

Segment 6

I'd now like to highlight some of the lessons I've learned about life transitions in the process of doing this research. First, early adulthood is a window into how the whole life course is changing. Every period of life today is being rewritten as old scripts no longer apply and can even be dangerous to follow in today's world. For example, what it means to be middle age or old, if we even allow ourselves to believe that we become old in our society, are similarly up for grabs. Every period of life today is characterized by new ambiguity, new vulnerability, and new uncertainty. I'm not sure why in the process we're so hard on young people. Next, seemingly private problems are often actually public issues. That is, people often believe that their situations are unique. And they somehow fail to appreciate the fact that many other people just like them are having the same kind of experiences. What happens in one stage also has implications for what comes next. Much of what we see in the 20s, for example, is clearly the result of things that have happened in childhood or in adolescence. Just as much of what happens in the 20s will be terribly consequential for the rest of adult life. Life is fluid, yes. But some things can't be easily reversed, especially as families are formed and as major debt related to housing or other kinds of spending is assumed. Similarly, the things that are going on for people in one period of life have implications for people in other periods. Lives are linked. The prolonged and more fragile transition to adulthood today has brought consequences for the choices and the resources of parents and grandparents, for example. In some families, it has raised anxiety, strained economic resources, altered mother's and father's choices about work, and saving, and delayed retirement. And of course, for young people themselves, it also means that they're getting a late start in building their own savings and their own retirements. Another lesson is that gender matters. Most of the crisis stories about this period of life are actually about men. High school and college drop out, unemployment, being disconnected, by which we mean being not in school, not in work, and not in the military, suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, high-risk sexual behavior, homicide, emotion regulation, imprisonment. The list goes on. These are also, especially, stories about underprivileged men. That's not to say that women are not vulnerable. Of course, they are. For example, women are at risk for depression, and sexual assault, intimate partner violence, eating disorders, and many other things. There's currently a measure focus on the years between zero and five, and especially on the years between zero and three. What is often not recognized is that there's still a need for intervention in adolescence and young adulthood, and that these later investments will also pay dividends over the decades of adult life. Another lesson is that hardship can prompt resilience and growth. This is not a reason to not intervene. But I'm often struck by how resilient the human spirit is and how growth and transformation can come in the face of adversity. Indeed, learning how to be adaptive and resilient may be one of the most important skills that we can teach young people. To me, learning to cope with disappointment and failure are probably the primary hallmark of adult life. In addition, adult life seldom turns out exactly as we planned it. And sometimes the most important things that happen are due to opportunities and encounters that happen by chance. Planning is important, sure, but so is flexibility. In an uncertain world, the most precious opportunities may go to those who have planned carefully. But at the same time, an uncertain world really demands that we constantly alter our goals and our expectations, and that we're open to finding opportunities in the places that we, sometimes, least expect them. We somehow expect young people to have their lives completely figured out, and to know exactly what they want, and how to get there. And yet, the rest of us who are no longer young know that adult life is anything but neat and tidy. And we conveniently forget that we didn't have it all figured out when we were young adults either. How many of us are actually living the lives we imagined when we were young? Another important lesson is that social

relationships matter. We tell young people that the goal of adulthood is to be independent. And yet, our existence at every age depends on our relationships with other people. Who we are, who we become, the opportunities that we get or are denied, those all are connected to other people. Success in early adulthood is about developing mutual and healthy relationships with other people who can nurture and support you and whom you can nurture and support. These people can be gateways to opportunities and also restrict opportunities. Indeed, many of the things that we associate with becoming adult, especially partnering and parenting, are things that bring a loss to our individual freedom. But they're also things that bring life much of its meaning. The bottom line is that the 20s are now a period in which people receive contradictory messages about themselves from the outside world and feel attention inside themselves about feeling not quite adult. After they've crossed the legal ages of adulthood, most young people say they are adults. But they also say that they do not feel entirely adult. In some ways and spheres they do. And in some ways and spheres they don't. With a general and gradual accumulation of experiences, one person we interviewed called these adult moments. They eventually build more integrated and stable senses of themselves as adults. They feel like adults, because they do adult things. And they also do adult things, because they feel like adults. Both directions matter.