

So What Are The Guys Doing?

*Inspiration about Making Changes
and Taking Risks for a Happier Life*

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DIVINE PHOENIX In coordination with
PEGASUS BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

I smile when I think about my 40th birthday. My wife arranged a surprise party that was attended by numerous friends and family members. I remember the belly dancer, and sitting on a stool and putting on a funny wig that covered my receding hairline as I opened gifts in front of a laughing, cheering crowd.

I lost count of how many beers I downed that evening. I was given all sorts of bawdy, age-related presents, including the book, *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis* and a white coffee cup that said “Life Begins At 40.”

When I hit my late 40s, though, I was bouncing off the walls—unhappy with myself, the way my marriage was shaping up and the direction in which my job was headed.

Despite being a newspaper editor with numerous acquaintances, I felt I had no close friends. There was no one I could ask to go out for a beer, or to go fishing. There was nothing apart from work, more work—and then family.

I was in a mid-life crisis up to my eyeballs and no amount of fly fishing by myself was going to help that.

My 50th birthday was unmemorable. I told my wife, “No party!” Didn’t want one. I had dinner with my family and there was a cake. I received a few cards

from in-laws. I bought myself an expensive guitar. Deep down, I wondered, *Is this as good as it gets?*

Things could have taken an ugly turn. They didn't. My wife and I sought marriage counseling, I changed jobs, actively sought out new friends and new experiences—and wrote this book.

I observed that many women seem to be handling these years better. They realize what's important for happiness and are more inclined to take action to make those things happen.

I kept it simple. I related what I went through and what other men from various walks of life told me along the way.

I'm no expert. I'm just a guy who loves the outdoors, sports and his beer. I'm also balding, fighting the battle of the gut, taking high blood pressure medication and getting nagged by my wife and daughter to use teeth-whitening strips.

Coming up with a title wasn't easy. The market is flooded with all sorts of self-help books and magazine articles focusing on women and their problems. I just wanted something that men could relate to.

Then the movie, *Eat, Pray, Love*, came out. The 2010 film is based on the true story of author Liz Gilbert, who following a divorce, takes a year-long sabbatical from her job. According to a promotional blurb, she risks "everything to change her life. In her wondrous and exotic travels, she experiences the simple pleasure of nourishment by eating in Italy, the power of prayer in India, and finally and unexpectedly, the inner peace and balance of love in Bali." Actress Julia Roberts played the role of Gilbert in the movie.

Oh, great! Another account of some woman going off and taking some risks, finding herself and getting her groove back.

If a middle-aged man did that, it would be looked upon by many as just another mid-life crisis.

My next thought was: *So what are the guys doing?* when women are off getting their lives together. I concluded that there are a lot of men struggling during middle-age. I was among them. I discovered I was putting too much time and emotional energy in some areas, while ignoring others. My life was out of balance. During my interviews, I found that I identified with many of the men I spoke to, felt sorry for a few and was truly inspired by others.

It's my hope that men who read this book will realize they're not alone in what they're facing or thinking, and will be motivated to make some much-needed changes in their lives.

Inertia can be a powerful thing. Many men continue to be miserable because they feel trapped, can't see themselves taking a different path and are afraid to take a risk.

Don't be one of those guys.

CHAPTER 1

RESENTFUL AND LONELY

The indispensable first step to getting the things you want out of life is this: decide what you want.

~ Ben Stein, actor, comedian, writer, lawyer

If you don't get lost, there's a chance you may never be found.

~ Author unknown

It was late August 2004, and I was on my front porch with a friend, Fred, puffing on a cigar and sipping from a tall can of Guinness beer.

I told Fred I was down, but I really did not let on how far I had sunk. We were not close enough for me to do that. I was 51.

I did not mention how I really felt about my 24-year marriage, my job, or even myself. Nor did I tell him about an affair I was considering. About the woman who had looked me up on the Internet and was relentlessly emailing and instant-messaging me, wanting to get together.

This was all *before* I started my diary—before I started reading magazine articles and books about middle-aged guys, and the seismic cultural changes they're currently going through, and how depression and suicide rates are rampant during these years—before the emotional marriage counseling sessions with my wife, Laura...

And yes—before I started interviewing middle-aged guys on how they felt on a variety of topics, including loneliness, friendship, money and sex.

No, what I told Fred that evening was just a small part of the big picture. I told him how resentful I was that my wife and her group of friends were doing more and more with each other, leaving me in their wake.

I am talking about annual weekend girlfriend kayaking getaways in the Adirondacks, traveling once a year to different cities along the Eastern Seaboard, weekly winter indoor soccer and spring softball leagues, with drinks and conversation almost always afterward, plus the growing trend among her friends of all-women—50th birthday getaways and celebrations.

Me? I had little or nothing going. I did not have a best friend, just a few casual friends. My 50th birthday had passed with no party. I did not want one. I bought myself an expensive acoustic guitar instead. I had not fished in more than a year. I did not belong to any sports teams. No all-guy getaways.

As president of the high school girls' varsity soccer booster club, I had dedicated a lot of time and effort—even organizing and taking the team to a nearly weeklong soccer camp. There was no time for a family vacation that year.

An entire summer... no, make that nearly three years had just elapsed, and I had set aside little time for myself. It was time to make a change.

There was a local co-ed volleyball league on Thursday nights during the fall and winter, the same night my wife and her friends were playing indoor soccer. Fred

said he would play. He recruited his wife, another couple and a female friend of his wife's. I signed the team up.

The six of us, all in our early to mid-50s, were miserable players. But it really did not matter, at least not to me. I wanted an all-guy activity, but I figured this would do. I was getting out during the week. My wife was with her friends, and I was out doing something on my own. So What Are the Guys Doing?

There was one problem. Nobody wanted to go out for a drink, a pizza or even a soda afterward. Nothing. They wanted to play, walk back out to their cars and just go home. Everybody had to get up early, they said.

In their pajamas by 8:15 p.m., I used to say to myself as I drove home. “So much for a night out!”

After more than a year and a half, I grew bitter. We had several new players, but even after dropping a few hints about going out, there were no takers. I even succeeded in getting all our games scheduled early. I kept asking my teammates (who were all empty-nesters) if they wanted to go out. Nothing.

After one game, I just blurted out that it was really starting to bother me. I offered several options: we go out every time, we go out just a few times during a session, or we just get together for a potluck dinner with our spouses at the end of the game over at my house.

While everyone liked the idea of the potluck dinner, most liked the idea of the occasional night out, but not every week.

Fred, however, was silent on the topic. He then joked, “Why don’t we send the women home after we play, then all the guys go out and have a few beers and then we can get together at your house afterward and watch *Brokeback Mountain* (a then-popular movie about a pair of gay cowboys).”

I was stunned. The idea that men wanting to get together on a regular basis had some homosexual connotation was not funny. It was sad.

Bottom line: Fred didn't get it. And unfortunately, many middle-aged guys today don't either. It is not about the volleyball.

David J. Figura – *Author Biography*



David J. Figura describes himself as “your average middle age guy who loves the outdoors, sports and his beer. I’m also balding, fighting the battle of the gut, taking high blood pressure medication and getting nagged by my wife and daughter to use teeth-whitening strips,” he says.

A Cornell University graduate, David is an award-winning journalist

with more than 30 years of experience as a reporter and editor in Southern California and Upstate New York. He is currently the outdoors writer for Syracuse.com/The Post-Standard in Syracuse, N.Y., covering everything from birding to bear hunting.

Figura has published columns about middle age men in The Post-Standard and on the websites of nationally syndicated advice columnist Amy Dickinson and the Good Men Project. He also read many of his columns on WJFF, a public radio station in the Catskills.

He and his wife, Laura, live in Skaneateles, N.Y. They have two grown children, Katie and Alex.

For more on his writings about “the guys,” see www.davidjfigura.com