



by Aaron Jennings, LCSW

# Failure to Launch

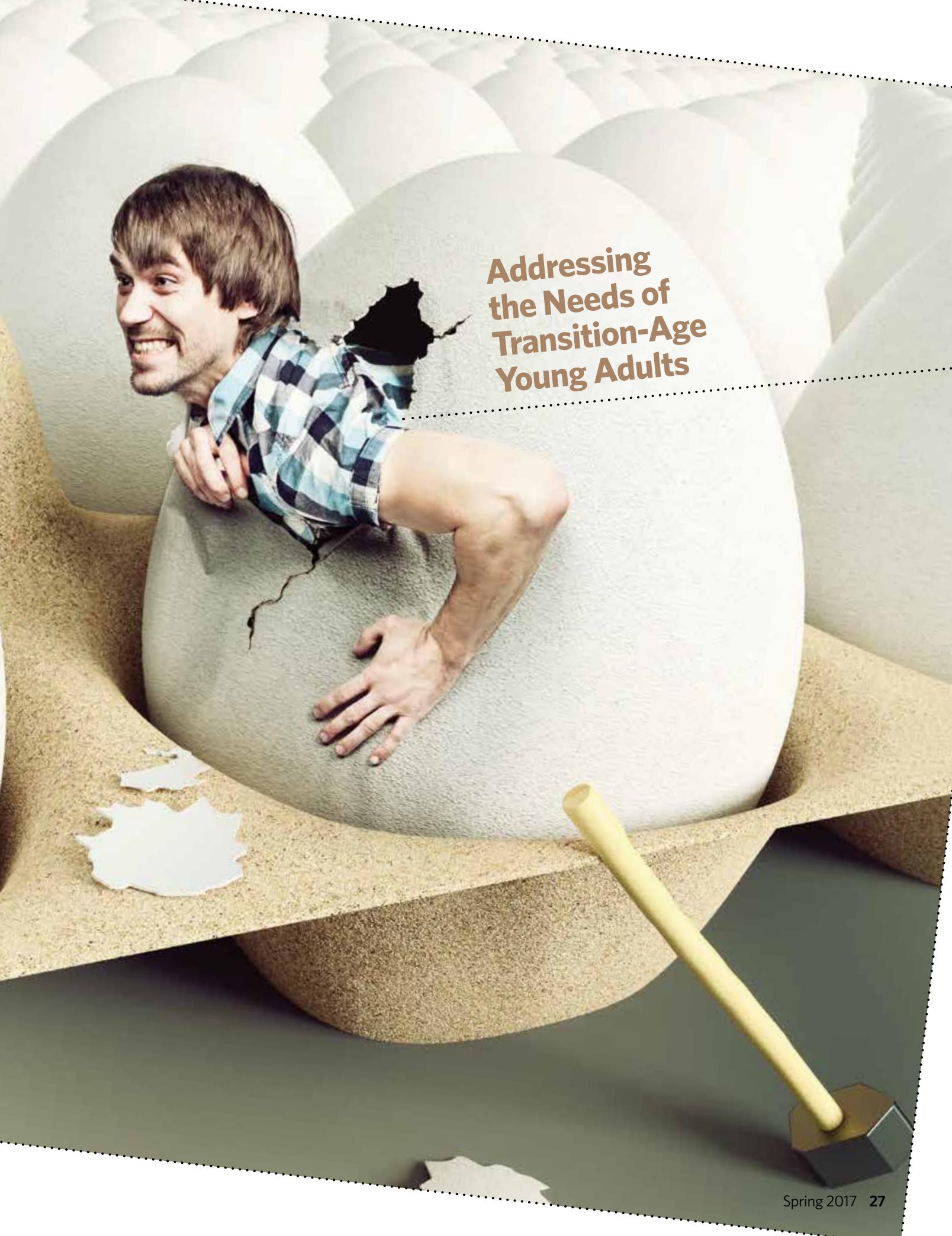
**D**O YOU REMEMBER the first time you purchased a car or signed a lease and said, “Now I am an adult!”? Looking back on that event now, what knowledge or skills did you have that allowed you to be successful? What help or advice did you get from parents, friends, or mentors?

Most likely, you employed some fairly well-developed executive functions—the ability to manage oneself, one’s materials, and one’s environment in order to accomplish a goal—to meet those demands. Some of those skills include setting goals, planning how to accomplish those goals, managing time effectively, focusing long enough to complete the tasks associated with the goals, dealing with distractions, and knowing what to do when barriers arise. For most young adults, these executive-function skills develop through trial and error over many years, with coaching from parents or mentors. The skills evolve naturally, enabling young adults to succeed at the next level (such as college, job, or career).

However, what happens when these skills do not evolve effectively or if a young adult struggles along the way? What if the young adult lags a few years behind peers in managing emotions, making good decisions, or dealing with problems? What happens if he or she tries to go to the next level but is unsuccessful?

These struggles can cause a “failure to launch.” Launching refers to the ability of young adults to successfully and independently meet their own social, emotional, and physical needs. In a failure to launch, an individual experiences difficulty adapting to the demands of the next phase of life and becomes “stuck.” And individuals who get stuck often end up returning home to live with their parents.

How does this happen? Is it poor parenting? Is it developmental delay? Is it just bad luck?



A young man with brown hair and a beard is smiling and climbing out of a large, light-colored eggshell. He is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt. The eggshell has a prominent crack running down its side. A hammer lies on the surface below the eggshell. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

**Addressing  
the Needs of  
Transition-Age  
Young Adults**

**The truth is,** failure to launch can be the result of a number of factors. Personal factors can include developmental readiness for independence, emotional resilience, willingness to try and potentially fail (grit), problem-solving skills, feelings of confusion or confidence about the future, or mental health diagnoses like ADHD and anxiety. At the same time, life events, such as a devastating injury, the loss of a loved one, or the end of a significant relationship can also impact a young adult's ability to launch. In reality, many factors can contribute to someone returning to a parent's home, the most important of which is the comfort and safety of home and the parent-child relationship.

### The dependency trap

These struggles can have devastating effects on the young adults and their parents. Young adults may experience a great deal of shame, problems with self-esteem, withdrawing from social connections, an unwillingness to try at anything (work, school, etc.), depression, anxiety, substance use, and even total isolation. Parents can have similar feelings of shame, feeling like a failure as a parent, emotionally pulling back from their child, anger, depression, and even resentment.

The interactions can result in what psychologist Eli Lebowitz refers to as the “dependency trap.” This is when the behaviors of the parent and the young adult are mutually reinforcing, and efforts by either side to alleviate the condition can actually aggravate or reinforce it.

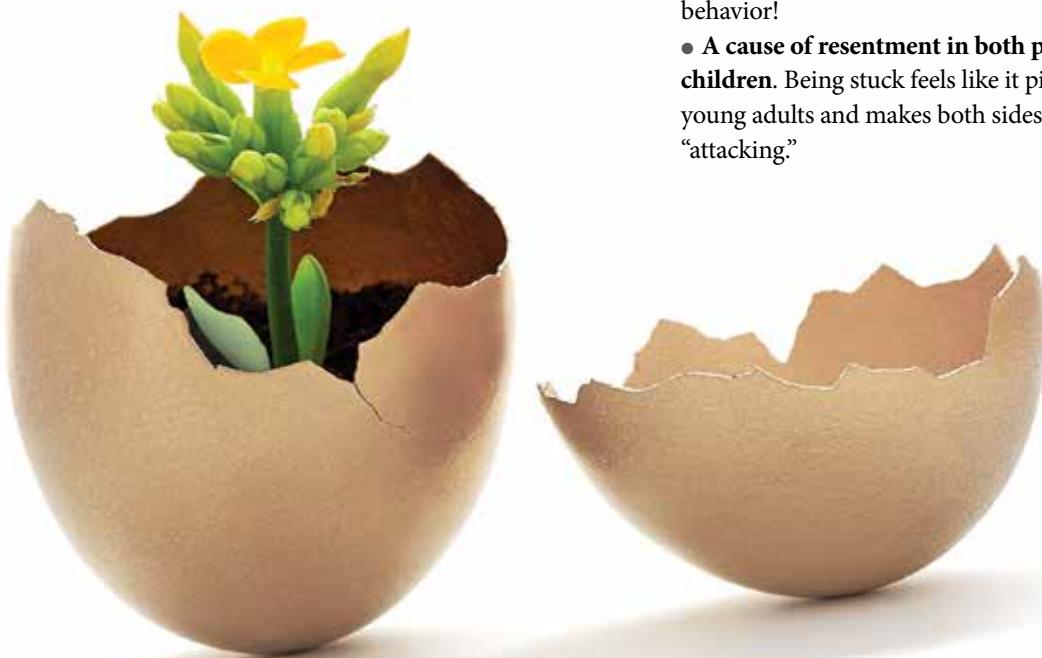
For example, a young adult is struggling to get a job because he is anxious about asking for an application. The parent may say, “Just go do it, and you will be fine!” The

young adult may feel his emotions are being dismissed and say, “You just don’t understand!” Then the parent and the young adult may begin to argue, further entrenching the negative cycle.

Or, if the young adult did go out and get an application, he may feel proud and report, “I got an application.” The parent might then question, “Why didn’t you get more?” This would effectively invalidate the efforts of the young adult and lead to a sense of futility. These examples reinforce the level of misunderstanding and desperation felt by both sides. Both are trying to take a step forward, but the approach used by the other side nullifies that success.

On the bright side, it is possible to change these patterns and for a parent and young adult to work together to achieve the goal of a successful launch. But, before we start talking about the solutions, remember that feeling “stuck” is often:

- **Not the product of just being lazy.** Almost all young adults would not choose to stay at home if they felt there was an effective way to overcome the situation
- **Stressful for young adults and their parents.** It is very distressing on both sides, not just the side of the parent whose adult child has failed to launch.
- **Embarrassing/humiliating/frustrating for both.** Both sides feel the pain!
- **De-motivating.** Feeling stuck can result in a sense of hopelessness and lack of control that makes it very hard to even take one step forward.
- **A self-reinforcing cycle.** Once hope is lost, it takes a monumental effort to change the pattern of behavior; just think about how many times we start a new diet or exercise routine and how difficult it can be to change our own behavior!
- **A cause of resentment in both parents and adult children.** Being stuck feels like it pits parents versus young adults and makes both sides feel that the other is “attacking.”



**Without hope, nothing is possible. We need to have a sense that things can and will improve, and we need to hold onto that hope. This allows us to get through the difficult times and persevere until things start to move in a positive direction or change is achieved.**

## **Change is possible**

So, what is the solution to all this doom and gloom? The first thing to remember when trying to help someone who is struggling with nearly any issue is to believe that change is possible. Things can get better, and if we work together, things WILL change.

There are four keys to successful change:

**1. Commitment.** For any change process to begin, there has to be some willingness to change and at least a commitment to try something different. It also has to be a mutually agreed-upon goal where both the parents and the young adult are able to weigh in. For example, if a parent sets the goal for the young adult to get a job and move out and the young adult is just told about the goal, the young adult may not commit to that direction and thwart any efforts toward that end.

**2. Willingness to take a risk.** Any change process requires doing something new. Both the parent and the young adult must be willing to try a new approach and see what happens. If you always do the same thing you will always get the same result, and no change will occur.

**3. Supportive environment.** Change is hard. Everyone will need support along the way. While this support can come from each other, it is best to have a strong and responsive support system. This can be a friend or family member to whom you can talk if you are having a bad day, or a professional who can offer specific feedback and encouragement to keep you moving forward.

Also, everyone does better when they get a pat on the back or some words of encouragement.

**4. Hope.** Without hope, nothing is possible. We need to have a sense that things can and will improve, and we need to hold onto that hope. This allows us to get through the difficult times and persevere until things start to move in a positive direction or change is achieved.

Now that we have established some keys to successful change, let's look at some more concrete steps that can be taken. Here are the components of a successful plan:

- Firm expectations.** One of the biggest initial challenges with any change is effectively defining the problem. Often we establish very general and vague goals that are difficult to measure and even harder to see where to start. The best place to begin is by defining very specific expectations, timeframes, and ways to measure suc-

cess. This will remove much of the ambiguity and frustration associated with people taking steps in different directions. Also, make sure the goals are realistic; nothing harms a plan faster than a goal that is out of reach or unrealistic.

Example: Johnny will fill out and turn in at least three job applications by Friday at 5PM.

- Clear guidelines around communication.** A common problem when communicating with loved ones is struggling with taking things personally or overreacting to certain hot-button statements. A way around this is to establish some general guidelines about communication. Examples might include agreeing upon the time of day to speak about the plans, how you will address concerns, what amount of flexibility exists in the plan to allow for mistakes or setbacks without getting frustrated, how you will deal with anger and frustration, and who can be a support in a situation that seems impossible.

Example: Mom and dad will ask about progress with applications once a day over dinner and only offer support/guidance when asked.

- Compassion and empathy for the struggle.** Starting at a place of understanding is probably the biggest hurdle. In most cases, young adults and their parents feel that the other person just does not understand. Typically, they are both correct. The way to address this is to start by both acknowledging the difficult nature of the problem and providing encouragement. This will set a positive model for future conversation about the struggle, both successes and failures.

Example: "I know that it is very difficult to ask for a job, I remember when I was applying for jobs..."

- Outside support.** At times we get stuck in old patterns or just get plain worn out. Engaging supports, like an ADHD coach or mental health professional, can offer some new ideas and allow for new energy to come in from outside the family.

- Praise.** Sometimes the best thing that you can say in a given situation is, "Nice job." This can be a very powerful motivator even though it is very simple. Resist the desire to say "Nice job, but..." Leaving out the "but" can be the difference between a successful interaction and further mounting resentment. Always remember to give credit where credit is due, and don't be afraid to give a compliment.

Example: "I am really proud of how hard you have been working toward your goals."

The most important thing to remember is that where there is hope, there is always a possibility for change. Change is difficult and will take time, but we should never give up on the people for whom we care the most, no matter how frustrating or difficult it may be. ☀

---

**Aaron Jennings, LCSW**, is the program manager for the ADHD Across the Lifespan Program, Center for Children and Families, at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pittsburgh.