



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 Woolfall

Like fashions, our ideas about success are in constant flux. If the 1980s were about flashing 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 goalposts 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 as 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.



THE PSYCHOLOGIST

'Striving for success is a recipe for disaster'

OCTAVIUS BLACK is the founder of The Mind Gym, an organisation dedicated to personal development, and author of *Give Me Time* (£12.99, Time Warner).

Our idea of success is based on something that doesn't exist, so we set ourselves up for disappointment. This innate human condition has always existed. True success lies in deciding what our priorities are, and what trade-offs we are willing to make.

Deep down, a lot of people know this, but want it all and don't want to focus on one area. Over the past 20 years, women have been bombarded with 'Superwoman' messages that they can have it all: a career, be a good mother and wife, have an immaculate home, and stay youthful, fit and healthy. They feel that in order to be a good person, they must succeed in more than one area, otherwise they've failed. But that ideal simply isn't possible; it's undermining and misleading.

'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.

True happiness and success has three components – pleasure, engagement and meaning. If people score low on any of these, then they feel they're leading empty and unsuccessful lives.

One undervalued aspect of success is the happiness that is

derived from helping others. When high-flyers feel dissatisfied 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 deprive yourself, but material success should never be your aim.

THE AUTHOR

