What is this research about?
The period between adolescence and adulthood, called emerging adulthood, is a difficult time for many young people. Emerging adults with problematic substance use face particular challenges, including a higher risk of mental illness and worse treatment outcomes. In this study, researchers asked emerging adults seeking substance use treatment to describe their criteria for adulthood, their transition to adulthood, and the relationship between this transition and their substance use.

What did the researchers do?
Researchers recruited 31 emerging adults from a substance use treatment program in Toronto. These youth completed a short questionnaire and participated in a 90-minute interview. The interview questions asked youth about their transition to adulthood, and what characteristics were necessary for someone to be considered an adult. Youth also commented on how their substance use impacted their transition.

What did the researchers find?
There were several key findings:

What you need to know:
Emerging adulthood is a difficult time for many young people, especially those with substance use problems. In this study, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with emerging adults seeking substance use treatment to better understand their views on adulthood and substance use. Many of these youth saw a direct connection between their transition to adulthood and their substance use. Most youth recognized that their substance use prevented them from becoming an adult. But many also saw their substance use treatment as promoting maturity by increasing self-reflection and personal development.

- About two thirds of youth considered themselves to be “adult” in some areas of their lives, but more “non-adult” in other areas.
- Independence and self-sufficiency were seen as two important markers of adulthood. For most of the youth, independence meant being self-reliant, financially independent, having “adult”
Most youth also saw establishing a long-term career, completing school, getting married, and becoming a parent as being markers of adulthood.

Although youth were not specifically asked about this, they reported that their mental health problems were a barrier to maturation and that they would need to gain control over these problems to become adults.

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How can you use this research?

Service providers can use this information to ensure interventions address the transition to adulthood as part of the treatment process and to educate parents on how they can support their children during this crucial time period.

Limitations and next steps

The sample included only treatment-seeking youth with high-severity substance use problems. As a result, the applicability of this research to a wider range of youth is one limitation. Participants in the study also received publically funded treatment at a large hospital in an urban setting in Canada. It is not known whether receiving private services in smaller urban or rural settings would impact the results.

About the researchers

Ilana Goodman is a registered clinical psychologist in Toronto, Canada. Joanna Henderson is a clinical scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, director of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Centre for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health, and associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Michele Peterson-Badali is a clinical psychologist, a professor in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the University of Toronto, and associate dean – research, international and innovation, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Abby Goldstein is a professor of counselling and clinical psychology at the University of Toronto.

Keywords
Youth, emerging adulthood, substance use, psychosocial processes, treatment

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