



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

ARE YOUR 20S for the panic or the glory?

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SUMAIYA RASHID

We've all heard it: your twenties are your prime years, the happiest years of your life, when you're full of energy and endless possibilities. It's a story that's been told in movies, songs, and pop culture. For many though, reality paints a different picture – one of concern, bewilderment, and, yes, fear. While this decade offers unique moments and opportunities that need to be cherished, it is equally important to grow awareness regarding the anxieties that begin to latch on to individuals once they step into their twenties.

According to social media lingo, these years have recently been referred to as the 'panic years', which I believe is a term correctly coined. One must stay on top of their finances and be responsible while spending their very limited income, but also make

appearances at social gatherings to make sure to remain present and "make the most" of these years never to come by again. The anxiety to have everything under control and sorted out by the age of thirty, because let's face it, we have all found ourselves calling someone around us turning thirty, 'old'.

There's also panic involved in people the same age posting their successes on LinkedIn or finding out there are no plans on a Friday night when the rest of Instagram does. Then there is the fear of starting to age, and making sure one finds the perfect skincare routine, and learns what retinol is actually used for.

Then there is the constant need to prove oneself. After years of parents tending to the needs of their children, twenties seem to become the years one proves their parents' efforts fruitful and make them proud. For many of us, the twenties are also when we

start to become more aware of the deteriorating health of our parents, and begin to come to terms with the inevitable sense of loss that comes with the awareness.

Given all of that, one must also stay up with trends before falling completely behind and running the risk of sounding like a 'boomer', while also continuing to grow and improve oneself, to read more until you grow a habit out of it instead of just picking up a book once a year.

Since childhood, societal standards have influenced our ideas of what life should be like in our twenties. Most think that we should follow a certain path: graduate, find employment in our sector of choice, form an established relationship, and possibly start a family. These pressures, along with the fact that life rarely goes as planned, can leave one feeling inadequate and unsuccessful.

The dazzling representations of the twenties in the media frequently gloss over the financial side. The truth is that a lot of people are suffering with their student loan debt, entry-level pay, and an increasingly competitive job market. This unstable financial situation might be a persistent source of worry.

This time is also the time of self-discovery, but we are also fraught with existential concerns. The overwhelming amount of choices we must make about relationships, job paths, and personal ideals can cause paralysis by analysis. This search for identity can frequently result in a feeling of being lost forever, especially when combined with social pressures.

First significant heartbreak, first serious relationship, and first exposure to the difficulties of adult partnerships are all firsts that are frequently experienced in our

twenties. Mental health issues could also become more apparent. Biological predispositions, societal influences, and personal difficulties all contribute to the development of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. The stigma attached to mental health contributes to the internal struggle by making many people suffer silently.

To romanticise the twenties as an unblemished decade of pure delight leads to the utter dismissal of the genuine difficulties that accompany it. While there are certainly exhilarating and growing moments, they are frequently intermingled with hurdles and panic. It is important to recognise that everyone's journey is different and that it is normal to not have everything figured out.

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The unhealthy side of academic competition



ILLUSTRATION: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

When all you've known is comparison, you'll engage in constant comparison yourself. Even when someone raises a D to a B, they don't stop thinking of themselves as lesser than the person scoring straight As.

ARANYO RISHI CHOWDHURY

When it comes to education, high levels of competitiveness are increasing with each passing day. Every year, we hear about a handful of students earning national and international awards despite high grade thresholds and difficult syllabuses. When we see just how much competitive behaviour is rewarded, it urges us not just to be well-read, but to specifically be better than the people around us.

While competitiveness amongst students can encourage more academic diligence, its darker side

warrants more discussion. What we don't hear about every year are the students debilitated by the suffocating atmosphere.

Since our initial school years, we see authority figures applaud those who do well on tests and reprimand those who do not. Over the years, we begin to tie our self-worth to numbers on test papers. Report cards begin to represent our worth as people to ourselves. When our self-perception is so drastically affected by grades, someone else surpassing us academically can have dire consequences.

For students falling behind, it breeds feelings of intellectual inferiority. Even outside classrooms, someone who consistently performs worse than their friends can feel stupid or inferior. Grades are largely regarded as indicators of how successful a person might be in life, which can make students unnecessarily anxious about their future. Constant pressure from parents can make one feel like they'll never amount to anything and work minimum wage their entire lives, just because they got a lower score than some distant relative's child.

When self-esteem issues arise from

such a central aspect of your life, they can cause self-sabotaging tendencies. Students can trap themselves in procrastination cycles and avoid studying, thinking "it's pointless anyway, so why even try?" Even when they end up accomplishing more than previously in class, self-sabotage takes other forms, such as undermining achievements. When all you've known is comparison, you'll engage in constant comparison yourself. Even when someone raises a D to a B, they don't stop thinking of themselves as lesser than the person scoring straight As. This is further compounded by the lack of awareness around mental health, where neurodivergent students may struggle a lot more in such competitive environments.

On the other side of the spectrum are students at the top of their class. Academic competition is usually fiercest at the upper quartiles. The obsession with performing not just objectively well, but better than everyone else, can bring out the worst in us. When competing at the highest level, burnouts are common. Being infatuated with scoring the highest leaves little room for other pastimes.

High achievers bear the brunt of intense competition as well. When all their work occasionally doesn't amount to academic perfection for any number of reasons, it can make them question their own self-worth. The sudden feeling of losing control over something you tied all your self-respect to is nothing short of terrifying, and can lead to severe self-esteem issues.

Regardless of ability, cheating has become a common occurrence specifically because of competition. Students who don't care about

studying can take extreme measures just to copy off of someone else. Despite knowing that they don't deserve the marks, seeing them on the results sheet satisfies a certain internalised craving, caused by years of conditioning that makes us value marks so highly.

Competition is irreversibly baked into education. But that shouldn't stop us from adopting healthier attitudes towards ourselves and other people, to ease the struggle for all fellow students. There's no end to the ways this can be done.

Evaluating your life goals and deciding exactly how important grades are in that scheme is a start. That way, you'll feel less pressured by other people to obtain the absolute best scores, and be satisfied if you're on the track you've set for yourself. For example, you won't need a Country Highest in Mathematics if your goal is to be a successful engineer someday, as there are easier paths towards that goal.

It's also important to break out of the internalised idea that report cards represent your worth as a person. No singular thing does. Re-prioritising and thinking long-term can help cope with peer and parental pressure. While healthy competition might be hard to maintain, you can't go wrong with comparing yourself against your previous self only, and no one else.

At the end of the day, we're all united by the same struggle, and it's important to be compassionate and supportive towards everyone else. In a system pitting us against one another, we need to have each other's backs.

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