



## 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*

**L**ike 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**

## '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.

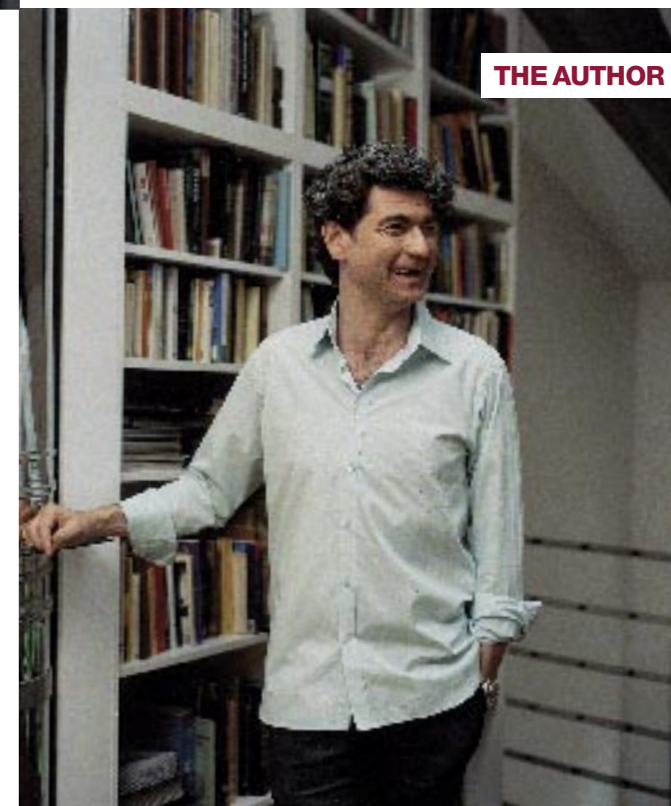
## 'Striving for success is a recipe for disaster'

**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.

**THE AUTHOR**



# Q Do we need to redefine success?



## 'My children changed my priorities'

**MARY TREVENA, 41, lives in High Wycombe with her husband and two children. She is a business development manager at BT.**

I was a high-flying career woman when I became pregnant, but I didn't let it slow me down. During my pregnancy, my marriage ended, which was devastating, and when my son was nine months old, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. It was a shock, but a huge catalyst for me.

My priorities had to change. There were endless hospital visits, doctor's appointments, occupational and speech therapy, and I fitted work around them. Once, when I was negotiating a massive deal, Finn became very ill and my bosses put the deal on hold until I could return.

Success to me now means being there physically and emotionally for my children, and compartmentalising work. I remarried in March. My new husband gives me the confidence to balance my life.

## 'I define success in terms of work'

**SUSAN FOX, 35, from Warwick, is married with no children, and works for hi-tech firm Openreach.**

I'm first-generation British – my parents are from India. My father gave me an English first name because he thought I'd have more chance of succeeding in life. He was quite progressive, encouraged me to study hard and get good grades, and I became an engineer. Many traditional Asian families frown upon girls having careers, preferring them to settle down and have children, but I didn't feel that pressure.

I have come this far by compartmentalising my life: first work, more recently marriage and, eventually, children, rather than mixing the three. I want to be head of a department within five years. By then, I feel I'll be sorted enough to step back and start a family. I'm fairly confident it won't be too late, but I'll be accepting if it is.



## 'Happiness is my measure of success'

**WENDY HARBUTT, 37, a marketing consultant, is married with two children and lives in Cheltenham.**

My dad came from an incredibly poor background – he created his wealth from nothing, and was my hero when I was growing up. He taught me that hard work equals achievement and success, and I felt I owed it to him to emulate that. I believed that having material possessions confirmed how successful I was.

Career tunnel vision meant I lost my perspective, and I gradually realised my pace of life wasn't sustainable, or healthy. I had put all of my spirit, heart and soul into my job, and there was nothing left for personal relationships. My life is still chaotic and busy, but it feels very successful to me. I'm content – not because I have things, but because I do things – and I no longer strive for perfection. Happiness is my measure of success, and I don't care how others view me. ▶



**‘Others felt I was a success, but not me’**

**GILL LEVETT, 46, from Sevenoaks, is a married mother of three. She is founder of 1click2cook.com.**

Before my breakdown, I had all the trappings of success – a big house, two Mercedes... The 1980s were all about power-suits, big hair and flash nightclubs. I wanted a huge business with my name in lights.

Things changed when I met a local fireman and remarried in 1999. My new husband’s family had no interest in money; their life seemed happier and simpler. I aspired to be like that, but part of me hankered after my old life; I still felt a failure. My breakdown was my body’s way of telling me I couldn’t go on, and subsequent therapy changed my views. Success now is about balance in my career and emotional life. Everyone says I’m much nicer to be around. Work is fun again, too.

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**‘A crisis made me redefine success’**

**EMMA SCHOLES, 31, a marketing director from Buckinghamshire, is married with three step-children.**

Many people never feel successful because they keep changing the goalposts, and, once they’ve reached a target, think, ‘What next?’ That used to be me. I’d decided I wanted to be on the board of my company by 30. I managed it at 26.

Everything changed when my dad was given 24 hours to live after a serious accident. He survived, but it shocked me into action. I gave up work immediately. There were so many things I wanted to do, such as see my dad become a grandfather.

The road to parenthood has been difficult. Dad’s accident and my trouble conceiving have helped me realise how important family is to me. To me, real success now means being part of a happy, healthy family.



**‘Success is about finding meaning’**

**JESSICA BERENS, 45, is a writer and single with no children. She works for the Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust charity.**

I got into writing because I wanted to marry David Bowie. I worked on top fashion titles, interviewing loads of celebrities. In my twenties and thirties, my life was a whirlwind of parties and I travelled all over the world. To me, success was a big byline, but things change. I realised I was bored when I fell asleep interviewing a Hollywood actor and was prodded awake with a biro.

As communications director of the Prisoners Trust, I have daily contact with people whose lives have been wrecked by drugs, but who have turned things around. I realise that I always knew, at some level, that something was missing before – there was no meaning to what I was doing. Now, I don’t have those feelings because I know I’m contributing to work that genuinely helps people who need it most. ■

GILL LEVITT PHOTOGRAPH: DARREN RUSSELL; STYLIST: ISABEL DEXTER; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: SAM LAMERY AT TIME; HAYLEY MCGREAL USING DERMATOLOGICAL; EMMA SCHOLES: JESSICA WEAHS; JUMPER: £25; KEVIN MARKS; CLOTHES: HER OWN; HEADY WEARS TROUSERS: £65; MARKS & SPENCER; NECKLACE: £44; KEVIN MARKS; £20; AND SHOES: £25; BOTH NEW LOOK; SUSAN WEARS JACKET: £25; NEW LOOK; VEST: £7.50; MARKS & SPENCER; OCTAVIUS WEARS SHIRT: £50; TED BAKER.