

Shifts in developmental milestones and the reality of modern adulthood transitions: Emerging adults and failure to launch

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Dear Editor,

Historically, adulthood was defined by specific milestones, such as working, marriage, and having children (1). However, these traditional markers are less prominent today. The current generation tends to favor more individualistic criteria (2). As a result, the transition to adulthood has become more gradual, ambiguous, and heterogeneous.

Several factors have contributed to the growing delay in reaching traditional markers of adulthood. Extended education is often associated with continued coresidence and financial interdependence between young adults and their families (3). Individual and global economic conditions, such as fluctuations in income, employment opportunities, and housing affordability, have also been associated with later residential independence and increased rates of return to the parental home (4, 5). Beyond these factors, mental and physical health conditions, and access to emotional and social support may also influence decisions regarding cohabitation (4, 6). On the other hand, individuals can show emotional maturity, financial responsibility, and autonomy in decision-making while still living with their parents and relying on them financially (7). From a social and psychological standpoint, three consistent criteria have evolved as identifiers of adulthood for young people: Assuming responsibility for oneself, making independent judgments, and attaining financial independence (8).

Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined the term “emerging adulthood (EA)” to describe a distinct life stage. While not universally recognized, EA is typically characterized by exploration, instability, self-focus, and a sense of being ‘in-between’ adolescence and full adulthood (8). It reflects a prolonged transition into adult responsibilities, including extended education, a later entry into stable careers, and delayed constant intimate relationships (8, 9). By their mid-to-late 20s, many individuals feel that they have reached adulthood (2). However, postponing traditional milestones of adulthood has become more socially acceptable; nonetheless, some individuals experience significant difficulty in navigating this transition. Even those who appear successful may experience internal conflict and dissatisfaction, masking instability beneath outward functionality (7,10). Thus, what initially appears to be a smooth transition may, over time, reveal hidden struggles with autonomy and identity.

Eli Lebowitz (2016) coined the term “Failure to Launch (FTL)” to describe individuals in late adolescence or young adulthood who continue to live with their parents, rely heavily on them, avoid pursuing higher education or stable employment, and exhibit strong emotional or behavioral reactions when their parents attempt to reduce their dependency (11). Although Lebowitz (2016) noted that those affected often show little interest in seeking treatment, in reality, individuals with FTL may struggle with anxiety, depression, and feelings of shame and isolation as they watch their peers progress (12).

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These concepts raise broader questions about how young adults can build meaningful lives in the face of challenges such as economic uncertainty and political and social polarization. Cross-cultural studies are needed to comprehend how different societies define adult development and to investigate the factors that support or hinder a successful transition to adulthood. Interventions targeting autonomy, coping skills, and family communication

could help bridge the gap between dependence, reliance, and independence.

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