



H.O.P.E.

Helping Our Parents Endure

HOPEforNutley.org

NEWSLETTER



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 44 Why Millenials Can't Grow Up

Parenting has caused my psychotherapy clients to crash land.

Amy (not her real name) sat in my office and wiped her streaming tears on her sleeve, refusing the scratchy tissues I'd offered. "I'm thinking about just applying for a Ph.D. program after I graduate because I have no idea what I want to do." Amy had mild depression growing up, and it worsened during freshman year of college when she moved from her parents' house to her dorm. It became increasingly difficult to balance school, socializing, laundry, and a part-time job. She finally had to dump the part-time job, was still unable to do laundry, and often stayed up until 2 a.m. trying to complete homework because she didn't know how to manage her time without her parents keeping track of her schedule.

I suggested finding a job after graduation, even if it's only temporary. She cried harder at this idea. "So, becoming an adult is just really scary for you?" I asked. "Yes," she sniffled. Amy is 30 years old.

Her case is becoming the norm for twenty- to thirtysomethings I see in my office as a psychotherapist. I've had at least 100 college and grad students like Amy crying on my couch because breaching adulthood is too overwhelming.

In 2010, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett coined the term "emerging adulthood" to describe extended adolescence that delays adulthood.* People in their 20s no longer view themselves as adults. There are various plausible reasons for this, including longer life spans, helicopter parenting, and fewer high paying jobs that allow new college grads to be financially independent at a young age.

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Millennials do have to face some issues that previous generations did not. A college degree is now the career equivalent of what a high school degree used to be. This

increases the pressure on kids to go to college and makes the process more competitive. The sluggish economy no longer yields a wealth of jobs upon graduation.

Rates of depression are soaring among millennials in college. A 2012 study by the American College Counseling Association reported a 16 percent increase in mental-health visits since 2000 and a significant increase in crisis response over the past five years. According to recent studies, 44 percent of college students experienced symptoms of depression, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death among college students.

It seems as if every article about millennials claims that these kids must all have narcissistic personality disorder. It's easy to generalize an entire population by its collective Facebook statuses. However, narcissism is not Amy's problem, or the main problem with millennials.

The big problem is not that they think too highly of themselves. Their bigger challenge is conflict negotiation, and they often are unable to think for themselves. The overinvolvement of helicopter parents prevents children from learning how to grapple with disappointments on their own. If parents are navigating every minor situation for their kids, kids never learn to deal with conflict on their own. Helicopter parenting has caused these kids to crash land.

The *Huffington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* have reported that millennials are now bringing their parents to job interviews, and companies such as LinkedIn and Google are hosting "take your parents to work day." Parents went from strapping their kids into a Baby Björn carrier to tying their kids' wing-tips.

A 2013 study in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* found that college students who experienced helicopter-parenting reported higher levels of depression and use of antidepressant medications. The researchers suggest that intrusive parenting interferes with the development of autonomy and competence. So helicopter parenting leads to increased dependence and decreased ability to complete tasks without parental supervision.

Amy, like many millennials, was groomed to be an academic overachiever, but she became, in reality, an emotional under-achiever. Amy did not have enough coping skills to navigate normal life stressors—how do I get my laundry and my homework done in the same day; how do I tell my roommate not to watch TV without headphones at 3 a.m.?—without her parents' constant advice or help.

A generation ago, my college peers and I would buy a pint of ice cream and down a shot of peach schnapps (or two) to process a breakup. Now some college students feel suicidal after the breakup of a four-month relationship. Either ice cream no longer has the same magical healing properties, or the ability to address hardships is lacking in many members of this generation.

The era of instant gratification has led to a decrease in what therapists call “frustration tolerance.” This is how we handle upsetting situations, allow for ambiguity, and learn to navigate the normal life circumstances of breakups, bad grades, and layoffs. When we lack frustration tolerance, moderate sadness may lead to suicidality in the self-soothingly challenged.

Maybe millennials are narcissistic, like most 14-year-olds are. And maybe they will outgrow their narcissism later in life if 30 is the new 18. We don't have the data on what millennials will be like when they're 40. But more importantly, they need to learn how to cope.

Amy is still figuring out how to grow up. After a few months of therapy and medication to stabilize her depression, she started exercising to help relieve anxiety. She started online dating, something she found daunting before, and got a girlfriend. She started applying to grad schools but also made a list of places she wants to apply for jobs. Amy still has no idea what she wants to do when she grows up, but she's a little less frightened of it now.

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