

Dear Shortly to be year seven,

A little while ago, I was asked to write a letter to my Year 7 self. Although it was over ten years ago, it doesn't seem very long ago. I still clearly remember finishing primary school and saying goodbye to its familiar people and environment with a sense of both fear and excitement. I remember getting used to a bigger school and adjusting to the presence of older students, while adapting to a new set of friends, expectations, and challenges. I couldn't have known that in my first year of secondary school, my mum would pass away in traumatic circumstances, and that my life would afterwards change dramatically, becoming far more difficult than I could ever have imagined. And while I sincerely hope that nothing like that will ever happen to any of you, it taught me a lot – about making the best of what sometimes seemed to be an impossible situation, and about how to overcome challenges in spite of the odds. Most of all, it taught me that when something goes wrong, there's no reason not to make up for the setback with determination and hard work. Those qualities, I think, have held me in good stead ever since – I went to a good university, got a good result, and am now working on my PhD.

Now you're at a turning point in your lives, when there will be new challenges and opportunities, as well as new risks and dangers. So you might benefit by learning from some of my experiences and reflections about starting secondary school. I didn't always get it right, but I really hope that sharing some of the things I learned along the way will help you to navigate those changes as best as you possibly can. The most important advice that I could give to my Year 7 self is that, in order to effectively develop resilience, you need to believe fundamentally in yourself and in your own worth. That may sound quite simple, but it's something that took me several years, and something that's almost impossible to do unless you put together three key ingredients. First, you'll need to have developed a positive attitude to life, bringing optimism and engagement to the opportunities that come before you. Second, you'll need a close and supportive network of people around you, who you can trust and depend on. Third and finally, you'll need a sense of self-ownership, where you believe that you are responsible for your own life and your own actions, and that you're not helpless when facing adversity.

I want to say a little bit more about each of these ingredients. As for the first, developing a positive attitude to life, I think the best way to start is to be grateful and appreciative. There are the basics: we live in a beautiful world, in a peaceful country, where we are fortunate enough to access good food and clean water, get an education, and take opportunities to live meaningful lives. But we should also be grateful and appreciative of the smaller things in our everyday lives – of the breakfast we share with others in the morning, the music we listen to on the bus to school, and even the moment we put our heads down on our pillows to sleep after a tiring day. Treating such small things, which we might otherwise take for granted, as precious gifts can make our everyday lives more meaningful, helping us develop an optimistic attitude. Most of all, developing a positive attitude is about saying yes: being motivated to stay active, go outside, and pursue our hobbies and interests. We often learn from engaging in the world, and saying yes to these opportunities, that they aren't as scary as we thought.

The second key ingredient for developing a strong belief in yourself and your own worth is developing a close and supportive network of people around you. Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, it's extremely important to make, maintain, and cherish close friendships with others, with whom you can share your innermost thoughts and feelings, and simply spend time in one another's company. I believe that my closest friends from school and university are the single most important aspect of my success. They have invited me into their families, supported me in innumerable ways, and given me a security and sense of purpose I would otherwise have lacked. When you show others that you believe in their worth, caring and supporting them with honesty and kind-heartedness, they'll undoubtedly show the same to you.

The final ingredient in developing resilience is a sense of personal self-ownership. This means that if everything seems to be going wrong, and you're facing new challenges which seem insurmountable, you nevertheless believe that you are capable of overcoming them. You accept your circumstances, whatever they are, and do your best regardless. In psychology, this is called an internal locus of control – it means you don't focus on what you can't change, but instead focus on what you can. Developing a sense of self-ownership means taking responsibility for yourself in a way which allows you to adapt, continue, and overcome whatever problem is in your way.

None of these skills are easy. You'll find some more difficult than others, and you'll never be perfect at any of them. In any case, they'll take years to develop to their full extent. But now that you're becoming young adults, they'll be essential for developing your maturity and living a good life. I wish you all the best of luck with beginning secondary school in September – make sure to be conscious, thoughtful, and work hard in navigating your way through this next step. It'll be worth it.

All best,  
Jon