Do we need to redefine success? Is success something we do, or something we are — and, asks Sarah Ewing, how do we know when we've achieved it?

Photographs by David Woollfall

Like fashions, our ideas about success are in constant flux. If the 1980s were about flaunting your cash, property ownership and smashing the glass ceiling, all in killer heels, it soon changed. By the time the sober 1990s arrived, pouring scorn on the previous decade's material vision of success, the bar had been raised. Now women had to excel in the boardroom, bedroom, nursery and kitchen; success was about 'having it all'. But the impossibility of achieving superwoman status meant the goalsposts were to shift yet again, and by the turn of the century the rat race had lost its appeal. The Noughties have been about downshifting. Success has meant achieving that elusive work-life balance we cash in our high-flier status for a pared-down, organic life in the country.

Today's women have done better in school; we marry and have children later. But where has that left us? With so many options to consider, are we simply paralysed by choice, or do we feel obliged to excel in all areas? We all want to be successful, but how often we feel successful is another matter.

Our idea of success changes as we get older

Dr Ilona Boniwell, positive psychologist at the University of East London, recently featured on BBC2's The Happiness Formula. Success doesn't mean balance for everyone — it depends on your life stage and current goals. For some, working flat out is what brings them happiness; for others, it's family.

'Our happiness and success has three components - pleasure, engagement and meaning. If people score low on any of these, then they feel they're living empty and unsuccessful lives,' she says. One unconsidered aspect of success is the happiness that is derived from helping others. When high-flyers feel disappointed with their 'successful' lives, it can be because they've achieved a lot of their goals in terms of status, promotion and money, but their life still lacks meaning. Discovering the pleasure to be had from helping others can make us feel revitalised.

'I've found that people's views of success definitely change from material to emotional as they get older. Material trappings can be a crutch or a substitute for feelings of inadequacy. That's not to say you shouldn't spoil or dignify yourself, but material success should never be your aim.'