

**Module *One***  
**Navigating**  
***Emerging Adulthood***

**BRIDGE**

BUILDING RELIGIOUS INCLUSION,  
DIVERSITY, AND GENERATIONAL EQUITY

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## Introduction to Module *One*.

# What Are the *Stories* We Tell About Young Adults?

There is a plethora of think pieces that try to capture an entire generation of young adults with pithy titles and easily digestible principles: Young adults are entitled; They are spiritual but not religious deists who utilize religion for its principles of kindness; They are lonely; They are militant atheists; They are snowflakes who are too worried about safety to take any risks; Young adults are lonely because they are constantly texting.

Although it is beneficial to try to understand the broader generational trends, it is crucial not to view young adults as a homogenous group. Much of the popular literature on young adults garner clicks at the expense of underselling the truth. Often, the stereotypes have just enough truth to appear believable and more than enough falsity to be dangerous. However, when religious leaders stop talking about young adults and start talking *with* them, they might immensely help this complex and diverse generation. There is a difference between knowing about young adults and entering into life with them with patient listening and empathy.

The question we might ask instead is this:

What are the stories young adults tell about *themselves*?

When we take the time to listen to young adults, we might understand how they are intentionally navigating this unique stage of life.

This module will help you understand the unique stage of life that is sometimes called “emerging adulthood.”

# ▶ Watch: Three Questions That Change Every Young Person

Kara Powell at *TheoEd*

## Discussion Guide

Kara E. Powell is chief of leadership formation at Fuller, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), and professor of youth and family ministry. Prior to coming to Fuller, she was an assistant professor of youth ministry and practical theology at Azusa Pacific University.

In this twenty minute video, Kara Powell lifts up three questions that teenagers today (and all of us) are asking and provides insights for how church leaders and parents can address these questions.



Topic *One*  
What is  
*Emerging Adulthood?*

"I'm an adult, but not like a *real* adult." "I'm in the process of adulting." "Adulting is rough."

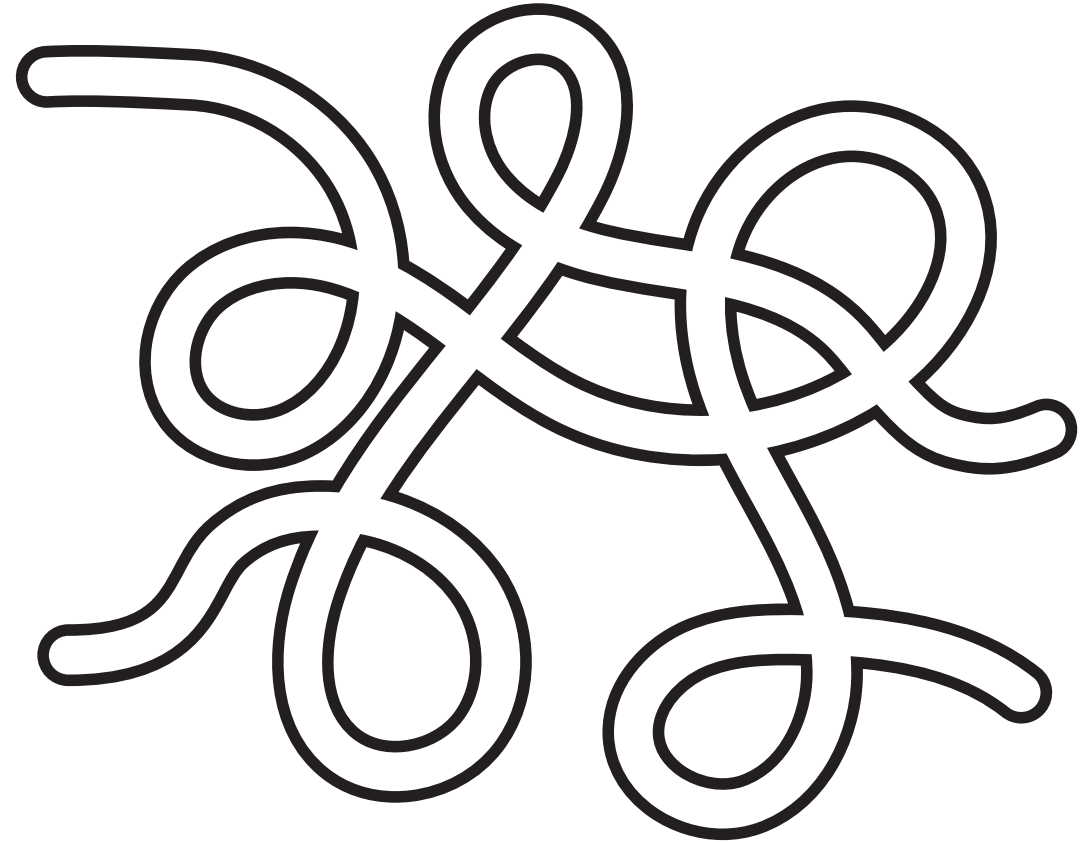
Today's young people are facing challenges unlike any other generation in the history of the United States. Fifty years ago, the ideal path from adolescence into adulthood was predictable—young persons finished high school, moved through college or career training, got married, had children, and secured a stable job. All of this took place before the age of 25.

Today, this 'traditional' path into adulthood is the exception as many 25-year-olds are finishing degrees or struggling to find a job lead. Marriage is a distant aspiration and child rearing is best relegated to one's thirties, if at all. Adulthood, in other words, waits on the other side of the woods, but the traditional trail to reach it has become so overgrown that it can feel impassable.

In the past, people used to think that life would follow a straightforward path: grow up, go to college, find a partner, have kids, and settle into a steady job. This idea shaped many church programs, too, like youth groups, college groups, and groups for young singles and married couples.

But today's emerging adults are taking a different journey. They might take gap years, spend more time in college, switch jobs often, put off getting married or having kids, or decide not to have kids at all.

This new way of doing things is less about following a strict timeline and more about exploring different options and finding what works best for each person.



# Arnett's Five Markers of *Emerging Adulthood*

[Jeffrey Arnett](#) argues that young adults (18–29ish) are actually in a new stage of life that he calls “emerging adulthood.” Arnett’s research argued for a new developmental phase, as many of the norms that guide young adults are being reformed or discarded completely. Cultural factors like longer and widespread education, postponed marriage and parenthood due to increased women’s rights and the sexual revolution, and unstable work opportunities due to the technology revolution have all shifted the ways that young people navigate the world.

Some cynically propose that young adults are lazy, coddled, or avoiding adulthood; in reality, they are growing up slower, caught in-between adolescent and adult, as they gradually accept more responsibility, financial independence, and autonomy apart from their primary caregivers.



## IDENTITY EXPLORATIONS

- “Who am I?”
- Trying out various life options, especially in love, work, and purpose.

## FEELING IN-BETWEEN

- Outgrown adolescence, but not yet adult.
- Lack of independence (financial, relational, and responsibility).

## OPTIMISM/ POSSIBILITIES

- Contemplating a wide range of possibilities.
- Hoping to flourish and achieve goals.
- Unparalleled opportunity to transform lives.

## INSTABILITY

- Making important decisions about career, schooling, belonging, and relationships.
- Life is rich, but intense.
- Life is remarkably unstable in love, work, and place of residence.

## SELF-FOCUS

- Often free from relational obligations and commitments.
- Freedom to make decisions with decreasing pressure from external influences.

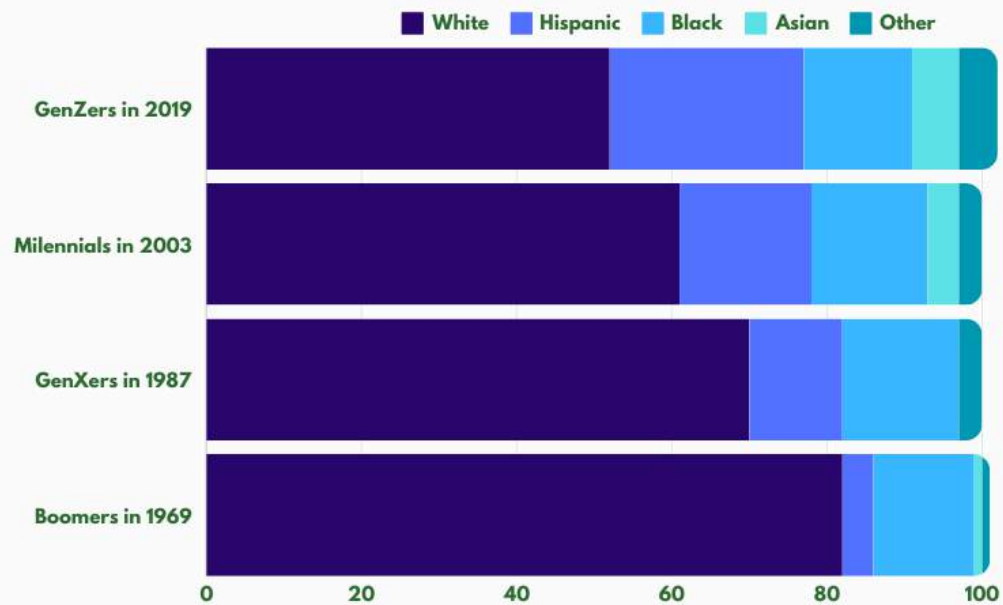
 **Watch: Why does it take so long to grow up today?**

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett | TEDxPSU



In this ten-minute video, Jeffrey Arnett explores four sociological factors that are contributing to longer periods of "growing up": The Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement, which collectively prolonged education, delayed marriage, and altered career pursuits. While older adults criticize this delay, waiting longer generally results in better partners and parents, making the twenties an ideal time for unique experiences.

# Generational *Diversity*



The diversity within emerging adulthood cautions researchers from making broad statements about emerging adults. While there are markers and cultural trends in emerging adults' lives and spirituality, they often overshadow the immense diversity of beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. To talk about emerging adults as a monolith is misleading, as current generations of young adults are the most diverse in the history of the world. There are trends, but there are no rules. Therefore, to talk about a young adult is to talk about one young adult who might differ greatly from neighboring young adults.

Amid such diversity, not everyone between the ages of 18 and 29 will experience the journey to adulthood in the same way. Current research explores how emerging adulthood is nuanced by race, gender, class, and other identity markers. For example, some ethnic groups will retain strong commitments to marriage, or young people from collectivist cultures may remain family-focused rather than self-focused.

Moreover, economic insecurity and societal changes influence the aspirations, beliefs, and behaviors of working-class demographics as they grapple with feelings of limitation in their identities and futures. For example, economic necessity might compel some individuals in their late twenties to work full-time to support their families.

While some young persons will likely not identify as “emerging adults,” there is still a broader cultural context of “emerging adulthood” that shapes young peoples’ experiences.

Thus, there are no universal problems and no universal solutions to the struggles of emerging adults. The obstacles and difficulties faced by this diverse cohort can differ significantly depending on their socio-cultural backgrounds, current life stage, and one’s cultural context.

Recognizing unequal opportunities among young adults in their twenties highlights the significance of understanding how the choices they make within their available options significantly impact the diverse paths they navigate through emerging adulthood and beyond.

## questions for *reflection*



[View more by Monkey Business Images](#)

- How has “adulthood” changed since you were a young adult? If you are a young adult, what characteristics would you use to describe this phase of life?
- How do Arnett’s five characteristics of “emerging adulthood” (feeling in-between, instability, identity exploration, self focus, feelings of possibilities) ring true? Consider the influence of societal expectations, cultural differences, and economic conditions on these experiences. If you don’t resonate with the characteristics, why not?

Topic *Two*  
*Instability* in  
*Emerging Adulthood.*

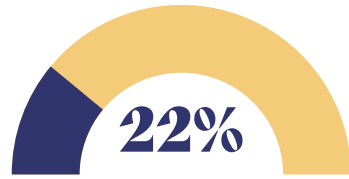
# Instability

Growing up can be pretty scary, even for the most confident young people. Many are dealing with mental health issues because of frequent job changes, moving around, and changes in their support systems. As they gain independence, they have to handle new challenges like finding stable housing, managing money, schoolwork, relationships, and career planning, which can be really overwhelming. Most young adults just want stability, a sense of community, and, if we're honest, the financial security to buy a house.



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# Mental *Health*



About 22% of emerging adults fulfill the criteria for an anxiety disorder, while the same percentage meets the criteria for a substance use disorder ([Tanner, 2015](#)).

One out of every three individuals aged 13-25 frequently feels completely isolated ([Springtide, 2020](#)).



It's no surprise that mental health issues are more common among young adults than any other age group. The brain keeps developing into the mid-20s, which means young adults can struggle with things like risk assessment, delayed gratification, rational thinking, planning ahead, and controlling emotions.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems for young adults, with around 22% dealing with anxiety and the same percentage facing substance use issues.

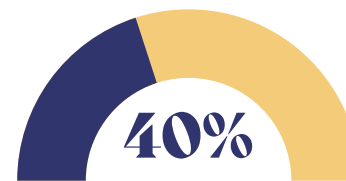
This period also sees a higher risk of depression, which can lead to trouble in relationships, substance abuse, and setbacks in school or work.

# Economic *Instability*

Young adults often struggle to land steady jobs. Even when things are looking up with low overall unemployment rates of around 5%, the unemployment rates for folks in their twenties can be double the national average. It gets even worse in economic downturns, hitting mind-boggling levels like the 50% unemployment.

Young adults might be cheaper to hire, but they're also greener, lacking the experience and job-specific skills that older workers bring. In many developed countries, tight labor laws often favor older employees, making it harder for young adults to break in.

Nowadays, the many high paying jobs require extra schooling. That leaves a lot of folks without a degree stuck in lower-paying service jobs. It's a tough spot because even if you do land a gig that feels right, your interests can change over time, and the hunt for that perfect fit keeps going.



40% of young adults will move back in with their parents during the years from age 18–25 .

**A typical young adult will hold about 8.2 jobs between 18–33!**

# Educational *Challenges*

Of those who enroll in a four-year institution, only about half graduate in four years



The average cost of higher education has tripled in the last twenty years leading to crippling debt. The average student debt is about \$35,000.

Going to college is a big deal for most young Americans these days. It's a chance to dig into subjects that high school barely touched on, to try out different majors, and to figure out what really clicks for them.

Sure, it's about getting ready for a job, but it's also about having a blast, making new friends, and getting fired up by cool professors and fresh ideas.

College is one way to learn to stand on your own two feet and make choices that set the stage for your future. It's like a bubble of freedom where you can test-drive different versions of yourself without all the responsibilities of full-on adulthood.

However, college is not always easy—many students have to work while they study, and not everyone walks away with a degree. And those who leave college before getting a degree can be left with inordinate amounts of debt.

# Relationship *Challenges*

## *Parental Relationship*

Young adults often go through a big shift in how they see their parents as they strive for independence. It starts in their teens but really kicks into gear when they move out on their own, taking charge of their lives. They get more freedom to decide how much they share with their parents, which changes things.

Even though they're becoming more independent, many find their relationships with their parents get better as they start seeing each other more as equals and open up about life. Of course, there are still boundaries—they'll hold back on some things to avoid drama, and parents learn not to pry too much. For those whose parents split up, this time can bring up old feelings, maybe leading to healing or just more resentment.

No matter their family background, how they feel about their parents runs deep, from love and gratitude to frustration and disappointment. These shifts really shape who they become and how they handle relationships as adults.



## *Romantic Relationships*

For teens, dating is all about having fun, feeling that first rush of romantic love, and maybe some sexual experimentation. As young adults, dating can get more serious and intimate, with a focus on emotional and physical connection, and relationships tend to last longer, sometimes even leading to living together. While teen relationships are all about enjoying the moment, young adults start looking for deeper connections and thinking about long-term compatibility with their partners.

## questions for *reflection*



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- Where do you notice instability in emerging adulthood (characterized by frequent changes in jobs, education, and living situations, impact the mental health and overall well-being of young adults)?
- Have you considered how the church can help young adults as they seek stable employment, complete their education, navigate housing challenges, and build or strengthen relationships?

Topic *Three*  
Ministry *Resources*

# Springtide Research

Over the course of these modules, you will often read about the Springtide Research Institute. Encouraged to understand and engage with the experiences of young people, Springtide Research conducts both quantitative research through surveys involving thousands of young individuals and qualitative research through interviews with hundreds.

Springtide Research "equips those who care about young people to care better."

Founded in 2019, the Springtide Research Institute has been publishing annual reports on the state of religion and young people since 2020.



## ▶ Watch: Helping Gen Z Flourish

In this thirty-minute video, Josh Packard, the former director of Springtide Research, shows what hundreds of interviews and over 20,000 survey responses from Gen Z can teach us about engaging effectively, creating meaning, and fostering a sense of belonging to help today's students thrive.

[Springtide Research at the Heterodox Academy](#)





## **Read: What Does a Flourishing GenZer look like?**

Despite so much instability and challenges, many Gen Zers report that they are flourishing, but what does it mean for a Gen Zer to be "flourishing"? Springtide Research data highlights the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors common among Gen Zers who identify as "flourishing a lot." These individuals don't experience all these aspects simultaneously, but collectively, these traits paint a picture of what flourishing can look like.

Read more [here](#).

# Conversation *Cards*

In each module, we will provide suggestions for engaging in conversations with young adults rather than talking about them. In this module, we begin by exploring the basics of young adulthood, the challenges they face in navigating this stage of life, and ways adults can better support them.



[yacobchuk](#) from [Getty Images](#)

# CONVERSATION CARDS

What's it like to be a young adult today?

What's something most adults don't know about people your age, but you think they should know?

Tell me about a typical day in your life. What do you do, where do you go, who are you around?

Describe some of the hardest or more challenging parts of your life? What is stressful, hard, or confusing to you?

How can our church be supporting you right now? Where do you think we're doing well? In what ways are we missing it?

What stories and stereotypes of young adults make you most frustrated? Why?