

Why it's life

Forget the biological clock. For a new generation
By Cecily-Anna Bennett

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hen I think about what it means to get older, I can't help but see life from the colourful perspective of my mum, Tutti

Bennett. From as far back as I can remember, she taught me to never view age as a barrier to anything; that you can be as vivid, vibrant and relevant at 50, 60, 70 and beyond as any 20- or 30-something. At 64, Tutti is the epitome of eccentric (as anyone who's ever seen her walk down the street in her typically bright, creative, beautifully-put-together outfits will attest). But her technicolour approach to life crosses generations: she is as inspiring to the gen Ys as she is to the so-called 'silver-haired set'. If you could bottle Tutti's particular brand of *je ne sais quoi*, it would contain (besides a tonne of oversized jewellery and more colourful scarves than you'd find at the Grand Bazaar) a combination of more confidence, less self-consciousness, joyful abandonment and an ease that has grown over time. ▶

time to listen to your
clock

of women, an even more powerful motivator is driving their midlife choices



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The percentage of women over 50 who say they're content with their life

While she hasn't changed in essence in the 33 years I've known her, my mother's zest for life escalated post-60. Following a breast cancer diagnosis at 62 (and subsequent recovery), something suddenly 'clicked'. She signed up to that art class she'd always dreamed of doing; she faced her fear of public speaking; she and my dad, Paul, 66, even decided to buy a yellow Mini Moke—the car they drove in the early days of their romance—and re-create the road trip they took on their honeymoon, 37 years prior.

Tutti isn't the only one. Women post-40 are taking control of their lives in droves. They're finally admitting what they *really* want for themselves; living their dreams and grasping each day with all the vigour, energy and optimism of a mayfly with a long-life plan. It's a phenomenon that Maria Rodale, 52, CEO of Rodale, publisher of *Prevention*, organic advocate and mother of three, calls the 'Life Clock'.

Rodale distinctly remembers the moment her biological clock stopped ticking. "I was sitting with my one-month-old baby in our kitchen, and my other two children were there. I remember thinking, 'Finally, everyone who is supposed to be here is here, and I am done having kids.' Silence. No more ticking. I was 45," she wrote on her blog mariasfarmcountrykitchen.com. But three years later, it started up again: the urgent, metaphorical 'tick-tock' of the Life Clock that was more powerful than anything she'd experienced biologically. "I'm 49 now. In even the best-case scenario, I'm now on the other side of the trajectory of the arc of life," she explains. "All the simple questions I had as a child have been answered: Whom will I marry? How many kids will I have? What will I do for a living? What will I look like when I'm all grown up? The Life Clock whispers that harder questions must be answered: What do I want to do before I die? What do I want my legacy to be? Am I happy here and now, and if not, what would make me happy? What's really important? Who am I *really*?"

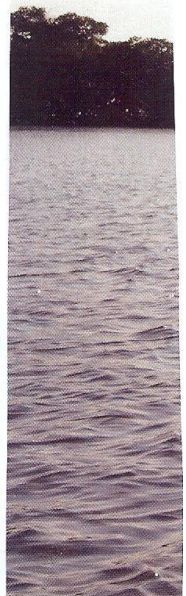
These are questions 40+ Australian women are

increasingly asking themselves and it's having a powerful knock-on effect. "Never in history has there been a generation of women so independent, so educated and so able to truly become whoever and whatever they want to become," says Rodale. The proof is in the figures: currently there are 5.6 million women aged 40+ in Australia, accounting for 48% of the female population. In the past four weeks alone, they've spent a collective \$1.7 billion. As for the over-50s, they hold 67% of Australia's wealth and are the fastest growing demographic on Twitter (taking over social media, one tweet at a time). Sixty per cent of women over 50 believe their greatest achievements still lie ahead of them. In the past, getting older was something to fear. Now it's something to aspire to.

"I think the timing varies from person to person, but, anecdotally, [the Life Clock] seems to be triggered by some sort of life event. It could be a birthday or anniversary, it could be a change of jobs, the kids leaving home; something that makes a particular person stop and think," says psychologist Dr Tim Sharp, founder of The Happiness Institute. "We're also seeing a significant redefining of age. Historically, 65 was seen as 'the end'. Now, it's just the start. There are people technically retiring from work at 60 or 65 but still living full, active, amazing lives. Not only are we living longer, but we're healthier for longer, so we have 10, 20, maybe 30, years our grandparents didn't have."

Sharp sees the idea of the Life Clock—and women's empowerment as a result of it—as an extension of women's liberation. "While we still have a long way to go, there are many more opportunities for women now," he says. "They see themselves doing things that they wouldn't have seen their mothers or grandmothers doing—and that's a great thing."

Aptly, it was writer, feminist and women's rights activist Betty Friedan who said: "Ageing is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength." Forget the midlife crisis—for this generation of savvy, switched-on women, it's a midlife opportunity. ▶



5 WAYS TO HARNESS YOUR LIFE CLOCK

Psychotherapist Marie Rowland shares her wisdom on what it takes to live your best life—starting today

1 DON'T SHELVE YOUR DREAMS
Even if you've deferred them in the past, remember them throughout your life so that, when you finally do have the space and time to come back to them, you haven't lost your confidence. That kind of inner resilience is powerful.

2 PUT YOURSELF FIRST
After being at the bottom of the pecking order for decades, I'm seeing so many women getting a second wind. They've set aside their obligations and are putting themselves first. It's a vital step—but as easy as it is to say, it's really hard to do.

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At 50, it's just the beginning. You're free to do what you want. It doesn't mean you're selfish. It means that you can save the world if you want to

Susanne Gervawy, OAM,
children's author



3 BUILD YOUR LEGACY
My clients regularly ponder what it means to lead a truly meaningful life. If you have the capacity to give, do so in a meaningful way whether you volunteer or work in the community on some level: aim to become a part of something bigger.

4 KEEP A CONSTANT INTERNAL DIALOGUE WITH YOURSELF
Remember what it's like to be an individual. We so often operate within the context of something bigger: as one half of a couple, or as a mother, wife or colleague. Your identity can become subsumed.

5 LIVE YOUR PASSIONS
There's no better time to go out there and travel or engage in some purposeful activity. Find a few hobbies that have no benefit outside of pure enjoyment. You'll find it's a brilliant time for self-expression, so go out there, see the world and live your dreams.



I have great health, the financial resources to do what I want and the confidence to go out and get it. I can laugh at myself, take feedback easily and no longer worry about embarrassing myself

Diane Westaway, 53,
founder of Wild Women on Top

For Tracy Madden, 53, it was only when her two children got married and left home within three months of each other, that she finally pursued (and achieved) her lifelong dream of being an author. “I was married at 18 and had my first baby at 20. Life got in the way; I was working in my interior design business, raising my kids, and anything I’d ever thought about being the best version of myself, I put into being a mother,” she says. “I’d always dreamed of being published and there was a voice in my head that kept saying, ‘Why not me?’” Madden’s first book *The Essential Ingredient—Love* (Pan Macmillan) was published the year she turned 50, and her second, *Love Is The Answer*, came out three years later. “It’s given me the confidence to say, if I can do this now, what could I be doing at 60?” she says, “What other wonderful things will I be doing at 70, and beyond?”

It’s something psychotherapist and *Prevention* advisor Marie Rowland is seeing frequently in her Sydney practice (talking-matters.com.au). “I’m finding my clients are doing quite big things—they’re taking that three-month sojourn to Tuscany for art and wine tours; they’re going on major retreats or revisiting their inner self through meditation,” she says. “Saying that, it can also be a panicky time for women, because they’re in a bit of a loop between being a mother and being a grandmother as well.

“Once you hit 45 or 50, the biological clock has stopped ticking, but you’re going through a whole set of new changes which can be quite confronting,” adds Rowland. “You’re forced for the first time to not take your body for granted. At 50, you have to start having a lot more tests—mammograms for example—so your health and body become a more primary focus, which



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The percentage of women aged 50+ who are more accepting of their looks than ever

means so does your mortality, your sense of what it is to be alive. You start asking rigorous philosophical questions like: 'How do I want to live for the next 20 or 30 years? What's truly important to me now?'"

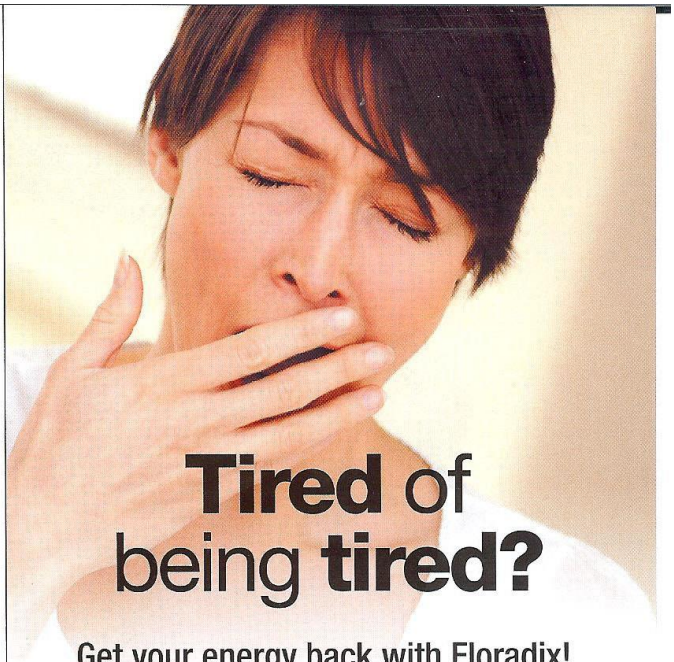
Taking out an open-ended ticket to see the world, which recent statistics show is a growing trend, is just one of the many challenges women over 40 are focusing their energy on. From grey nomads caravanning across the outback to learning a new language or attending an art class, fulfilling those long-held dreams has been proven to be an important element to a more satisfying life. It's also having a positive impact on ageing. Numerous studies prove that the more you enjoy yourself, the longer you live.

Another thing about getting older: you acquire a certain self-composure; a coolness that not even the hippest young hipster can hope to emulate—and it has nothing to do with sartorial style. "When we're younger, we're a little more narcissistic; it's that sense of being validated and known," says Rowland. "Once you're older your attachment to external validation isn't as extreme. What takes its place is internal validation—the knowledge you're living a good life. In our 30s and often 40s we're still looking to external influences to tell us we're fabulous or successful. When you hit 50, you realise you can be exactly who you are. Wisdom, experience and a sense of self make a huge difference. It's a lovely evolutionary process. The more self-acceptance you have, the better choices you make and the more fun you're going to have."

Of course, ageing is inevitable: there's no escaping that day when you'll find another grey hair, your knees start to creak or you look in the mirror and realise the love and laughter you've enjoyed in life is etched on your face like a map of happy memories—indelible lines of accrued wisdom and experience. But it's not about stopping the clock, or turning it back—it's about moving forward, buoyed by life's many possibilities. Just take it from Maria Rodale: "The Life Clock is your soul's way of keeping time and reminding us why we're here. It's not about slogging through life, it's an inner song that reminds you to live it to the full. This is the most exciting time to be a woman 40+ because we're the first generation that can truly reinvent what it means to age well, healthfully, gracefully and with joy. No one can escape the big D; the most we can ask is to have lived life well, loved without shame and enjoyed as much of it as possible. And hopefully we can leave the world a better place because we lived in it." **P**



Want to keep the feel-good factor flowing? Be inspired by Tutti Bennett's incredible post-cancer story. Read it at preventionmag.com.au/health



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