Although child and adult service delivery systems are often disconnected by separate funding streams and different service packages, the consumer networks and their leaders and emerging adults do not need to follow suit. There exists a great opportunity for consumers to play a critical role in modeling and coaching emerging adults ages 18 through 26 years of age as they navigate a new world; often on their own in the midst of significant life changes.
Emerging Adult Consumers of Mental Health Services

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Who Are Emerging Adults?

Emerging adulthood is generally accepted as the period between 18 through 25. This is the period between adolescence and adulthood, when young adults are switching from a pediatric service system to an adult service system, when they are shifting from a school system laden with entitlements to post-secondary education that thrives on individual capacity, and a period when, amidst intense change, they begin to naturally push their family and parents away. Emerging adulthood is a period of transition. It is a time in which individuals are called upon to make difficult decisions about services, schooling, work, finances, and personal relationships.

For the more than three million young adults (ages 18-26) diagnosed with serious mental health conditions, this phase of life poses even greater challenges. Youth with mental health needs often face unemployment, underemployment, and discrimination when they enter the workforce. Statistics show that youth with mental health needs, diagnosed or undiagnosed, are over-represented in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and among school disciplinary cases and high school dropouts.

What makes emerging adulthood distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the adulthood that follows it? And what makes people so vulnerable during this period? Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (What Is Emerging Adulthood? Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties 2004, Oxford University Press) proposes five main features of the emerging adult years:

- The age of identity explorations, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work;
- The age of instability;
- The most self-focused age of life;
- The age of feeling in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult; and
- The age of possibilities, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

The absence of a coordinated system of service delivery adds to these features by presenting significant challenges for youth and young adults with mental health needs as they age out of youth services. They may be passed on to an inappropriate service tunnel that does not address their specific needs, or they may “fall off a cliff” as they age out of youth services and have to navigate the complexities associated with the adult service system by themselves.
The Impact of System Changes and Challenges on the Emerging Adult

Adolescence is a time when emotional centers begin to shift from the immediate family to persons outside, though still within close proximity to themselves, such as peers at school, extracurricular clubs, neighbors, or online friends. In young adulthood the emotional center remains distanced from the family but also becomes distanced from the original support network of friends formed in high school, as each goes his own way. The emotional center during emerging adulthood becomes more complicated as affiliations are made with institutions, fields of study, places of work, and characteristically-defined peer groups with whom the emerging adult may, or may not, have friends (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

The period between adolescence and adulthood may be further complicated because individuals with mental illnesses are dependent upon their support networks, which may disappear altogether, or be altered in a manner that may not be adequate for the emerging adult. Often, it takes a long time to get used these changes, and to and learn to use new supports appropriately (Mercer-McFadden & Drake, 1997). For emerging adults, leaving pediatric status in the health care system (pediatric patients are individuals aged 0 – 18) forces changes in their professional circle of support and the types of professionals that will manage their care. (College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, 2007). When the new doctor does not conform to roles and behaviors that the emerging adult was used to in the pediatric world, they may feel rejected, confused, and may miss their pediatric system of care where their family or care coordinators wrapped them with services and supports. This can make it difficult for them to form healthy relationships with their new physician, which in turn makes treatment difficult (McGuire, McCabe, & Priebe, 2001).

For some young adults suffering from a psychiatric illness, their psychiatrist or other supplementary clinician may be their sole support, at least until other bonds can be made with peers, if possible. Therefore it is important that professionals provide the nurturance and guidance needed by these displaced youngsters, while also encouraging and supporting them in developing friendships that can become sources of support and contribute to healthier development during emerging adulthood.

The adult systems of education, mental health, Social Security, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce development all have different terminology, eligibility requirements, and service options than those of corresponding youth systems. The lack of a seamless youth-to-adult system can cause emerging adults to lose services and fall behind in career planning.

The adult mental health care system also presents its own challenges. Millions of emerging adults go without services or pay for expensive private mental health care for several reasons: public adult mental health systems vary widely, provide services only to adults with severe and persistent mental illness, and frequently have long waiting lists. Additionally, emerging adults do not understand how to use them.
System Responses to the Needs of Emerging Adults

Despite the recognition of these challenges, few programs are designed to meet emerging adults’ unique need for integrated services that combine goals of providing mental health care and developmental support from one funding phase (pediatric) to another (adult). As they turn 18, they “age out” of traditional services designed for children and teens and may be expected to “age into” mental health services designed for adults. In reality, this “build it and they will come” practice does not work. Emerging adults use mental health services less and they use different resources. Emerging adults see psychiatrists and psychologists less; they turn to friends and family more often and are more likely to seek information from the internet. Emerging adults use social services to meet their mental health needs more often than adults do. This makes sense given that emerging adults are more likely than older adults to be poor, unemployed or underemployed, on public assistance, and without health care. Thus, they may delay or deny needs for mental health services in order to devote efforts to procuring basic needs such as shelter, food, and protection (Mental Health in Emerging Adulthood Jennifer L. Tanner, Rutgers University http://changingsea.org/tanner.htm).

How Consumers and Consumer Organizations Can Help

A number of factors indicate that the transition to adulthood is a unique window of opportunity for the involvement of consumers of adult mental health services. Through partnerships with youth and family programs during the transition phase, consumers can assist youth and their families in preparing for the adult world without getting lost in a tunnel or falling off a cliff. Consumers have years of experience and expertise in navigating a system that is foreign to emerging adults. They often know the short cuts, the places to go for targeted services, and how to get what is needed on their road to recovery. They can assist emerging adults to:

- Understand the adult system of care
- Learn what systems may or may not provide
- Make contacts within those systems
- Self-direct services
- Develop formal and informal support systems
- Advocate for necessary services
- Built a capacity to balance life, mental health needs, and work or school

Families of emerging adults are often at a loss in preparing for their new roles within the context of a new system of care. They often feel inept in the transition process and hold tight to pediatric services, programs, and policies. Consumer leaders, organizations, and peers play an important role in helping them shift from a family driven support for their child to a self-directed system for their emerging adult.
Helping families of emerging adults:

- Educate families on the realities of the adult system
- Provide resources that can assist emerging adults in transition from the pediatric to the adult service delivery system
- Participate in family oriented conferences
- Develop a training curriculum that helps families formalize their role as a supporter of self-direction
- Contribute regularly to family oriented activities and events on recovery, self-direction, and the role of families in building their emerging adults capacity to manage their own care

Assisting emerging adults:

- Guide them to opportunities to get involved with consumer run initiatives.
- Make sure there are plenty of opportunities for emerging adults to be involved in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of services, programs, and policies.
- Engage emerging adults through developmentally appropriate relationships.
- Acknowledge and respect the emerging adult’s safety net of support that may include their parents, family members, and other informal and formal key players.
- Assist emerging adults in developing personal choice and social responsibility.
- Enhance competencies they will need to successfully navigate the adult system through social media, training, newsletters, blogs and other methods.
- Involve emerging adults in your organization’s efforts at the system, practice, program, and community levels.

Facilitating systems serving adolescents:

- Advocate for emerging adult involvement in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of services, programs, and policies.
- Serve as a broker of emerging adult involvement, assisting adult programs in identifying and engaging emerging adult leaders.
- Facilitate the involvement of adult service system and program representatives with family and emerging adult programs, such as the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health and Youth M.O.V.E.
- Expect and promote application of consumer driven practices across the entire age spectrum in the adult system of care.
- Broaden terminology in collaborative partnerships; modeling the recognition of the unique challenges and needs of the emerging adult population.

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Resources

http://www.erasingthedistance.org/who/ Founded in 2005 and seen by over 26,000 people, Erasing the Distance is a non-profit arts organization based in Chicago, IL that uses the power of performance to disarm stigma, spark dialogue, educate, and promote healing surrounding issues of mental health.

http://www.youthmovenational.org/ Youth M.O.V.E National is a youth led national organization devoted to improving services and systems that support positive growth and development by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experience in various systems including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare.

http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/index.shtml The RTC for Pathways to Positive Futures aims to improve the lives of youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions through rigorous research and effective training and dissemination. Our work is guided by the perspectives of young people and their families, and based in a positive development framework.

http://us.reachout.com/index.php Reach Out is an information and support service using evidence based principles and technology to help teens and young adults facing tough times and struggling with mental health issues. All content is written by teens and young adults, for teens and young adults, to meet them where they are, and help them recognize their own strengths and use those strengths to overcome their difficulties and/or seek help if necessary.

http://www.strengthofus.org/ StrengthofUs is an online community designed to empower young adults through resource sharing and peer support and to build connections for those navigating the unique challenges and opportunities in the transition-age years. StrengthofUs was developed by NAMI.

http://thejackproject.org/ The mission of The Jack Project is to support our youth as they transition from late high school into their years of college, university or independent living, helping them to achieve and sustain their optimal mental health. (Canadian)
The CAFÉ TA Center is a program of The Family Café, a cross-disability organization that has been connecting individuals with information, training and resources for more than twelve years. The Center is supported by SAMHSA to operate one of its five national technical assistance centers; providing technical assistance, training, and resources that facilitate the restructuring of the mental health system through effective consumer directed approaches for adults with serious mental illnesses across the country. The project utilizes a peer-driven approach that is founded upon strategies and interventions consistent with self-determination and recovery models and guided by expert consultants and national technical assistance professionals. The CAFÉ TA Center target areas includes workforce development, supported education, and the dissemination of resources and training that will ensure consumer leaders contribute to the system’s capacity to make adjustments at every level to ensure a responsive system of care.

The CAFÉ TAC
1332 N. Duval St.
Tallahassee, FL 32303
1-855-CAFETAC
(1-855-223-3822)
850/224-4674 (fax)
http://cafetacenter.net/