

What we'd tell our younger selves

With age and experience comes understanding and wisdom. Three readers, who have all been through challenging times, reflect on the life lessons they've learned as a result, and what they wish they'd known earlier in their lives

Interviews MEL HUNTER Photography LIZ McAULAY

'You are more resilient than you realise'

Lonely and isolated as she grew up, Kalini Kent, 62, from Macclesfield, hardly dared to dream of the happy life she would go on to lead, providing a listening ear for others.

My family moved to London from Guyana in South America when I was three, to escape political unrest. Arriving in the UK in 1963 was not easy. I didn't look or speak like the others at my school in Ealing, and I didn't fit in. I was shy, introverted and petrified of this strange new place. Other children never came to my house and I rarely went to theirs. I was taunted for being different. Although my self-esteem hit rock bottom and I felt alone and friendless, I kept the hurt to myself. Ashamed, I tried to make myself invisible and didn't tell anyone. Home should have been a refuge but, as the youngest of six, I struggled there, too. My parents had a turbulent relationship and divorced when I was 17. Two things kept me going: I was very sporty and played hockey for my county, Middlesex; and I discovered drama in my late teens. They were real lifelines. They gave me joy, the chance to meet new people and helped my confidence grow.

I had some difficult times heading into my 20s, carrying my poor self-esteem into university, which led to me failing my first year, and then heading into an unsuitable



“Your future isn't yet written”

KALINI WEARS: JUMPSUIT: CLOSET; LONDON; NECKLACE: ZAVANA; SHOES: JUST PAIS
JULIA WEARS: DRESS: WITH A FEMININE EMBROIDERED FRONT; EARRINGS: TROUSERS: BOOTS: GAGS
JEWELLERY: HARRIET AND SMALL RESPONSE; JEWELLERY: HARRIET AND SMALL RESPONSE



“The only person who can make you complete is you”

JULIA WEARS: DRESS: WITH A FEMININE EMBROIDERED FRONT; EARRINGS: TROUSERS: BOOTS: GAGS
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“You can do anything you put your mind to”

'No one should feel excluded just because they're single'

Julia Collis, 59, from Windsor, has discovered that a romantic relationship is not a requirement for living a fulfilling life.

When I was younger, I assumed I'd get married and have children. It was an unspoken assumption and, following my happy upbringing in Lincolnshire with my parents and brother, there was no reason to think otherwise.

I partied a lot in my early 20s, and had one long relationship, but life was shaken up when I was 23. I had endometriosis that was so severe, it caused an ovary to burst. The solution was a total hysterectomy, which ended any thoughts of having my own biological children.

The doctors unfeelingly labelled it 'female castration', which left me feeling incomplete as a woman. But free from the pain I'd endured for years, I was also strangely almost grateful for the operation. Now I can see that I buried many of my feelings about it.

When I was 27, David, my childhood sweetheart, came into my life again, and swept me off my feet. He dashed away my concerns about not having children and, within a year, we said our vows.

In love with the idea of being married, I thought it would make me whole.

Of course, it didn't, and it took me a long while to realise that the only person who can make you complete is yourself. That was a lesson I started to learn in Turkey, on my first solo holiday soon after we broke up. I was terrified when I arrived, but I had the time of my life. I've since travelled all over the world on my own.



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The late 1990s was the dawn of internet dating and, to my parents' horror, I threw myself into it wholeheartedly. After many disastrous dates, I met Ian. He was funny and loving, and we moved in together, but something felt wrong. I loved him but recognised that, ultimately, we wouldn't make each other happy, so I ended the relationship. That was a turning point. I began to realise I didn't need a man to be fulfilled. With that came new confidence. I launched a successful marketing agency and threw myself into living the life I wanted. I did sometimes date - but none of the dates I went on gave me the same satisfaction I got from other areas of my life, such as



Julia is living her best life as a single woman

my career, friendships or love of travel.

Slowly, I began to realise that the single life wasn't bad. In fact, it suited me rather well. On my own now for more than 15 years, I've learned to be very happy.

I have a busy social life; love visiting art galleries, jetting off to different cities and going to the theatre. Sometimes I go with friends, but often alone.

People tell me I'm brave and they wouldn't have the courage, which is sad. No one should feel excluded because they're single. I'm now on a mission to celebrate the freedom that being single brings, and to encourage others to be as comfortable and happy as me.

I'd tell my younger self to be bold, and remind her that she is braver than she believes and shouldn't feel pressure to pursue the 'fairy tale', because marriage isn't the Holy Grail of adulthood.

There have been some lonely times, especially during the Covid lockdowns. It made me realise how much we need connections with others. Out of that experience, I started an online community, Jetty Socials, to encourage single people in my area to get out, meet others, try new things and live their solo life joyously.

If there's one big piece of advice I'd hand down, it's to invest in friendships. Some of mine have lasted longer than I could have imagined, and have sustained me through the best and worst of times. Give love and support to others, and you'll get it back in spades.

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STYLIST: HELEN JOHNSON; HAIR & MAKEUP: MALIN COLLEMAN; CAROLINE PIERCE/STYLING; JULIA WEARS: JUMPER, WINDSOR LONDON; SKIRT: ASOS; EARRINGS: COEUR DE LION; RING: YAA YAA LONDON

Be inspired

Continued from previous page

and unhappy relationship. But it was my love of sport that changed things for me. In my mid 20s, I joined a mixed hockey club, where I met my husband, David. We married when I was 28, in 1988.

His family was close, dependable and loving, and our relationship gave me the stability to start a different kind of life, rewriting my future and leaving behind the painful experiences of my childhood.

Although I did go back to university and qualified as a solicitor, I poured my energy into creating a stable and loving upbringing for our children, Martin, now 30, and Jennifer, 25. While David travelled a lot for work, I put my career on hold, instead volunteering as a leader at Beavers and Rainbows groups, where I'd inject drama into the weekly gatherings, which the children loved.

David retired early from his job as an industrial pharmacist 14 years ago and this gave me the opportunity to make my

Kalini built up her self-esteem by focusing on her strengths



mark. I set up a drama academy to give youngsters the self-esteem I'd lacked, and many children left transformed. I wanted to devote myself even more to supporting children, so I am now a youth and parent coach, working with youngsters who are anxious or going through trauma.

I also set up a not-for-profit performing arts group, Cygnets, and established an anti-bullying programme, which I deliver in schools. Drama gave me the confidence to speak up, and now I support others to find their own voices.

I know now that we may not be able to choose the things that happen to us, but we can control how we respond. My turbulent childhood made me a stronger person, sometimes wary of others, but with a resilience that has made me who I am. I became the confident person I am today through focusing on the things I was good at – sport and drama – rather than the things that were wrong.

I'd tell my younger self that we all have a past, but our future isn't yet written. Whatever age you are, the possibilities are still in your hands.

• *Kalini has contributed to Letters To My Teenage Self (A Box Full Of Joy) by Nicole Bateman, which is out now.*

KALINI WEARS: CREEKS; LONG TAIL; SALLY; NECKLACE: FULLAUTUMN

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STYLING: HELEN; JEWELLERY: HARRIET KELSALL; COAT: EMMY; CAROLINE FRAGTON; JULIA WEARS: JARVIS; WINDSOR; JEWELLERY: HARRIET KELSALL; COAT: EMMY; CAROLINE FRAGTON

'After staring death in the face, the obstacles and "what ifs" melted away'

Harriet Kelsall, 51, from Cambridge, used to worry about the things she couldn't do as well as her friends. Now she knows anything is possible.

Words were my downfall at school. I was good at art and science, but anything that involved writing was a disaster. Eight out of 10 words were spelled wrong.

The teachers thought I was mucking around. My parents couldn't understand it either: My dad, a GP who was a talented jewellery maker on the side, nurtured my love of art and making things. We'd spend hours tinkering together at his work bench.

One teacher stood out. While everyone else was always angry with me, an English teacher, Mrs Pearson, told me that my spelling was bad but what I was

writing was good. She told me never to stop putting pen to paper.

The world of work was kinder to me than school. I started out in IT, where spelling wasn't an issue. In the evenings, like my dad, I poured the creative side of my brain into making jewellery for friends in my garden shed.

As more orders came in, I realised I might be able to make a living out of it. In 1998, when I was 28, I started my business, Harriet Kelsall Bespoke Jewellery, bringing a personal design service to the high street.

Around the same time, I met my future mother-in-law, who was a specialist dyslexia teacher. She immediately spotted that I had dyslexia, which was confirmed by tests. Suddenly everything made perfect sense.

The funny thing is, my poor spelling didn't really hold me back any more. As an adult, I've realised my dyslexia is an advantage. I can juggle lots of things and come at tasks from a different angle to other people. Like many other dyslexics, the creative side of my brain is highly developed.

Nevertheless, I was still haunted by a confidence crisis over my writing. The idea of writing anything as ambitious as a book seemed preposterous.

Then something happened to change my mind. In 2012, I noticed I was getting out of breath, but I was busy with my business and my children, Thomas, now 17, and Eleanor, 13, so I didn't have time to dwell on it or go to the doctor.

In late November 2012, I collapsed while running a stall at Thomas's school fair. I was rushed into hospital and had emergency heart surgery. A coronary valve had broken open, causing my heart to balloon. I recall asking a wonderful nurse if I was going to die and her admitting the doctors didn't know.

I was able to join my family at home just in time for Christmas 2012 and, as I gingerly recovered, the idea of writing

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Dyslexia hasn't held Harriet back from success

a book took hold. I had been mentoring other creative businesses and had so much knowledge to share. If I died, how would I pass that on?

After staring death in the face, the obstacles and "what ifs" melted away. Nevertheless, beginning to type the words of my book, *The Creative's Guide To Starting A Business*, was like revisiting a ghost. I couldn't start at the beginning and finish at the end, like most people. Instead, I wrote different parts, knowing I'd be able to pull them together at some point.

In 2019, to my shock, it won an award at The Business Book Awards. My first thought was that my teachers would be amazed. It shows anything is possible.

At school, I didn't know where I'd end up. Now, with four jewellery studios, and as deputy chair of the National Association of Jewellers, and a non-executive director of the British Hallmarking Council and the Intellectual Property Office, I'd tell my younger self that she can do anything she puts her mind to. Instead of being ground down by what you can't do, notice and celebrate what you can.

• *The Creative's Guide To Starting A Business (Robinson) by Harriet Kelsall is out now. Visit hkjewellery.co.uk*

Notice and celebrate the things you're good at