



# Resilience and Transitioning to Adulthood among Emerging Adults with Disabilities

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Transitioning to adulthood is not without challenges. The move away from family influence towards independence and self-determination is filled with uncertainty. Increased challenges and vulnerabilities in transitioning are evident among emerging adults with disabilities because they face additional challenges related to their disability over and above what others of this developmental stage experience. The purpose of this convergent parallel mixed methods study was to understand resilience in a select group of emerging adults with disabilities, who have been recognized for their accomplishments, as they are transitioning to adulthood. Quantitative instruments were used to measure the relationship among resilience, physical health, mental health, satisfaction with life, future orientation, and social support resources, while a qualitative focus group and individual interviews further explored the central phenomenon of resilience. This study revealed transitioning goals and values, challenges encountered while transitioning, and key attributes of resilience that have aided in transitioning. Findings conclude that resilience mitigates adversity and facilitates transitioning, the capacity for resilience is well within reach, and resilience comes from a variety of individual and environmental attributes. Nurses care for individuals and are uniquely present to intervene throughout all stages of the transitioning process. Knowing which resilient attributes are most effective in facilitating transitioning would be especially useful in the development of preventative holistic patient-centered nursing interventions. The research and practice implications of this study may suggest that resilience is a viable concept for the development of strength-based, patient-centered nursing interventions that facilitate transitioning.

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TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD is not without challenges. The move away from family influence towards independence and self-determination is filled with uncertainty. As emerging adults (18–29 years old) transition to adulthood they will encounter various challenges related to their new adult roles (Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Jensen & Arnett, 2012). Although emerging adults begin to rely less on their adult counterparts for support and direction, they are not yet totally independent (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001; Arnett & Tanner, 2005).

Meeting the responsibilities of adulthood is more challenging than it was in the past. Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut

(2008) imply that “it is not possible for most young people to achieve economic and psychological autonomy as early [in life] as it was a half century ago” (p. 5). These challenges are further compounded for individuals with disabilities because they face additional challenges related to their disability over and above what all others of this developmental stage experience (Betz & Redcay, 2002; Blomquist, 2007; Faux & Nehring, 2010; King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2005; Murray, 2003; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2009; Urbano, 2010). Individuals who are not prepared are vulnerable to developing maladaptive behaviors (Arnett, 2001; Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Froese, 1975). Like all emerging adults, those with disabilities must be adequately prepared to handle new responsibilities and freedoms associated with adulthood.

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The concept of resilience emphasizes human strength and is defined collectively as an individual's tendency to cope with adversity better than expected; the process of becoming proactive rather than reactive in dealing with adversity; and having a positive outcome through the use of individual and environmental attributes also known as protective factors (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996; Garnezy, 1991; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994; Wagnild & Young, 1993). Protective factors are elements that facilitate the process of effective adaptation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987). This study is based on the premise that increased resilience facilitates transitioning and builds upon numerous published studies that have identified resilience as a process of overcoming adversity (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996; Garnezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wagnild, Young, Lau, Morse, & MacFarlane, 2010; Werner & Smith, 1982).

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand resilience in a select group of emerging adults with disabilities (EAWD) as they are transitioning to adulthood. The following research questions guide this study.

1. What is the level of resilience, physical health, mental health, life satisfaction and future orientation among this select group of EAWD?
2. What is the relationship among resilience, physical health, mental health, life satisfaction and future orientation among this select group of EAWD?
3. How many areas of social support are reported by this select group of EAWD?
4. What is the relationship between the quantity of self-reported social support and resilience among this select group of EAWD?
5. To what extent are the self-reported values and goals of developmental transitioning consistent across this select group of EAWD?
6. To what extent are the self-reported challenges of transitioning consistent across this select group of EAWD?
7. To what extent are the self-reported attributes of resilience consistent across this select group of EAWD?

## Significance of the Study

The Americans with Disabilities Act, 2009, § 12102 defines a person as disabled if he/she "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or is regarded as having such an impairment." The incidence of disability in America is on the rise. According to the Institute of Medicine's report, *The Future of Disability in America*, there were more than 40 million Americans living with a disability in 2005 (IOM, 2007). More recent statistics from the 2010 Household Economic Studies estimate that there are over 56.7 million Americans living with a disability; among them were 2.8 million school-aged children with reported disabilities (Brault, 2011). Today's medical technology has improved the odds of people surviving complex medical conditions that would have in the past been considered fatal. It is expected that approximately 90% of all children living with disability will survive well into adulthood (White & Gallay, 2005). Evidence indicates that, despite gains in federal, state and

privately funded programs that advocate for persons with disabilities and offer assistance with employment, health care, income and related support services, problems still exist (Kessler Foundation & National Organization on Disability, 2010; Perrin, 2012; Zirkel, 2012). As more children with disabilities survive into adulthood it is important that they are prepared to manage challenges associated with developmental transitioning.

## Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Transitions Theory (Meleis, 2010) (Figure 1) to conceptualize the characteristics of EAWD as they are developmentally transitioning to adulthood. It examined transition conditions that impact successful transitioning.

Transition is a change in fundamental life patterns experienced as a "passage from one life phase, condition, or status to another...embracing the elements of process, time span, and perception" (Meleis, 2010, p. 25). Developmental transitioning is the process of movement through the life cycle (Meleis, 2010). Transition is dynamic. It is not bound by time or marked by discrete stages, but rather transition itself is a change over time (Meleis, 2010; Meleis & Trangenstein, 1994; Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). Vulnerabilities are often uncovered as they are "related to transition experiences, interactions, and environmental conditions that expose individuals to potential damage, problematic or extended recovery, or delayed or unhealthy coping" (Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Messias, & Schumacher, 2000, p. 12). The state of being after transition has much to do with transition conditions; just as the state of being after adversity has much to do with resilience (Garnezy, 1991; Luther, 2001; Masten, 1994; Wagnild, 2010; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Transitions Theory suggests that certain transition conditions will facilitate the process of transitioning (Meleis, 2010; Meleis & Trangenstein, 1994; Meleis et al., 2000; Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). In the same way, resilience research identifies numerous protective factors, also called attributes of resilience, that allow certain individuals to handle adversity better than others (Benard, 1991; Haase, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 1994; Rhodewalt & Zone, 1989; Wagnild, 2010; Werner & Smith, 1982). Similar to attributes of resilience, transition facilitators include personal, community, and societal conditions that aid transitioning. Among those conditions are personal meanings and expectations, level of knowledge and skill, level of planning and preparation, socioeconomic status, emotional and physical well-being, societal norms, cultural beliefs and attitudes, and community resources (Meleis, 2010; Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). This study examined transition conditions, paying particular attention to transition facilitators as they are attributes of resilience.

## Related Research

The popularity of transition research has steadily increased over the last decade, but only few studies focus on resilience (Masten et al., 2004) and even fewer on

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