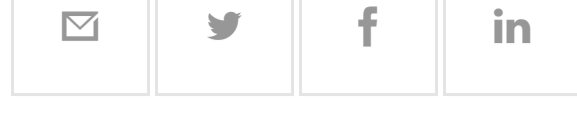
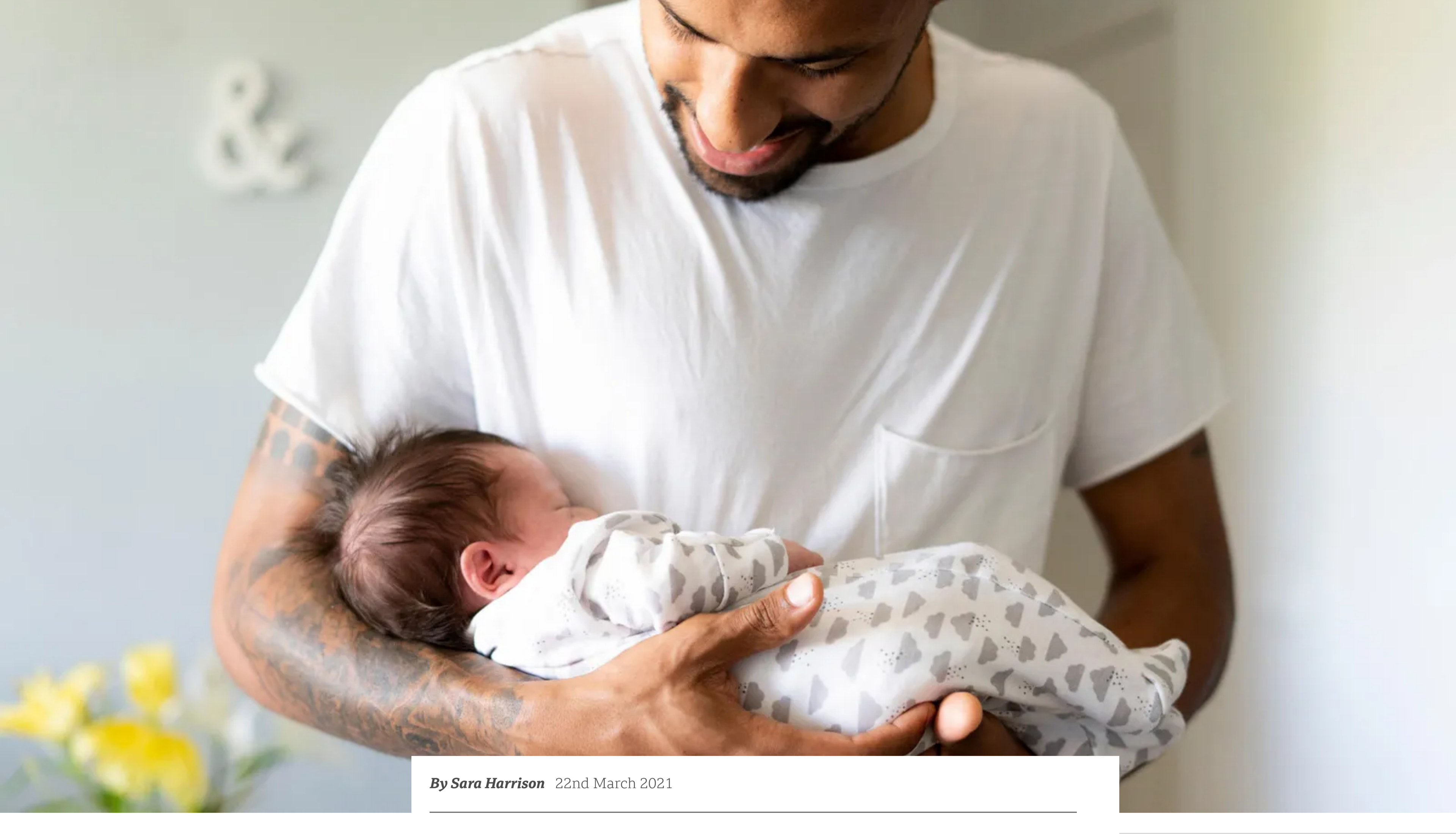


HOW WE LIVE

# The tyranny of life milestones



(Image credit: Alamy)



By Sara Harrison 22nd March 2021

There's lots of pressure to live up to certain life achievements on a strict timeline. But those milestones are often arbitrary – and way more harmful than we realise.

**N**akul Singh is on track. At 30, he's finishing up his residency in ophthalmology at Massachusetts Eye and Ear specialty hospital in Boston, looking forward to starting his fellowship year and thinking about marrying his girlfriend in the next couple of years.

This is just how he had envisioned things would go. "My personal goal was to be married or engaged by the time I was finishing my residency," he says. These goals didn't match up to any intrinsic logic or biological necessity. "I don't know why. It just seemed like the right sort of timeframe," he says. When he looked around at what everyone else was doing, it seemed like they were getting married in their late 20s or early 30s, so he matched up his expectations and plans to follow suit. Plus, his grandparents kept teasing him to get married before they died.

But Singh wasn't always so sure that life would go according to plan. While his friends started to get serious with their significant others right after college, he was single, wondering when he was going to find his person. He stressed over getting into the right medical school, then winning a good residency. Life felt uncertain and, as he waited and waited to meet the right partner, he worried that he was falling behind.

Every society has a few important life milestones, and those achievements are often tied to a specific timeline. For instance, Western societies prioritise moments like graduating from college at 22, getting married by 30, having kids and buying a house before 35. We mark success by ticking off the boxes, and worry that missing a deadline means we're failing in our lives or careers. But where do those metrics come from?

As it turns out, these all-important deadlines are often arbitrary, and the pressure to achieve them sometimes comes from amorphous, unidentifiable places. They also aren't as set in stone as they may seem. From generation to generation, changes in technology and the economy, advances in science and even the political climate can turn what once seemed like a social necessity into an antiquated expectation. Understanding where these expectations come from, and how they differ from the reality we live in now, is important for making personal milestones that are meaningful, instead of clinging to outdated expectations.

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The conditions in which younger generations achieve have changed dramatically – but the pressure to hit major life milestones like getting married hasn't moved (Credit: Alamy)

### The mystery of social norms

From the moment humans pop out of the womb, we are ready to learn. We pick up the language around us and learn the rules of our society, what behaviour is allowed, what's considered good or bad. "We're absolutely built that way: to learn norms and to comply with them," says Jeffrey Arnett, a senior research scholar at Clark University in Massachusetts who studies emerging adulthood. "For the most part we do what's expected of us."

How these norms get set is a combination of social, economic and technological factors. "These things develop and we're all aware of them and we all follow them, but nobody determines them," says Arnett. "It's this aggregation of millions of people thinking about things and making decisions and talking to each other. Nobody's really in control of it."

Among these influences, parents and families play a huge role, especially around expectations for timing around marriage and kids. For instance, most baby boomers in Western societies generally married in their 20s, bought a house and had kids soon after. Subsequently, they transferred those expectations and that timeline to their millennial children.

*These things develop and we're all aware of them and we all follow them, but nobody determines them – Jeffrey Arnett*

But millennials in the US and the UK aren't hitting those milestones; instead, they're getting on married an average of **seven years later** than their parents, and haven't married at all. And the age women first give birth has consistently **risen over the past 40 years**, so most millennial women are having children later than their baby boomer parents – waiting until age 29 or older. Similarly, the **homeownership rate for millennials is 8% lower** than it was for the preceding two generations.

That's because parents aren't the only factors that influence these milestones, and millennials were born into a very different world than the one their parents knew, and navigate it in a very different way.

Millennials are, on average, **better educated** than previous generations – nearly 40% in the US have a bachelor's degree compared to only a quarter of baby boomers. That means they're entering the workforce later, so they start saving for homes later, too. "We certainly realise more and more the importance of education and training," says Arnett. "That means you're not likely to be self-sufficient at 19 or 20." **Debt from financing college, along with rising home costs**, also means that fewer millennials can afford to buy homes.

Most millennial women are having children later than their baby boomer parents – waiting until age 29 or older (Credit: Alamy)

And although expectations that women get married and have kids haven't changed, ideas about gender norms have shifted. "There was a lot of pressure on women to find a man and get married," says Arnett. "If you didn't, what else were you going to do?" But now it's much more common for women to pursue education and careers. Since the mid-1990s, **more women have attended university than men**. So, while in 1966, **only 40% of women** aged 22 to 37 were employed, in 2020, 72% of millennial women were participating in the workforce.

That interest in education and career has changed when women have kids. A New York times analysis showed that **women with college degrees have children an average of seven years** later than women who don't go to college, and that education level was a greater factor in delaying having kids than other factors like home prices.

Advances in science and technology also have had a huge impact on these expectations. Take the example of birth control, which allowed women to start being sexually active years before they planned to marry or have children. "That gives people so much more decision-making power over whether to enter marriage or parenthood," says Arnett. "That is truly revolutionary." Right now, it's considered fairly normal to start exploring sexuality perhaps a decade before marriage, something he notes was unprecedented before the latter half of the 20th Century.

But while economic and educational realities have changed drastically, our social expectations haven't kept pace. One survey by the US Census Bureau showed that **the majority of Americans believe people should be economically independent by age 21**. But the same survey also found that the majority of the country didn't think most students would be done with college until age 22. This contradiction sets people up to fail milestones, even as they work desperately to achieve them.

### 'The tyranny of the should'

Newer generations are feeling the stress. They still feel pressure to live up to their parents' and grandparents' norms, even if those expectations really aren't relevant anymore. One survey showed that, on average, adults **older than 25 still plan to get married, have kids and buy a home all before age 30**, even though the number of people actually able to do so has decreased with every generation.

That gap between what recent generations think they ought to be achieving and what is possible in today's financial and educational climate is having a massive impact on their mental health. "In general, greater discrepancies between what people want and what they actually do reliably predict poorer health and wellbeing," wrote the survey's authors. The researchers also suggest that the increasing inability to reach major life milestones in the timeframe we set for ourselves may be one explanation for the rise in 'deaths of despair', drug overdoses and suicides caused by vanishing jobs and bleak economic outlook.

*People tend to make big, globalised exaggerations like, "everyone is getting married" or "everyone has more money than I do" – but that's not true*

Charlotte Housden, an occupational psychologist based in Kent, UK, calls this social pressure the "tyranny of the should". She counsels people who are feeling stressed that they are falling behind to remember that they aren't alone. Lots of people struggle with the misconception that they aren't measuring up to society's standards. She says people tend to make big, globalised exaggerations like, "everyone is getting married" or "everyone has more money than I do". But that's not true. "It's a thinking error," she says. "Some people have more money. Some people are getting married."

And she warns that achieving these goals – either by getting a high paying job or buying a nice home – won't necessarily make you happy. "It's about finding your fit," she says. Housden recommends taking a moment to separate what it is that you really want and what it is that you feel your parents or family expect. "Understand where your drivers are coming from," she says. "Is it you that wants to go to college or is it your parents? Is it something you really want?"

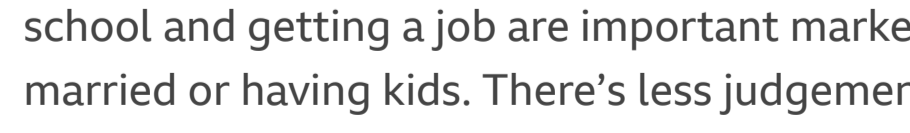
Housden emphasises focusing on achievements that make you happy, rather than achievements that conform to parental or social expectations. But, she acknowledges, that's easier said than done.

Buying a house is a major milestone many strive to reach, but economic factors have made it significantly more difficult for younger generations to reach the goal (Credit: Alamy)

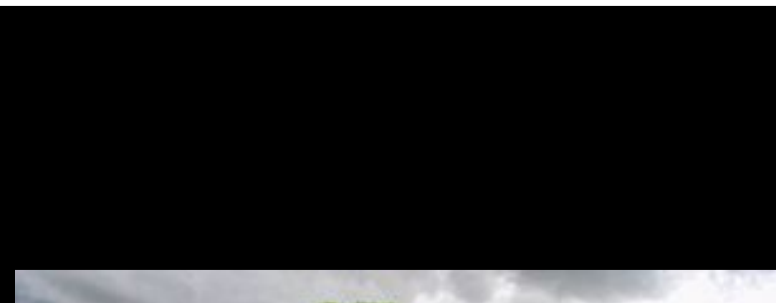
Singh spent much of his mid-20s thinking he had fallen hopelessly behind his friends. But as he aged, he started to gain more confidence in his own path. "I hadn't met anybody that I wanted to start my life with and that was OK," he says. "I was putting in the work and becoming the person I wanted to become." He was lucky to enjoy what he calls "Indian boy privilege", which gave him a break from the family pressure to get married. Because many of his friends also pursued graduate and professional degrees, he didn't feel self-conscious about being in school for so long and delaying certain milestones like buying a home or having kids.

But he acknowledges that he wouldn't feel so confident and laid back now if he hadn't found his girlfriend and started getting life to conform to the milestones he'd set. "I think it would be a lot harder for me to feel satisfied," he says.

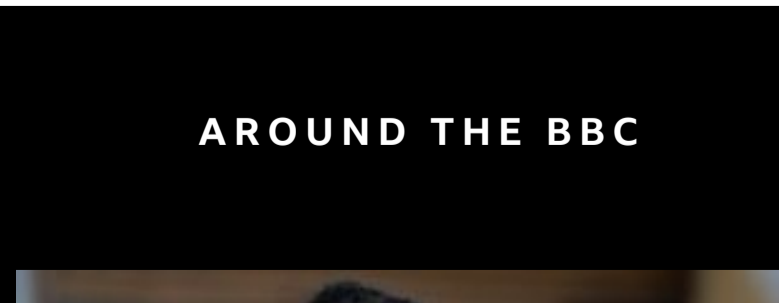
Singh's path took longer than he expected, but there is evidence that these ideas about when we should settle down and have kids are starting to change. The US Census survey also showed that the vast majority of Americans believe that finishing school and getting a job are important markers of adulthood, more so than getting married or having kids. There's less judgement about living with parents for a period of time after college, and more emphasis on education and financial security. So, while these expectations seemed fixed and finite, the truth is that they're changing all the time – even if you may not think so.



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