



Supporting Young Adults in College through COVID-19

Young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 years face many challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They may not have entered the workforce, finished going to school or college, be in a relationship with a significant other, or started a family.¹ Parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults, such as mentors, educators, and counselors, can support young adults and help ensure their wellbeing during this challenging time.

Young Adult Development

Young adults often waver between true independence and continuing dependence on their parents or caregivers. This is an awkward stage for both parents/caregivers and their young adult. Parents may feel their young adult needing them less and be coming more involved with peers. They might miss the days when their child depended on them more. This can be frustrating if young adults still require financial help, but do not ask for help in other ways. Often, young adults complain about their parents' personal traits and household rules.

As this age group is still developing and experiencing increased hormones, young adults may become highly emotional over minor things. Young adults are figuring out who they are. It can be a time of finding oneself. Parents and caregivers may feel like they are failing, but you are not alone in feeling this way.

¹Lane, J. (2014). Counseling Emerging Adults in Transition: Practical Applications of Attachment and Social Support Research. *The Professional Counselor*, 5(1), Pages 30–42.



A Guide for Parents, Mentors, Educators, and Counselors

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Lost Opportunities due to COVID-19

Young adults may feel robbed of important turning points in their lives that they imagined or planned on achieving. Some have spent a lot of time practicing, studying, or waiting, only to have sports competitions, performances, or graduations cancelled or postponed. Others have had to change their wedding plans, are starting or raising a family, or are struggling to keep a job. Additionally, plans for jobs or further education might seem out of reach due to new social and financial challenges.

Given these difficult times, young adults may be feeling a variety of emotions. People experience loss differently. Some young adults may be anxious or depressed. Others may act out or resort to substance use. Young adults may be feeling some of the following: sadness, worry, frustration, anger, resentment, confused, disconnected, grief, withdrawn, depressed, anxious, irritable, overwhelmed, longing, jealousy, and lost.

Young Adult Safety

This is a tough time in a young adult's life. You may wonder what behaviors are usual versus what behaviors should be addressed due to safety concerns.²

Usual behaviors for this age are:

- Increase in attention to body and image (self-conscious)
- Experimenting sexually
- Increase in conflict with parents or caregivers, more criticism of parents or caregivers
- Experimenting with substances
- Increase in risky behavior
- Feeling overwhelmed with decisions and changes

Seek professional help for the following concerning behaviors:

- Unsafe sexual behaviors, many sexual partners, unwanted pregnancies
- Unusual eating behaviors (binging, purging, restricted eating)
- Social withdrawal, lack of connection to school or friends
- Physical or extreme verbal aggression and rebellion
- Self-harm behavior (cutting, burning, etc.)
- Suicidal thoughts ([suicide warning signs](#))
- Many accidents, extreme risk-taking behavior, running away
- Abuse of substances or selling substances

²Miller, A., Linehan, M., Rathus, J. (2007). Dialectical behavior therapy with Suicidal Adolescents. Guilford Press.

How to Support Young Adults

Supporting and encouraging young adults to handle and cope with life's challenges is important for their healthy development. The list below will help encourage good communication, process emotions in a constructive way, and build resilience (the ability to recover quickly from difficulties).

As you support young adults, please remember this period of time is temporary and will not last forever. Use this time to learn and grow. Be kind to yourself. Practice self-care by finding ways to relax, destress, and take breaks. Your physical and mental health are important during this time too.



Be a good listener.

Really listen to the young adults in your life. Show you are listening by repeating what they said. Ask questions to go deeper into the topic. Give them all your attention when you're spending time together. Set your phone and other devices aside. To encourage conversation, try going for a walk or drive, or make a meal together. Sometimes doing an activity together feels less threatening and makes it easier for young adults to talk. Save your advice, opinions, and lectures for another time to prevent young adults from becoming defensive. This will allow for more open communication when the time is right.



Show empathy.

One way to calm anger, frustration, and other emotions is to show empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Let go of your own ideas and think about the young adult's views. Sometimes, young adults have trouble understanding their emotions. Make a guess at what they may be feeling, such as, "Are you disappointed about not being able to attend college in person?"



Find meaning.

Through time and processing events or emotions, people can find purpose and meaning from their experiences. Helping young adults find the "silver lining" of a challenge or difficult experience brings healing and helps build resilience. Using stories and humor can help them to see the situation through a different perspective.



Encourage social connection.

Social support promotes resilience and healthy development.¹ Self-esteem increases and negative behaviors decrease when there is perceived support from family and friends.³ There are many ways for young adults to stay connected while following social distancing and mask wearing guidelines, such as group walks or bike rides. Other options are virtual hobby meetups, chats with family and friends via video chat apps, and online group classes or games, but take care to balance screen time with off-screen activities.



Encourage good health habits.

Daily exercise, good nutrition, self-care, and sleep are important to overall health. Taking care of one's physical health supports better mental health. Encourage young adults to eat nourishing meals, get 7-9 hours of sleep each night, and be active. These healthy habits will help improve relationships, mood, and focus.



Acknowledge boredom.

The free time that comes with less activities and responsibilities can result in too much time spent looking at screens.⁴ Too much screen time can become a problem during the pandemic, especially due to many hours per day of online school. For some students, screen time is getting in the way of sleep and other activities. Encourage and help young adults balance screen time and get creative to fill downtime, such as learning a new hobby, finding a job, or volunteering.

³Szkody, E., & McKinney, C. (2019). Indirect Effects of Social Support on Psychological Health Through Self-Esteem in Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(17), 2439–2455.

⁴Stockdale, L. A., & Coyne, S. M. (2020). Bored and online: Reasons for using social media, problematic social networking site use, and behavioral outcomes across the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescence*, 79, 173–183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.01.010>

How to Get Help

Reaching out to professionals in times of need is not a sign of weakness. None of us can function at our best when we try to do it alone.

IMMEDIATE HELP

If you are experiencing a life-threatening emergency, call **911**.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

We can all help prevent suicide. If you, or someone you know, is in distress:

- Call the free and confidential [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **800-273-8255** or text **HEAL to 741741** to reach a trained crisis counselor. You can call or text 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org for more information and resources.

EMOTIONAL CRISIS

Call the [24-Hour Crisis Line](#) at **866-4CRISIS (866-427-4747)** if you, or someone you know, are experiencing:

- Anxiety or loneliness
- Family or relationship difficulties
- Symptoms of mental illness
- Loss of a job
- Health concerns
- Abuse
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Thoughts of suicide

The [24-Hour Crisis Line](#) provides immediate help to individuals, families, and friends of people in emotional crisis. This line helps determine if you or your loved one needs professional consultation and can link you to the appropriate services, including emergency mental health services. Visit www.crisisconnections.org for more information and resources.

STRESS OR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

If someone is feeling stressed, anxious, or lonely due to COVID-19:

- Call [Washington Listens](#) at **1-833-681-0211** to speak with a support specialist who can offer support and help you get connected to community resources in your area. Visit www.crisisconnections.org/washingtonlistens for more information and resources.

If someone is experiencing emotional distress related to a natural or human-caused disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support. You can call **1-800-985-5990** or text **TalkWithUs to 66746** to connect with a trained crisis counselor. Visit www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline for more information and resources.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

If someone needs help with substance abuse, problem gambling, or mental health:

- Call the [Washington Recovery Help Line](#) at **1-866-789-1511** to get connected with a professionally-trained support specialist who can provide emotional support and connect callers with local treatment resources or other community services. You can also text 1-866-789-1511 Monday through Friday from 9am-9pm. Visit www.warecoveryhelpline.org for more information and resources.

Additional Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Teens-Young-Adults>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/parental-resource-kit/young-adulthood.html>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): <https://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/youth-young-adults>

Suicide Prevention Resource Center: <https://www.sprc.org/Youth.gov>



Shannon DuBois, PsyD

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