

Emerging Adulthood

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Emerging adulthood is a developmental phase that people go through, typically between the ages of 18 to 28 years. In 2000, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett first described emerging adulthood as a phase that involves distinct developmental tasks and challenges that differ in important ways from the tasks of an adolescent and from the hallmarks of a full-fledged adult.

The overarching theme of this phase relates to self-exploration and identity development. The task of identity development involves answering the questions “**Who am I?**” and “**What do I want out of life?**”

Beginning in their late teenage years, emerging adults experience a significant number of new freedoms. These freedoms can lead to a sense of excitement and empowerment, and they often contribute to a person focusing more intently on himself or herself before committing to longer-term relationships (for example, spouses and children) and career paths.



Emerging adults often feel optimistic about the future, as though unlimited possibilities are available to them both personally and professionally. However, this phase also can be challenging to navigate, because life suddenly seems full of more uncertainty, instability, and personal responsibility.

It is usually **necessary for emerging adults to try out a variety of new opportunities for the first time**, such as jobs, educational opportunities, living situations, friendships, and romantic relationships. These types of experiences can help clarify questions of identity; however, a person’s struggle to find opportunities that feel like “the right fit” can produce anxiety. Inevitably, some opportunities or relationships won’t work out, and this can lead to feelings of disappointment and failure.

Many emerging adults will move away from their parents’ home and then move back in when they need more support or when they are between periods of school or work. Relationships with parents can be difficult to negotiate, particularly when the emerging adult struggles with feeling independent in some ways and needing to rely on parental support in others. In addition, issues of social-emotional functioning, grief, or trauma that were not worked through during earlier stages of childhood or adolescent development could resurface and contribute to the stress of moving forward, becoming more independent, and refining a sense of self and purpose.

For many reasons, emerging adulthood is an emotionally complex time. Feelings of excitement and optimism that come with newfound independence often are counterbalanced with feelings of confusion, loneliness, and fear due to loss and uncertainty about what the future holds. Because this period of transition can include a number of significant changes, a certain amount of anxiety and grief is normal.

However, when a person feels overwhelmed or underprepared to face the stress of a transition, more serious symptoms of anxiety and depression may develop and affect mood, motivation, and decision-making skills. The combination of having less parental supervision and feeling the stress of developmental challenges also can contribute to the likelihood of developing problems with substance use, eating disorders, and risky sexual behavior. These types of issues can affect a person's social, emotional, and physical well-being, and create difficulties for a person to develop or sustain meaningful relationships and to work toward educational and occupational goals.

How can therapy help? The most important thing that counselors can offer an emerging adult is an empathic, nonjudgmental relationship, in which the person feels supported and encouraged to work through questions of identity and self-exploration. Some of this process may include understanding that it is normal to experience emotional struggles during this period of development. It can be confusing and painful when certain hoped-for opportunities and plans do not work out as expected. But setbacks that do occur also can create important opportunities for self-reflection.

Therapists are trained to help emerging adults become more aware of their emotional response to challenges and recognize problematic relational patterns and ways of coping. This awareness creates opportunities for learning more adaptive ways of relating to others and coping with stressors.

Through this process, a person can start to feel more connected, capable of dealing with the challenges of adulthood, and empowered to make decisions and follow through on plans that reflect a renewed sense of self and purpose. In the context of a therapeutic relationship, emerging adults have a better chance at gaining perspective and developing the resilience they need to overcome challenges and enter adulthood with a sense of who they are and how they experience satisfaction and fulfillment in life.