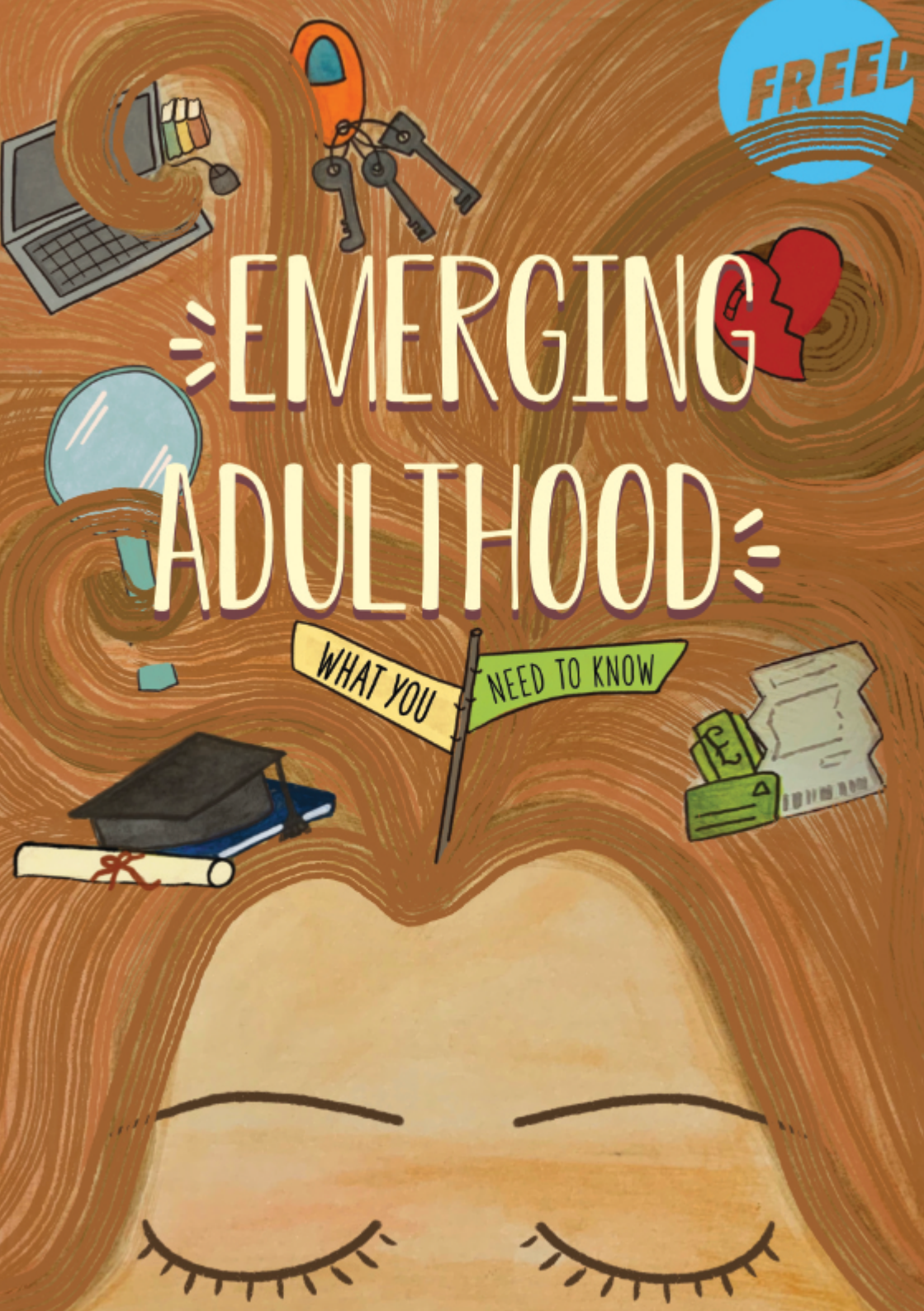


**FREE!**

# EMERGING ADULTHOOD



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW







## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

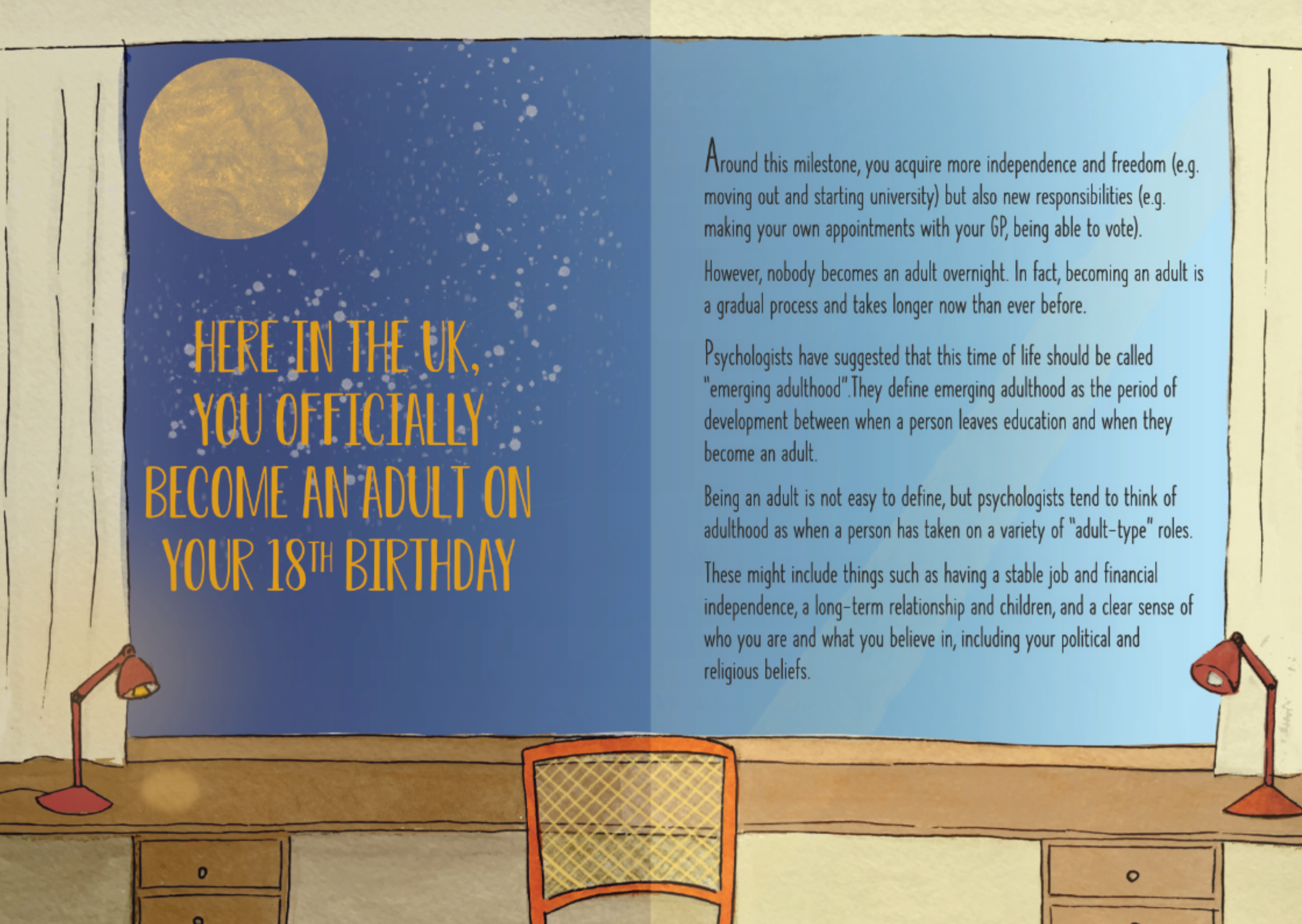
Your late teens and twenties can be a really exciting time, with lots of opportunities and new experiences. But it can also be challenging, particularly if you're living with or recovering from an eating disorder. Lots of recent research has focused on understanding this life-stage and we want to share some of these findings, as they might be helpful for you.

This guide aims to explain what psychologists currently know about emerging adulthood. It was developed jointly by researchers, clinicians and emerging adults who are living with or recovering from an eating disorder.

This guide will address some common questions, such as:

- What is emerging adulthood?
- What happens to the brain during emerging adulthood?
- How do psychologists understand the process of becoming an adult?
- What are common difficulties experienced by emerging adults?
- How can these difficulties be overcome?





HERE IN THE UK,  
YOU OFFICIALLY  
BECOME AN ADULT ON  
YOUR 18<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

Around this milestone, you acquire more independence and freedom (e.g. moving out and starting university) but also new responsibilities (e.g. making your own appointments with your GP, being able to vote).

However, nobody becomes an adult overnight. In fact, becoming an adult is a gradual process and takes longer now than ever before.

Psychologists have suggested that this time of life should be called "emerging adulthood". They define emerging adulthood as the period of development between when a person leaves education and when they become an adult.

Being an adult is not easy to define, but psychologists tend to think of adulthood as when a person has taken on a variety of "adult-type" roles.

These might include things such as having a stable job and financial independence, a long-term relationship and children, and a clear sense of who you are and what you believe in, including your political and religious beliefs.



## RESEARCHERS USED TO BELIEVE THE HUMAN BRAIN



WAS FULLY-FORMED  
RELATIVELY EARLY IN LIFE

However, recent improvements in the technologies we use to study the brain have revealed that it's not in fact fully developed until the mid-twenties. Brain formation tends to occur in a "back-to-front" direction, so the area at the front of your brain - called the prefrontal cortex - is the focus of development during emerging adulthood.

The prefrontal cortex is a part of the brain associated with your ability to plan, make decisions and work towards goals, and we see these abilities gradually improve over the course of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adults are therefore in quite a unique position: they have more independence to make decisions than ever before, but their decision-making abilities are not yet fully formed. This might sound like a recipe for disaster, and indeed emerging adults tend to make "riskier" choices compared to adults, and even teenagers. However, it's probable that we need this bravery and tendency towards trying new things in order to move towards being an adult.





## LEARNING HOW TO BE AN ADULT IS A TRIAL AND ERROR PROCESS

There's no "one size fits all" way of doing adulthood, now more so than ever. There are so many career options, relationship types, values, and belief systems available to all of us.

Psychologists have identified that emerging adulthood is a really vital time for forming your identities - essentially seeking answers to the questions "who am I?" and "who would I like to be?".

“ I took a long time to decide what I wanted to do for a career. I studied English at university, and I did internships in a publishing house, and in marketing. I also considered teaching, and I discussed that with a family friend who's a teacher. I've always been really arty and was doing painting classes in my spare time. In the end I decided that was the direction I wanted to go in. I did an MA in Fine Art and now I work in a gallery. ”

Chloe, 32 years old



In adolescence or at the start of emerging adulthood, we tend to have the same or similar identities and values as our parents. Some people don't move beyond this and stay committed to the identities their parents advocate. Whilst this might have benefits in the short-term, psychologists believe it is much more adaptive to go through a trial-and-error process of trying various options and deciding which suit you best.

Following a period of exploring and trying out things, people form firm identity commitments late in emerging adulthood.

Starting adulthood with a really strong sense of identity is important to our sense of wellbeing and mental health.

“ It's taken me a while to find my friendship group. When I first started university, I mostly stuck with a few people I knew from college. They were really into partying and looking back now I don't think I really enjoyed all that. I ended up joining a few different societies. I really enjoyed bouldering and liked the people I met there. I would say they're my main friends now, I spend most of my time with them. ”

Ben, 25 years old







You may find the experience of trying new things and deciding whether they are for you overwhelming. You might also find you tend to compare your progress with that of your friends, or feel quite alone in this process.

**SOME PEOPLE FIND EMERGING  
ADULTHOOD VERY EXCITING  
HOWEVER, IT CAN ALSO BE STRESSFUL AND DIFFICULT.**

Do any of these experiences sound familiar to you?

What do you find difficult about being an emerging adult?



# FREEDOM TO TRY LOTS OF NEW THINGS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMING

Some people find that when faced with lots of choices, they feel somewhat paralysed and reluctant to try new things. This may be because they worry about making a mistake, or not getting things right first time round. They may worry about making the wrong choice and being stuck with it.

“I’m really not sure what uni course I want to do. I’m scared I’ll pick the wrong one and I’ll be stuck doing that forever.”

Aisha, 17 years old

“I would like to meet someone, but I find the thought of dating terrifying. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

Rebecca, 20 years old

Often the easier option is to retreat into what we know and what feels safe. For emerging adults with eating disorders, this can often mean continuing with their eating disorder behaviours.





On the flip-side, some emerging adults might feel that they want to make the most of their new-found freedom and try all of the available options and experiences.

This can be really exciting and stimulating to start with, but emerging adults with this inclination sometimes feel like they lack a sense of direction, which can be confusing and exhausting.

Some emerging adults find that they are always making decisions on impulse, which have negative consequences (e.g. drinking too much, having unprotected sex).

“I have so many interests and ideas about what I want to do with my life. There are so many options, I really don't want to commit to one in case something better comes up.”

Jack, 19 years old

“I seem to keep making the same mistakes over and over again. I'll go out on a night out, have too much to drink, end up going home with someone and then feel regretful and ashamed for days afterwards.”

Sinead, 23 years old



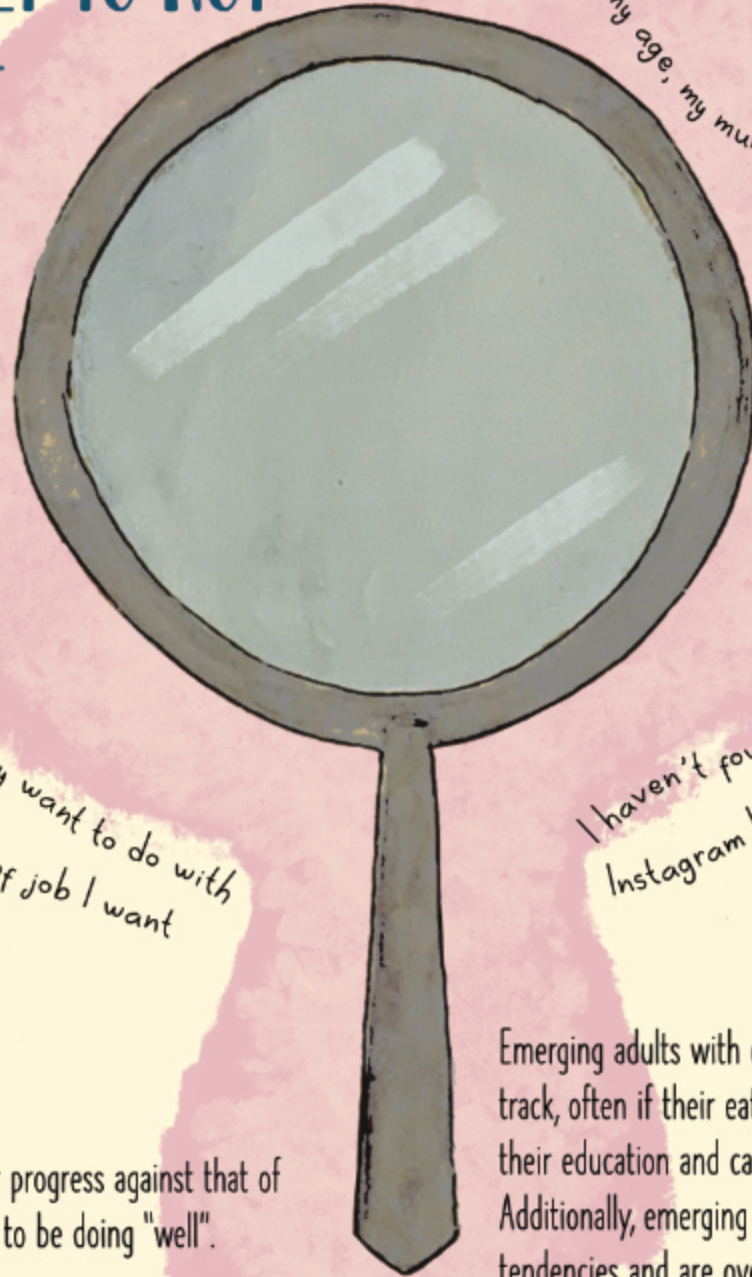


# IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO NOT COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS

At my age, my mum had met my dad. I've never even had a boyfriend.

All of my friends seem to know exactly what they want to do with their lives. I have no idea what kind of job I want

I haven't found my group of friends yet... Everyone on Instagram looks like they're having a great time...




Lots of emerging adults find that they measure their progress against that of their friends and put a lot of pressure on themselves to be doing "well".

Emerging adults with eating disorders in particular can feel like they're not on track, often if their eating disorder has hampered their ability to move forward in their education and career or have relationships, for instance.

Additionally, emerging adults with eating disorders often have perfectionistic tendencies and are overly focused on doing things "right".



An illustration of a person's lower body and travel gear. The person is wearing an orange coat, blue jeans, and brown lace-up boots. A yellow messenger bag is slung over their shoulder, and a brown suitcase is on the ground next to them. The background is a light blue wall and a light grey floor.

## OFTEN IT CAN FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE TO DO IT ALL ON YOUR OWN

Sometimes emerging adults may feel they have to prove themselves, and that maybe people won't take them seriously as an adult if they're not able to do things independently. This is often the case for emerging adults with eating disorders, as they might be embarrassed or ashamed of their eating disorder or blame themselves for their difficulties.

“I was a bit embarrassed or cautious about telling my family about my eating disorder. I tried very much to handle it by myself.”

Charlotte, 21 years old



# SO EMERGING ADULthood IS NOT ALWAYS EASY

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF THINGS WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THESE MORE DIFFICULT ASPECTS WHICH MIGHT BE USEFUL FOR YOU TO BEAR IN MIND.

## Focus on what you are learning from your experiences

Trying new things - and them not working out - is an essential part of emerging adulthood. The most important thing is that you reflect upon and learn from your experiences.

Useful questions to ask yourself might include: what's the one thing I want to take away from my experience? What would I do differently next time?

Trying something new or trying again after things have not worked out as you wanted them to can often make the person very anxious in anticipation of the new situation, especially if there is an element of competition, a sense of being assessed or evaluated involved. Try what top athletes do when they feel anxious before an important event. Instead of saying to yourself I am super-anxious, say to yourself that you are excited. Both are feelings linked with high arousal, but excitement is positive.

“ I learned how to manage my money the hard way. When I started university, my student finance came in and it was the first time I had to manage quite a bit of money myself. The first term, I spent it all really early on and had to scrape by until the next instalment. Rather than beat myself up about it, I reflected on what I could do better next time. I got a budgeting app on my phone which helped me to monitor my spending and that's been really helpful. ”

Fran, 21 years old

We have included some resources in the list at the end for this guide to help you in your relationship with failure and success. In particular, podcasts such as "How to Fail" and "Unlocking Us" provide interesting perspectives on how we can learn from our experiences.



## Remember there is no "right" way of doing emerging adulthood

Whilst it might often feel like others are doing emerging adulthood the "right" way, we know that there is no such thing as a wrong path through this life-stage. The beauty of emerging adulthood is that it's always possible to catch up and get back on track. Lots of patients we see are able to make progress towards their goals with the right help and support.

“My treatment has enabled me to begin to get my life back on track. In my first appointment, I was told that my plans to pursue a career in music would be non-existent if my anorexia continued; I nearly dropped out of university last year, when my anorexia was at its most aggressive. Treatment prevented this happening - I was able to finish university with a first, meaning I will be able to pursue my master's and performance career.”

Emily, 22 years old

Often social media plays an important role in comparing yourself unfavourably with others, so it may be worth reflecting on your social media use.

You might like to look at the FREED social media guide, which we have included in the list of resources at the end of this guide.

“If I hadn't had treatment, I would not be where I am today. I've got my life back, and am now able to enjoy it, and appreciate things more than ever. I've gone travelling and done activities I never thought I could achieve.”

Victoria, 25 years old



## IDENTIFY A SUPPORTIVE ADULT YOU CAN TURN TO

Whilst it might feel like you should be making your own way in life, we know that having supportive adults in your life is really important for mental health. Have you identified an adult you turn to when you need help? It's worth bearing in mind that this doesn't have to be your mum or dad; it might be an older sibling or another family member, a tutor at college or university. The important thing is that they are someone you feel you can speak openly with, and you can trust that they will be there when you need them.

We know that asking for support with your eating disorder in particular can be difficult. The good news is that there are lots of resources out there which are designed to help you with talking to friends and family about your eating disorder, some of which we have included in the resources list at the end of this guide.





# MOVING FORWARD

We hope you have found this guide a useful starting point for thinking about emerging adulthood. We have included some freely available resources you might find helpful.

There are lots of books, films and TV series about growing up and becoming an adult which might be of interest.

- Check if you have any of the books on this list at home or if you can borrow from a friend.
- Find your nearest library to access services such as book and e-book loans

Available at [www.gov.uk/local-library-services](http://www.gov.uk/local-library-services)

Listening to podcasts can also give you insights of relevance to emerging adulthood

- "How to Fail" with Elizabeth Day
- "Unlocking Us" with Brene Brown

Available on all podcast platforms

Accessing other resources from the FREED and BEAT websites can give you tools to cope specifically with your eating disorder

- "Social Media and Apps: Friends or Foes?"
- "Preparing for University: A guide for those recovering from an eating disorder"
- "The Brain and Eating Disorders"

All available at [www.freedfromed.co.uk](http://www.freedfromed.co.uk)

- "How to Tell Someone you Have an Eating Disorder"

Available at [www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

You may also like to follow FREED on twitter or Instagram  
[@freedfromed](https://www.instagram.com/freedfromed)







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FREED services are based in NHS Trusts across the UK and aim to provide quick and effective early intervention for eating disorders.

For more information see [www.freedfromed.co.uk](http://www.freedfromed.co.uk)



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EXPERIENCE



FREE

IDENTITY



LOVE



OPPORTUNITIES

KNOWLEDGE



INDEPENDENCE

