

Magazine Feature
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Headline: Welcome to Your Quarterlife Crisis

Deck: Being in your twenties is not as easy and carefree as it once was. Feeling overwhelmed by a slew of decisions and major life changes has several young adults scrambling to keep their sanity.

She wails her hands into the air as if to scream I SURRENDER! Then, in a gesture of defeat, drops her face in her hands, letting out a long, exhausted sigh. Stale coffee stains an incomplete job application for East Side Mario's. Like a small mouse lost in a maze, she is frantically searching for the right direction, skeptical that she'll ever find her way.

Amanda Van Niekerk, a recent graduate from the University of Western Ontario, is more than \$25,000 in debt and still not sure where her life is taking her. She graduated with a double major in English and Geography to become a teacher but, despite her good grades and consistent volunteer work, she was still rejected from Teacher's College this year.

"I'm starting to question whether teaching is even right for me," she says.

These overwhelming anxieties have become so common among twentysomethings that Abby Wilner went as far to coin the term Quarterlife Crisis (QLC) for the stressful phase that usually occurs between the ages of 20-26.

Wilner, a well-known author on the transition to adulthood, says the QLC is prominent now because students are made to believe the "world is their oyster" and that a rewarding and easy life awaits them in the real world.

But this so called "real world" isn't meeting their expectations.

Quarterlifers are questioning everything, including: their school majors, career decisions, future goals, financial security, friendships, relationships, health choices and more.

After graduating from Washington University in 1997, Wilner had her own crisis. She searched endlessly for a diagnosis of her symptoms, but discovered that she'd have to play doctor herself. She has now co-written two books called *Quarterlife Crisis* and *The Quarterlifer's Companion*.

She is also the founder of the website quarterlifecrisis.com and has appeared on popular shows like Oprah and CNN.

"You learn how to get an A in class and you know how to succeed... but it's not all laid out for you like that in the real world," says Wilner. "It's learning how to carve out your own path"

The Quarterlifer's Companion says, "Most graduates feel unprepared to choose from the multitude of new job options such as those in technology. Students are no longer traveling down the clear-cut career path that our parents' generation did."

"I feel like a failure and I'm only 22!" says Van Niekerk.

Barbara Kaufman owns a Toronto business called Career Trails and conducts several workshops and programs with recent and upcoming graduates experiencing confusion with their career decisions.

She refers to these students as "Gen Y" (generation Y, which are the children of the baby boomers.) She says a big difference between Gen Y and their parents is that "they (Gen Y) really don't want to leave anything to chance, they want to find something meaningful."

Kaufman says that unlike many of their parents, Gen Ys want to do more than just put bread on the table. She said they are asking themselves, "This is who I am, how does it fit into the workplace?"

Twenty-three year old Tyler Boyle remembers asking himself the same question a year ago when he graduated from Concordia University in fine arts. "I want my life to be about art, to somehow incorporate art into my everyday life," he says.

He has now graduated from Teachers' College to be an art teacher because he thinks it's the best way to make a living and be involved with art on a daily basis. "I have too much debt to live the life of a starving artist," he says.

Because of debt, some twentysomethings are choosing higher paying jobs over ones they would prefer and an outstanding number of graduates are moving back home to save up some money to pay off some loans.

"As much as I love my family, the thought of sharing an everyday life with them again is haunting," says Van Niekerk, who has realized that moving home may be her only option until she finds a job that can pay her accumulated expenses.

As the societal pressures on twentysomethings grow thicker, most graduates can expect to feel the severe anxiety and confusion that is a quarterlife crisis. Wilner believes that schools should be doing more to prepare students for the real world.

"I think there should be a new way to learn in college," she says. She criticized the traditional educators who don't believe it's their job to prepare students for a career, but to give them a broad education in topics like philosophy and history.

Wilner conducts workshops on campuses in the U.S. to prepare students for the crisis they are about to incur. She speaks not only about careers, but also of other major issues for quarterlifers, such as relationships, personal finances and health.

She says there is a big fear of commitment amongst our generation due to the high divorce rate of our parents. Also, now that women have the same career options and expectations as men, it's not as easy to find someone who will mold to our lives.

In 2000, Statistics Canada reported the average age for a woman to marry for the first time was 31.7 and 34.3 for males. This is up from 25.9 and 28.5 just five years earlier.

As family responsibilities occur later in life, there are a few things twentysomethings can keep in mind to get through what will probably be the most difficult transition of their lives.

First, be prepared for, or at least believe you're prepared for, a quarterlife crisis so the shock of reality may not hit you quite as hard.

Wilner says, "Don't feel limited by your major or course of study, it often ends up having nothing to do with our jobs."

This is perhaps the biggest disappointment for recent graduates because most expect to enter their field of study right away, or at least at some point in their lives, but many don't.

She explained that many students are not prepared to face the rejections of the world after college or university so they decide to go back to school.

"Going to graduate school shouldn't be taken lightly. You should be sure that's the field for you. You should take some time exploring the working world before committing to more school," she says.

Kaufman couldn't agree more, but she suggests taking on a co-op or contract work so you can test out a few jobs before settling into one.

"It's like dating before you marry," she says.

Spending some time in the "working world" is also a more cost-effective way of learning what you want from life.

Kaufman runs seminars to teach businesses how to adapt to the new generation of incoming employees, but she says it's also important for grads to have realistic expectations.

Perhaps the best advice Wilner has to offer quarterlifers is, "Don't let yourself be defined by your job."

She says it's important to invest in your personal life as well, to maintain a balance between your life and your work life.

When she finished school, Wilner stored her passion for photography and piano away for a few years, but when she finally dug them out, she remembered what it was like to do something she actually enjoyed.

She warns, “Don’t forget about your hobbies and personal interests.”

SIDEBAR

You know you’re having a quarterlife crisis if:

- You’re worried you didn’t pick the right school major and might be headed for the wrong career
- You feel like you aren’t ready to take on the “real world” and all those scary people in it
- You feel like you are never going to have that dream job or perfect life you always pictured
- You are extremely overwhelmed by all the decisions you feel you need to make
- You’re thinking some of the relationships you have now may not fit so well with your “new life”
- The concept of being an official adult scares the crap out of you