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What Psychologists Want Today's Young Adults to Know

The generation entering adulthood now faces novel, sometimes debilitating, challenges. Experts offer tools to navigate a “quarterlife crisis.”



Credit...Matt Chase



By [Dani Blum](#), Published July 29, 2022 Updated Aug. 15, 2022

Satya Doyle Byock, a 39-year-old therapist, noticed a shift in tone over the past few years in the young people who streamed into her office: frenetic, frazzled clients in their late teens, 20s and 30s. They were unnerved and unmoored, constantly feeling like something was wrong with them.

“Crippling anxiety, depression, anguish, and disorientation are effectively the norm,” Ms. Byock writes in the introduction of her new book,

“Quarterlife: The Search for Self in Early Adulthood.” The book uses anecdotes from Ms. Byock’s practice to outline obstacles faced by today’s young adults — roughly between the ages of 16 and 36 — and how to deal with them.

Just like midlife, quarterlife can bring its own crisis — trying to separate from your parents or caregivers and forge a sense of self is a struggle. But the generation entering adulthood now faces novel, sometimes debilitating, challenges.

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Many young people today struggle to afford college or decide not to attend, and the “existential crisis” that used to hit after graduation descends earlier and earlier, said Angela Neal-Barnett, a psychology professor at Kent State University who has studied anxiety in young people. “We’ve been constrained by this myth that you graduate from college and you start your life,” she said. Without the social script previous generations followed — graduate college, marry, raise a family — Ms. Byock said her young clients often flailed around in a state of [extended adolescence](#).

Indeed, according to a recent online survey by Credit Karma, a personal finance platform, [nearly one-third](#) of Gen Z adults are living with their parents or other relatives and plan to stay there. Many find themselves so mired in [day-to-day monetary](#) concerns, from the relentless crush of student debt to the swelling costs of everything, that they feel unable to consider what they want for themselves long term. That paralysis is often exacerbated by mounting [climate anxiety](#) and the slog of a multiyear pandemic that has left many young people mourning family and friends, or [smaller losses](#) like a conventional college experience or the traditions of starting a first job.

Experts said those entering adulthood need clear guidance for how to make it out of the muddle. Here are their top pieces of advice on how to navigate a quarterlife crisis today.

Take yourself seriously.

“Set aside time to be selfish,” said Dr. Neal-Barnett, who is also the author of “Soothe Your Nerves: The Black Woman’s Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety, Panic and Fear.” She recommends scheduling reminders to check in with yourself, roughly every three months, to examine where you are in your life and whether you feel stuck or dissatisfied. From there, she said, you can start to

identify aspects of your life that you want to change.

Tips for Parents to Help Their Struggling Teens

Are you concerned for your teen? If you worry that your teen might be [experiencing depression or suicidal thoughts](#), there are [a few things](#) you can do to help. Dr. Christine Moutier, the chief medical officer of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suggests these steps:

Look for changes. Notice shifts in sleeping and eating habits in your teen, as well as any issues he or she might be having [at school](#), such as slipping grades. Watch for angry outbursts, mood swings and a loss of interest in activities they used to love. Stay attuned to their social media posts as well.

Keep the lines of communication open. If you notice something unusual, start a conversation. But your child [might not want to talk](#). In that case, offer him or her help in finding a trusted person to share their struggles with instead.

Seek out professional support. A child [who expresses suicidal thoughts](#) may benefit from a mental health evaluation and treatment. You can start by speaking with your child’s pediatrician or a mental health professional.

In an emergency: If you have immediate concern for your child’s safety, do not leave him or her alone. Call a suicide prevention lifeline. Lock up any potentially lethal objects. Children who [are actively trying to harm themselves](#) should be taken to the closest emergency room.

Resources If you’re worried about someone in your life and don’t know how to help, these resources can offer guidance: 1. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: [Text or call 988](#) 2. The Crisis Text Line: Text TALK to 741741 3. [The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

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Ms. Byock said to pay attention to what you're naturally curious about, and not to dismiss your interests as stupid or futile. Maybe there is a place you have always wanted to visit, or a language you want to learn. Maybe you want to take up a new hobby or research a part of your family history. "Start to give your own inner life the respect that it's due," she said.

However, there is a difference between self-interest and self-indulgence, Ms. Byock said. Investigating and interrogating who you are takes work. "It's not just about choosing your labels and being done," she said.

Be patient.

"Some people are still locked into the view that you turn into an adult when you're 18, and that you should be all ready to go," said Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a researcher at Clark University who studies the psychology of young adulthood. "I don't know if that ever made sense, but it certainly doesn't now."

Quarterlifers may feel pressure to race through each step of their lives, Ms. Byock said, craving the sense of achievement that comes with completing a task. But learning to listen to oneself is a lifelong process. Instead of searching for quick fixes, she said, young adults should think about longer-term goals: starting therapy that stretches beyond a handful of sessions, building healthy nutrition and exercise habits, working toward self-reliance.

"I know that seems sort of absurdly large and huge in scope," she said. "But it's allowing ourselves to meander and move through life, versus just 'Check the boxes and get it right.'"

Ask yourself what's missing.

Ms. Byock also said to take stock of your day-to-day life and notice where things are missing. She groups quarterlifers into two categories: "stability types" and "meaning types."

"Stability types" are seen by others as solid and stable. They prioritize a sense of security, succeed in their careers and may pursue building a family. "But there's a sense of emptiness and a sense of faking it," she said. "They think this couldn't possibly be all that life is about."

On the other end of the spectrum, there are "meaning types" who are typically artists; they have intense creative passions but have a hard time dealing with day-to-day tasks, Ms. Byock said. "These are folks for whom doing what society expects of you is so overwhelming and so discordant with their own sense of self that they seem to constantly be floundering," she said. "They can't quite figure it out."

But quarterlife is about becoming a whole person, Ms. Byock said, and both groups need to absorb each other's characteristics to balance themselves out. Stability types need to think about how to give their lives a sense of passion and purpose. And meaning types need to find security, perhaps by starting with a consistent routine that can both anchor and unlock creativity.

Channel Yoda.

That process of cobbling together self-understanding can seem pointless in an unstable world, Ms. Byock acknowledged, and many young people are overwhelmed by the current state of the world.

She turns to perhaps the prototypical inspiration for staying calm in chaos: Yoda. The Jedi master is "one of the few images we have of what feeling quiet amid extreme pain and apocalypse can look like," Ms. Byock said. Even when there seems to be little stability externally, she said, quarterlifers can try to create their own steadiness.

Dr. Gregory Scott Brown, a psychiatrist and author of "The Self-Healing Mind," said establishing habits that help you ground yourself as a young adult is critical because transitional periods make us more susceptible to [burnout](#). He

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suggests building a practical tool kit of self-care practices, like regularly taking stock of what you're grateful for, taking [controlled breaths](#) and maintaining healthy nutrition and exercise routines. "These are techniques that can help you find clarity," he said.

Don't be afraid to make a big change.

It's important to identify what aspects of your life you have the power to alter, Dr. Brown said. "You can't change an annoying boss," he said, "but you might be able to plan a career change." That's easier said than done, he acknowledged, and young adults should weigh the risks of continuing to live in their status quo — staying in their hometown, or lingering in a career that doesn't excite them — with the potential benefits of trying something new.

Despite its confusion and constraints, quarterlife is typically "the freest stage of the whole life span," Dr. Arnett said. Young adults may have an easier time moving to a new city or starting a new job than their older counterparts would.

Know when to call your parents — and when to call on yourself.

Quarterlife is about the journey from dependence to independence, Ms. Byock said — learning to rely on ourselves, after, for some, growing up in

a culture of [helicopter parenting](#) and hands-on family dynamics.

But even if you're still living in your childhood bedroom, Ms. Byock said, there are ways your relationship with your parents can evolve, helping you carve out more independence. That can involve talking about family history and past memories or asking questions about your parents' upbringing. "You're transitioning the relationship from one of hierarchy to one of friendship," she said. "It isn't just about moving away or getting physical distance."

Every quarterlifer typically has a moment when they know they need to step away from their parents and to face obstacles on their own, Ms. Byock said. For her, the realization came after a breakup in her mid-20s. She called her mother sobbing in the middle of the night, and her mother offered to visit her and help her through. Ms. Byock was tempted, but declined. "It felt so good to have her offer to come to my rescue, but I also knew in that same moment that I had to do this by myself," Ms. Byock said. That doesn't mean you can't, or shouldn't, still depend on your parents in moments of crisis, she said. "I don't think it's just about never needing one's parents again," she said. "But it's about doing the subtle work within oneself to know: This is a time I need to stand on my own."

Audio produced by Kate Winslett.

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A Mental Health Crisis Among Our Youth

Mental health issues among children and teens in the United States are on the rise. Learn more about this worrisome trend from various angles.

- **Turning to TikTok:** Teens are using the popular app to diagnose themselves with mental illnesses. [Some are embracing ineffective or inappropriate treatments.](#)
- **The Toll of Covid-19:** During the pandemic, the number of [children](#) and [adolescents](#) needing urgent mental health care [spiked](#).
- **Rise in Suicide Among Black Youth:** A recent study uncovered a sharp rise in suicide rates among Black youth, [especially among girls](#).
- **Prevention:** With more young people reporting suicidal thoughts, concerned parents and loved-ones [are looking for ways to help](#). [Here are some suggestions](#).
- **Advocacy Efforts:** To contain the crisis, teens [are organizing to improve the mental health services](#) available to them.
- **The Suicide Website:** An online platform providing directions on how to die [is linked to a trail of deaths](#) among young people, a Times investigation found.