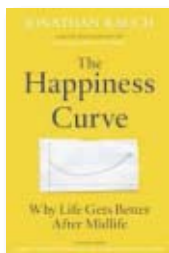


Why we're wired for a midlife crisis

Book of the week

If you're in your late forties and feeling glum, don't worry, you're supposed to be unhappy, says Damian Whitworth



The Happiness Curve
Why Life Gets Better After Midlife
by Jonathan Rauch
Green Tree,
244pp; £18.99

The age of 49 is apparently when we are most miserable, disappointed and confused. This week I turned 49, so reading *The Happiness Curve* was sobering. The curve of the title refers to the U-shape on a graph that represents the relationship between life satisfaction and age. One data set of more than 300,000 Britons shows that the bottom of the U, the point where people were most dissatisfied with their lot, was 49. Anxiety and stress also peaked at — take a wild guess — the same age.

Jonathan Rauch, our guide to the midlife doldrums, found himself at the bottom of the U in his forties. He was a successful magazine journalist and in a happy relationship, but he was puzzled by a “restless turbulence”. He felt that his life was disappointing; he was preoccupied with what he had not accomplished.

A diary entry from that time, which he candidly includes, possibly because he is unfamiliar with Adrian Mole, lists professional and personal reasons why he should be happy. “When I was twenty... I weighed probably 112 pounds... Today I weigh 136 or 138 and the difference is all muscle... When I was twenty I had no money of my own. Today I have \$600,000

including this condo. It is possible I will be worth a million in a few years...”

My emotions at this point began to register strongly on the toe-curling curve, but his point is interesting. Objectively, his life was good, but he could not shake off a feeling of failure. He wasn't suffering a crisis that was making him act out of character. He was, however, in a confusing trough.

The phrase “midlife crisis” was coined by the Canadian psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in 1965, but it has become a terrible cliché. His professional peers now conclude that the concept of a distinctive midlife crisis is not supported by evidence. It would be better to talk about a midlife slump. Rauch has trawled the growing body of work by happiness economists and psychologists; he also draws on replies to his own questionnaires and case study interviews to show why this is the case. There is good news, though. In the early fifties satisfaction tends to increase again.

The bottom of the U, Rauch argues, is a natural period of transition in which we reassess our values and what makes us happy. We need the reordering of these slump years before we can move on to the

contentment of our Indian summer. When Rauch was 50, when all the conditions were there for a real crisis — his parents died, he lost his job, his start-up venture failed — the fog of dissatisfaction lifted.

Researchers, including the British economist David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, professor of economics and behavioural science at the [University of Warwick](#), have found that satisfaction drops in the late thirties and forties, bottoming out in the late forties and early

fifties, before rising again steadily as we get older, reaching a peak around 70, then levelling out, with a mild decline, until the deep old age of 80 and beyond.

So age is a factor in life satisfaction and the reason could be partly biological. It is also reflected in the animal world. Data on the wellbeing of 336 chimpanzees and 172 orangutans in zoos and research centres also shows a U-shaped curve, with the apes hitting bottom at an age equivalent to 45-50 in humans.

They may not be able to assess their own life satisfaction, but they express a lot of emotion, and keepers charted their moods and the pleasure they got from social interactions. Like humans, chimpanzees were found to be more introverted, less competitive, less emotional and better able to control their behaviour as they got older.

These findings gripped Rauch because of their implication that his midlife crisis wasn't about his circumstances, or even about him. It was hardwired into us.

Data tracking people over several years shows that in our twenties and thirties, still brimming with optimism, we overestimate how satisfied we will be in the future. The gap between expectation and reality closes when we are in our forties. Then in our late fifties, sixties and seventies we rate our life satisfaction more highly than what we had gloomily predicted it would be five years earlier. These forecasting errors,

according to some cognitive neuroscientists, may be wired in too. We need them to survive. If, when younger, we didn't think things were going to get better, we would find it hard to get out of bed.



Stress drops after the age of 50. We get a better grip on our emotions, feel less regret and are not as prone to depression. In what psychologists have called the paradox of ageing, physical decline is not mirrored by a drop in life satisfaction. Older people are more focused on the here and now and don't, contrary to the stereotype, dwell excessively on the past. And they are, as Laura Carstensen, the director of Stanford University's centre on longevity, puts it, "more attuned to the sweetness of life".

Wiser and more interested in helping others, we learn after those tricky midlife years to lower our sights and be more settled. Rauch speculates that this may be how, as a social, tribal species, we evolved. It makes sense for us to be competitive when young, then, after the parenting years, to do less egocentric things for the good of the group. To do that we need this midlife transitional period when we undergo a "slow-motion reboot of our emotional software to repurpose us for a different role in society. It came into being because it helped our tribes survive and thrive."

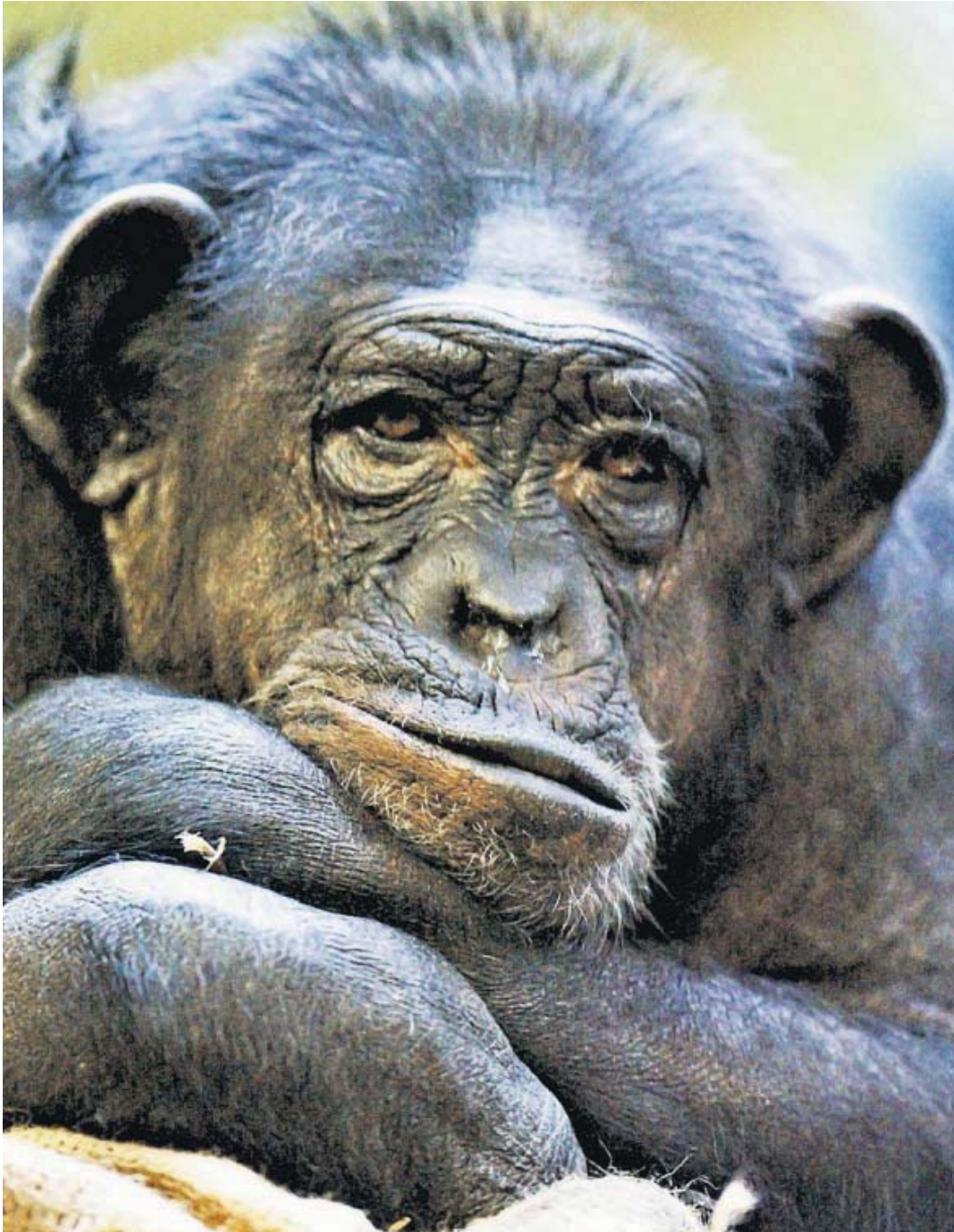
Rauch believes society needs to re-educate itself about middle age. We need to share the good news that such feelings of malaise are normal. He argues that this period of low-level despondency is like adolescence. The difference between the group going through adolescence and the one bumping along in the trough of the happiness curve is that "one of them has a supportive social environment, whereas the other has red sports cars". The thought occurs: maybe older people are happier because they are no longer living with mardy adolescents or midlife misery-mongers. Those two groups are cooped up together in the same homes, perhaps as a result of a big joke by Mother Nature.

Our species is living longer (these extra years are a "gift the likes of which mankind has never known before", says Rauch) so we need to be prepared. He wants to see greybeard gap years, work sabbaticals and college programmes aimed at the middle-aged to help us to reboot our lives. Rauch recommends you stop comparing yourself with others, take up mindfulness, or try counselling, but he occasionally lapses into overly earnest happy-speak, including when he suggests that "each of us create a safe space for the people in our own lives".

Much of his advice is sound, though. Hunker down through the slump years. Don't dramatically quit your job and do something you'll regret. (He doesn't specifically say, "Don't give it all up and become a dry stone waller", so I am not relinquishing that fantasy just yet.) Most of all this absorbing book encourages moody midlifers to believe that things will get better. And he makes a good case that they will. Life begins at 50. That's what I'm taking away from this book anyway.

We need the reordering of these slump years before we can move on

TOBIAS SCHWARZ/RETUTERS



CHEER UP, PRIMATE Chimpanzees also experience a slump at the ages equivalent to 45-50 in people