





# Understanding and Supporting Your Emerging Adult

by Michael Reiter, PhD

**U**NDERSTANDING OUR EMERGING ADULTS is an essential step to supporting their growth and developing independence. Transgenerational expectations for how individuals should “progress” in life don’t apply like they used to, as today’s emerging adults are different than those of any other generation. Cultural, economic, healthcare, educational, and technological changes have pushed back the clock for identity formation, education, employment, marriage, and financial independence.

Currently, more young adults aged 18 through 29 live at home than at any other time on record—and many of them say they are satisfied with this arrangement. For many, this new path is paved with opportunities including college, internships, vocational training, or employment. But for some, this stage of life is more struggle than success, with starts and stops, wrong turns, and dead ends.

To understand our struggling young adults, accepting this redefined stage is not enough. We need to understand the underlying challenges getting in the way of forward progress. Let’s take a snapshot at some common challenges: ADHD, anxiety, and depression, and how they impact emerging adults (EAs) at *this stage of life*, and how to set realistic expectations moving forward.

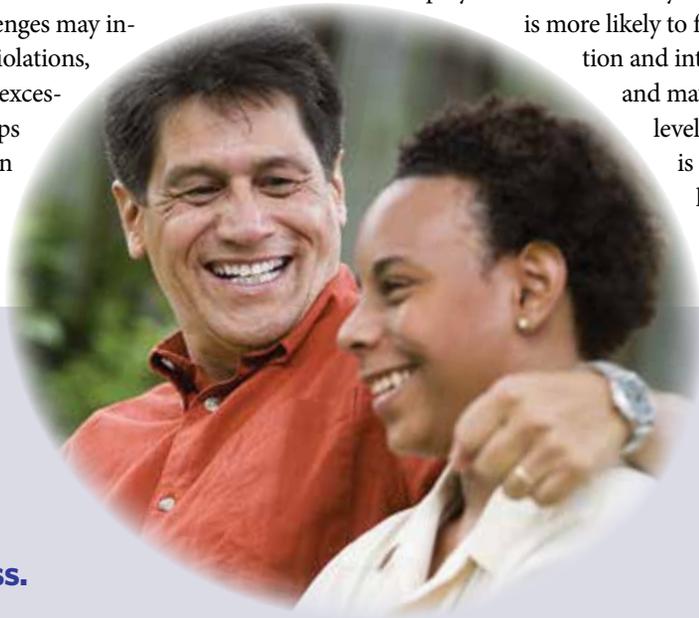
## ADHD challenges

For an adolescent with ADHD, typical ADHD struggles include inattention, forgetfulness, impulsivity, getting stuck on screens, and the unexplainable meltdown. While many of these challenges continue as they enter adulthood, a new set of problems can emerge. These may run under the radar because we thought the EA “outgrew” ADHD or simply because we have less interaction and are not present to see what’s going on.

For a young adult, ADHD challenges may include reckless driving and traffic violations, increased or excess substance use, excessive romantic or sexual relationships (beyond that of what may be within the new online and app-dating norm), money management problems, continued or increased

and/or thinking they will not be able to get there, can be quite distressing, and sometimes paralyzing.

For others, that feared stimulus is interacting with their social world. EAs experiencing social anxiety can find themselves socially isolated or struggling in school because they feel uncomfortable seeking help from professors and/or are unsure how to join or form study groups with peers. Such anxiety can also contribute to unemployment, as the socially anxious individual is more likely to fear the application and interview process, and may avoid an entry-level job where there is a greater likelihood of customer interaction. Other forms



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online gaming, an unexpected return home from college, low motivation, continued difficulty with planning the future, and recurrent job loss. Struggling with these challenges can make this stage of life feel unmanageable, and may raise feelings of both hopelessness and helplessness about one’s future.

If your EA has a history of ADHD and is having some of these problems, have an open and supportive conversation to discuss how ADHD may be playing an uninvited role in his or her life. Revisit what helped your EA manage ADHD before and try that again: medication, therapy, an executive function coach, and so forth. You may need to help your EA supplement with new approaches and/or connect with professionals. Keep in mind that ADHD often co-occurs with other mental health diagnoses.

## Anxiety and depression

In emerging adults who are struggling are both anxiety and depression, it is sometimes hard to know what came first—the struggle or the emotional distress. Anxiety is the emotional response to a feared stimulus, and for many young adults that feared stimulus is the future. Not having a plan, not knowing what the future will look like,

of anxiety that can negatively impact an EA’s progress include the following: panic disorder, where individuals experience and intense fear from known or unknown triggers (a classroom, for example); agoraphobia, the fear of not being able to escape a particular situation; and obsessive compulsive disorder, where an individual has excessive worry and then must engage in some compulsive or ritualized behavior to alleviate the distress.

No form of anxiety is mutually exclusive; for example, someone could experience a generalized fear of their future while also being socially anxious and having panic attacks. Anxiety can be disabling, and thus, it should be taken very seriously and addressed with treatment as soon as possible. The longer an anxiety disorder is allowed to be in control, the harder it becomes to resolve.

Anxiety is often accompanied by depression. An anxious emerging adult who is isolated, possibly unemployed, or having academic difficulty, is at risk for being depressed. Negative self-talk is a core feature of depression, and common examples include: “Others my age are way past me.” “I won’t like that job; I will be bad at it.” “It’s too late to do what I want to do.” “What do others think about me?” How we think impacts how we feel, and help-

ing EAs shift negative thinking to more positive thinking is key. The place to begin is at home with a positive environment and the modeling of positive self-talk and forecasting a bright future.

For both the anxious and depressed person, there are many avenues for support, though one in particular stands out in its effectiveness--cognitive behavioral therapy. CBT helps anxious and depressed individuals shift negative thoughts and behaviors to more positive ones by helping them understand they are overestimating the likelihood that the future is filled with bad outcomes. CBT also encourages individuals to face their fears and engage their world in a more positive way (also called exposure and behavioral activation). The goal-oriented approach of CBT is apt for an EA population, as it can be concrete, relatively short-term, and allows for incremental successes that build self-esteem and momentum.

### Other challenges

In addition to ADHD, anxiety, and depression, struggling EAs may experience a host of other mental health challenges, including substance use, eating disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and the newly classified social pragmatic communication disorder. If you are concerned about any of these, working with a professional can help clarify what's going on and how to best move forward.

While understanding what is going on for your young adult is a key first step, understanding what is going on for you as a parent is a key second step. The expectations you have influence how you think about your young adult, your communication approach, and the types of support you provide. Having *developmentally appropriate* expectations is vital. Developmentally appropriate refers not just to the EA's cognitive and emotional developmental status, but also takes into account the new norms of his or her generation.

Here are some key questions to ask yourself about your expectations. Are they:

- Developmentally appropriate?
- Observant of medical and mental health concerns?

- Realistic (meaning that your EA has been able to achieve them consistently in the past)?
  - Specific?
  - Communicated both positively and in advance, along with any consequences?
  - Comprised of smaller steps the EA is able to consistently achieve that lead to the larger expectation?
  - Consistent with your EA's values, beliefs, and goals?
- This is perhaps the most important question. Appropriately set expectations are healthy for both yourself and your relationship with your EA.

Remember that we live in a new normal. In addition to the resources you typically use, you may need to think outside the box and consider ways to support your emerging adult that you never expected. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to communicate positively with your emerging adult. Recognize that no matter how upset, frustrated, angry, or concerned you become, he or she likely feels the same but to a much greater degree. And thus, they need more support and warmth than ever, as they are likely looking to you to be their secure base and guiding light (even if they don't say it). 🗨️

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