Focus group with three women exploring career choices and challenges.

Key:

Ab: Abby, 33; speech-language pathologist, private practice

De: Delyth, 32; Occupational therapist, NHS

Uv: Uvi, 29; business management

	Great, ok. So what I'd like you to think about now is – while still focusing on that one major life event – can you describe any challenges or conflicts that you experienced that were related to this life event or decision, and explain how you resolved these? Abby would you like to start? Ab: Sure. Ok so I suppose there were obviously a load of challenges that I faced when I lost my brother. Not just losing him but, like, in the time leading up to that too, I guess. It's horrible watching someone you love drift away but it really made me evaluate what the hell I was doing and I started to think, like, life is too god damn short for me to be stuck working somewhere that I don't want to be. I wanted to make a career out of something that I could be proud of – feel like I could or was able to give something back, you know? It was tough with my family for a while. Grief is a strange thing, isn't it, and I quickly learned that my way of dealing with grief was very different to my parents. **Are you happy to elaborate on that a bit?** Ab: What I mean is, like I've said, I saw *Liam* dying as the kick up the arse I needed to grab life by the balls and do what I wanted to do. He would never get that chance – although he did life his life to the fullest in the best way that he could –	Change in job role – unhappy and spurred on by loss of brother? Grief – experience different to others – why?

	but it was cut short. Mine hasn't been cut short and, as far as I'm aware, I'm not likely to be going anywhere anytime soon. So I dealt with my grief by throwing myself back into uni and working on assessments and projects. And my parents couldn't understand that. I think they saw me as being a bit cold – like I didn't care. But I did care. I really did care. I just interpreted *Liam*'s death as something different to them. They lost their son; I gained a perspective on life that I hadn't previously had. Uv: That's really lovely, Abby. You're right that grief can affect people in such different ways and it is hard. Ab: Yeah it is. So the challenge was his death, of course, and the conflict was between my parents and I. But it's all good now and they understand why I was like that, I think. I feel like I'm at a place in my life where I'm good at what I do and I LIKE what I do. I made my own decision then to pursue this career in memory of *Liam* and I make my own decisions now in terms of what I do in my job. And that's benefitted me massively. **Thank you for sharing that, Abby. Uvi how about you?** Uv: Um what was the specific question again? **I'd just like to explore what challenges or conflicts you experienced during the significant life event you described – so what did you go through that relates to your career when you met your current partner?** Uv: Ah yeah! Right well I'm not entirely sure I can answer the question correctly but I'll have a go.	Spurred on as above Reflection? Positivity stemming from loss

	There aren't any right or wrong answers to any of these questions, so don't worry about that. Uv: ok cool. Um well, yeah, I met *James* in the bar that I was working at at the time and, like, he was so fit [laughs]. Really suave, you know? He'd come in from work once a week in his suit and I'd just be like oh my god. Totally out of my league, of course. Anyway I was just a part-time barmaid so I never thought anything of my ogling him – window shopping, right? [laughs]. One day one of the girls I was on shift with gave me a business card with his details on it and I was like I don't want that. And she was like well he just gave it to me and asked me to give it to you, so I think you do want it. Ab: that's such a business man thing to do [laughs] Uv: Wasn't it! And at first I was like who does he think he is handing out his *business* card as if that'll get my attention. It did like [laughs] but still! De: Did you ring him? Uv: Did I hell! I put the card in my purse and forgot about it until he came in the next week. Then of course I was beetroot when he walked up to the bar and asked why I hadn't text. I'm rambling on here about my romantic love story [laughs] but I swear it is relevant **Uvi please say whatever you want to.**	'just' a barmaid?

	Uv: I'll cut a long story short – we went out, I fell head over frigging heels for this bloke and then one day I just had this realisation of, like, he's too good for me. I'm JUST a barmaid, a single mother – and he's this cool as a cucumber, fit as a roman God guy who I have no business being seen with. Ab: You're joking right?! Uv: I wish I was [laughs]. The conflict for me was my own personal worth, I guess, and I pushed and pushed the poor guy away. A lot. And he just kept coming back and eventually he made me feel like I was good enough. Or at least that I *could* be good enough because I did have ambition and I wanted to be something and make something of myself – I just wasn't there yet! After he met my daughter I knew that I was screwed [laughs] – she loves him as much if not more than I do and he's been my rock in terms of giving me the confidence to 1. Go back to uni and further my education. At my age then – 22 – I felt like it was a big step to decide that I didn't want to give up and I wanted to keep going and get into a tidy profession. I didn't want to be a statistic. I didn't want to be one of those… teenage mums you hear about with no goals… I needed to graduate and make a life for my and do what I had always planned on doing. And 2. To allow someone else to make some sacrifices sometimes, too! I was able to go back to work almost full-time because of him coming into my life and I never ever thought I'd get to that. **Thank you Uvi. Delyth? What about you with baby *Jonah*?** De: Um well I sort of mentioned that I didn't have to sacrifice a lot but I suppose there were still so many challenges and conflicts when it came to work. I did cut my hours and at the time it was, like, I'm doing this to be able to be a good mother, and spend time with *Jonah*. But as time went on it became a big issue and an argument that always seemed to	Career related to self-worth – not good enough? Ambition and admiration Sacrifice – theme? Sacrifice – child Challenges causing conflict? Real or perceived?

	rear its head. I was, effectively, just a part time worker. And I know there's nothing wrong with working part-time but there is kind of a stigma isn't there? Like what else could you possibly be doing that you can't work full-time? Anyway we argued A LOT about how I was the one who had given up hours at work, and therefore given up pay etc but I was still the one who would take *Jonah* out each week, I'd be the one spending money on the food shop because I was home and all that. I started to take my personal problems on other people at work and that was a low point for me I think. Maybe the lowest point. And I realised then that I needed to get a grip. Working part-time is FINE. It was my inner conflict that made part-time working a problem, nothing else. **One of the questions I wanted to ask later on was about working patterns and working hours, but as you've touched upon your experience or feelings with part-time working, Delyth, would you all mind if we continue with that just for now?** De: no of course not! Ab: That's fine by me Uv: Yeah absolutely fine. **Great. Well the question I wanted to ask was regarding working hours and influence on womens' careers – specifically what do you think the relationship is between the hours women work and their careers? These can be positive or negative.**	'just' again – perception that PT = less worthy? Conflicting here Strife re: professional sacrifices made Recognition of perceived conflict?

	Ab: I think both Delyth and Uvi have hit the nail on the head, really, in regards to part-time working. There's nothing wrong with it at all. But everyone has this thing about it. It's as if having other life commitments makes you less of a worker … when really it's a bloody hard thing to balance work AND a life! I'm going to hold my hands up and admit that I am proud of working full-time. Not because I want to spend all my time in work or because I love what I do that much – but because, again, it's sort of a status thing. But… I don't have a child, or a partner or a husband or a parent that needs caring for or a dog or a cat that relies on me. I have nothing BUT work. I made that decision a long time ago and I've had to accept that I do live to work. De: don't you ever get bored? Or lonely? Ab: [laughs]. Yeah sometimes, I guess. I think you said earlier that like you used to not think anything of staying in work late or going in early. You had to change that mind set because you had a baby. I've not had to do that – I stay in late or go in early because I still can and, basically, I have nothing else to do. But then on the flipside of that I feel sometimes like I do get better training opportunities, or I'm the first one that gets asked if I need any development. So I guess that's a positive? I mean in answer to your question of the relationship between working hours and careers… I am able to take full advantage of courses and conferences and that because I am there all the time…. Uv: I think you are right there, Abby – I think there maybe is a link between how much you work and what you get offered. I've been on a few training courses, been on a couple of trips abroad with work looking to secure new contracts – but I'm not top of the pecking order when it comes to that kind of stuff. I'd never really thought about it too much but you are right. It's like when you are a 'full-time' worker you're seen to be more committed? Maybe? And therefore you get offered more? I dunno….	Stigma related to working hours… for women Social element? Enjoyment of job? Lack of sacrifice Preferential treatment for working full time? Stating and questioning at the same time – perception that working hours are related to

	De: Yeah I agree with both of you, as well. I technically work part-time – 30 hours a week – which is ridiculous that that is considered part-time anyway! But effectively that is what my contract says. And now that I'm thinking about it I haven't really been given that many options when it comes to going on courses and all that since I came back from maternity…. **So what you're all saying is that you consider full-time working women to be preferred to women who work part-time – is that right?** De: Yeah I think so. I think it's a weird one because women *do* go back to work now after having kids and that, and there aren't many women who can afford to stay off and play housewife. Life is too expensive – kids are too expensive! And then there's this expectation that women should be the primary caregiver as well as rushing back to work to also contribute to the money in the house… Uv: I agree in that I think part-time working women aren't viewed as positively as those who work full-time. I read this article not so long ago about this female doctor who had gone 'part-time' at her surgery and how she felt stigmatised because she was 'JUST' a part-time worker, and her colleagues actually said to her, like, oh I heard you only work part-time now. And it was something like she was doing extra work outside the GP surgery in clinic and with charities or something… so basically she was working full-time, maybe even more than full-time hours, but because her workmates only saw that she was working part-time with them she had a bit of stick.	commitment at work .. for women? Further perception of lack of opportunity due to working hours Expectation of ability to juggle multiple roles 'just' used a lot in relation to PT working…

	Ab: What the bloody hell. The fact that there was an article written about, really, how she felt she needed to explain herself for 'only' working part-time tells you everything about how part-time workers are viewed really, doesn't it? De: That's just ridiculous. She's doing additional work but still feels like she's being judged for only doing part-time at surgery. Absolutely ridiculous. Uv: Tell me about it. But yeah it does highlight this issue – would that have been a story if it was a man? Do all male GP's work full-time and only full-time? Like it's beyond. **So in terms of your own individual working hours, what is the relationship between the hours you currently work and your personal circumstances? So, for example Delyth you have *Jonah*, did that impact upon your working pattern?** De: Yeah definitely. I went back to work after like 8 months I think which is maybe a bit less than the average time women usually take off… and I went back with the full intention of picking up my full-time, five day a week working hours. And I did that for a while and it was okay…. But it wasn't ideal. I just felt a bit different, you know? I wanted to be at work – but I also wanted to be with *Jonah*. I'd just spent 8 months with the kid all by myself and then all of a sudden I have zero time with him by myself. It was weird. Not bad weird, not good weird – just weird. And I decided quite quickly that I didn't like it. We didn't have family available to take care of him – either because they were also working or weren't well enough – so we decided he would go into childcare. He was fine in nursery and we could afford the costs between us with me being back in work, but I chose to speak to my manager and say, like, I really am struggling with this and I didn't expect it, but this is how it is and what can I do? So it definitely impacted upon my working hours – I decided to drop a day and now I have every Wednesday off with *Jonah* and I love it.	Questioning differences in gender roles and expectations Was this expected? Money is a factor in working hours and childcare Positive

	Ab: it's really cool that you had the opportunity to make that decision as well, though.	Choice was D's.. the norm?
	De: Yeah it is because I know of other 'mum' friends – ugh mum friends [laughs] – that didn't and don't have that option. They're either stuck working working working or they've had to give up a lot of hours and be on a, like, .5 contract. I can't imagine the impact of that on your financial situation. And, for me anyway, I'd feel a bit like I've made this massive sacrifice, given up work for whatever reason – whether I HAD to make that decision in terms of saving on childcare or because it simply wasn't feasible to work whatever hours I felt like – and I just know that I'd end up resenting my husband for that. Whether he was involved in the process or not I'd be looking at him like 'look at you with your dad bod, no stretch marks, still working your five day week moaning about how hard you have it when you get to have a hot lunch every day…' Like I'd resent him [laughs]. I'm laughing because I know that I've been lucky – but there are women who are not that lucky and I say women because it IS the woman who tends to end up being the one to lose out, you know?	Money Sacrifice and potential conflict Sacrifice made on part of woman only? Sacrifice for good of child but detrimental/bad for the woman?
	Thank you Delyth. What about you Uvi? Same question for you – what's the relationship between the hours you work and your circumstances?	
	Uv: I mean if you'd been asking me this question 8 or 9 years ago then I'd be giving such a different answer – I'd be saying that having a baby obviously decided for me that I could not work full time anymore and I simply had to take what I could get. Quite literally! But talking about the here and now – I more or less have had it easy in that after I left uni I was able to commit to full-time working. We had my mum and *James'* mum around to get Ellie from school and she was like 5 by then so she was in all day anyway – it made no real sense for me to be at home. And now she's in	Sacrifice of work for child

	comp so she's even more independent and I'm just not needed [laughs]. I said that meeting *James* gave me that opportunity to go back to work and I still believe that. Not to be all like 'he was my knight in shining armour' [laughs], but having a stable relationship really allowed me to get back to me again. And ME is a woman who likes to work! Ab: hear hear! **And Abby, what about you?** Ab: Well I don't have any commitments that impact on my working hours…. But I guess that is an answer to that question, isn't it? **Of course – I don't want you to say something has made you choose your pattern of working if it hasn't.** Ab: cool. Yeah I make my own decisions, more or less. I have a sort of 9-5 I guess but I work whatever hours I want – or maybe need to. I don't have to think about anyone else other than me so it's not like I have pressure to stop working, or finish at a certain time. But then, like, I guess my over-commitment to my career has had an impact on me building relationships. I haven't had a boyfriend in such a long time. I haven't been near a man I don't work with in years [laughs]. And I've been in situations where I've blown off social events because I've needed to work to get a report finished, or because I wanted to have an early night to get in a bit earlier the next day. That's really sad isn't it… Uv: It's not sad. I can understand that. It's easy to do what you know and love – and clearly you know and enjoy your work more than anything.	Strong. Passionate. Indication of sacrifice but in opposite way to other two women – sacrificed relationship for career? Chooses to work

	Ab: Yeah I guess so. Yeah, so, no real influence on my working hours [laughs].	