Baby Boomers and the generations preceding them often started their adult lives around age 20, getting married, starting families, establishing careers, and building a home life. Today's generations of young adults start their lives much later, believing that they don't need to start making serious decisions until age thirty, and that their twenties are a time for unencumbered fun.

However, the truth is that a good career and a good relationship don't magically appear at age thirty. To ensure they will happen for you in your thirties and forties, when you finally feel ready for them, you need to prepare for them in your twenties.

Meg Jay is a clinical psychologist who specializes in helping twenty-somethings figure out their lives. In *The Defining Decade*, she offers insights to help you take control of your life and pave the way for future happiness in both work and love. Your decisions today can greatly affect your options tomorrow, and she encourages all twenty-somethings to take these years seriously—even while having fun. She walks the reader through how to find success in work and in love, and discusses why twenty-somethings are uniquely positioned to establish their adulthood because of both timing and biology.

**Finding Work**

To end up in a career you're happy with down the road, you need to make difficult choices now—and the sooner you start, the better. Without purposeful planning, it's easy to live day-by-day and put off the difficult tasks of making meaningful career choices. The following guidelines explore ways you can begin to craft a fulfilling work life.

**Have a Productive Identity Crisis**

An “identity crisis” is a period of youthful exploration during which a person can collect experiences and try out different paths in life without risk or obligation. It's an important step toward developing an identity, and it has two main elements: reflection, through which you are thoughtful and aware of your life, and action, through which you collect experiences that help you learn about yourself. This collection of experiences becomes your “identity capital.”

Your identity capital is the collection of things you've done long enough or well enough that they become part of who you are. It's the intangible currency we use to obtain jobs and relationships, and it includes your schools, clubs, jobs, hobbies, degrees, and experiences.

When having an identity crisis, many people focus more on the reflection piece than the action part, but it's those who strike a good balance between the two who'll end up with stronger identities and be more satisfied with their lives: better able to manage stress, more in control of their future, and find themselves following more original, unique paths. Seek out opportunities that will give you meaningful experiences you can learn from. Volunteer with a charity, work as an intern in an industry you're interested in, or take classes in something you might like to pursue.

**Pursue Weak Ties**

Your identity, and your identity capital, is determined in large part by the people in your life. Though you may feel most comfortable around people you have strong ties with, it's your weak ties that are most likely to actually help you move forward in your pursuits. Because those you share strong ties with are so similar to you, they have nothing new to add to your journeys, either in work or love. People with whom you have weak ties, though, can give you access to information and people you don't otherwise know.

One of the best ways to begin the process of establishing an adult life is to reach out to those weak ties for information and possible opportunities. A great way to approach a weak tie is to ask her for a small, interesting, specific, and easy-to-accomplish favor.

When approaching someone for a favor, whether it be a letter of recommendation, an introduction, or an informational interview, follow a few guidelines:

- Research your target: Find out any relevant information that might connect you.
- Make yourself relevant: Find a connection to your target’s expertise.
- Make yourself interesting: Show some personality.
- Make your request specific: Don’t approach someone with a vague, “Can we meet for coffee?” Instead, let her know what exactly you’d like to discuss.
- Make your request easy to execute: Don’t ask for advice that would require lengthy, thoughtful responses on a broad subject like what you should do with your life.

**Look Realistically at Your Options**
As a child, you've probably been told you can do "anything you want" with your life. In truth, your options are limited. They are determined by your past—who you are, where you've come from, and what identity capital you have—and your vision of the future—where you ultimately want to be.

This is not a bad thing. In the face of excessive options, it can feel safer not to make any decision, so that you don't risk missing out on something better. The best way to move beyond decision-making paralysis is to think honestly about what options are available to you:

- Make a list of the realistic options you have available to you based on your experience, education, strengths, and interests.
- Examine these options rationally and think about which will lead you to a place you'd like to see yourself in ten or twenty years.

Making yourself aware of your true options is the first step towards setting realistic, workable goals: the building blocks of future happiness.

Create Goals; Ignore "Shoulds"

In your twenties, you'll likely get significant pressure from other people as to what you should do with these years. Instead of getting caught up in what others think you should do, focus on setting realistic, workable goals that make sense for you. Then move toward achieving them in realistic steps.

When creating your goals, keep in mind that a fulfilling adult life has three essential elements:

1. People (who we spend time with)
2. Places (where we live)
3. Things (what we do for work)

Start with whichever element you are certain of, or whichever you know you have a specific goal regarding. From there, create goals addressing the other areas that can accommodate your first priority.

Build Uniqueness From Common Parts

Many twenty-somethings resist pursuing a career because they feel doing so would mean giving up their uniqueness; working on a career is conventional and boring, right? However, if you don't commit to something, your life is far more likely to end up unexceptional and unoriginal.

Just because you are pursuing a career doesn't mean you are fated to be unoriginal. Treat the process as you would building a custom-made bike: the parts might be common, but the result is an expression of you alone. Collect your own experiences and cobble together a path that is uniquely suited to you.

Leverage Yourself With a Good Story

When you have a résumé with lots of educational credits but little practical experience, it can be difficult to stand out: How do you leverage yourself when you don't have much leverage? Fortunately, you can solve this problem with a good story.

A good story is a narrative about your interests and talents that shows interviewers a link between your past, present, and future: what you did before, what you want to do now, and what skills you have to get you there. Interviewers know that a person's goals for the future will change and they don't expect you to have an exact, definite plan. But they do want to know you have some workable ideas.

Finding Love

We get much less information and training on how to find a long-term partner than we do on how to find a career. And yet, choosing a marriage partner arguably has a more lasting effect on your long-term happiness. Giving the topic serious thought now, in your twenties, will decrease the chances you'll have to settle later. The following sections are some guidelines that can help you approach the subject mindfully.

Don't Date Down

When you date down, you date people you've outgrown in maturity, experience, and insight, and in doing so, you prevent yourself from finding a person you have a more meaningful connection with. A person often dates down when her identity stories reflect difficulties from her past: Someone who was neglected as a child or bullied as a teen often harbors negative beliefs about herself that cause her to make poor decisions as an adult.

Fortunately, you can change the stories you tell yourself about yourself. Listen carefully to your identity stories and recognize which parts of them come from other people's judgments, evaluations, and advice. Examine those elements and decide which ones
you can disregard. Then find a new story to take its place. If you've been raised by emotionally abusive parents, and now find yourself having serial one-night stands, look at who you are now and what you've accomplished, and focus on where those traits can lead you.

**Seek a Similar Personality**

Relationships are far more likely to be successful if the two people involved are fairly similar in personality. **Personality is the overall way you interact with and react to the world: your outlook.** It's not about the experiences you've had but how you've handled them. It's not about what you like but why you like it.

The "Big Five" personality model outlines five major personality traits that a person can have. A person has each of these characteristics in either low, medium, or high levels. They are:

1. **Openness:** Are you practical, conventional, skeptical, and reluctant to try new things? Or are you open to new experiences, intellectually creative and curious, adventurous, and insightful?
2. **Conscientiousness:** Are you easygoing, sometimes careless, spontaneous, and a bit prone to addiction? Or are you disciplined, organized, and responsible?
3. **Extraversion:** Are you shy, independent, cautious, and recharged by alone time? Or are you outgoing, active, chatty, and energized by others?
4. **Agreeableness:** Are you combative, suspicious of others, and contrarian? Or are you cooperative, trusting, flexible, and affectionate?
5. **Neuroticism:** Are you secure in yourself and emotionally resilient? Or are you moody, anxiety-prone, and easily triggered?

There's no "right" or "wrong" personality on any of these scales, but we are often more compatible with people who lie somewhat near us.

**Don't Cohabitate, or Do It Wisely**

Many young adults think that living with a partner before marriage will allow them to “try out” a marriage before committing and will result in a stronger union. Unfortunately, the statistics don't back this up: Couples who live together are actually more likely to divorce down the road than those who do not.

The effect seems to be a result of the fact that **when people cohabitate, they often end up passively and reactively sliding toward a marriage, rather than proactively deciding on one.** This can result in two people getting married for reasons like sunk costs rather than because they are actually right for each other.

Interestingly, the cohabitation effect does not hold for couples who move in together after becoming engaged, most likely because they've consciously chosen the marriage rather than slide into it. If you are considering moving in with your partner before marriage, get clear about their long-term goals and commitment level before you move in and keep an eye on the costs of leaving. Make sure the constraints keeping you in the relationship don't get so burdensome that you would be unable to walk away.

**Pick Your Partner With Your Family in Mind**

When choosing a life partner, it is easy to forget that the decision involves more than just the two of you; it involves a future family that includes your partner's family as well as the children you create. The family you create and adopt with your partner will define your life in...

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**The Defining Decade Summary Introduction**

Baby Boomers and the generations preceding them often started their adult lives around age 20 by getting married, starting families, establishing careers, and building a home life. The subsequent generations brought with them enormous cultural changes.
As birth control became common and women went to work in much greater numbers, people began to put off marriage. Then, a cultural fascination with the youthfulness of the twenties, along with a misunderstanding of the process of “finding oneself,” encouraged people to put off starting a meaningful career.

People began to think of their twenties as a “free period” between childhood and adulthood, where choices, or the lack thereof, have no lasting impact on a person's long-term happiness. The idea that “thirty-is-the-new-twenty” became popular, convincing generations of young adults that they don't need to start making serious decisions until age thirty, and that their twenties are a time for unencumbered fun.

Unfortunately, this idea is a myth, and its widespread acceptance has led generations of young adults to trivialize and squander their twenties, which, it turns out, is a critical decade for establishing future success and happiness both professionally and personally. As a result, we are now seeing many twenty-somethings who feel lost, as well as thirty- and forty-somethings who regret the time they wasted and now feel left behind.

**The truth is, a good career and a good relationship don't magically appear at...**

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**The Defining Decade Summary Finding Work**

At one point or another, the vast majority of twenty-somethings have been unemployed or underemployed, working at low-skilled jobs they are highly overqualified for. This is sometimes necessary; forces beyond their control might compel them to, and oftentimes these jobs are a means to an end—a source of cash during grad school, for example.

But it is easy to fall into a trap of living day-by-day, spending long periods of time in low-end jobs and delaying meaningful career choices. Unfortunately, this is a poor strategy for long-term happiness. Research shows that chronically underemployed people are more depressed than their peers, and unemployment in a person's twenties is a strong predictor of future depression and drinking problems, even after that person becomes employed.

Extended periods of voluntary underemployment and unemployment can also do lasting harm to a person's career prospects and future happiness. A delay in starting a career can permanently depress long-term wages, as the majority of lifetime wage growth typically happens during the first ten years of a career, before responsibilities like families and mortgages prevent a person from pursuing opportunities that would increase her salary like higher education or cross-country moves.

To find yourself in a meaningful career in your thirties and beyond, you must make purposeful career choices in your twenties. Do so by approaching your life mindfully and accumulating helpful experiences:

- Have a productive identity crisis: Reflect on your life but also accumulate experiences.
- Pursue weak ties: Network to seek opportunities and knowledge you would not otherwise stumble across.
- Be realistic about your options: Examine what options are realistically available to you.
- Create goals; ignore “shoulds”: Ignore what others say you should do. Examine your own objectives.
- Build uniqueness from common parts: Craft your own unique path by piecing together a life of varied and interesting experiences.
- Leverage yourself with a good story: Use the experiences you've had to...

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**Shortform Exercise: Cultivate Weak Ties**

Your weak ties are people with whom you share a distant or occasional connection. These are the people who are most likely to help move your career or love life forward, since they can introduce you to information, opportunities, and people you would not otherwise have had access to. A great way to approach a weak tie and open a connection is to ask for a small, interesting, specific, and easy-to-accomplish favor.

Think of two or three people you consider weak ties that could possibly provide you with an opportunity. An old roommate? A
The options you have before you at any given moment are determined by your past—who you are, where you’ve come from, and what identity capital you have—and your vision of the future—where you ultimately want to be.

Make a list of five realistic options you have based on your experience, education, strengths, interests, and goals. (These could be career options or options related to another major life choice.)

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The Defining Decade Summary Finding Love

Planning for a career has a different status in our culture than does planning for a marriage. Having a specific and measurable career plan is socially acceptable and admired by many. To help you plan a career, you have a wide variety of resources available to you, including books, classes, counselors, and consultants.

Having a specific and measurable marriage plan is not as socially acceptable. It is often mocked. And there are far fewer resources available to help you; universities don’t offer classes on it and unless you go “downmarket” to talk shows where marriage is more commonly discussed, there’s not a lot of public discussion about it.

And yet, choosing a marriage partner arguably has a far more lasting effect on your long-term happiness. You can revise your career many times over the course of your life, but your life partner is far less modifiable. You can’t just leave a marriage like you can leave a bad job; after divorce, you may be permanently linked to your ex both financially and logistically through children or other ties.

Furthermore, though they may not openly admit it, and while it’s not often acknowledged in pop culture, young adults do generally want to get married. In the United States, about half of young adults marry by age 30, 75 percent by age 35, and by age forty, 85 percent are married.

While it might not be politically correct to be strategic about finding a relationship, as it violates the ideal of having a relationship find you, unexpectedly and uncontrollably, the truth is being strategic is very important. Give it serious thought now, in your twenties, so you don’t find yourself settling later. There are some guidelines that can help you approach the subject mindfully and purposefully:

- Don’t date down: Don’t date people you outgrew several years ago.
- Seek a similar personality: People with similar attitudes are generally happier.
- Don’t cohabitate, or do it wisely: Move in together only under certain circumstances.
- Pick a partner with your family in mind: When choosing a mate, remember you’re also...

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Shortform Exercise: Measure Your Personality

Relationships are far more likely to be successful if the two people involved genuinely like each other and are fairly similar in personality. The “Big Five” personality model outlines five major personality traits that a person can have. A person has each of these characteristics in either low, medium, or high levels. They are: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Write down where on the scale of each trait you lie. Are you low, high, or in the middle for each of these characteristics?

What Our Readers Say

This is the best summary of How to Win Friends and Influence People I've ever read. I learned all the main points in just 20 minutes.

The Defining Decade Summary Understanding Your Brain and Your Body

As should now be clear, your twenties are a unique decade during which you'll have opportunities you won't encounter again. Many of these are available simply because the world is very open to you during this time. But timing is not the only reason your twenties are so full of potential. In your twenties, your brain and body are developing in remarkable ways specifically designed by evolution to prepare you for the rest of your adulthood.

Understanding both the opportunities and limits of your brain and your body during this decade can help you better anticipate and plan for the future. Here are some of the steps involved in this process:

- Learn new skills while you can: Take advantage of its remarkable potential to learn. At the same time, watch out for your brain's wiring shortcomings.
- Take control of your primitive brain and its emotional reactions to setbacks.
- Cultivate real confidence through mastery of skills: Gain experience and face challenges to find confidence.
- Cultivate a positive personality by being active.
- Be aware of your body's childbearing limits: Don't put off raising a family.
- Keep track of the time: Plan your years smartly.

Learn New Skills While You Can

In your twenties, your brain goes through a period of massive neuron production, one of two major growth spurts in your life. The first growth spurt is during your toddlerhood, and prepares you for all you are about to learn in childhood. The second starts in adolescence and continues through your twenties, preparing you for adulthood.

Because of this, your twenty-something brain is incredibly plastic and open to learning, and the experiences you have in your twenties will shape how you approach the rest of your life:

- Your job teaches you how to plan for the decades ahead and how to negotiate the complex social world of adult life.
- Your relationships prepare you for the intricacies of a long-term partnership.
- Your setbacks and disappointments train you how to handle the challenges you'll inevitably face in work, love, and parenthood....

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Shortform Exercise: Cultivate Confidence by Facing Challenges

Real confidence comes from the mastery of skills. You will not feel authentically confident until you've overcome challenges and accumulated successes. You'll become a master of your skills only after devoting about 10,000 hours to practicing them.

Think of a skill you've either already started or would like to start. It can be anything you're interested in: artistic talent or a business skill, a medical pursuit or a legal endeavor. What challenges might it present to you that will leave you feeling accomplished once you've resolved them?
Shortform Exercise: Create a Timeline

The attitude that life-begins-at-thirty might lead you to postpone getting started on major milestones, and might then lead to a very stressful thirties decade in which you need to do everything at once.

Brainstorm the important milestones you envision for your future. Include goals from both your professional and personal life. What are the major events you want to happen in the next decade? Grad school? Job? Marriage? Kids?

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The Defining Decade Summary Epilogue: Looking Forward From Here

As you enter your adult life, you become entirely responsible for your own choices. You no longer have another adult figuring out things for you—it’s up to you now to figure out your life. There’s no magic formula and there’s no right or wrong answers on what kind of a life you should live. But there are right and wrong ways to go about establishing that life. Happiness as an older adult starts with the goals you set as a younger adult. It continues to develop as you consciously and intentionally move towards those goals.

Make...

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