Introduction to the Special Series on Addiction Among Emerging Adults

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Many people in their late teens and 20s have—often for the first time—what seems to be endless opportunities to discover who they are and what they want to do with their life. They may move states, change careers, get married, or adopt a pet—just to name a few common events. In short, this transitional life stage is marked by distinct exploration: the exploration of identity, instability, self-development, feelings of the "in-between," and future possibilities. We refer to this stage as emerging adulthood. And as the brain continues to develop, and emerging adults build connections and habits, emerging adulthood becomes a critical developmental period for long-term wellbeing.

However, there are potential dangers in exploration, namely risky behaviors like substance use or gambling, that place emerging adults as a group at increased risk for addiction and addiction-related harms. In fact, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found in their most recent survey on drug use and health in the United States that adults aged 18 to 25 years—in comparison to other age groups—had the greatest risk for past-year substance use disorder, a statistic that echoes previous years' reports. At the Division on Addiction, we have recently directed attention towards gambling harm among emerging adults, developing several educational materials specifically for this population. These materials provide emerging adults encountering gambling opportunities, and professionals working with them, with practical information on how to reduce harm and intervene when concerns arise.

In this month's Special Series, we will spotlight more work that aims to address addiction within emerging adults, beginning with the first of four insightful op-eds written by subject matter experts. Dr. Michael Broman, Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University College of Social Work and Faculty Affiliate of the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Misuse Prevention and Recovery, shares how his personal experiences with addiction directed him towards substance use prevention and treatment research, with a special focus on his research exploring the factors that correlate with high-intensity drinking among college and non-college young adults.

Next, Ms. Megan Poliquin, LPCC-S, LICDC-GAMB, and Manager of the Gambling Treatment Program at the Zepf Center, draws on her work with college students through campus outreach to argue that having authentic, honest, and judgment-free conversations about gambling can create opportunities for reflection, support, and earlier recognition of gambling-related harm among emerging adults.

Third, Dr. Jeff Derevensky, Professor in the McGill University Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Director of the International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-risk Behaviours, reviews his groundbreaking research exploring essential elements of programs aimed to prevent problematic gambling and other high-risk behaviors among young adults.

Finally, Lindsey Mortenson, MD, Executive Director of University Health & Counseling and Chief Mental Health Officer, Student Life at the University of Michigan, shares her perspective on the unique needs of emerging adults, including college students, at risk for gambling harm and the dark data problem.

We supplement these op-eds with four science reviews that all examine facets of emerging adulthood exploration and how they may relate to addiction. We begin with a STASH review that assesses the relationship between loneliness and problematic alcohol and cannabis use among young adults. Next, The WAGER examines early life influences that may lead to gambling harm among young adult sports bettors. On The DRAM, we summarize the lived experiences of transgender and gender diverse youth pertaining to alcohol use and harm reduction. Lastly, we conclude our Special Series science reviews with an ASHES review that describes the use of smartphone diary data to analyze daily substance use patterns among youth who vape nicotine and cannabis.

We hope you enjoy and learn from this Special Series.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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