



INSIGHT

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Advice to your younger self

If I could sit down with my 25-year-old self over a cup of coffee, I think she would arrive early.

She would probably have read more than she needed to, worried about what to wear, and already started comparing herself to people who were not even in the room yet. She would be ambitious, curious, capable, and far more anxious than she knew how to name. She would be trying to work out the rules of success: how to be impressive, how to be useful, how to be liked, how to be taken seriously, and how to belong.

I would want to tell her, gently but firmly, that some of the rules are not real.

I would tell her that excellence matters, but perfection is a trap. She will build a career in a demanding profession where precision, stamina and judgement count. She should learn the technical work properly. She should ask questions. She should prepare. She should respect the craft. But she should not confuse being excellent with being invulnerable. The most impressive people are not always the most whole. The calmest person in the room may be carrying plenty.

I would tell her about the confidence gap, before she spends years living inside it without a name. I would explain that there may be a distance between how others experience her and how she imagines they experience her. She may receive encouragement, trust and opportunity, yet still believe she is seconds away from being found out. She may assume that if she just becomes better, the feeling will disappear. It will not work like that. Confidence will not come from becoming everything everyone else is. It will grow when she learns to become more fully herself.

I would tell her to stop treating self-compassion as softness. One day, life will ask more of her than any transaction ever has. There will be moments when family, health, work and identity collide. She will discover that control has limits. She will discover that pushing through is not always resilience. Sometimes resilience is asking for help. Sometimes it's taking time off. Sometimes it's putting a hand on her heart, breathing deeply and saying, "I am not exceptional right now, and that is good enough."

I would tell her to learn the language of her own mental health early. Anxiety may be present long before she recognises it. It may disguise itself as high standards, over-preparation, comparison, or the need to hold everything together. She should learn her triggers. She should find the support systems that help her regulate. She should not wait for her body to force an admission her mind is too proud to make.

I would tell her that coming out is not just something she did at 16. It will happen again and again, sometimes in personal moments, sometimes in professional ones, sometimes in response to questions that assume a life she does not have. She will not always correct people, and that's okay. She does not owe everyone access to every part of herself. But she should know this: every time she chooses not to edit herself for the comfort of others, she is practising freedom.

I would tell her that there will be rooms where she feels different before anyone has said a word. There will be rooms where she is the only woman, the only gay woman, the only person carrying her particular combination of experiences. She may be spoken over. She may hear her point ignored, then accepted when repeated by someone else. She may be underestimated. She may be asked to perform roles that have nothing to do with her expertise. She should pick her battles, not because the battles don't matter, but because her energy does.

I would tell her that courage doesn't always happen in the moment. Sometimes it happens afterwards, in the direct conversation, the follow-up, the boundary, the explanation of why something was not okay. She will be surprised by how often people listen when impact is named clearly. She will also learn that if someone refuses to own it, she can find someone else who will help shift the room.

I would tell her to look for her superpower, but not in the shallow language of personal branding. Her superpower will not be a slogan. It will be the thing that helps her take power back from discomfort. For me, it became getting comfortable with the uncomfortable. That did not mean discomfort disappeared. It meant I stopped letting it decide who I was allowed to be.

I would tell her that leadership is not a destination where doubt ends. It is a practice of being intentional about who you are, how you show up, and what kind of room you create for others. People will watch her. Juniors will watch her. Children will watch her. The small things will count: how she speaks about difference, how she responds to vulnerability, how she challenges bias, how she makes space.

Finally, I would tell her this: you do not have to become less yourself to become more successful. The parts of you that feel inconvenient may become the parts that make you a better adviser, leader, partner, mother and human being. Bring them with you. They belong at the table too. 🍷

