



# **Encyclopedia of Human Development**

## **Young Adulthood**

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What does it mean to become an adult? Most people rate the top criteria for marking the entry to adulthood as accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions apart from parents, establishing egalitarian relationships with parents, and achieving financial independence. Although self-sufficiency has been attained in young adulthood, the period of the twenties and early thirties, young adults continue to grow and change in multiple arenas: biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and social.

### **Biological Changes during Young Adulthood**

Typically, full height is attained in middle to late adolescence. Yet growth is not complete; the size and shape of the body continue to change in young adulthood. Both accumulation of fat and growth of muscle continue such that women reach their full breast and hip size and men their full shoulder and arm size in their early twenties. Throughout the twenties, physical strength and athletic skill increase, peaking at about age 30 and declining thereafter. All the body systems (e.g., the digestive, respiratory, circulatory, immune, and reproductive) reach peak levels of functioning in early adulthood. When physical growth stops, senescence, or age-related gradual physical decline, begins.

Generally, the first noticeable age-related changes occur in the skin. The connective tissue of the body, collagen, begins to decrease at about age 20, by about 1% each year. The skin thins and loses elasticity, making wrinkles visible, especially around the eyes. These age-related changes in the skin occur all over the body but are most noticeable on the face. At about 30, reductions in the number of pigment-producing cells in the head lead to the emergence of gray hair. At this age, hereditary baldness in men becomes apparent; hair also begins to thin because of hormonal changes and reductions in the blood supply to the skin.

There is a great deal of variability in the process and timing of aging. Connections between age and physical change in adulthood are loose and not as predictable as developments during earlier periods in life. Change varies widely across parts of the body, with some parts affected more than others. For example, a given individual's liver may age more quickly than his or her lungs, particularly if he or she consumes heavy amounts of alcohol. In addition, there are tremendous individual differences in the aging process. Some individuals age more quickly than others, because of genetic and lifestyle differences.

### **Cognitive Changes during Young Adulthood**

Most of us recognize the changes in cognition that children and adolescents undergo, but cognition continues to develop in young adulthood.

### **Postformal Reasoning: From Dualism to Relativism**

During young adulthood, many people progress beyond Jean Piaget's formal operational stage of reasoning to postformal reasoning, entailing a shift from dualistic thinking to relativistic thinking. Dualistic thinking entails a belief in absolutes regarding information, authority, and values. Individuals who think in dualistic terms believe that there are concrete right and wrong answers to every question. Adolescents, for example, tend to think in dualistic terms, always looking for the one "right" answer. With time, experience, and exposure to diversity, young adults transition to relativistic

thinking in which they realize that there are many perspectives on any given topic. Instead of one absolute truth, relativistic thinkers consider multiple truths, relative to given contexts and perspectives.

The postformal reasoner understands that an individual's perspective is one of many views and that there are few absolute answers; knowledge is not fixed, but changes. Therefore, postformal thinking is flexible, permitting us to attend to both the problem and its context, which is needed to adapt our cognitive problem-solving skills to real-world situations. Postformal reasoning combines objectivity, or abstract logic, and subjectivity, or situation and individual-based feelings and experiences. In young adulthood, we are confronted with problems in work, marriage, and family life that do not have single correct solutions. Yet how we handle these problems influences our future and life course. Mature thinking entails integrating logical and objective processing with sensitivity to context and personal perspective.

### **Dialectical Thought**

At its best, the cognitive flexibility of formal operational reasoning reaches the level of dialectical thought, an advanced level of reasoning. Dialectical reasoners understand that every idea also suggests the opposite idea. Dialectical reasoners are capable of considering both poles simultaneously, integrating and synthesizing them, and adapting to the resulting continual changes. Dialectical thinking entails integrating and synthesizing our experiences and ideas with the contradictions and inconsistencies we encounter, resulting in a constantly changing perspective of oneself and the world. It is understood that few questions have single unchangeable answers; however, unlike relativistic reasoners, dialectical reasoners recognize that although there are many perspectives or viewpoints on a given situation, some hold more merit or can be better justified than others and permit a more solid foundation for decision making.

Although we first become capable of postformal operational thinking in young adulthood, and many young adults transition to relativistic thinking, only some young adults develop the capacity for dialectical reasoning. Many people do not become dialectical thinkers until middle adulthood, if at all.

### **Effect of College on Cognition**

How does college influence thinking? With college education, people tend to become more tolerant of differing political, social, and religious views and more flexible in their attitudes and consideration of differing perspectives. Research suggests a progression by which the more exposure students have to college, the greater the level of cognitive development, from dualism, to relativism, and, in some individuals, dialecticism.

First-year college students, for example, tend to believe in absolute truth (dualistic thinking); they are often disappointed when professors answer their questions with lengthy generalities (i.e., "it depends on a variety of factors"). Then students enter a phase of extreme relativism in which they question the notion of a universal truth and become lost in a sea of perspectives, recognizing that there are multiple perspectives and each can hold merit, varying by context (relativistic thinking). Finally, students come to realize that although there are multiple perspectives, each can be weighed, and they differ in terms of overall merit. They become committed to particular values, can recognize multiple perspectives, and remain open-minded. True dialectical thought in which contradictions are synthesized into a complex and dynamic perspective occurs

for some, but not most, college students.

The intellectual challenge, social interactions, and exposure to a variety of perspectives through class discussions, peers, books, and professors that is typical of a college education stimulate students to consider new questions and thoughts and thus progress cognitively. Generally, the more years of college education and life experience one has, the more likely one is to demonstrate advanced levels of reasoning. However, young adults who are not enrolled in college may advance cognitively if they are confronted with similar opportunities to be intellectually challenged, engage in social interaction and issue-focused discussions, and be confronted with multiple perspectives.

### **Expertise and Cognition**

During the college years, we not only develop our thinking skills but also gain expertise in a given field. We choose a college major, or a field in which to specialize. As we take courses in that field, we develop a knowledge base that influences how we process information. This is also true regarding life experience, regardless of education. As we gain more experiences within a given context, we develop expertise, enabling us to think in more complex and efficient ways. Compared with novices, experts remember and reason more quickly and effectively. We develop more abstract ways of thinking about the material within our area of expertise, which helps us better organize and reason with it.

### **Moral and Self-Concept Development**

Changes in cognitive development and in social experience also bring changes in moral development. We encounter moral dilemmas throughout our daily life. As we advance cognitively, we think in new ways about our lives. Events in our lives, such as committing to a relationship, job promotions, psychotherapy, and serious illness, can lead to a disequilibrium, a mismatch between our perspective and experience, and stimulate reflection. Reflecting on these experiences leads to deeper convictions about our values, self, and place in the world.

### **Vocation**

Vocational exploration and choice begins in childhood, when we fantasize and imagine what different careers are like. In adolescence, we explore and evaluate potential careers in light of our skills and abilities, and choose educational experiences that prepare us for possible careers. In young adulthood, we narrow our options based on our experiences, interests, personalities, and opportunities. Our families and social contexts influence our vocational decisions in the sense that we tend to choose vocations similar to those to which we have been exposed. People who grow up in higher socioeconomic status homes and communities are more likely to select high status vocations such as lawyer, doctor, and scientist, whereas those who grow up in low-income homes and communities are more likely to consider less prestigious occupations. Those individuals who enter college often sample majors, to further exploration and determine where their interests lie. Then they choose a major and explore careers within that field. Some people may not choose an occupation until well after college. Occupational choice does not end with college graduation or entry into the first job. Unlike prior generations when adults could expect to put in a lifetime of work at the same company, retiring with a gold watch and a pension, most young adults can

expect to be employed in a range of positions, even changing occupations several times through life. The consideration of various careers and vocational growth and change continues throughout young adulthood.

Young adults who do not attend college have more limited vocational choices. Twenty-five percent of young people with a high school diploma have no plans to go to college. North American young adults who do not attend college often find it hard to find a job other than the one held as a student. Of American recent high school graduates who do not continue their education, about 20% are unemployed. North American young adults who are not college bound have few alternatives to turn to for vocational counseling, training, and job placement. Many flounder after high school graduation because most North American employers perceive high school graduates as poorly prepared for occupations. When high school graduates find work, they often are limited to low-paid and unskilled jobs.

### **Psychosocial Tasks of Young Adulthood**

Young adults are faced with several psychosocial tasks: solidifying autonomy, further shaping and committing to an identity, and developing a capacity for intimacy.

#### **Autonomy**

Autonomy refers to self-governance, the ability to make decisions independently of others. Although the development of autonomy is a lifelong process beginning in toddlerhood and becoming more obvious in adolescence, many people do not establish a full sense of autonomy until young adulthood, when education is complete, work life has begun, and the individual is living on his or her own, apart from parents and formal institutions. A sense of autonomy permits young adults to maintain close bonds with family members, seek family members' advice in problem solving, and ultimately make and carry out their own decisions based on considering their values and opinions. The task for young adults is to gain experience and feel more comfortable in exerting their autonomy.

#### **Identity**

Like autonomy, identity development begins in adolescence when individuals experiment with possibilities and explore alternatives in order to ultimately make enduring decisions in the areas of career, love, and worldview. Identity refers to a sense of self. In young adulthood, the individual has committed to an identity and the commitment strengthens. The identity also undergoes change and refinement as the young adult takes on new roles, such as worker, spouse, and parent.

#### **Intimacy**

According to life-span development theorist Erik Erikson, the primary psychosocial task of young adulthood is developing a capacity for intimacy. The development of intimacy refers to the ability to establish close, committed relationships with others that will last a lifetime and that will support the individual's maturing identity throughout life. Managing this task entails balancing the opposing needs for independence, or autonomy, and connections, or intimacy. We learn to experience intimacy by making and maintaining important attachments with others. Intimacy entails giving of oneself, openness, and vulnerability—sharing without asking what will be received in return.

## **Social Changes of Young Adulthood**

Young adulthood is a time of great social change—we progress to full independence and take on adult roles. As we take on adult roles, the impulsivity characteristic of adolescence and emerging adulthood wanes. For example, after the early twenties, particularly college graduation, substance use, such as alcohol and marijuana consumption, declines.

### **Friendship**

Friendship is important at all ages in life because it is a source of emotional support, positive feelings, and self-esteem. Young adulthood is a time in which we sort through and solidify existing friendships and make new ones. The overall absence of marital and family obligations permits young adults time to form extensive and varied social networks, forming friendships at college or at work; among political, cultural, athletic, or religious groups; and even on the commute to work or on vacation. Young adults have many social opportunities from which they select people who provide information, advice, companionship, and empathy.

Friends are usually similar in age, sex, and socioeconomic status. They also share common interests, experiences, and needs. Friends share their thoughts and feelings with one another, revealing themselves and making themselves vulnerable. In adult friendships, trust and loyalty are important. Friends often come and go throughout life, but some adult friendships continue for many years. Women are more likely to experience lifelong friendships and tend to see their friends more often than do men.

Women friends get together to talk. Male friends get together to do things such as play sports. Men are more likely to report barriers to intimacy such as feeling in competition with other male friends. Because they are free of marital and family obligations, open to new people, and exposed to many people, young adults in their early to middle twenties experience low levels of loneliness comparable to other ages in life. Young adults who live alone tend to form an extensive circle of friends and spend nearly as much time with friends as they do alone.

As young adults enter the thirties, family obligations and changing lifestyles cause some friendships to intensify and others wane. A lack of time, caused by juggling work, home life, and child care, makes maintaining friendships more challenging. Because we tend to form friendships with people who are similar to us, a change in marital status or parenting status can change the dynamics of friendship. Some friends, therefore, drift apart, and new friendships are made based on similarities such as children, occupation, and neighborhood. Despite the changes, most people report a few lifelong friends.

### **Sexuality**

In young adulthood, sexual activity increases in prevalence, with fewer people remaining virgins and more people regularly engaging in intercourse. Sexual activity increases through the twenties as people marry or cohabit. At around age 30, sexual activity begins to decline, despite few changes in hormonal levels. The decline in sexual activity is associated with the multiple roles and demands of adult life, work, family, and child care.

Males and females display a similar pattern of sexual activation, arousal, release through orgasm, refractory, and recovery. For males, sexual arousal and excitement can occur very quickly in response to many stimuli, in addition to or in lieu of an arousing partner. Over the course of young adulthood and particularly toward the end of young adulthood, males may notice a gradual increase in refractory period and slower arousal, requiring additional stimulation and additional time between arousal and full erection, erection and ejaculation, and orgasm and recovery.

Generally speaking, in females, sexual arousal, excitement, and orgasm take longer than in males. As females progress through young adulthood, arousal and orgasm become more likely. In adolescence, girls are often advised to protect their virginity and may be conditioned to resist their own desire, and instead emphasize their control over sexual experiences. In young adulthood, many women explore their sexuality through multiple partners and different sexual experiences, becoming more comfortable with and appreciating their sexuality, and experiencing orgasm on a regular basis.

Like friends, we tend to choose partners to date, cohabit, or marry based on similarity. Our partners tend to be similar in age (within 5 years), education, ethnicity, and often religion. We tend to meet our partners for long-lasting relationships through introductions by family or friends, at work, school, or through activities based on common interests.

### **Cohabitation**

Cohabitation refers to the lifestyle of unmarried couples who live together, sharing intimacy, a sexual relationship, and a residence. Cohabitation is more common today than ever before, especially among young adults. For example, more than one half of all women aged 25 to 40 in the United States have lived with a man outside of marriage. Many couples view cohabitation as an opportunity to test the relationship and get used to living together. Others view it as an alternative to marriage, a long-term arrangement with the rewards of companionship while maintaining independence. Homosexual adults often find no alternative to cohabitation because few states recognize homosexual relationships in formal partnerships. Increasingly, cohabitation includes children.

### **Marriage**

Young adults are waiting longer than ever before to marry. The overall rate of first marriages in young adulthood is the lowest it has been in 50 years. Sixty percent of young adults aged 20 to 30 in the United States are not yet married, and 3% are already divorced. More young adults choose to remain single, cohabit, and, after divorce, do not remarry.

The transition to marriage itself is a challenge. The transition to marriage entails a great deal of work in defining the relationship and each person's roles within the relationship. For example, negotiating the marital relationship requires deciding who does what in completing the myriad details of daily life. Who will cook? What will be eaten? When is leisure time and what is on the agenda? How will the household and financial tasks be decided? These decisions may be particularly challenging for today's young adults and therefore make the transition to marriage more difficult because of changes in gender roles and the tendency of young adults to live farther away from family members (and

thus have fewer sources of support and guidance) than prior generations. Cohabitation before marriage may make marriage less of a turning point; however, many young adults report transitional stress despite prior cohabitation.

Generally, spouses with similar backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, education, religion, and age tend to report higher levels of marital satisfaction. Overall stability in other areas of life, such as stable financial and employment status, are also associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. Although similarity in interests and in background is ideal, most successful married couples share some critical values and interests and learn to compromise, adjust, and agree to disagree about others.

The maturity of the partners also contributes to the overall success of a marriage. Generally, the younger the bride and groom, the less successful the marriage. A full sense of identity is needed before one can establish intimacy. Because many young adults in their early twenties are still determining and solidifying their identity, shared intimacy, compromise, and growth as a couple are difficult. Before a full sense of identity is achieved, passion may be valued over the true predictors of marital success: openness, trust, loyalty, intimacy, and commitment. Young adults who married early may find that their values and roles diverge with those of their spouses as they mature. Those who wait until their late twenties and thirties to marry are less likely to divorce.

### **Divorce and Remarriage**

About one half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. Most divorces occur within 5 to 10 years of marriage. Divorce itself is a stressful experience for men and women, who both show signs of depression and anxiety, which typically declines within 2 years. Men show a more positive and quick adjustment when they remarry shortly afterward. Most women prefer their new single lives over unhappy marriages, despite increases in loneliness and reduced income. However, some women, particularly those who were in traditional marriages and who highly identified with their roles as wives, find divorce particularly challenging and are likely to remain anxious and depressed over time, experience drops in self-esteem, and tend to form other unsuccessful romantic relationships. Overall, the economic and psychological health of divorced women are enhanced by career advancement through education and job training and social support from family and friends.

After divorcing, two thirds of men and more than one half of women remarry. Typically, remarriage occurs within 4 years of divorce. Men remarry more quickly than do women. Remarriages face many of the same challenges of first marriages, with higher rates of divorce in the first few years. The practical reasons that often influence second marriages, such as financial security, social acceptance, relief from loneliness, and help in raising children, may not provide a basis for a solid marriage. Also, after a failed marriage, people may be more likely to view divorce as an acceptable solution when marital difficulties resurface. Finally, stepfamilies are stressful; children from prior marriages place stress on new marriages. Although the first few years of second marriages are at higher risk for divorce than first marriages (about 7% higher), afterward the divorce rates are about the same.

### **Parenthood**

Recent generations of young adults have come to recognize parenthood as a choice. Some adults choose to remain childless and, because of changing cultural values, are

less likely to experience social criticism and rejection than those of prior generations.

The physiological ability to produce children, reproductive capacity, is highest in the early twenties and declines with age. Females' ovulation is most consistent in young adulthood and becomes more erratic in the mid- to late thirties. Males, on the other hand, experience little to no change in sperm production throughout young adulthood. Despite their reproductive capacity, young adults are having children later in life than ever before. Most births occur to women older than 25. The number of women who give birth in their thirties is higher than ever. Families also are having fewer children, with the average number per couple at 1.8.

Young adults note many advantages of parenthood, particularly opportunities for love and change: the giving and receiving of warmth and affection, experiencing the stimulation and fun that children add to life, and the growth and learning opportunities that add meaning to life. They tend to report the sense of accomplishment and creativity from helping children grow and from someone to carry on after one's death as other advantages of parenthood. Parenthood is also an additional marker of adulthood; some young adults view parenthood as an opportunity to learn to be less selfish and to learn to sacrifice as well as to become accepted as a responsible and mature member of the community.

However, young adults also recognize that parenthood entails disadvantages, such as a loss of freedom, financial strain, and worries over children's health and well-being. Parenthood is associated with a decline in marital satisfaction; couples have less time to spend together and experience more stress and sleep loss. Parenthood is associated with a shift toward more traditional roles in the relationship such that the mother usually takes a larger role in child care. Women who have been very active in their careers before parenthood may find this transition particularly challenging and may experience a greater decline in marital satisfaction and mental health than men.

Couples who postpone parenthood until their late twenties and thirties tend to experience a less stressful and easier transition. Couples who have achieved some of their occupational goals and have acquired life experience and maturity navigate new parenthood more successfully and with less of a decline in marital satisfaction. Men in their late twenties and thirties tend to participate more actively in child care, and women this age are more likely to encourage their husbands to share in the housework and child care. Despite this, in most families, women manage most of the parenting, caregiving, and household responsibilities, which can lead to fatigue and stress and sometimes be a detriment to their careers.

## **Summary**

The twenties and early thirties, young adulthood, is a time of biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and social change. Our body reaches the peak of maturation and begins senescence. Our mind undergoes further development, permitting us to think in new ways. Young adults become more comfortable asserting their autonomy, further refine their identities, and develop a capacity for intimacy. Young adulthood is also a time in which we begin to make decisions about relationships. More young adults choose to remain single, cohabitate, and, after divorce, do not remarry. Those who marry do so at later ages than ever before, and about one half divorce. Likewise, young adults are waiting longer to become parents. In all, it appears that the social changes of young adulthood, the transition to marriage and parenthood, are delayed among today's

young adults, as compared with prior generations. The nature of young adulthood itself is undergoing change as we proceed into the new millennium.

- young adults
- parenting
- marital satisfaction
- transition to marriage
- intimacy
- marriage
- cohabitation

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