



JUMP: The only intelligent thing to do is take a deep breath, face who you are, and take a shot at messing up your life and putting it back together the way you want it.

Mess Up Your LIFE!

**Feeling bored?
Restless?
Disappointed with the way your life is going?
Maybe the best thing for you is a little chaos ... or a lot**

BY ELLEN MICHAUD

Throwing her strong, tanned legs over the side of the fishing boat, 59-year-old Joan Anderson gave the dark-haired fisherman a grin as she slid into the chilly water off Seal Island and began wading toward the beach where hundreds of fat seals lifted their heads in doglike alertness.

"Let's go ladies!" she yells over her shoulder. "The water's 57°!"

Yikes, 57°? The 10 of us on board glance at each other in horror. Well, we wanted an adventure, didn't we? Holding up the canvas bags that held our bottled water, sunscreen, journals, and pens, seven of us grabbed the boat's railing and swung into the water, following Joan, one by one, like a flotilla of baby ducks trailing their mother.

Three of us remained on board. The fisherman grinned at my pals Vicky and Kelly, then at me. "Ready?" he asked as he tightened the cord on his sunglasses. At our eager nods, he chuckled, brought the boat sharply around, threw open the throttle, and sent us hurtling across the surface of the silver-green sea toward a distant lighthouse.

I grabbed the railing, took a quick breath, and began to laugh helplessly as I felt all my edges dissolve into the wind and spray. Some adventures are on land; others are at sea. And we had chosen the latter.

STEVE COLE/PHOTODISC

Wake Up!

Okay, so we're restless. And, okay, so maybe our marriages are boring, our kids are demanding, our jobs are frustrating, our mothers still want to know why we're biting our nails, and our dreams of changing the world are fading fast. But if you're between the ages of 35 and 55—welcome to the club, *chica*. Restlessness at this age is a natural part of growth. And however much you'd like to pretend it's going to pass, believe me, you can run, but you cannot hide, from this rite of passage.

Right now, you may be miserable because you're under so much pressure, and you're wondering who you are, where you're going, and is-that-all-there-is? But your very misery is—*trust* me on this—a sign that things are about to get better. A whole lot better.

"It's all about waking up," says Kathleen A. Brehony, PhD, a psychologist who lives on North Carolina's Outer Banks and author of *After the Darkest Hour* (Henry Holt, 2001). "At



RISK: Move slowly, but move. Ask a friend for moral support on your climb to greater heights.

or it will manage you," says life coach and psychologist Suzanne W. Zoglio, PhD, author of *Create a Life That Tickles Your Soul: Finding Peace, Passion, and Purpose* (Tower Hill Press, 2000).

"It could be a cancer diagnosis, the loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one," she says. "Or it could be that you married a guy, and 10 years later, he took off. Or you went into business, and the market fell out." Whatever the curve, it will make you look at what you've done with your life. Next thing you

some point, you wake up and realize that your life is half over and brimming with the things that are your responsibilities—not the things that give it meaning."

And whether it's Peggy Lee humming "Is That All There Is?" in the background or the Rolling Stones pounding out "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," the result is the same: An unsettling sense that somewhere along the line, your life went off the tracks, and a downright primitive urge to get it back.

Watch Out for That Curveball!

One reason that ignoring midlife restlessness doesn't work is that life simply doesn't let us.

"Eventually life will throw you a curveball. You either manage the change,

know, you'll wake up one morning, look at the ceiling, think about the day ahead, and ask, "Do I really want to spend the rest of my life waiting tables/teaching first grade/toting up figures/or whatever it is that I've been doing for *way* too long?"

But don't pat yourself on the back if you've managed to dodge those personal curveballs so far, says Dr. Brehony. At least once in each generation, our entire culture gets hit with one right between the eyes.

"September 11 was a collective wake-up call for all of us," she points out. Nobody got left behind. We all started to examine who we are, what we are doing, and where we are going.

Now, says the psychologist, all of us

are asking, "What do I really want to do with the rest of my life?"

Jump!

Since there's no way to avoid the restless questioning ignited by a midlife wakeup call, the only intelligent thing to do is take a deep breath, face who you are, and take a shot at messing up your life and putting it back together the way you want it.

It's kind of like being on the high dive when you were a kid: You can't go back because there are a bunch of kids behind you on the ladder, and they'll never let you live it down. But going forward means taking a leap into the great unknown. It's risky. You don't know whether you're going to belly flop your way into the annals of childhood humiliation, sink to the bottom and die, or soar like a seagull.

The solution? Just what your friends on the high dive told you to do when you were 12: "JUMP!"

A Year by the Sea

That's what Joan Anderson did. She was forced to deal with her curveball 8 years ago, when her husband, Robbie, came home and announced he was taking a new job hundreds of miles away and expected her to follow. "He didn't even consult me," says Joan indignantly. But then why should he? Like many women, Joan had always sacrificed her needs to those of her family. And now their two sons were grown, and Joan's job as a



IMAGINE TAKING THE PLUNGE: Even if you're scared. Anxiety means you're on your "growing edge." Go for it!

freelance writer could go with her. So what was there to talk about?

Joan didn't know. But as she sat in frozen silence listening to Robbie plan her life, something made her blurt out a decision that she hadn't even known she was making: Instead of going with him, she was going to their summer cottage on Cape Cod to think about her life.

Talk about a jump off the high dive! Though it was emotionally painful, Joan packed a few belongings and moved to the tiny cottage in Harwich. Then she spent the next year walking the beaches, digging clams, swimming with seals, watching sunsets, thinking about her

LEFT, CHRIS NOBLE/STONE; RIGHT, KO FUJIMARA/PHOTONICA

life, and working in a fish shop to make ends meet.

It wasn't all surf and clams either. Layer by layer, Joan stripped away the accumulated debris of other people's needs and expectations until she found the Joan she had been as a child underneath. And that Joan was spectacular. She questioned everything. She had to turn over every rock, examine every clam, and squat for hours in a tidal pool watching everything that moved.

And she brought the same kind of curiosity and intensity to her life. Nothing emerged unexamined: where she wanted to live, who she wanted to wake up beside, what she wanted to do every morning when she got up. Her curiosity about herself and those around her was boundless. And once unleashed, it moved her unerringly toward a more meaningful life.

Today Joan is no longer just Robbie's wife or somebody's mother, even

though she is still both of those things. Today she's written two books—*A Year by the Sea: Diary of an Unfinished Woman* (Broadway, 1999) and *An Unfinished Marriage* (Broadway, 2002)—visited with Katie Couric, and chatted with Oprah. And she's done it without forgetting the rest of us: Twice a year she holds workshops by the sea for women who want the last little nudge to make a change in their life.

How to Mess Up Your Life

Although Joan's yearlong leap off the high dive was spectacularly successful, not all of us can pack up and take a year off to figure out what we want to do. Nor do we have to. Instead, says Dr. Brehony, we can inch forward through the inertia of unmade beds and overcontrolling bosses one step at a time. So when just showing up for life is no longer enough, here's how women who have done it themselves

LEFT, COURTESY; RIGHT, STEPHEN FRIMM/STOCK MARKET/COBBIS



CONNECT WITH THE WILD: Getting up close and personal with nature can release the "wild" in you.

When you feel centered and calm, close your eyes and just focus on your breath. If a worry or thought pops into your head, gently bring your focus back to your breath. Be patient with yourself; build your "quiet mind" time gradually. Start with 10 minutes a day, and work up to 20 to 30.

■ Find out what's

not right. Every morning for 30 days, write three pages of whatever's in your heart. Don't read them. And don't show anyone what you've written. Those pages should be an uncensored dumping of your emotions that will help you think clearly.

On day 31, go back, and read what you've written. Chances are, you'll see a theme that will tell you what's not right with your life, says Dr. Zoglio. And that's a key step toward finding out where you want your life to go from here.

■ **Connect with the wild.** When Joan first went to her cottage by the sea, she wasn't sure what she was really doing there. But one day, she hitched a ride with a fisherman out to an island where hundreds of seals congregated every morning. The fisherman dropped her off and went clamming, and Joan, after

suggest you get moving.

■ **Retreat.** Take time to take stock of your life, says Dr. Zoglio. Take a year, a week, or a weekend, whatever you can. As Joan says, "There are 8,760 hours in a year; if you can't find 24 just for yourself, that's pitiful." Sign up for a personal retreat at a convent or a seal adventure with Joan. Anything will work, as long as it gives you the opportunity to get away from your responsibilities and reflect on your life.

■ **Turn up the silence.** Silence is instrumental in learning how to listen to yourself, says Dr. Zoglio. "Take time to sit quietly in the morning and afternoon," she urges. Turn off the phone, and lock up your pets. Then breathe deeply for a few minutes. Inhale to a count of 4, hold the breath for a count of 2, then release it for a count of 4.

Dig Out Your Girlhood Photos!

If you're having trouble making time to reflect on your life, get a picture of yourself when you were a kid, and stick it up on the refrigerator with pictures of your children, suggests Kathleen A. Brehony, PhD. **Every time you pass by, look at your picture, and pretend it's a picture of another one of your kids.** Then think: You're ignoring this child. And if you're as good a mother as you think you are, you'd better give her the time and attention she needs. There's nothing most of us wouldn't do for our kids, says Dr. Brehony. So eventually, that extra "kid" on the refrigerator will get what she needs too!



Take care of the kid you were.

watching the seals for a while, decided to go swimming.

The experience changed her life. Watching the seals in the water, dipping into the waves and riding the swells just a few feet away, Joan felt they were “taking me by the hand and leading me back to my childhood.”

The seals allowed Joan to see the fragmented woman she'd become and how far distant that woman was from the little girl she was. But her epiphany moved her toward becoming the person she wanted to be.

“Connecting with the wild allows you to stop all the exterior chatter,” Joan explains. “And connecting with a wild creature gives you a sense of a creature without pretense. And that connects you to who you really are.”

■ **Surrender everyone else's expectations.** “When we left school, we set our expectations based on what our peers and parents wanted,” says Dr. Zoglio. “People told us what ‘good girls’ did, what the ‘sensible’ career was. As a



MAP THE JOURNEY: Once you know where you want to go, write down the steps it will take to get there.

result, we often denied our own internal compass and did what people said we should.” Now it's time to recognize those expectations, slough them off, and take another look at the direction in which our internal compass is pointing.

Ask yourself two questions: “What are you insatiably curious about?” and “What are you doing when you become so absorbed in it that you lose track of time?” The answers to both questions will point clearly to your heart's desire.

■ **Decide what you want.** Relax. It's easier than you think. Just sit down, and write an imaginary letter to a good friend, says Dr. Zoglio. Imagine that it's 2 years from now, and you're describing what your life is like. Write about where you live, whom you're living with, and where you're working.

If your imagination gets stuck, try describing what you *don't* want first,

advises Dr. Zoglio. Imagine that it's 2 years from now, and your life is horrible: The job from hell. The man from Mars. The home from Outer Gorgonzola. Then reverse everything. A picture of the life you were meant to lead, and the direction in which you now need to go, will emerge.

■ **Map the journey.** Once you have a picture of where you want to go, then ask yourself, “What would the steps be if I were to actually do this?” says Dr. Brehony. Write them down. Then remember the old Chinese proverb that says: “The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.”

“Say you want to be an artist,” says Dr. Brehony. “You don't have to leave a note for your spouse saying you've gone to Tahiti. Instead, you can go to an art store and buy brushes and paints. Or take an art class. Or tell your family that on Saturday afternoons, you're going up to the mountains to paint.” One step at a time, and you're there.

■ **Commit to 1 hour a day.** One common obstacle to change is the lack of time in which to make it happen, says Dr. Zoglio. But isn't there an hour somewhere in your busy schedule in which you can get started? Maybe your spouse could get the kids off to school while you spend an hour on that book you've always wanted to write or tapestry you want to weave. Or maybe you could order groceries online instead of spending valuable literary or weaving time at the store.

■ **Get a friend to back you.** Don't ask your spouse or significant other to support you as you move ahead, cautions Dr. Zoglio. Change can be threatening to those with whom we share an intimate relationship. Instead, ask a good friend to be there when you need to discuss what you're doing.

■ **Talk with older women.** Ask them, “What do you regret?” says Dr. Zoglio. Their insights may help you avoid the same ones, and they can also provide a role model.

■ **When you're scared, keep moving.** “One of the key things that holds women back is anxiety,” says Karen Kahn Wilson, EdD, a personal coach who works with recently divorced women. “Yet anxiety is a cue that we're on our ‘growing edge.’ Unfortunately, women have been taught to read their feeling of anxiety as a cue that they're somewhere unsafe, so they retreat. Men are conditioned to the opposite.

“That's a key piece that women don't get,” she adds. “When you feel anxiety, keep moving. Move slowly, but *move*.”

■ **Make a difference.** “That's where the joy is,” says Dr. Zoglio. When you use the gifts you've been given to make this a better world, that's when you'll find both meaning and peace. •

For years, Ellen Michaud, Prevention's award-winning editor-at-large, wanted to live in the woods in Vermont, and now she does.

STEVE BILY/IMAGESBANK

READY FOR A WEEKEND BY THE SEA?

To find out more about Joan Anderson's “Weekends by the Sea,” *Prevention* readers can contact her at joanleeand@webtv.net or write to her at Box 1314, Harwich, MA 02645.