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Spoilt for choice

For super-achiever Joanne Jowell, life rated an A-plus through school and university. Then, in her 20s, she hit a wall. Was she making the right choices? Realising her potential? Doing as well as her peers? Where, what and who should she be at this stage of her life? Welcome to the Quarterlife Crisis

CRISIS is a word that has no place in the company of golden girl Joanne Jowell. At 29, with her long blonde locks, her handsome new husband making his career in property development, and a background in the stratospheric level of achievement at school and university, she seems to have everything ... and then some.

But Joanne is, by her own assessment, a perfectionist and an over-achiever. Combined with high intelligence, those characteristics have never been easy to live with - ask any anorexic/bulimic. In Joanne's case, she was fine as long as she was operating in the structured environment of school (head prefect and straight A student), university BA, BSocSc Hons summa cum laude and her first job in management consultancy.

Then she was faced with some choices, and her carefully controlled world fell

apart. Her boyfriend persuaded her to break away from the predictable trajectory of her career and the safe confines of her family and friends to spend some time living and working in England. There, she found another good job and another safe routine, but the spell was broken. She'd moved out of her comfort zone and seen the possibilities ... the Quarterlife Crisis had begun.

Should she and Richard live in London or come home? Should they travel or focus on their careers? Be frivolous or serious? Make money or memories? If they came home, was management consultancy her passion? What else could she do (what couldn't she do?) with an Honours degree in clinical psychology? How did her progress in life match up to everyone else's expectations? Was she too old or too young to take the next step?

"When you leave the structured routine of school and university behind, there's

no one to give you report cards and performance feedback in neat ticks and crosses to show where you can improve," says Joanne. "Suddenly you're on your own. That's one of the big quarterlife issues."

She didn't coin the phrase Quarterlife Crisis; she read it in a London newspaper a few years ago and recognised herself instantly. Now she has written a book - apparently only the second book written about it - called *Managing the Quarterlife Crisis - Facing life's choices in your 20s and 30s* (Struik R119.95).

"The underlying problem with the Quarterlife crisis is excessive choice or options, and how they complicate your decisions in life," says Joanne. "That's unique to this era, so it doesn't allow us to draw from our parents' experience - and doesn't make it easy for our parents to understand us."

"Parents think it's such a



ANGELO KALMEYER

Golden girl: Joanne Jowell with her dog Isabella. Faced with a host of choices, Joanne's carefully controlled world fell apart.

great thing that their children have so much choice; they think it's incredible that they can live in any city in the world and earn vast amounts of money in IT and go where previous generations never went.

"In the most extreme cases, we have young people committing suicide or going through terrible depressions. There are so many people experiencing it, but so few telling their friends, because they don't want to be seen as out of control or out of sync with progress and achievement and success."

She believes the technology

boom has a lot to answer for when it comes to young people's expectations. "One minute you were graduating from university; the next, one of your friends had three BMWs and a corner office because they had made it big in a tech company."

"Never mind that it all bombed a couple of years later. It completely changed perceptions of what we can achieve, and by when."

Joanna was deep in her crisis a year ago when she came back to Cape Town and married Richard Goldstein in a wedding planned down to the minutest detail. The

perfect wedding, after all, was something she could control. But as soon as it was perfectly executed, the question was "what now?"

The answer has come, in part, from writing this book. For one thing, she discovered she was much happier writing than management consulting and she took the plunge and gave up her job.

"The thing that helped me most was breaking up the problem into its components," she says. "The crisis feels like an abyss, a seething mass of confusing questions and dilemmas, but actually they fit quite neatly

into a few categories. From there, you can prioritise and decide which ones you're going to deal with first and which can wait.

"For me they were career, location, my dreams/passions, my age (do I feel old or young?) and my identity. And I've divided the book into those chapters.

"It really works to put pen to paper: to write down the biggest questions, the biggest hurdles, and the emotions that are tearing you apart. Literally, to get them out of your head and into a form where you can see them and cross them out and highlight

them and get them into perspective."

Isn't she creating a crisis where once there were only decisions to be made?

"I don't think so, but I am putting a name to it - which also helps. And the word 'crisis' can mean a disaster or it can mean a dilemma. And how you interpret it will probably dictate how you deal with it. At the end of the day it's all about whether you choose to look inside yourself, how much you choose to understand, how much you want to question how your life is different from your parents' lives."