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Scared about graduation ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I'm supposed to be graduating this spring and I am totally freaking out. This summer, I formulated a plan for what I want to do when I graduate (e.g., job, grad school, etc.) but now I don't know what I want to do. I feel like my life is moving too fast. I don't want to grow up! Is it normal to feel this nervous? I almost feel like I might just die because I can't picture the future at all.

Thanks,
Scared Senior

Answer

Dear Scared Senior,

What you're experiencing is common among individuals going through this type of life transition. A lot of students completing undergraduate or graduate school share the feelings you describe. These emotions may also be amplified when there's uncertainty about the future. The good news is that there are resources available to help you work through your fear and build off the plan you formulated over the summer (or even start from scratch). It's also okay to take some time to celebrate this exciting time and not have all of your future plans set in stone just yet.

To help you work through some of these emotions, you might start by exploring the source of your nervousness. Is it because you're used to being in school and upon graduation you won't have the safety of that familiar space? Are you concerned about the lack of structure the future holds, relative to the parameters of an academic year? Could it be because your plans are changing but you're not sure how to adjust? Or is it because you're concerned about the societal expectations to have your life figured out upon graduation? Whatever the reason may be, it's good to recognize and acknowledge how you're feeling so you can access appropriate resources and start to work through them.

As the sentiment suggests, the best laid plans often get derailed by unforeseen circumstances. It's also possible that change occurs because you find new passions or interests that shift the trajectory of your career or life. While that can create other sources of fear, it's good to keep in mind that change is constant and building some skills to adjust to that change can be helpful in

the long run. Change can certainly be intimidating, but viewing them as opportunities may help ease some of your fears. It's also good to keep in mind that making career decisions right now isn't the end all be all — there's no right or wrong plan because there's always room for change, if you choose it. What you decide to do after graduation doesn't have to be what you'll spend the rest of your life doing, so you can continue to make adjustments as you learn more about your interests and goals.

If your fears are rooted in not having a clear plan or direction for your future, you might find it helpful to talk with someone in your school's career center. They often have staff who are specially trained to help students figure out options following graduation. Whether that's going to graduate school, finding a job, or getting work experience to prepare for graduate school, they'll be able to help you consider different options following graduation. Many career centers are also connected to alumni from different areas of study. It might also be good to talk to alumni from your major to learn about their work, but also learn more about their career trajectory and how it might have been different than the plan they created for themselves. Understanding how they adapted to uncertainty in their situations could provide some options for you to consider, but also ideas for potential career paths.

If you don't find career counseling helpful and your anxiety and fear are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, talking to a mental health professional at your university or in your community may be beneficial. Hopefully by this time next year, you'll be looking forward to all the possibilities you have at your disposal. Until then, enjoy your remaining time in college!

Alice!

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