakening to a sense of your own mortality and of a longing to make a difference in the world constitutes chapter 12’s crisis, “Helping Others and the World.” This chapter explores your longings for greater meaning and offers recommendations to propel you toward sustainable work that fulfills your life purpose.

Does everything feel like it’s falling apart? Chapter 13, “Falling Together After Falling Apart,” looks at the crisis of key areas in your life coming apart at the seams all at once. It explores steps for releasing your commitment to struggle, accepting positive possibilities, and creating your new life as you want it to be.

Chapter 14, “Balancing Life and Work,” discusses the crisis of failing to balance the demands of work with other key life responsibilities. It uncovers habits of perfectionism and overfunctioning and discusses how to receive help to stop trying to achieve the impossible.

A large number of professional women have simply lost touch with who they are at the core. They struggle with the questions “Who am I in this world and what am I here to do?” Chapter 15, “Doing Work and Play That You Love,” offers new approaches to saying yes! to knowing who you are and believing you can live a life of your dreams.

The concluding chapter, “Claiming Your Passion, Power, and Purpose,” distills the most powerful advice interviewees have shared on ways to move through professional breakdown to breakthrough. This advice is straight from the hearts, minds, and souls of those who have overcome feeling powerless in life and work, and lived to tell the tale.

Real Stories/Real People

The stories presented here are real, based on interviews and conversations conducted in 2006–2007 with more than one hundred professional women across the country. Except where noted, the individuals' names are real. As far as possible, I've retained the specific details of each interviewee's inspiring story.

In some cases, at an interviewee's request, I've modified identifying information and events to maintain confidentiality. In others, to protect the privacy of the persons involved, I've merged specific details of two individuals' accounts.

Recommended Steps for Stepping Back, Letting Go, and Saying Yes!

There are thousands of ways to assist individuals who wish to change their lives. Many of these are effective, but no single approach works for everyone. The recommended exercises at the end of each chapter have been selected from years of training, study, and experience. The journal exercises help you *step back* for new perspective and gain a deeper connection to your inner thoughts and feelings. Use the *Breakdown, Breakthrough* Journal available at www.elliacomcommunications.com, or use your own. The coaching exercises offer approaches to *letting go* of limiting thoughts and actions, and *saying yes!* to what compels you.

These recommendations have one powerful trait in common: they draw on what you already know at your core. They honor you and how you view the world, and they foster self-acceptance while giving you the courage to move forward.

Here, you'll find women's courageous stories of breakdown to breakthrough, along with great advice for others.

What You May Expect Going Forward

Making lasting positive change is not easy, but the rewards are tremendous. As you go through this book and read about others' experience of breakdown to breakthrough, you may be surprised by new realizations. And unsettling emotions may surface. If this happens and you would like support, please see the helpful resources at the back of this book. Or you may wish to develop your own *Breakdown, Breakthrough* circle to explore this material and share your thoughts and progress on an ongoing basis.

In the end, *Breakdown, Breakthrough* will help you redefine success, purpose, and true quality of life in terms that are meaningful to you. Since I have personally experienced each and every one of these crises (some at the same time), I know that these crises can be not only survived but ultimately viewed as blessings that lead to an expansive and enriched life. Awakening to the realization that you are dissatisfied with your situation is the first step to changing it.

Use this book to start you on your way to breakthrough!

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Yes!



Sweet are the uses of adversity.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 1

Defining Professional “Crisis”

What is true *crisis* in our lives? How can we tell we’re heading into crisis, rather than simply going through a really bad time? What are the signs of breakdown? This chapter explains what professional crisis is for women today. You’ll learn what working women lack when they are in crisis, as well as the many benefits of moving forward to break-through.

As defined in Webster’s dictionary,¹ a “crisis” is:

- The turning point for better or worse, as in an acute disease or fever
- A paroxysmal attack of pain, distress, or disordered function
- An emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person’s life (a midlife *crisis*)
- The decisive moment (as in a literary plot)

- An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; *especially* one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome (a financial *crisis*)
- A situation that has reached a critical phase (the environmental *crisis*)

Clearly, we're talking about a no-turning-back situation—a time that calls for a reckoning and reevaluation. Crisis involves the occurrence of a deeply troubling, heart-wrenching, or grueling event or series of events that brings you to a recognition, finally and irrevocably, that change must occur *now*. Crisis pushes you to your knees and cracks open your awareness that to repeat this experience (feeling/event/situation) would be close to intolerable.

Breakdown in the professional arena means that you have discovered beyond a doubt that how you work, what you work on, who you work with, who you are when you work, or where you work—one or more of these elements are causing damage to you, your life, your body, and your spirit. Breakdown often seems to strike out of the blue, yet we rarely get to this point without warning signs along the way.

Crisis may look different for each person, but one unifying theme defines it: Crisis is a wake-up call that demands your attention and reveals that major change in life or work is required, and fast.

Why Focus on Professional Women in Crisis?

Women typically feel powerless and are breaking down in the professional arena in ways that men are not. This is not to say that men do not struggle with professional and personal crises; of course they do. In fact, many of the challenges discussed in this book will resonate with men. (Based on my many conversations with men, my next book may be *Breakdown, Breakthrough II* for men!)

Breakdown, Breakthrough is not about finding fault—in men or women. Thousands of women—myself included—can say that some of our best and strongest mentors have been men. Also, many women reveal that their most significant challenges have been with female bosses and colleagues. The goal of this book is not to focus on one specific professional dilemma, but to help you gain clarity on *your* personal and professional situation and identity—whatever it may be—to assist you in moving successfully through your challenges. To do so, we need a new model or guide for empowered living that speaks directly to each of our particular sets of challenges.

What Are Women in Crisis Lacking?

What are professional women longing for when breakdown occurs? Women who have gone through significant professional transition reveal that when they were in professional crisis, they struggled with the absence of one or more of the following benefits of a fully empowered life.

They yearned for, but couldn't find the way to:

- Honor or express their various facets
- Respect both the work they do and their colleagues, and be respected in turn
- Be treated fairly
- Earn the money they need to
- Expand their self-reliance
- Achieve “quality of life,” flexibility, or control over what they do and how they do it
- Balance their numerous important life roles
- Make a significant positive difference in the world and in the lives of others
- Utilize their voices, talents, and abilities
- Contribute fully in ways that reflect their unique needs and values without being negatively judged or diminished

Professional breakdown, then, involves realizing that you are struggling—and failing—to attain a positive life experience that includes passion, power, purpose, security, integrity, self-reliance, and balance. For some, addressing crisis and making room for positive life change requires a good deal of inner and outer work. But for others, small tweaks in a critical dimension are enough.

For all individuals, breaking through to positive life change involves three powerful steps:

1. Step back to disentangle from your situation and gain a fresh, expanded perspective.
2. Let go of negative thinking and actions that hold you back.
3. Say yes! to honoring yourself and taking action toward what compels you.

Benefits of Addressing Crisis and Saying Yes! to Yourself

After living in the midst of crisis for a long time, women often feel chronically debilitated, depressed, angry, or sick. They may feel unable to live fully or experience meaning and joy, or be present for those they love and care for. Once you awaken to the sense that you are somehow thwarted and not living up to your potential, you feel discomfort and pain.

As you begin your exploration, the difficulty of your experiences may seem to be draining you of the energy needed to start the process of change. But those who have lived through this period have said, “Once I took the first step of examining what was not working, I began to feel hopeful that things could change. It seemed as if an enormous weight had lifted, and I knew then that I could do what I needed to.”

The benefits of taking the first step, and gaining even small degrees of power to overcome professional breakdown, are enormous. You will begin to:

- Make friends with yourself and your body, and understand the information your physical condition reveals
- Enjoy stronger, healthier, more connected relationships that are based on empathy and respect rather than conflict and competition
- Recognize the influence of your ego and learn how to integrate it with other aspects of yourself
- Find enjoyable, purposeful work that sustains you
- Access inspiration and helpful support when you need it
- Discover your unique purpose that gives meaning to your life and work, and live from that knowledge each day
- Embrace change rather than fight it
- Live more joyfully and passionately
- Thrive and grow through life’s challenges

The growth experience of breaking through your struggles transforms all aspects of your life. Ample evidence shows that women are finding new ways to successfully deal with major professional crises and are reaching new levels of success and satisfaction. Overcoming breakdown, and finding new meaning in life and work, is not only a possibility but a necessity—and a blessing—for thousands of women today.

THE DISEMPOWERMENT DILEMMA

1

Breakdown in Professional Women— Why Now?

* * *

*We shall not escape our dangers
by recoiling from them.*

WINSTON CHURCHILL

THE DISEMPOWERMENT DILEMMA

“Everything I’ve worked for *has just lost its importance to me. I really have no idea what to do or where to go next. I desperately want to do something different, something more meaningful to me, but I can’t figure out what that is.”*

“I feel so mistreated and unappreciated at work. What I really want to do is tell them all off, but I end up coming back each day, and stuffing down my anger and resentment.”

“I can’t keep up this pace. I want some time off, and I need more flexibility and space to be with my daughter. But how can I ask for that when I’ve just been promoted?”

“I feel sick and exhausted all the time, and I just can’t beat this illness. I can barely function, at work or at home. I need a break!”

“If I really get honest with myself, I realize I’m just not performing at my peak anymore at this job. I’m not at my best anymore and it’s scary to me.”

“A friend of mine has her own small business, loves it, and makes great money without killing herself each day. I wish I could figure out how to do that, but I don’t think I have what it takes to make it on my own.”

I hear these and similar comments continually from professional women who have reached a critical turning point in their lives. After devoting years to building solid careers, they’ve discovered, sometimes in a flash and sometimes over the course of months or years, that their professional lives and identities simply no longer work. This experience—what I call a breakdown—is occurring with greater frequency and impact than ever before to professional women in the United States.

Professional Crises

Women today face many forms of professional crisis. Each revolves around powerlessness—perceived or real—to act positively and effectively on their own behalf. Whether it's being afraid to speak up; allowing themselves to be mistreated; doubting their capabilities or longings; resisting the truth; or acting in ways that are contrary to their values, disempowerment is at the heart of the problem.

When women feel powerless, they perceive themselves to be unable to affect positive change. They experience a persistent longing for acceptance and validation from others. They view themselves as small, ineffective, and unworthy—as hapless victims of circumstance incapable of charting their own course with a commanding hand or voice.

Empowered women, on the other hand, have conscious and direct access to their own vast capabilities, strengths, and gifts. They are aware of—and continually draw on—the deep wellspring of internal and external resources available to them, for their highest good and the good of others. They embrace change and transition, trusting themselves to weather any storm successfully. Somehow they believe that all will come out well in the end.

Why Crises for Working Women Now?

The current cultural and professional landscape for women reveals new trends affecting women's ability to succeed in the workplace and at home. While women have made great progress and are achieving new heights professionally, they are still fighting against some very tough odds.

According to Catalyst, a leading research and advisory organization devoted to expanding opportunities for women at work, recent changes in women's professional involvement and contribution in the United States have been dramatic.¹ Midlife women are experiencing newly forged independence, higher earning potential, and increased power and responsibility in the workplace. They are also experiencing greater access to higher education, which leads to increased professional prowess.² Nearly one-third of wives now outearn their husbands, and the proportion of women earning more than \$100,000 has tripled in the past decade.³

Double Lives/Double Demands?

Women's professional contributions are on the rise, but a key question remains at the heart of their success in life and work: "What has shifted in women's lives to make way for this change?" Not enough, according to thousands.

While women have stepped up to carve out new and important professional identities, many remain constricted by outdated thinking and behavior. For instance, although women now make up nearly one-half of the U.S. labor force, the majority of domestic responsibility still falls to women, as does raising and caring for children and elderly family members. Dual-career families are on the rise, yet the availability of quality child care has not kept pace. Surprisingly, some people continue to believe that maternal employment is detrimental to children. Despite well-documented evidence that children can develop equally well regardless of the employment status of their parents, many working women are bitterly criticized for being both professionals and mothers.⁴

With the rise of mothers in the workforce comes the ever-important need for women to balance work with home life. The amount of leisure or free time has steadily decreased, and the associated stress in balancing full-time job demands with other responsibilities such as tending to a sick parent or spouse is escalating.⁵ These added pressures create acute stress for women.

Not “Men in Skirts”

According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s groundbreaking book, *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps*,⁶ recent research has documented what you and I have known for years—women are not “men in skirts.” Generally speaking, women have different professional values, motivations, needs, and desires than their male colleagues.

The following components are highly important to women in their work lives:

- Flexibility in their careers and schedules
- A healthy, satisfying balance between life and work
- Reasonable demands on their time in the office and in travel
- The ability to shift time and focus when important child- and elder-care needs emerge
- Respect for themselves, their work, their colleagues, and their supervisors
- A satisfying degree of control over their time, endeavors, and responsibilities
- The sense of contributing in a meaningful way to others and to society

Men, on the other hand, typically value power, recognition, responsibility, and compensation. When we look at the predominant setup of American corporations today, we see evidence of a white male competitive model. As Hewlett describes, this career model

assumes a preference for linear, continuous employment history; an emphasis on full-time employment and “face” time; the expectation that an “ambitious” professional will exhibit the most intensive commitment in his or her 30s (or miss out forever on key opportunities for advancement); and, finally, that money is the primary motivator for professionals.

The assumptions of this model fly in the face of what many women need and want. One consequence of this ill-fitted model is that while women have the talent and ambition to perform outstandingly in the workplace, many are unwilling to fulfill these requirements over the long arch of their career. Why? Because these demands require too great a compromise in other life dimensions that women highly prize.

Midlife Crisis for Women Is Not a Myth

As those who are in midlife know all too well, the middle years of 35 to 55 represent a time of reckoning, reevaluation, and rethinking. One’s perspective can shift radically. From the ages of 22 to 35, a committed professional spends an enormous amount of time, energy, and focus building her career to the level she desires. All of the accomplishments and accolades, however, come with personal sacrifices. These losses take on a very different meaning when viewed from the eyes of a 45-year-old.

Midlife individuals frequently awaken to brand new and startling realizations about what matters most. The glory of achievements and “winning at all costs” often fade. Other aspects of the human experience—helping, supporting, teaching, learning, growing, sharing, giving back, relishing life—become more compelling and meaningful. Dissatisfaction with who we are professionally becomes an urgent issue as we reach the middle years and look ahead to the future, glimpsing what might be waiting there.

At the same time, midlife women are going through dramatic personal change. As Sue Shellenbarger notes in *The Breaking Point*, there are currently 41.6 million baby-boomer women in the United States, and by age 50, more women than men are reporting a turbulent midlife transition. Based on recent studies, it has been forecasted that “more than 15 million U.S. women who are 38 to 55 years old will have, or are already having, what they regard as a midlife crisis—a staggering number about equal to the populations of Colorado, Massachusetts, and Minnesota combined.”⁷

Midlife women are increasingly finding themselves in a host of new experiences that would have been inconceivable fifty years ago. Divorce rates for midlife women are on the rise, and women are initiating these divorces more often than men.⁸ New life

situations include blended families, single parenting, and dating. While life-changing events often lead women to reinvent themselves, adjusting and reconstructing requires tremendous effort and energy.

What's It All Mean?

Many factors are colliding at this time, bringing about a radical shift in what women want to achieve. Women now hold completely different expectations and longings than those of previous generations. This shift brings with it new beliefs about what is important in life, and what women are capable of. Role models from previous generations don't offer guidance on how to achieve a healthy, balanced, and meaningful professional and personal life. Today's midlife women may have grown up believing they could "have it all," but now that they have it, they're not sure it's worth keeping.

The critical thing to realize is that if you are a professional woman longing for a radical change in how you work and live, you are not alone. There are many solid, reasonable, well-founded, and well-documented reasons for what you're experiencing. Simply put, thousands of women in this country view life as unsatisfying, challenging, and exhausting—for many, it's a struggle. But we can't help ourselves if we continue to hide how we feel.

Let's face it: we all can't be wrong!

Can Women Achieve Breakthrough and Find Passion, Power, and Purpose?

The answer is a resounding "YES!" But not without significantly revising our individual and collective thinking, assumptions, and behavior. When women experience crisis, they often think, "How did I blow this?" and "When will I be found out?"

What I'm proposing here is a revision to that line of thinking. I'm suggesting that you stop in your tracks when facing crisis and begin to ask different questions than you're used to, questions that allow the possibility that this situation is occurring for a critical reason you are meant to address, for the betterment of yourself and others, challenging as it may be to do so.

Asking yourself "What am I meant to learn from this, and what changes am I needing to make in my life?" is a powerful start to examining the process of living, rather than just the content of your life.

this material has been excerpted from

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Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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