

## POSTSCRIPT Culture Club

Reaching that unhappy milestone? Cheer up, as it gets better. While many hit a low at 47, we often perk up in our 50s.



# The age of discontent

A new study says we're unhappiest at 47.2-years old — and that's exactly right

**'M 50 years old, which means that roughly two-and-a-half years ago I passed the unhappiest point in my life.**

That number isn't arbitrary. It comes from new research by Dartmouth economist David Blanchflower who, after examining data from 500,000 people in 132 countries, pinpointed the exact moment when the majority of people in developed parts of the world feel the most miserable: 47.2.

Every lifetime has a U-shaped "happiness curve," he concludes in the study, which was published in mid-January by the National Bureau of Economic Research. The bottom of that curve, where we're at our most forlorn, is (at least statistically) always around the same age.

"The curve's trajectory holds true in countries where the median wage is high and where it is not and where people tend to live longer and where they don't," Blanchflower wrote in his findings.

Depression has never seemed like a topic open to sweeping generaliza-

tions. It's like trying to predict the precise age when everybody gets their heart broken for the first time.

But for me, the research is accurate. For most of my life, with a few rare exceptions, I was generally a happy person. But when I turned 47-ish, I became an emotional wreck, despite being at a professional high point. I'd been a freelance writer for almost 25 years, but as the father of a young son, I felt like it was time to be a grown-up and find a "real" job, one with some financial stability. So I accepted a full-time position as an editor at a popular men's magazine. I was making a ridiculous salary — at least by freelance journalist standards — with full health coverage, a 401(k), and a spacious office with a standing desk and views of a duck pond.

But I hated it. I hated waking up every morning and putting on pants and driving to an office. I especially hated the pants part.

On one god-awful day in particular, I was driving to the office when the Harry Chapin song "Cat's in the

Cradle" came on the radio. I burst into tears. Not because the song is so sad — it's always been sad — but because for the first time in my life, I identified with the dad character. I'd gone from somebody who didn't miss a milestone in his kid's life to being the working dad who says, unconvincingly, "We'll get together soon, son."

So maybe there's something to that 47.2 number. But there is one big problem with Blanchflower's study: It doesn't explain *why* 47.2 is such a depressing age.

Blanchflower, 67, went through his own mid-life crisis "around age 50" and says he didn't discover any unifying reason for people falling into despair at that point.

"It doesn't seem to matter how we ask [case studies] about well-being," he told The Post. "Whether it be happiness or life satisfaction or other things like the economy."



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most upon them. "It's often that a potential scenario is more stressful than a literal one," he told The Post. "Ripping the Band-aid off is never as bad as you fear it's going to be."

The good news from Blanchflower's study is that it gets better. The "happiness curve" dips back up as you rebound from the sadness of your late 40s and ease into something approaching contentment in your 50s and beyond.

Why? That explanation is a bit easier to explain, says Blanchflower.

"People start getting realistic in their lives," he says. "That big dream

they had about themselves, that they were finally going to write the great American novel or become a big pop superstar, it disappears. They start to accept that their lives are probably as good as they're going to get, and that's OK."

This idea has rang true with many of my middle-aged friends. Kevin Clough, 50, of South Berwick, Maine, sums up his post-47.2 life this way: "It's the point where most of us are ready to accept what we are and just roll with it."

"It kinda forces one to reevaluate things," adds Jeff Schramm, 50, a professor at Missouri University of Science and Technology. "I take more joy from the little things now. And I have almost completely stopped caring what others think about me. That is wonderfully freeing."

"Every decade of your life brings new revelations," says Klaus Schuller, 54, in Chicago. "I hope my 60s and 70s will keep bringing them. But peak happiness? Sometimes that's just a beer and a good book."

As for me, I eventually lost that fancy job at the magazine and went back to freelancing. As I approached the mid-century mark, I no longer had the office with a duck-pond view or a standing desk or a 401(k) or anything resembling a dependable income.

But I was almost blissfully happy for so many reasons. I work from home, so I'm always around when my son comes back from school or my wife comes home from work. And as I write this, I'm not wearing pants. (Sorry not sorry!)

I no longer have the 47.2 panic that this could be my last chance to make my mark, to do something big and meaningful with my life while I still have the chance. My 5-0 milestone came and went, and Burnett was right, it was like pulling off a Band-aid.

It's not that sadness goes away. There's still plenty to be sad about. But the bar for happiness gets a little lower.

*Eric Spitznagel is a frequently pants-free freelance writer, happily based in Chicago.*

NY Post photo composite