

Young Adult Worker Mental Health

By Mark Simon

About the Author

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Methods

This literature review highlights the experiences, needs, and assets of young adult workers and identifies actions that employers can take to support their mental health. Literature on this topic exists across various fields, including education, organizational psychology, and public health. A search strategy and list of keywords were developed and refined as the search progressed. Information was initially gathered from academic databases and search engines, including PubMed, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar. Subsequent literature was found by referencing the citations in the articles initially reviewed. All selected literature was saved to a Zotero citation management database.

Definitions

The author acknowledges that mental health exists along a continuum and encompasses a broad array of experiences, conditions, and periods in people's lives. States of psychological wellbeing range from being mentally healthy to having a mental illness with varying levels of severity. This literature review uses "mental health condition," "mental illness," and "psychiatric disability" to describe varying mental health experiences as defined by the original authors.

The terminology used to describe individuals aged 18-25 is debated by scholars and has changed many times. Noted psychologist and researcher Jeffrey Arnett (2000), proposed a new theory of development for people aged 18-25 years that coined the term "Emerging Adulthood," which has since become widely accepted by the research community (with some extending the age range to 30 years). This report will use "young adult" and "emerging adult" interchangeably.

Importance of Focusing on Young Adults

Young adult workers are a unique and rapidly growing demographic. "Gen Z" individuals (under the age of 26) represent 30% of the total global population and will make up an estimated 27% of the workforce by 2025 (Koop, 2021). This often-overlooked population is now receiving much attention because they are a driving force behind the "Great Resignation" happening in the United States, with almost 65% of Gen Z workers planning to quit their jobs this year according to a recent poll of 1,200 full-time employees (Lever, 2022). There is a public debate about the reason for this dramatic shift in the workforce, but new data suggests that one motivating factor could be young workers' desire for jobs that support their mental health.

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Literature Review

Emerging adulthood is described as “a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, [and] when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (Arnett, 2000). Davis & Munson (2018) describe the transition to adulthood as a period when most people move from dependence to interdependence and independence. It is when changes and new skills gained in young adulthood are stabilized and consolidated (Davis & Munson, 2018). While this can be an exciting period for many, it is also a time of critical development during which the experiences of emerging adults can have significant and long-lasting implications for psychological and physical wellbeing, future employment, and financial security (Stroud et al., 2015).

Shulenberg et al. (2004) also described the transition experienced by young adults as a period of considerable change. Young adults have newfound self-direction in daily life activities and greater flexibility and geographic mobility. Other changes include emotional regulation, perspective taking, independence, identity, affiliation (with parents, peers or romantic partners), and achievements (work vs. school). There are also biological changes occurring in the brain, including developmental transformations in the prefrontal cortex and limbic brain regions, synaptic pruning of the prefrontal cortex, and continued myelination of the intracortical and mesolimbic dopamine systems. The transitions undergone by young adults are unique because extensive changes in nearly all aspects of life occur in just a few short years (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

According to Cadigan et al. (2021), the many transitions experienced by young adults can lead to an increased risk of alcohol or substance abuse and mental health challenges. The Transitions Overload Model suggests that more transitions are associated with increased health risks, decreased overall wellbeing, and increased substance use. The model asserts that increased instability during young adulthood (multiple simultaneous transitions) may lead to an increase in perceived stress and an overload of an individual’s coping capacity. This situation can lead to increased health risks, diminished mental health, and increased alcohol and substance misuse as a method for coping with the stress (Cadigan et al., 2021). Other research has found that the transition to adulthood is when many mental health conditions emerge, with one longitudinal study that followed individuals from age 9 to 21 finding that by age 21, the cumulative prevalence of any psychiatric disorder among participants was 82.5% (Copeland et al., 2011).

One of the most significant transitions experienced by young adults is entering the workforce. Today’s job market is highly competitive. Citrin (2015) found that some entry-level positions receive hundreds if not thousands of applications. For example, Johnson & Johnson receives more than 180,000 applications per year for the approximately 720 positions the company hires directly from universities and colleges. As a result, many recent graduates take jobs for which they are overqualified (Citrin, 2015). Research by García-Aracil (2015) found that being overqualified for a job was one of the most influential factors of job dissatisfaction.

On the contrary, young adults with jobs that utilize the skills and knowledge gained in school, as well as those with jobs where education requirements matched their education level, experience a dramatic increase in job satisfaction (García-Aracil, 2015). Being overqualified also has financial implications. College is more expensive now than ever before, and the likelihood of high-paying jobs without a college degree is increasingly low. As a result, many young adults are entering the workforce with sizeable student loan debt, which is associated with poorer psychological functioning (Walsemann et al., 2015). In addition, entry-level jobs often come with inadequate compensation, poor benefits, and low job security, creating additional stressors when combined with burdensome loan payments (Stroud et al., 2015).

Once young adults secure a job and begin their career, they face new challenges, including the lack of a routine, new job tasks, developing a new social network, and a divergence of actual experiences from expectations (Reichert & Pihet, 2000). Recent graduates often fail to recognize how much the academic culture shapes their behaviors, expectations, attitudes, and view of new employers. The process of succeeding in the workplace is different from succeeding in school. Academic institutions often provide very structured feedback, which is not always the case with a job (Holton, 1999). For many, the disappearance of the institutional structure offered by schools can be debilitating, resulting in avoidance of basic life tasks and creating a sense of floundering that can negatively impact mental health (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

In a study by Polach (2001), participants indicated that friends, and the process of making friends, was a pivotal component of the first-year experience. Workplace friendships allowed for social activities outside of work and a sounding board for life's situations. However, making friends at work is very different from making friends in school (Polach, 2001). Emerging adults can also face difficulties in the workplace because they have extraordinarily high expectations: finding work that pays well but provides an enjoyable and satisfying fit. This expectation is difficult for real life to match and often requires compromises (Arnett, 2007).

Young adults with psychiatric disabilities face additional barriers in the workplace. Rutman (1994) described nine challenges unique to individuals with mental illness. First, people with mental health conditions often exhibit interpersonal, affective, cognitive, and perceptual challenges. These challenges manifest through poor work history and job skills, needing help with basic living skills, being unable to establish or maintain personal support systems, and having poor educational performance. Second, most types of mental illness are unpredictable and episodic. Third, treatment for mental illness can cause disruptive physical, emotional, and cognitive side effects that affect a person's behaviors, appearance, and attractiveness as a job candidate. Fourth, mental health disabilities lead to inappropriate values, aspirations, and attitudes regarding work. Fifth, different definitions of psychiatric rehabilitation interfere with positive outcomes. Sixth, there are major disconnects between service systems that treat individuals with mental health disabilities. Seventh, Social Security Disability benefits disincentivize the return to work. Eighth, significant challenges exist in assessing an individual's work readiness and predicting their occupational outcomes. Ninth, stigma that exists at all levels of society negatively impacts opportunities for employment for people with mental health disabilities (Rutman, 1994).

Meaningful work provides psychological support to everyone, regardless of diagnosable mental health conditions. Employment provides social identity, personal roles, financial security, and opportunities for people to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

It facilitates social and economic participation in society and an overall sense of connectedness, which are essential to the mental health of individuals and communities (Lloyd & Waghorn, 2007). Work is particularly important for young adults with mental illness and can assist with overcoming mental health challenges and living in recovery (Torres Stone et al., 2018).

Given the significant mental health challenges faced by young adults and the influence that work has on an individual's overall wellbeing, employers can support employee mental health by creating supportive workplace cultures. A qualitative study by Murphy et al. (2010) found that positive aspects of a workplace culture included the ability to "leave work at work," continuous learning, and experiencing relational benefits. Negative aspects included insufficient time to explore outside interests, stressful and demanding environments, nonwork salience, and struggles with the learning curve (Murphy et al., 2010). Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza (2000) found that good relations with management and having an interesting job are the most important determinants of job satisfaction. Being able to work independently, having a high income, and clearly defined career advancement opportunities are also important. Having an exhausting job is the most important negative influence on job satisfaction (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). A meta-analysis by Faragher et al. (2005) found that job satisfaction was strongly associated with burnout. It was also positively correlated to depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and general mental health. Employees with low job satisfaction are more likely to experience reduced self-esteem, psychological burnout, and increased levels of depression and anxiety (Faragher et al., 2005).

In addition to culture-building, employers can implement specific policies and procedures to facilitate successful newcomer adjustment, which is the process employees go through during their first year at a new company. Saks & Ashforth (2000) suggest that employers need to pay special attention to reducing the level of stressors that new hires experience and provide training on how to cope with stress effectively. Counseling, training, buddy systems, coaching, and social support networks could be beneficial. Their research also found that unmet expectations are particularly influential in young adult adjustments to the workplace. They suggest that employers consider a needs analysis to identify new hires' needs and expectations and ensure that early career experiences meet them (Saks & Ashforth, 2000).

HR professionals can help develop recent graduates' psychological capital through new hire orientation programs that span the entire first year (Klemme Larson & Bell, 2013). The orientation programs should introduce new hires to the organization's goals, company history, performance requirements, and interpersonal relationships, and encourage the active involvement of new hires (Jusoh et al., 2011). In addition, new hires can be matched with mentors who have higher psychological capital and who can demonstrate healthy workplace behaviors (Klemme Larson & Bell, 2013).

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Another area in which young adult workers need support is goal setting. Research by Hardie (2014) shows that a person's career goals may become standards against which they judge themselves. The "possible selves" theory suggests that an occupational goal may be linked to daydreams about future lifestyles, home ownership, leisure activities, and material expectations. Not meeting career goals (and the accompanying lifestyle) negatively impacts job satisfaction and leads to depression in young adults. Workplace solutions should balance aspirations with the means to accomplish them. Employers should help young adults work towards specific career goals that are ambitions but achievable. Specific goals include identifying particular jobs to apply or be promoted to and the associated qualifications, pay, and work environment. Understanding the path to a career goal is an essential factor for achieving the goal (Hardie, 2014).

There are also actions that individual managers can take to support the mental health of their young adult direct reports. Polach (2001) found that young adult workers expect frequent, job-relevant feedback that reinforces strengths, anchors behaviors, and draws attention to areas requiring further development. This expectation is possibly because such feedback is commonplace in educational settings. A lack of regular feedback leaves many workers feeling confused, uncertain, and fearful. In addition, young adult workers often expect feedback to come from the organization, rather than exhibiting feedback-seeking behaviors themselves. These workers would benefit from training that encourages this feedback-seeking behavior (Polach, 2001).

One of the most important facets of newcomer adjustment among young adult workers is socialization, theorized by Feldman (1976) to occur in three distinct stages. First, Anticipatory Socialization includes all the learning and interactions that happen before a new hire starts a job. This stage includes forming expectations (through sending, receiving, and evaluating information with employers) and making a decision about a job. Second, Accommodation is the period when a new hire sees what the new organization is like and attempts to become a participating member of it. This second stage includes learning new tasks, establishing new interpersonal relationships with coworkers, clarifying their roles in the organization, and evaluating their progress. Third, Role Management is when new hires begin resolving problems at work and now need to mediate conflicts between their work group and other groups. This stage includes conflicts between work and home life and between new hires' work groups and other groups in the organization. Successful navigation through these three stages leads to general satisfaction and mutual influence (the extent to which employees feel some level of control/power over the way work is carried out) (Feldman, 1976).

Research suggests that successful socialization and developing workplace friendships—both crucial to young adult worker mental health—requires physical proximity, particularly in the early stages (Sias & Cahill, 1998). A major benefit of employment is a sense of community and shared identity, which is difficult to create in a virtual environment (Brower, 2021). Research from the University of Michigan found that being together also makes us smarter. Socializing, talking, and connecting leads to improved mental functioning and increased cognitive performance (Ybarra et al., 2008). A study at MIT found that people were three times as collaborative and saw higher output in academic papers and patents when they worked in physical proximity (Claudel et al., 2017). All of these findings stand in stark contrast to the growing trend of remote work. A recent report from the ADP Research Institute found that 71% of 18 to 24-year-olds would consider leaving a job if their employer mandates returning to the office full-time (Richardson & Antonello, 2022).

Implications for Research

Extensive literature was found on youth mental health, the concept of “newcomer adjustment,” and the impact of work on adults. However, these “buckets” of research exist in silos. Research on the intersection of young adults, the employment transition, and workplace mental health is scarce. In addition, the emerging topics of remote work and young workers’ apprehension about returning to the office appear to run counter to decades of research on the importance of an in-person work environment. Future qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (national survey) research should focus on this new area of workplace mental health to fill in the knowledge gaps.

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