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## Understanding This New Stage Of Life--Emerging Adulthood

By Jennifer Tanner, PhD, Fellow, National Institute of Mental Health Research

The transition to adulthood is a period of the life course when young people are faced with the challenge of becoming part of the adult world. For some, this is a time to spread their wings and fly. For others, the demands that accompany the task of growing-up are overwhelming. Still yet, for others, it is difficult for them to pursue their goals despite aspiration and motivation because they are under-prepared and under-resourced.

New ways of becoming adult, much different than a generation ago, have inspired a wave of both media attention and research science devoted to better understanding how it is that we can support young people as they take their first steps toward adulthood. One perception of these changes is communicated through publications, such as, *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever*. A 2005 cover of *Time* magazine provides a visual of a young man, clad in contemporary business attire, sitting in a sandbox and the cover reads, “*They just won’t grow up.*” The take home message...emerging adults are breaking their parents’ banks continuing to live off of them; they are self-centered and narcissistic because they delay devoting themselves to marriage and parenthood; and, yet, despite their easy lives—they’re unhappy.

An alternative perspective refutes the notion that the lives of emerging adults are problematic and asserts that a lack of recognition that the behaviors of this generation are normal, for them. Furthermore, the negative spin portraying 18-to-29 year-olds as irresponsible is considered a form of ageism, specifically, youth-bashing. This argument contends that the transition to adulthood is categorically different today than it was in prior generations. Not better, not worse. Different. Multiple social forces have shaped the adult world to which young people must adapt in order to find “fit.” In response to the new economy, the need for post-secondary education, and growing gender equality, young people now experience a new stage of development between adolescence and adulthood—*emerging adulthood*—a time in life when young people see the world as full of

possibilities and spend time figuring out who they are before they make commitments and take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

Empirical evidence of this new life stage is accumulating. Studies that track individual's lives from adolescence, through emerging adulthood are invaluable tools for gaining a scientific understanding of life experience through the transition to adulthood. Findings from one study that followed a community of 17 year-olds through age 27 demonstrated incremental gains in independence each year. From the same study, when you look at the emerging adults individually, paths toward independence are unique and most are non-linear. That is, as adolescents are making their way to adulthood, they move forward and backward to get there, and they each do it in their own way. And, progress in one domain—say, one's career, is associated with gains in independence in others, e.g., establishing romantic relationships and becoming homeowners. In sum, the ebb and flow toward adulthood and the long walk that contemporary emerging adults are taking is, for the majority, normal.

The lack of a clear pathway to adulthood, and the fact that normal and healthy growing-up sometimes involves moving back into a parents' home, quitting a job, or returning to school, it may be more difficult to determine when an emerging adult is floundering, failing, and in need of help. Studies that have tracked emerging adults from adolescence into emerging adult show that, on average, depressive symptoms and anger decrease across this age period; and, moreover, self-esteem increases. Studies also show that becoming more independent and self-sufficient is associated with feeling better. Those emerging adults who don't demonstrate increasing well-being during this age period or a decrease in problems are likely in need of help meeting the demands of becoming self-sufficient.

Those who are having difficulties establishing and maintaining self-sufficiency are particularly likely to be in need of mental health care. Scientific evidence is clear-- emerging adults with histories of mental health problems and those who experience mental health problems during these years are more likely to demonstrate problems functioning during this demanding stage. While this finding is not surprising, it may be startling to know that mental health service use, or accessing mental health care drops off dramatically after age 17. The result: despite great need, emerging adults are the least likely of all adult age groups to receive mental health services. *Why?*

Emerging adulthood is about learning to take steps into adulthood on one's own, at least semi-autonomously from parents. Prior to emerging adulthood, schools and parents commonly connect young people to mental health services. During emerging adulthood, connections to these resources change, decreasing the likelihood that a referral will be carried out on behalf of the individual. And for the emerging

adults, they are just learning to take responsibility for their own health. Aging out of pediatric care and parents' insurance also undermine the likelihood that emerging adults will receive mental health care when needed.

Perhaps critical to addressing the gap between emerging adults' mental health needs and the help they receive—the newness of the emerging adult age period calls for new types of programs that address both the developmentally normal challenges of the age period and mental health issues. A strong call goes out to those who love and care for emerging adults to come together and help emerging adults connect with excellent care. In return, all emerging adults, including those most vulnerable can mature during these critical years and reap the benefits of exploring and finding oneself.

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