

It can feel like there's a lot of pressure to achieve certain things, especially at school, university or in work. Hannah, 21, shares her tips for coping.

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Pressure. There seems to be so much pressure on young people to compete in - and complete - the ‘race of life’. Growing up, I always felt there was a time-frame to life, and if I didn’t ‘complete’ life within this designated time-frame, I had somehow ‘failed’ and would never be ‘successful’. The race to the finish line seemed to get harder and harder the more pressure I put on myself and this just made my already declining mental health worse.

Pressure to succeed academically

For a long time, I felt such a pressure to succeed at school that I truly believed my worth in the world depended on whether I got my GCSEs, went to sixth form to study four A-levels (which would have to be straight As), headed off to a Russell Group university to study my dream degree, then had my dream career all by the time I was 25. I felt so much societal pressure to succeed, and that is what I was taught success was.

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My self-worth was dictated by a grade on a piece of paper and the prestige of a building. This, as you can imagine, led me down a very self-destructive path and to a place in life that my younger self would have deemed a complete failure. I was left with no A-levels, hospitalised for my mental health, and with more self-hatred than ever. I believed so strongly I had failed - that I had nothing and was never going to amount to anything.

But in actual fact it was the opposite. I have had to learn the hard way and I wish I knew then what I know now, which is that I am worthy and valuable regardless of what I’ve ‘achieved’. I have had to learn to change my mindset to see this. I have learnt the most valuable lesson of all - contentment. Success cannot be measured by a grade on a piece of paper. Success is not measured by where you went to university or at what age. If you go at 18, love it and are super happy, then that is amazing and good on you. But equally, if you never go or decide to leave education till later that is also okay, amazing and great. There is no rush or ‘one size fits all’ approach; we are all different and that is fantastic and should be celebrated. There is a place for everyone in this world, at every stage of life and in every capacity, so follow your own path and the world will be better for it.

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You are more than your grades

I have learnt more in the four years I've been out of education than all 13 years I was in it. School is so important, and learning and getting your qualifications is great, but I wish I hadn't spent so long basing my whole worth on what that grade said. There is so much more about me than just that. I may have my GCSEs but that isn't all I am; I am a daughter, a sister and a friend, I have a dog who I love very much, I have volunteer roles in which I contribute to change within a broken system, I play music, I dance, I laugh and I smile. I may not have my A-levels or go to university, but I am beginning to find happiness. It's baby steps - academic perfectionism is a tricky thing to overcome. But I am finding myself outside of academic validation. I am finding the me who people love being around, I am finding the me who is funny, kind and helpful. That's the me I want to value.

For me, moving away from finding my sense of worth in academic achievement was a slow process. It began with remembering who I was away from the academic part of my life. I looked at hobbies and interests. I rebuilt myself from scratch and found all these things I had locked away for so long. With the pressure I had put on myself easing, my mental state began to recover - I am now better able to see what's important in life.

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We're all still figuring it out

When I turned 18, I believed all adults had it together - that there must be something 'wrong' with me for not being where I thought I should be in life. But it has been comforting to discover so many of the adults around me have no idea what they are doing either! Some of them have never used the 'dream' degree they got when they were 18, and others are still as confused by life as we are now!

There is no perfect way to do life, it isn't a race to the finish line but more a wander through an enchanted forest - you never know what you will find around the corner, but if you rush you may just miss out on some magic!

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