

Defining Success for Ourselves

How often have you thought about what success means to you?

If you're anything like my younger self, that would be almost never. It's not that I didn't want to be successful. It's just that it wasn't something I'd given much thought to. No one ever asked me about it or even encouraged me to think about success. I'd just absorbed it from the people and culture around me, watching how they lived and what was important to them.

From what I saw around me, I internalized a vague idea of success as looking like a decent job and a house with a dining room and a tidy green lawn. So that's what I was going to do. I was going to follow that plan for success and live happily ever after. How could there be anything wrong with this plan? Who wouldn't want these things?

I was going to make this dream happen. I went to college, got a good corporate job, and waited for happiness to rain down on me. It didn't. I was miserable in that job and left it to try a different position. And then another different position.

Along the way, I became a homeowner with a dining room and a tidy green lawn. Okay, happiness—I'm ready for you! But it turned out that I hated the upkeep of a lawn, and the dining room gathered dust because it was hardly used.

This was not going as I'd planned. I was confused. I'd done all the "right" things, so why wasn't I feeling better about my life.

Because I wasn't really living my life. I was living others' ideas of how I should live my life.

That's a big difference. When we're young, our understanding of who we are and the how the world works comes from what we see around us. For the most part, you don't question it because it's your normal. What your normal looks like is defined by your family, friends, community, and culture. Whether it's told to you explicitly or it's how you see people behaving, you learn the rules and expectations of your world.

As a child, your job is to follow the rules, like go to school, finish your homework, do your chores, be good, and do what you're told. And by following the rules and meeting these expectations, you're rewarded. You get good grades, praise, maybe a trophy or an allowance.

It's expected that you'll stay on track, hit the education goals you've been training for, and make your way in the world as a bona fide adult. Even though the people who steered you on this path meant well, it's a one-size-fits-all path toward an accepted idea of success that wasn't questioned.

And that's the problem. Because one size does not fit all. That path may be perfect for some people, and that's great for them. They're able to take the rules and expectations and run with them.

But for everyone else, it's a different story. Does this sound familiar? You did everything just like you were expected, you followed the rules... and yet, you wonder why you're not happy. You worked hard to get here. Your life looks good on paper, but it doesn't feel like it looks. Is this what success is supposed to feel like?

It's important to understand that you haven't done anything wrong. You followed the obvious path that was set before you when you didn't know any other way. But following someone else's idea of success is like wearing a toddler's outfit as an adult: it never fits and it feels really uncomfortable.

But even at that point, when we're squirming in the toddler clothing version of our life, sometimes we still go all in on the idea of success we've been given. Because what else do you have? You weren't taught any other way.

It's like driving a car into a ditch and stepping on the gas pedal. You put more effort into the thing that isn't working, pushing yourself further into a rut that seems inescapable. You end up stretched thin, exhausted, working too much, and frustrated that you can't make this better.

When the old way isn't working for you and you're ready for a change, it's time to create your own definition of success.

This means you determine what success looks like for you, on your terms. You stop trudging dutifully along the path that's not right for you. You uncover what's important to you and live your life in a way that aligns with your values.

This is very different from following someone else's plan for your life. It's about deliberately and authentically choosing how you want to live and focusing on what means the most to you.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you turn your entire life upside down and inside out (though it can). Sometimes small shifts can make a big difference. There's no right or wrong way—it's distinctly personal and specific to each of us because we're crafting our own unique definition. (Like the unused dining room in my house—you may love having a formal space in your home for people to gather.)

Have you ever asked yourself what you really want? This is a big question. Answering it might take some patience and time.

And, this might sound a little crazy but you don't want to think too hard about it. Your mind will likely start yammering about what you "should" do (which will probably look a lot like the old ways you want to change).

Your deeper wisdom will provide the answers you seek. You'll feel it in your body—a spark, a sense of freedom, a burst of joy or enthusiasm—as you uncover what's most important to you.

Look at the old idea of success you've been living. Was the whole idea wrong for you? Or were only parts of it problematic? What parts did you enjoy? Your answers will begin to illuminate your new definition of success.

Dig deeper into what you value and what you want more of in your life. How do you want to spend your time? Where and with whom? Consider all aspects of your life, not just work, including relationships, intellectual development, spiritual growth, hobbies and leisure, and health and wellness.

I wish I'd known how to think about success back when I was zigzagging through different careers and dusting the dining room table. But it's okay, really, because we can always start right from where we are and make choices that move us in a different direction.

We each have our own journey of discovery. Where we are isn't who we are; it's just a step along our path. It's so important to keep in mind that we're never too late, too old, or too stuck to change the direction of our lives.

Sometimes it can feel like the life we want is unattainable, always out of reach, and we'll never get out of the rut we're mired in. This is a big fat lie and I urge you to shift "I can't" to "I can" (or at least "maybe it's possible") because you can choose to start doing something different. Even small changes toward your vision of success will start to shift your entire trajectory. It's a process and a practice. Keep going, one step at a time, in the direction that calls you.

I now live in a different state, in a house that's dining room-free and doesn't have a blade of grass in the yard. It's a life that's so right for me. And I know you can find your just-right life too, when you define success for you.