



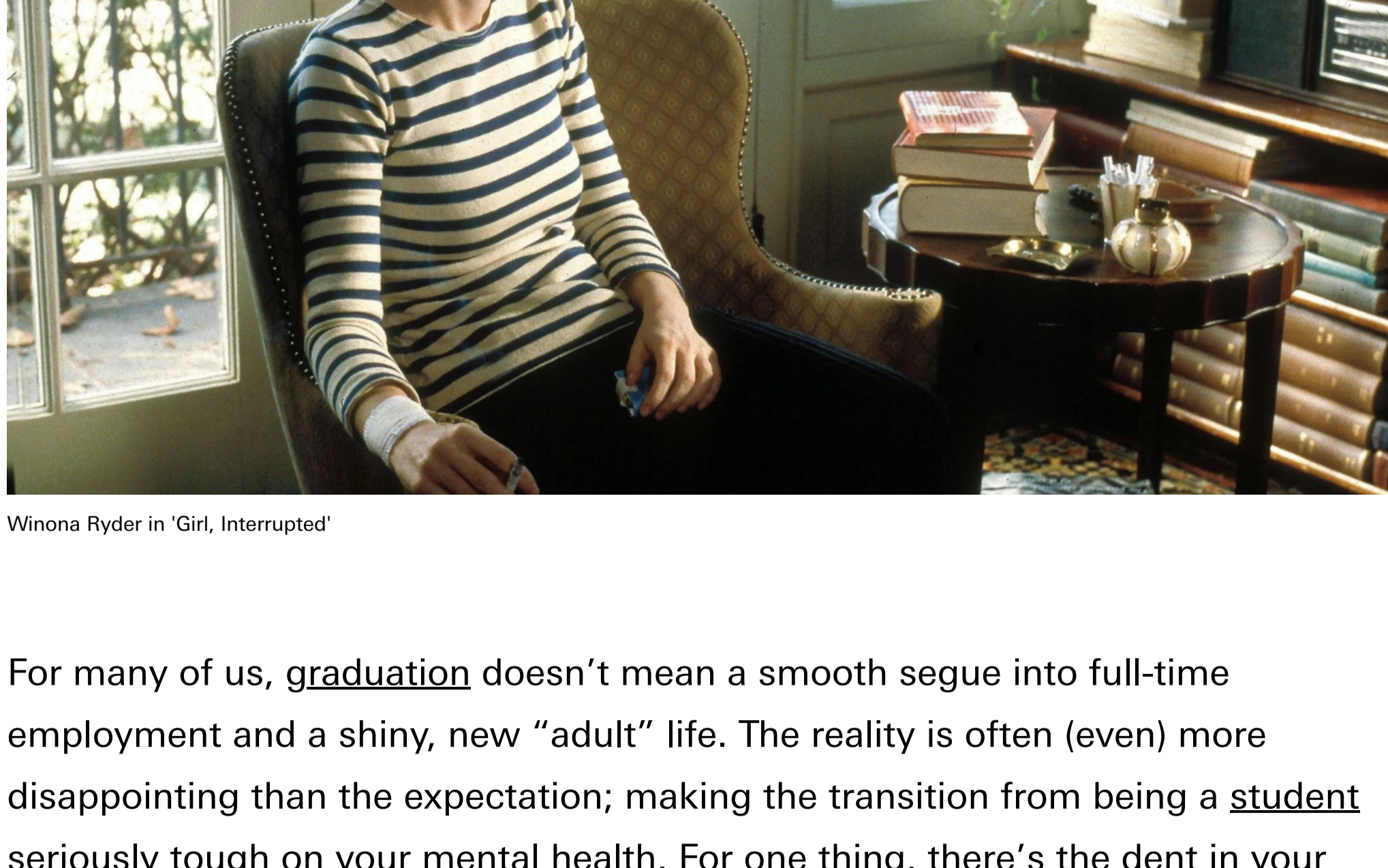
CULTURE

Here's what you need to know about post-university depression

The pandemic, and its effect on the job market, have seriously compromised recent graduates' mental health.

BY MEGAN WALLACE | 11.11.20

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For many of us, graduation doesn't mean a smooth segue into full-time employment and a shiny, new "adult" life. The reality is often (even) more disappointing than the expectation; making the transition from being a student seriously tough on your mental health. For one thing, there's the dent in your self-esteem left by job rejections. Then, there's the loneliness that hits when your friends move to different corners of the country, literally pulling apart the support network who you'd normally rely on to help get you through big life changes. Oh, and don't get us started on your engineer friend who won't stop bragging about his £30k starting salary...

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If you've recently graduated and are struggling, then you're not alone: a new survey by the City Mental Health Alliance suggests that 49% of graduates feel down after leaving their studies. But for some, these negative feelings can morph into depressive symptoms like exhaustion, low self-esteem and chronic sadness. "Post-graduate depression" is the term which has sprung up to describe this phenomenon and, while it's not yet a medically recognised term, that doesn't mean it's not a very valid issue.



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As Nick Harrop, Head of External Affairs at mental health charity YoungMinds explains, graduating can have a seriously negative effect on your emotional wellbeing. "While university can be tough for some students, post-university life can also take a lot of adjustment. Once students move on, they may be left to navigate the world without their university support system, without a set routine and without the same friends around them," Nick explains. "The pressure to find a job, coupled with issues around money and other changes in their lives, such as moving back home, may lead to some people feeling low and struggling with their mental health."

In short, post-university depression is real and, as you might expect, it sucks. But how are 2020 grads fairing with it, particularly when we consider the unique set of hurdles (read: deadly virus, lockdowns and mega recession) they've been faced with? Amy*, an Art History and English Literature graduate from the University of Edinburgh, explains that the uncertainty created by the pandemic and the damage it inflicted on her post-graduation plans led her pre-existing anxiety to take on depressive elements. "After graduating, I felt that all my hard work had been for nothing, like a moment in my life was just driving past me in a very fast car while I sat at the side of the road and tried to flag it down," Amy says. "My anxiety has always been bad, but I experienced depression symptoms alongside it for the first time [in my life] after graduation. I had, and have, bouts of very low energy, I feel hopeless, and my self-esteem has been very low."

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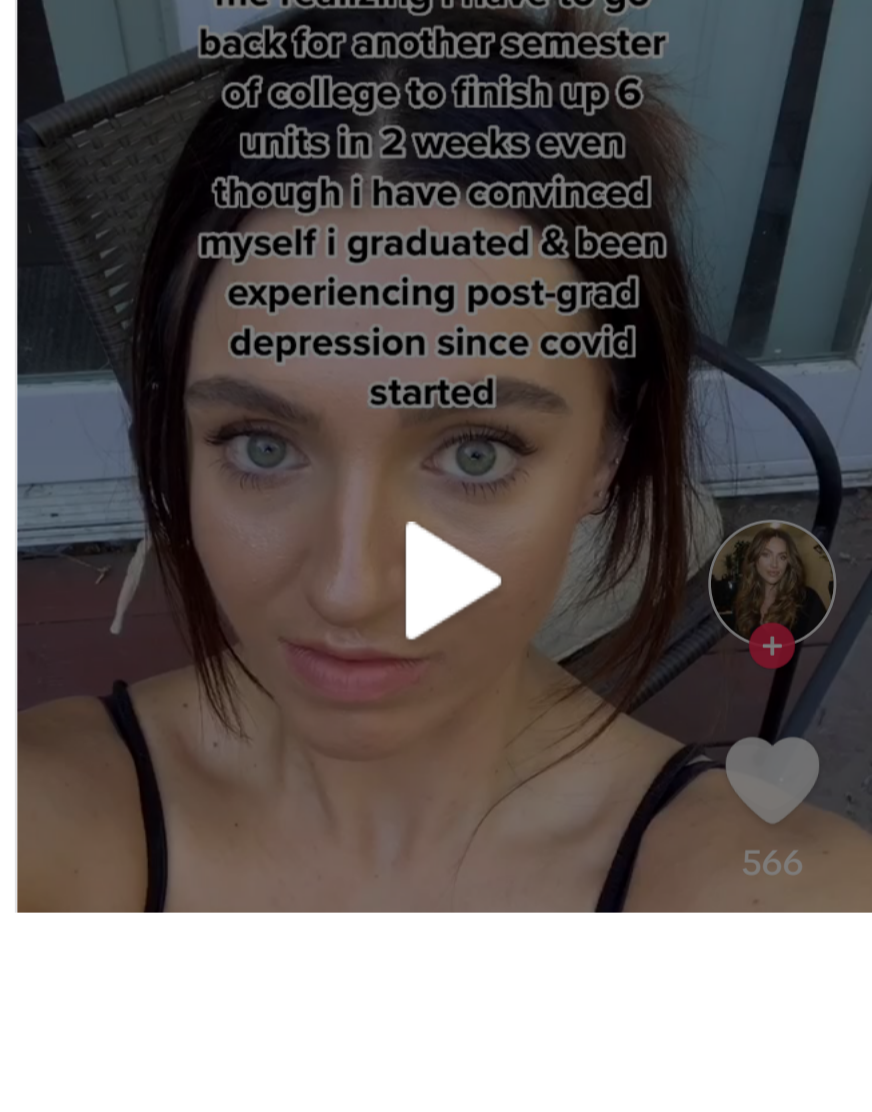
Similarly, Emma, who graduated from CSM earlier this year with a degree in Performance; Design and Practice, describes her mental health as "being in the gutter". She explains that the dispiriting job prospects for young people have severely impacted her self worth. "There were a lot of factors that made my mental health worse [following graduation] but the job market was a big one," Emma says. "I graduated with a first-class degree, from one of the UK's top art schools and I'm still struggling to find work. I felt and [still] feel like such a failure. How can you come from the launch pad of some of Britain's greatest designers and artists and be unemployed?"

With the unemployment rate rising by 6.5% among 16 - 24-year-olds and sectors like theatre, hospitality and nightlife being crushed by government lockdowns, Emma's difficulty in finding a job is, sadly, not unique. But although it's not easy to think positively right now, we need to remember that this won't last forever – especially with a vaccine hopefully on the horizon. But if you're already experiencing a downturn in your mental health, the hope of a better tomorrow will probably be even more difficult to grasp. Depression is so debilitating because it makes it difficult to look past what you're feeling in the moment: you're left thinking that you'll never get a job, or that you'll be feeling this low forever. The truth, however, is that as cliché as it sounds, it does get better.

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This, at least, is the experience of Ashley* who graduated from Durham University with a Geography degree in 2017. In the years following her undergraduate experience, she reports feeling so depressed that she "couldn't focus on work [or] bear to go out and do things" and that searching for jobs for the first time made her feel "useless and worthless". Since experiencing post-graduate depression she has undergone talking therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and non-medical strategies like yoga and, while she admits the pandemic has been a mixed bag emotionally, her mental health is slowly getting to a better place. "I think I'm on the up now," she says. "It's not always a straight road but on the whole, I'm going the right way."



So what can you do if you or someone you know has post-university depression? First, you need to know the signs. As Nick outlines, it's a lot more than just feeling a bit bummed out. "We all feel a bit down or low at times, but with depression, these feelings can be more severe or last a long time, affecting your mood negatively over a longer period," he says. "Depression can have a wide range of symptoms, including feeling constantly sad, hopeless or exhausted, or losing motivation to do the things that you would usually enjoy."

From there, it's important to know that no one should be suffering in silence. "If you think you may be depressed, an important first step is to acknowledge your feelings and look for support," Nick tells i-D. "You're not alone, and you deserve help to feel better. Reach out and talk to someone you trust about what you're experiencing, such as a family member, friend or partner, or reach out to your GP, a helpline or a counsellor for further support."

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Ultimately, graduates like Emma and Amy need to remember that whatever difficulties they are faced with, and whatever they're feeling as a result, they're not to blame. As Amy puts it; "depression and anxiety aren't rational, and they aren't your fault".



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You'll find a list of organisations that offer mental health support here. If you feel like you're in a mental health crisis, you can use Young Mind's free Crisis Messenger service by texting YM to 85258, where you'll be connected to a trained volunteer within minutes.

* Names have been changed

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