

# Counseling Emerging Adults in Transition: Practical Applications of Attachment and Social Support Research



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Today's emerging adults (i.e., individuals between the ages of 18 and 29) in industrialized nations navigate multiple significant life transitions (e.g., entering career life), and do so in a rapidly changing society. While these transitions pose psychological difficulties, a growing body of research has identified attachment and social support as two notably salient protective factors in emerging adulthood. The purpose of the present article is to explore the counseling of emerging adult clients, particularly those in the midst of one or more transitions. The concept of emerging adulthood represents a relatively recent phenomenon that the counseling community has been slow to acknowledge. Specifically, this author reviews literature pertaining to emerging adulthood, attachment and social support, and uses this literature to provide clinicians with practical recommendations for counseling emerging adults.

**Keywords:** emerging adulthood, life transitions, attachment, social support, counseling

Emerging adulthood is a stage of life resulting from recent societal trends in industrialized nations, occurring between the ages of 18 and 29 (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2007). These trends include the proliferation of college enrollment, significant delays in settling down and high unemployment compared to prior generations of young adults (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Corresponding with these changes is an evolution of the psychosocial development of current emerging adults, who engage in extended identity exploration and report subjectively feeling *in between* adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2001). While the benefits and drawbacks of these changes are a source of frequent and intense debate (Arnett, 2013; Twenge, 2013), few would disagree that being twenty-something today is a drastically different experience than it was several decades ago.

Emerging adulthood presents many life transitions and significant mental health risk. In the midst of prolonged identity experimentation and subjectivity, emerging adults navigate a multitude of major life and role changes, such as leaving home, entering and leaving educational settings, and starting a career. The convergence of these factors—the subjective feeling of not being an adult and near-constant life changes propelling one toward adulthood—seems to contribute to critical periods of identity crisis and various psychological difficulties (Lane, 2013b; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007; Weiss, Freund, & Wiese, 2012). Though not all emerging adults experience difficulties during these transitions (Buhl, 2007; Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006), some respond with significant distress (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010; Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Polach, 2004), which is problematic given that the emerging adult years are considered a critical juncture in the development of mental illness (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Ingram & Gallagher, 2010) and substance abuse (APA, 2013; Chassin, Pitts, & Prost, 2002; Ingram & Gallagher, 2010). Elevated distress also has been shown to increase impulsivity and risk-taking behaviors in emerging adulthood (Scott-Parker, Watson, King, & Hyde, 2011). The distress accompanying these transitions, therefore, poses a considerable threat to emerging adult well-being.

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Despite these changes and risk factors, the counseling community has been slow to acknowledge the evolving landscapes of the late teens and twenties. Counselor training programs continue to prominently feature theories of development contending that identity development is a task completed by the end of the teenage years (i.e., Erikson, 1959/1994). It seems likely that many counselors face the challenge of using outdated developmental models to conceptualize their emerging adult clients. For counselors to work effectively with the many challenges and risks that emerging adults face, they must have an increased awareness of emerging adulthood and better understand factors that predict well-being and stability during the numerous transitions commonly experienced. To address this concern, the author provides an overview of emerging adult theory and research describing the significance of emerging adult life transitions; reviews literature examining the importance of attachment and social relationships in emerging adulthood, which appear to especially salient sources of risk resilience during this period of life; and considers implications for counseling professionals to utilize when working with emerging adults.

## **Emerging Adulthood**

Current societal expectations regarding normative life trajectories in the early-to-mid 20s—being finished with education, marrying, acclimating to a professional setting and adjusting to life as a parent—do not seem fully applicable to today’s emerging adults in most industrialized nations. Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as a period of feeling “in between” (p. 471), during which individuals are no longer adolescents, but do not yet identify as adults. Thus, the normative developmental tasks for individuals in their 20s seem to have shifted from objective tasks like attaining work, settling down and becoming financially independent, to more subjective tasks like considering the question, Who am I and what do I want my life to look like? This shift is reflected in several factors that distinguish emerging adulthood from other life stages and from prior young adult generations. Of these distinctions, the three most prominent pertain to demographic instability, changes in subjective self-perceptions and extended periods of identity testing (Arnett, 2000).

### **Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood**

One way that emerging adulthood is distinct from other life stages is with regard to demographics. The past several decades correspond with higher proportions of 18- to 25-year-olds leaving home and periodically moving back home several times (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999), attending college immediately after high school (Arnett, 2004), delaying marriage and childbirth (Arnett, 2000), spending more time in college (Arnett, 2004; Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, & Shanahan, 2002) and changing careers (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). In comparison to other age groups, the demographic statuses of emerging adults today vary with little predictability (Arnett, 2000; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003); however, the demographic factor that is most predictable is frequent residential change (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Shulman & Nurmi, 2010). All of these trends indicate the changing demographic landscapes of today’s late teens and early 20s compared to those of prior generations.

Another changing landscape of emerging adulthood is a trend toward increasingly vague and subjective self-perceptions (Arnett, 2000; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Emerging adults view their progression into adulthood as long and gradual. When a sample of emerging adults were asked if they felt they had reached adulthood, over 50% selected the answer choice “in some respects yes, in some respects no,” and fewer than 5% selected “yes” (Arnett, 2001, p. 140). Moreover, emerging adults seem to consider individual character qualities (e.g., accepting responsibility) to be more salient indicators of having reached adulthood than objective milestones, such as completing education or becoming a parent (Lopez, Chervinko, Strom, Kinney, & Bradley, 2005). In short, emerging adults perceive themselves as no longer adolescents, but also not quite adults, and report vague perceptions of what it will take to feel more like adults.

A third distinction of emerging adulthood is a prolonged period of identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Gerstaecker, 2010). Given the relative freedom from life obligations, in tandem with the long-term implications of many of the decisions that will be made during emerging adulthood, this stage of life represents an opportunity for significant identity development to occur (Gerstaecker, 2010). The freedom to engage in identity exploration results in the delay of firm decisions regarding adult roles (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). These factors also contribute to an increased self-focus during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). While some researchers have interpreted these features as resulting from increased narcissism among emerging adults (e.g., Twenge, 2013), Arnett (2004) conceptualized them as temporary and developmentally normative qualities.

The three most common areas of emerging adult identity exploration are love, work and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). First, emerging adults use their freedom to explore varying levels of commitment with regard to sexual and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004), and do so in a time period with unprecedented societal acceptance of differing sexual and romantic preferences (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). Second, significant identity exploration occurs with regard to professional identity, for which evidence can be found in several college trends. Emerging adults are increasingly likely to change their majors more than once (Arnett, 2000), report negative attitudes toward graduation (Lane, 2013a, in press-a; Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews, 2010), spend more time in college (Arnett, 2004) and experience more career turnover (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008) than prior generations. Finally, worldviews represent a third area of identity exploration. With today's unprecedented higher education enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Weber, 2012), a growing number of emerging adults are gaining a more complex understanding of the world around them via higher education experiences. The impact of the college environment on moral reasoning and cross-cultural experiences is well documented (e.g., Bowman, 2010). These trends may explain the observations of several scholars that today's emerging adults share an unprecedented passion for social justice and community well-being (e.g., Arnett, 2007), especially in urban areas.

### **Emerging Adult Transitions**

A central feature of emerging adulthood is the frequent occurrence of significant life transitions. Each of these transitions initiates significant role changes that impact social networks, familial support and autonomy. The influence of life transition on well-being has been well documented and frequently results in periods of self-doubt, immobilization and denial (Brammer & Abrego, 1981). In contrast to common assumptions that the transitions associated with emerging adulthood (e.g., college graduation, obtaining employment) are positive life events, these transitions represent periods of loss (Vickio, 1990) that consist of considerable psychological distress for some individuals (Lane, in press-a, in press-b; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007). The proceeding section reviews a growing body of recent research suggesting that the characteristic delay in adult identity formation in emerging adulthood may increase the degree of loss and difficulty experienced during several normative transitions.

**High school graduation.** Conclusions are mixed regarding the assertion that high school graduation is a critical emerging adult transition. Though some have reported that graduation is associated with increased quality of parental relationships and decreased depressed mood and delinquent behaviors (Aseltine & Gore, 1993), others have reported significant differences in these trajectories as a function of race and college attendance (Gore & Aseltine, 2003). Similarly, social and institutional support predicts whether deviant behaviors increase or decrease after high school (Sampson & Laub, 1990). These findings suggest that the transition of high school graduation is a positive experience for some emerging adults, but a psychologically distressing experience for others, especially those who lack social support, do not attend college, or identify as African American or Latino.

**The transition to professional life among non-college attendees.** After high school, the two most common trajectories are to enter either postsecondary education or the workforce (Arnett, 2004). The transition to work can be particularly difficult for those who forgo college. These emerging adults attempt to transition into professional life without the advantage of higher education—a psychologically beneficial resource that provides important institutional and social support (Raymore, Barber, & Eccles, 2001). Among individuals with high school diplomas, unemployment rates are highest between the ages of 18 and 19, approaching 20% in 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Those who do find work are unlikely to receive a sustainable income, as mean incomes among emerging adults are drastically lower than for other adult age groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Such difficulties are particularly problematic given that unemployment and economically inadequate employment have been implicated as mental health risks (Dooley, Prause, & Ham-Rowbottom, 2000).

**The freshman transition.** For those emerging adults who decide to attend college, their adjustment to college life also represents a significant life transition. In particular, the first year of college is a risk factor for psychological distress. Bowman (2010) found that among first-generation college freshmen, psychological well-being significantly decreased throughout the course of the freshman academic year. Similarly, Sharma (2012) demonstrated that first-year undergraduates experienced significantly greater emotional and social difficulties than other college students. A prominent focus of first-year transition literature is the important role of attachment relationships, a construct that will be discussed in greater depth later in this article. In short, the attachment security of incoming freshmen predicts their overall well-being, as well as their social and academic adjustment (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Larose & Boivin, 1998).

**The senior year experience.** A small but growing body of recent research has identified potential difficulties for college seniors preparing to transition out of school (Lane, 2013a, in press-a). The college experience represents a period of moratorium from many adult responsibilities (Fasick, 1988) and is associated with increased leisure behaviors compared to individuals who do not attend college (Raymore, Barber, Eccles, & Godbey, 1999). Given the subjective experience among emerging adults that they have not yet reached adulthood (Arnett, 2001) and the prevailing societal expectation that college graduation is associated with adult roles (e.g., entering the workforce, settling down), it is likely that emerging adults increasingly view graduation as an important signifier of impending life changes for which they do not feel ready (Lane, 2013a). For example, ambivalence about graduating was one of the primary themes to emerge from a qualitative study of college seniors (Yazedjian et al., 2010). Other qualitative studies of college seniors have found that students are frequently anxious about graduating due to the impending changes they will experience in priorities (Overton-Healy, 2010) and the sense that they lack direction regarding the next phase of life (Allen & Taylor, 2006). Factor analyses of surveys given to college seniors uncovered domains of concern about graduation, including leaving behind the student lifestyle, the impending loss of friendships and support, the process of obtaining employment, and the process of applying to graduate school (Pistilli, Taub, & Bennett, 2003). A recent path analysis revealed significant relationships between these domains of concern and factors such as life satisfaction, psychological health and attachment security (Lane, in press-a).

**Life after college.** Given the psychological implications of preparing to leave the college environment, it is not surprising that the time immediately following college life often presents psychological difficulties as well. A sample of Australian college graduates voiced concerns about adjusting to life after college and to work life, referring to this period as a low point of their lives (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) found that well-being suffered when emerging adult graduates encountered difficulties obtaining employment. Such findings are especially significant since they contrast overall trends toward increased well-being throughout emerging adulthood (Galambos et al., 2006). That is, while emerging adulthood is associated



with upward trends in well-being, the time immediately following graduation can alter this trajectory, especially when emerging adults experience difficulties obtaining employment.

However, emerging adults who do secure postcollege employment are not exempt from transition-related distress. This transition involves significant changes in attitudes, expectations and levels of preparedness compared to college life (Polach, 2004; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Transitioning to the world of work can be particularly difficult since emerging adults are typically leaving an environment in which they felt experienced (e.g., high school, college) and becoming inexperienced professionals (Lane, in press-b). More than half of all college graduates leave their initial place of postcollege employment within two years of graduating (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008), and there is evidence suggesting that this turnover is due to difficulties in adjusting to professional life for the first time (Sturges & Guest, 2001). Such difficulties seem to frequently result in experiences of imposter syndrome (i.e., perceiving oneself as incompetent despite evidence of competence) among emerging adults entering professional life (Lane, in press-b). Other related difficulties include significant learning curves, less feedback and structure than afforded by the college environment, guilt about initial levels of work production, and difficulties forming new social networks (Polach, 2004). Similarly, the results of a survey conducted by Slep and Reed (2006) suggested that most graduates possess limited awareness of the impending culture changes they will experience as a result of leaving higher education and entering the workplace. The importance of this awareness was demonstrated in a longitudinal study in which emerging adults were tested as college seniors regarding their knowledge about workplace culture, and then were subsequently tested both six months and one year after entering professional life (Gardner & Lambert, 1993). Those who had more accurate information as seniors were more likely to report job satisfaction at both subsequent intervals. Buhl (2007) conducted a similar longitudinal study, finding that the subjective quality of participant parental relationships predicted well-being trajectories during the initial three years of professional life.

In sum, it is clear that the common transitions experienced during emerging adulthood pose threats to well-being due to role confusion and psychological distress. Given the risks associated with psychological distress, it is paramount to better understand factors that might promote the maintenance of well-being during periods of transition in emerging adulthood. Accordingly, a focus of emerging adult research has been examining constructs that predict positive developmental progressions through these periods of transition. Two such constructs that have received considerable attention are attachment (e.g., Kenny & Sirin, 2006) and social support (e.g., Murphy et al., 2010). It seems that emerging adults who feel secure in their relational attachments and supported by social networks are able to face the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood with greater confidence and well-being than those who lack support and secure attachments. To better explain the impact of these constructs on emerging adult development and well-being, the proceeding sections of this article examine attachment and social support literature pertaining to emerging adulthood.

## **Attachment**

Attachment theory contends that the early relationships people develop with their caregivers inform attitudes toward help seeking and new learning in times of distress across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969/1982). *Attachment* is defined as the emotional bonds that develop between children and their caregivers beginning in infancy. Based on repeated experiences of caregiver responsiveness, infants begin to develop beliefs and expectations regarding the degree to which their physical and emotional needs will be satisfied. According to attachment theory, these beliefs become internalized as subconscious representations of self and other, which continue to increase in complexity and broadly inform social interactions throughout the lifespan. Those whose representations are based on consistent and sufficient caregiver responsiveness are considered securely attached

and are likely to trust their ability to resolve future needs, either by themselves or by relying on caregivers. Insecurely attached children, on the other hand, develop expectations that their caregivers cannot be adequately relied upon in times of need; these children are likely to react to perceived threats with inappropriate levels of affect (i.e., overactivation or deactivation). These reactions interfere with the children's development of effective emotional regulation and with the successful resolution of stressful situations, thereby continuing to reinforce such responses to future stressful situations (Guttman-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006).

This idea positions early attachment relationships as a likely influence on psychological health in emerging adulthood. The years of later adolescence and early emerging adulthood are a time in which attachment needs are increasingly fulfilled by peers and romantic partners, as opposed to caregivers (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Thus, the relative security of parental attachment representations is likely to inform interpersonal trust and intimacy, as well as the ability to seek the meeting of attachment needs from others (Schnyders & Lane, 2014). In fact, frequency of contact with parents during emerging adulthood is negatively associated with subjective closeness to parents (Hiester, Nordstrom, & Swenson, 2009), while geographical distance from parents is positively associated with psychological adjustment (Dubas & Petersen, 1996). Younger emerging adults are likely to begin experimenting with independence, though they often still use parents or caregivers as attachment figures in times of distress (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Kenny, 1987).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) conducted what was perhaps the first study to consider the relevance of attachment to the unique needs of young adult populations. They demonstrated several trajectories in interpersonal functioning on the basis of attachment functioning. In the study, attachment was conceptualized as occurring across dimensions of self and other: secure (positive representations of self and other), anxious (negative representations of self, positive representations of other), dismissive-avoidant (positive representations of self, negative representations of other), and fearful-avoidant (negative representations of self and other). Such a conceptualization has become a standard for contemporary adult attachment research (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Fearful-avoidant participants seemed to struggle with interpersonal passivity. Dismissive-avoidance was "related to a lack of warmth in social interactions" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 234). The interpersonal problems of anxious participants suggested control seeking or overinvolvement in the affairs of their peers. These findings corroborate more recent conceptualizations of insecure attachments in adulthood (Brennan et al., 1998; Mallinckrodt, 2000). Specifically, individuals with elevated attachment anxiety are likely to respond to distress with a hyperactivated strategy, heightening awareness of their distress and causing them to seek inappropriate levels of interpersonal dependence. Conversely, individuals with elevated attachment avoidance are likely to respond to distress with a deactivated strategy, inhibiting awareness of negative affect and preventing them from seeking support from others.

A growing body of emerging adult research supports the importance of healthy attachment functioning for various psychological outcomes during emerging adulthood. Attachment is a crucial predictor of well-being trajectories at many key emerging adult transition points (Lane, 2014), including the first year of college (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991), the last year of college (Lane, in press-a) and the postcollege years (Kenny & Sirin, 2006). For example, one study tracked Israeli males from their final year of high school through their third year away from home for compulsory military service (Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004). Securely attached individuals demonstrated better coping strategies and higher capacity for intimacy during their military service than those with insecure attachments. More generally, attachment security in emerging adulthood also influences self-reinforcement capacity and reassurance needs (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Larson, & Zakalik, 2005), affect regulation and resilience (Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012), perceived self-worth (Kenny & Sirin, 2006), dysfunctional attitudes and self-esteem (Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996), self-compassion and empathy toward others (Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011), self-organization strategies (Lopez, Mitchell, & Gormley, 2002), and

identification with emerging adulthood (Schnyders, 2014; Schnyders & Lane, 2014). Many of these factors illustrate the importance of attachment functioning in developing healthy and supportive interpersonal social networks.

## Social Support

The construct of social support refers to social relationships or interactions that provide individuals with actual or perceived assistance (Sarason et al., 1991). Social support is psychologically beneficial in its capacity to mitigate stress during stressful situations (e.g., Ditzen et al., 2008), an idea commonly referred to as the *stress buffering hypothesis* (Cohen & McKay, 1984). A wealth of recent research has strongly suggested that social support is particularly salient during emerging adulthood, as this is a life period marked with numerous transitions and opportunities to experience distress. In a qualitative study of emerging adults who had recently transitioned into professional life, social support was the most prominent theme related to adjustment (Murphy et al., 2010); those who reported relational isolation also struggled with unpreparedness for new financial obligations and feeling that their expectations about life after college were left unfulfilled. Mortimer et al. (2002) reported similar findings. Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008), noting that social support is often lacking in the transition out of college and into the work force, urged college counselors to develop interventions aimed at increasing perceived support. This idea was supported in a study of college graduates who had recently relocated to a metropolitan area and were adjusting to their first year of professional life (Polach, 2004). Participants reported frustration and difficulties trying to establish new peer groups outside the college environment. They also cited the importance of a sense of belonging as the primary reason for moving to a city after graduating. Clearly, ample evidence supports the protective qualities of social support for emerging adults transitioning into professional life.

Moreover, social support also seems to be important during other emerging adult transitions. In one qualitative study, emerging adult participants described the ability to understand friendship dynamics as an important component in the subjective experience of reaching adulthood (Lopez et al., 2005). Examples of understanding friendship dynamics included the maintenance of preexisting friendships, changes in friendships based on varying maturation rates, and understanding the importance of the social network. In another study, first-year college students seemed to adjust more effectively to college life when the support they received from family members shifted from actions consistent with parental attachment to actions consistent with social support (Kenny, 1987). In a multiethnic sample of urban high school students, perceived social support predicted aspirations for career success, positive beliefs pertaining to achieving career goals and the importance of work in the future (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003).

Several longitudinal studies also have demonstrated relationships between aspects of social support and various elements of positive adjustment in emerging adulthood. A large study that tracked individuals for nearly 30 years beginning at age 7 (Masten et al., 2004) found that social quality was an aspect of resilience and predicted success in various emerging adult developmental tasks (e.g., academic attainment). Moreover, success with these tasks predicted success in postemerging adult developmental tasks (e.g., parenting quality, romantic success, work success). O'Connor et al. (2011) found perceived quality of peer relationships to predict positive development in emerging adulthood, which they conceptualized to include life satisfaction, trust and civic engagement. Galambos et al. (2006), in a longitudinal study tracking nearly 1,000 Canadian participants throughout the course of emerging adulthood, found that increases in social support were significantly correlated with increases in well-being.

These findings suggest that the degree to which emerging adults are able to develop and rely upon support networks directly impacts their ability to adapt to various normative experiences and transitions. Given the aforementioned discussion regarding emerging adult attachment, it is likely that these two constructs (attachment and social support) are of shared importance during such transitions. That is, attachment representations inform one's capacity for positive interpersonal interactions (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005), and in this way, attachment and social support collectively facilitate transition processes in emerging adulthood (Lane, 2014; Larose & Boivin, 1998).

## **Implications for Counseling Emerging Adults**

Counseling professionals who work in mental health or university settings are uniquely positioned to intervene with emerging adult clients and to foster resilience and well-being during this turbulent life phase. If counselors are to be effective working with the many challenges that emerging adults face, it is necessary to better understand factors that predict well-being during life transition. The aforementioned literature demonstrates the protective qualities of social support for emerging adults in transition. Emerging adults who are able to rely on positive social relationships during life transitions derive higher psychological well-being, life satisfaction and positive affect (Lane, 2014). Accordingly, counselors would be wise to assist their emerging adult clients in cultivating supportive social relationships. While counseling is a supportive relationship unto itself (Slade, 2008), the degree to which emerging adults in transition are able to derive satisfaction from a number of supportive relationships seems to directly impact the experience of well-being during transition. In this regard, counselors are encouraged to recognize the unprecedented complexity of emerging adult support networks (Arnett, 2007; Garcia et al., 2012; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012) due to the proliferation of social media and changing attitudes toward romantic relationships.

Moreover, social support is not limited to interpersonal relationships, but also includes structural and institutional forms of support (Masten et al., 2004). Thus, possessing knowledge of community programs and resources available to emerging adults also is imperative when working with this age group. Support can be enhanced through transition-specific programs (e.g., Lane, 2013a; Yeadon, 2010) that provide information about future expectations and strengthen coping skills (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Further benefits can be derived as counselors work with their clients to rely on these support systems during times of transition.

As the literature further suggests, one's degree of attachment security will impact the ability to develop and rely upon social support. Thus, excessive attachment anxiety or avoidance could pose challenges to working with emerging adults on support utilization. Accordingly, counselors of emerging adults should be aware of this potential therapeutic roadblock; they also should be prepared to intervene to develop corrective attachment experiences with their clients. Mallinckrodt (2000) suggested an approach in which clinicians utilize the therapeutic relationship to promote secure attachment strategies. The focus of this approach is maintaining relational boundaries through anticipating how clients might resist such boundaries. That is, because elevated attachment anxiety promotes a desire for maladaptive interpersonal dependence (Brennan et al., 1998), counselors should work to establish greater interpersonal distance than their anxiously attached clients would prefer (Mallinckrodt, 2000). Similarly, since elevated attachment avoidance promotes a desire for maladaptive interpersonal isolation, counselors should seek greater interpersonal closeness than their avoidant-attached clients would prefer. While doing so, clinicians should monitor the affective experience of their clients as a result of the therapeutic relationship, and should assist their clients in self-monitoring as well. This process can facilitate client awareness of attachment tendencies and enhance mindfulness about communicating future relational needs.



Other helpful suggestions come from a qualitative study of experienced therapists who worked toward corrective attachment experiences with their clients (Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009). The therapists in the sample suggested that therapeutic boundaries should be reevaluated over the course of therapy. These therapists also emphasized the importance of sensitivity to client defenses early in the therapeutic relationship, and suggested several strategies for both managing boundaries and combating resistance. Such strategies included intentional disclosure of feelings toward client patterns, fostering a sense of consistency and dependability about counseling, and developing an awareness of the temporary nature of the therapeutic relationship, beginning at the onset of therapy. These considerations may aid counselors in helping emerging adult clients work past insecure attachment patterns to develop healthy social relationships that can be utilized to facilitate emerging adult transition.

More broadly, the preceding literature review speaks to the importance of counselors acknowledging the changing landscapes of young adulthood. Current trends in the media seem to advance a narrative that today's young adults are narcissistic, entitled and lazy. While the veracity of such labels is a focus of current debate in the research community (for an overview of this debate, see Arnett, 2013 and Twenge, 2013), the narrative that these labels perpetuate is not conducive to an empathic understanding of the needs of those in this age group. Thus, counselors are encouraged to consider Arnett's (2004) theory of emerging adulthood when conceptualizing their work with emerging adult clients. This theory indirectly encourages counselors to honor the process of emerging adulthood, during which it is normative to engage in numerous behaviors that are often negatively misconstrued. Specifically, emerging adults are likely to (a) frequently move out and back into the parental household (which could be construed as parental enmeshment), (b) engage in prolonged identity exploration (which could be construed as laziness), (c) possess vague subjective understandings regarding the realization of adult identities (which could be construed as lack of direction), (d) think optimistically about the future (which could be construed as entitlement) and (e) temporarily possess a heightened self-focus (which could be construed as narcissism). Thus, acknowledging and normalizing these characteristics, even if they might constitute relatively recent phenomena, is important for fostering empathic understanding between counselors and their emerging adult clients.

## Conclusions

Emerging adults navigate many significant life and role transitions with important long-term implications. These transitions can induce great pressure and distress for some emerging adults, increasing their likelihood of experiencing many of the risks commonly associated with this age group. Thus, it is important that counselors understand the unique dynamics of emerging adulthood, especially given the myriad ways that this group has changed and evolved compared to prior young adult generations. In particular, the aforementioned literature suggests that counselors may find success with their emerging adult clients by working to enhance social support and correct potential insecure attachment behaviors, as well as by incorporating emerging adult theory to conceptualize client behaviors and perspectives. Though emerging adulthood is often a time of turmoil and instability, it is also a period rife with opportunities and possibilities, thus providing the potential for deeply rewarding and transformative counseling experiences.

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