

Success in the Modern Era

Why mindfulness is more valuable than money

Generation after generation in this country has been taught what it means to be “successful” according to society. From a young age, children are taught how to act and what to think in school, with the implicit understanding that following the rules leads to a good life. Parents instill into youth a life path for success - go to college, get a car, get a job, get married, buy a house, have children - thus beginning the relentless pursuit of a nuclear family and a solid 9-5. Somewhere along the way, the message is received that the most successful people are the wealthiest, or the sexiest, and the masses strive to make themselves fit that mold at any cost. Hundreds of books have been written dissecting the attributes of the world’s most successful people, and everyday, headlines scream “5 Things Successful People Do Every Morning Before 5AM”. Our nation is obsessed with success.

Of course, those defining success and charting its course throughout our history have largely been white males. And there is much debate about what the definition of success actually is. But regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other identity, and how one defines success, the majority of the population is educated that the key to a successful life lies in structures that society has created for everyone: if you just follow their set of rules you will be successful.

The results of a nation set rigidly in its ways for a one-size-fits-all approach, where success is judged by external expectation versus internal fulfillment, have been cantankerous. Those who followed society’s formula for success, but are left unhappy, suffer immensely. According to the National Institute on Mental Health, nearly 7% of adults have a major depressive episode in a given year. Rates of depression and anxiety among youth have increased significantly since 1935. Rates of alcoholism have increased steadily and alcohol related deaths in 2014 were over 30,000. More troubling, rates of drug overdose resulted in over 60,000 deaths in 2016 and is now the leading cause of death among Americans under 50. While some of the underlying causes of the issues raised above are unknown, it is evident as professor Jean Twenge puts it, “I think the research tells us that modern life is not good for mental health.”

Additionally, those who were left out of society’s self-instilled structure were marginalized and ignored. 12.7% of Americans, or over 40 million people, live in poverty in this country. Income inequality is getting worse, with the top 1% making over 20% of total income and wages for the bottom 50% are not increasing. The very structures that society deem successful - that of going to college and owning a home - are largely unavailable to much of the nation.

But a new movement is emerging, and people who were trained to look outside of themselves and trust rules in order to live a successful life are seeking happiness elsewhere: inside. In a world with over 6 billion people, unique individuals, and different cultures, Americans are finally realizing that not one formula works for everyone. Our own neurology, our DNA, the experiences of our ancestors, our own experiences, what triggers us, what inspires us, what

makes of different, our personalities, our strengths and weaknesses, our habits - good and bad - all determine what makes us happy and successful.

There are many examples of how the process of learning about yourself is gaining popularity, and they are all buzzword worthy. Nearly 10% of adults have a meditation practice, and the rates of adults using yoga has doubled since 2002. Companies are investing in “mindfulness” as a benefit for employees and classes are now offered in schools for students and parents, and hospitals for doctors and patients alike. People are going deep within themselves to reflect on their own circumstances, and how to be present in their lives. Minimalism is trending throughout the country, especially among millennials, who believe that there is more to life without possessions and a decluttered life will lead to less stress. Other trends include aromatherapy with essential oils, color therapy, and health and fitness trends like Whole30 and Crossfit, are rising with the notion that people are geared towards finding creative ways to feel better. Veganism alone has even grown by 600% over the last 3 years around the world.

It is clear that men and women are starting to take ownership of their lives and find success inward instead of the traditional ways society has instilled. Finding personal peace and fulfillment is especially important under this political climate, and will continue to grow as access to these ideas and practices grows through the internet. We should learn from the past, with understanding and empathy for why and how society determined the structures for success. And we must be aware moving forward - what does the future look like for a generation obsessed with self-exploration and growth? What suffering will it bring to generations to come?

But for now, the beauty about being alive today means that instead of marrying your high-school sweetheart at 20 years old, or working at the same company for 50 years, or staying at home unwillingly, or waking up and checking email and running 5 miles and drinking a protein shake all before 5am, is that you can find a happy and successful life by asking yourself one simple question: “What do I want?”