As a therapist, I have been working with young adults (ages 15-25) and their parents for 10 years. Of all the lifecycle changes, this period is one of my favorites because it seems filled with every ingredient of life experience all wrapped up in the fantasy (and dread) that anything is possible. Hollywood and novelists love this period also. Moving from childhood to adulthood is an exciting and scary passage; naturally, movies capitalize on the “coming of age” drama. But in real life, the drama can be all too real and overwhelming for many American families. Some of our fears and fantasies actually come true, and Failure to Launch is not just a cute movie but a very difficult reality.

Over the years I have mapped out a plan to help many parents and young adults launch successfully by cultivating healthy separation, setting realistic goals, and developing resiliency. Three key ingredients need to work together during this therapeutic intervention process: the therapist, the young adult and the family/society. The challenges are an ideal match for Systems Therapy; therefore, MFTs possess an advantage for working with families during this dynamic stage of life. As a starting point, I will begin with societal changes, then the clients and the therapist, to better understand this plan.

Stop by your local bookstore and visit the “Parenting” aisle. You won’t need directions; it’s huge. This may epitomize the biggest change facing families today; parents striving to be perfect. Steeped in this is the fear that failure to do so will result in the horror of all horrors: a kid with low self-esteem. For the past 50 years, our American culture has been trying to cure this potential disease, and in doing so, we have created a more distasteful beast in the narcissistic child and parent combination. Often called “helicopter parents,” because they are always hovering, these parents are trying to protect their child from every fall, every tough friend, and every experience that may make them think badly of themselves or have a bad feeling. They are the product of a society with a growing disconnect between fear and fact made even wider by a rise in social isolationism. These growing fears leave parents just shell-shocked enough to think they have to save their children from everything.

In working with families, a thorough assessment/treatment model should weed out these fears while beginning to guide parents with their fears in check. “What am I really afraid of?” “How do we become adults?” and “What are the reasonable risks of growing up?” are all great themes of therapeutic work with parents of this generation. Additionally, most parents gain an incredible amount of normalizing insight through the process of reviewing their own launching period. Re-defining healthy self-esteem based in real attributes like cooperation, communication and competency gives parents a platform to help educate and stimulate their young adult. Resiliency and courage are natural byproducts of healthy self-esteem, but often humans gain these characteristics through a painful or difficult process. Parents who began to trust that their children will survive themselves are helping launch their children successfully. This reframe, repeated throughout the therapeutic process, begins building a family of origin with a framework of competency, trust, autonomy and hope; in other words, a family that is brave.

Many young adults are coming from possibly the most affluent and educated group of parents in American history. Most have had access to an unprecedented number of educational and social opportunities. Even some lower socio-economic
families provide their children with an incredible amount of access to the latest in everything compared to previous generations. These situations have in many ways created an impression for young people that the world will work for them. As they begin to move into adulthood, the realization that they will have to work in the world comes into focus. This can present a need for therapy in a variety of ways, with the most likely being 1) “I am fine and don’t need anyone’s help,” or 2) “I can’t do anything,” or display of inadequacy. A thorough assessment of their life experience will help guide the practitioner to discover the client’s predominant story and thereby guide the therapeutic process.

Most therapists keep up with the latest in brain research, which demonstrates that the frontal cortices are still forming, sometimes up until age 25. This cortex helps humans use strategy, plan behavior and regulate emotion. Without full formation of the frontal/pre-frontal cortex, the middle brain is left in charge. The middle brain, often called the “emotional brain,” is wired for stress fight or flight responses, and is not suited for well-reasoned, mature decision making. This mechanism could make young adults hard-wired for power struggles and emotional outbursts. To be clear, mature behavior is more dynamic than just structure of the brain. Realizing that this is an oversimplification of the studies on brain development, psycho-education regarding this research can help normalize and guide families with young adults.

Most young adults have figured out that they are millennial children. Sometimes they even quote the brain research back to me in defense of forgetting their appointments. This is a savvy population and not for the weak of heart; they can sniff out hypocrisy and dislike from a mile away. They say it as they see it; no sniff out hypocrisy and dislike from a mile away. They say it as they see it; no

be of help. One 22-year-old Caucasian man, during his closing session with me said, “I just told that last counselor what he wanted to hear, but when you told me you wanted my parents to be a bit involved, I was relieved. I knew things would change finally.” Five years later, this man is working full-time and finishing his college degree. He and his family could not be happier. These are typical responses I receive from clients regarding working together in therapy. More so than the previous generation, many in the millennial generation actually like their parents and want their help to grow into productive adults.

Although some may say this generation thinks too much of themselves, I believe they are a product of our culture; one that is striving to improve upon itself. They prioritize their comfort and happiness while having strong family attachments. Oftentimes, they are more at ease with what they don’t know than my “back up” generation was. To work with them, I have had to muster up courage and strength as I witness their families work together to launch successfully. As the parenting trends and societal isolationism continue to increase, the need for a systematic approach to working with families with young adults will likely increase, providing MFTs the missing ingredient from traditional psychology. Therapists aware of these changes and able to work in close family systems may possess the qualities needed to begin the change process for families struggling with launching issues. When Billy Joel said, “Go into the world brave,” he wasn’t just talking to the young people…Good luck.

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SUGGESTED READINGS ON LAUNCHING ADULT CHILDREN