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# Top 5 Things to Say (and NOT to Say) to a New College Graduate



Christine B. Whelan(<http://acculturated.com/author/cwhelan/>)

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According to new national survey data, the #1 advice that older adults would share with their twenty-year-old self is this: make sure you know your purpose before making big decisions. This commencement season, here's a primer on how to talk purpose with your graduate:

## Top 5 Things to Say to the New Graduate

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Ask open-ended questions, and be ready to answer them yourself, too. Think of this as an opportunity to explore ideas, encourage introspection, and validate your grad's interests.

1. ***"If you could design your ideal day, what would it look like?"***

As you discuss this, you could ask questions like: Would you spend most of the time with a lot of people, or by yourself? Would you be dressed up, or in casual clothes? Would you be doing more physical, emotional, or intellectual work? What skill would you be using most often? What would you *not* want to have as part of your day?

2. ***"If you could choose any career path, regardless of money, what would it be?"***

In an ideal world, your graduate loves his or her job choice so much that the pay is irrelevant, but more likely, financial constraints are coming into play. Is there a way to incorporate other passions inside and outside this current job? Is there a plan to switch to a different job in the future, to continue on for an advanced degree, or to join a virtual or in-person group that shares similar interests?

3. ***"I just did this cool exercise where I chose my values and passions and put together a purpose statement. Do you want to see mine?"***

Those in midlife might consider doing their [LifeMap from Life Reimagined](https://lifereimagined.aarp.org/lifemap-go) (<https://lifereimagined.aarp.org/lifemap-go>), a cart-sorting exercise that creates a Mad-Libs style purpose statement in just a few minutes. I've also created a free [parent-child program](https://lifereimagined.aarp.org/challenge/42121-talk-purpose-with-your-young-adult) (<https://lifereimagined.aarp.org/challenge/42121-talk-purpose-with-your-young-adult>) for Life Reimagined to help parents talk to their adult children about what matters most.

4. ***"When I was young, I was so afraid of \_\_\_\_\_. Have you ever felt that way?"***

After asking questions and testing exercises with more than 600 undergraduates, I learned that fears of failure, fears of self-doubt and fears of the criticism from parents and friends top the list of unhelpful comments young adults receive on their path to purpose. Talking about your fears—and how you overcame or incorporated those fears—will quell some of the anxiety your young adult faces during this transition period.

5. ***"I think you are wonderful at A, B and C. What do you think your greatest talents are?"***

My new book, *The Big Picture: A Guide to Finding Your Purpose in Life* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Big-Picture-Finding-Purpose/dp/1599474247>), begins by helping readers identify their talents, strengths and personal skills. You can help boost your graduates' confidence by highlighting specific strengths you see in them and asking them to highlight some talents they are excited to bring to the world as well.

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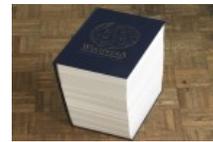
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While these are heavy topics, keep your tone light. (The car is an excellent place for these sorts of conversations.) And lest you be tempted to go down the wrong path in the conversation, here's a list of purpose conversation no-nos.

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1. ***“By the time I was your age, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life.”***

This may be true. But it's more likely that you've revised the story of your life to make all the pieces fit. Emerging adulthood is a time of exploration. It's a time to say yes to opportunities. And if your graduate is paying the bills and generally engaging in prosocial activities, encourage them to find their own way.

2. ***“This stuff is important: Why aren't you prioritizing these questions?”***

Purpose is important. Indeed, “What's my purpose here?” is the number one question that adults of all ages would ask God or a supreme being, according to several national surveys. But being pressured into purpose is counterintuitive.

3. ***“You should read this book because you have to figure your life out.”***

Remember: a soft sell will work better than the parental guilt routine. As they head into the job market, 69% of young adults say that they would be willing to take a cut in pay to work at a job that allowed them to focus on more meaningful work. Encourage them to pursue that path.

4. ***“It seems like all your friends have a life plan. What's yours?”***

Successful behavioral change hinges on the synthesis of personal discovery and the ability to translate it into action. Consider the analogy of filming the documentary of your life: Your grad is the star, but the plot—the vision and purpose of your actions—is much bigger than just one person. What are the roles he plans—and what commitments is he making to make those happen? Who's her supporting cast, and how can they help her along, given the inevitable plot twists that life will bring? And what's the theme song and the tagline for this movie?

5. ***“The real world is hard. It's time to grow up and act like an adult.”***

Instead of threats, try inspiration: Research shows that embracing a purpose mindset—identifying how your specific talents and values intersect with the needs of others—in your twenties is correlated with increased well-being in your thirties, so the time is now to think about the “big picture” of your life. (You can even try sending them to a website where one young adult each month [wins \\$500 to help them pursue their purpose](http://thebigpicture.life/contest/) (<http://thebigpicture.life/contest/>)).

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Graduates are seeking a vocabulary for their feelings of hope, frustration and excitement, a language for their yearnings for meaningful work, and concrete steps to help make sense of these “big questions” that challenge us all.

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Sorry, but this 'to say' versus 'not to say' article assumes that we should only tell recent college graduates what they want to hear. To use contemporary language, we should treat them as precious little snowflakes, not using trigger words, or invading their safe spaces.

There are undoubtedly some recent grads who're so self-obsessed and neurotic, it's pointless to do anything but disengage from all conversation with them as soon as possible. Doing anything else is courting unnecessary trouble. What we can't fix, we should not try to fix.

But all new graduates aren't like that. Whether they initially get angry or not, they'll appreciate someone older reminding them that they do need to grow up and develop a plan for their lives.

Just before I graduated from college I confronted a friend about the meanness of what he was doing, playing one girl friend against another, while chasing after yet another. Years later, he remembered and thanked me for that.

In the end, how someone reacts now to what you say matters less than how they regard those remarks years later. Sometimes we all need to hear words that are hard to accept.

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**Mack** · 7 days ago

Just say "Congratulations," and then mind your own life.

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