

# Becoming what you are seeking: Building Relational Self-Awareness in emerging adults

Alexandra H. Solomon | Carolina J. Martinez | James Eric Wren

The Family Institute at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

## Correspondence

Alexandra H. Solomon, The Family Institute at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA.

Email: asolomon@northwestern.edu

## Abstract

Emerging adults are attempting to navigate a rapidly shifting and immensely complicated landscape of modern love, often without meaningful sex and relationship education. Although individually oriented relationship education programs for emerging adults make a difference in the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of the recipients (Simpson et al., *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2018, 47, 477) and most emerging adults report they yearn for relationship education (Weissbourd et al., *The talk: How adults can promote young people's healthy relationships and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment*, 2017), these programs are not widely available. Educators who are working with emerging adults in a classroom or psychoeducational setting are well-positioned to help emerging adults identify and enact healthy and purposeful relational and sexual choices. The first part of the paper orients readers to the “topography” of the modern love landscape by describing four macro cultural themes that impact the intimate lives of emerging adults. The second part of the paper introduces relationship educators to Relational Self-Awareness (Solomon, *Loving Bravely: 20 lessons of self-discovery to help you get the love you want*, New Harbinger, 2017), an integrative approach to helping emerging adults understand the self-in-relationship. Each of the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness is defined and operationalized, and specific recommendations are provided for how educators can integrate these pillars into their existing curricula. Clinical implications and future directions are offered.

## KEYWORDS

Dating, Emerging Adulthood, Intimate Relationships, Psychoeducation, Relationship Education, Sex Education

When we learn to love and understand ourselves and have true compassion for ourselves, then we can truly love and understand another person.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, *how to love*

In the last 20 years, the field of psychology has begun to conceptualize the ages of 18 to 25 as a discrete lifestage, emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), and the relational and sexual lives of emerging adults have been the focus of considerable research. During this same period of time, the average age of entry into marriage has continued to climb in the US to 27.8 years old for women and 29.8 years old for men (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Marriage is increasingly viewed, especially for those with a college-education, as a capstone not a cornerstone (Cherlin, 2010), as young adults increasingly express a desire to have their “ducks in a row” regarding education and career, before saying “I do.”

This shifting relationship with marriage means that today's young adults are likely to spend years moving between single, dating, and single again. While the delayed entry into marriage may in part reflect the reduction in stigma regarding nonmarital sex, today's young adults are on track to have fewer sexual partners than members of the two preceding generations (Twenge, 2020) with some data indicating that as many as 1 in 3 men, ages 18–24 reported no sexual activity within the last year (Ueda et al., 2020). Navigating a world of intimate relationships that is complex and shifting requires skill, support, and resilience. However, most emerging adults report they have not received the relationship education they want and need from either their families or their schools (Weissbourd et al., 2017). This is the case even though individually oriented relationship education programs (like Relationships Smarts (Chan, 2018)), which are aimed at individuals, rather than dyads, show promising results for emerging adults (Simpson et al., 2018). This is evidenced for example by the high demand for relationship education courses like the one at Northwestern University (Nielsen et al., 2004).

Given the elevated expectations for emotional and sexual intimacy, heightened skepticism, and greater heterogeneity regarding the “rules” of coupling, educators, and clinicians need to focus their efforts on helping emerging adults understand *themselves* more deeply so that they can make sexual and relational decisions that feel healthy, aligned, and authentic *to them*. This paper introduces the “inside-out” approach that has guided the first author's teaching for over two decades. This approach, Relational Self-Awareness (Solomon, 2017), helps emerging adults “become what they are seeking.” Relational Self-Awareness is a meta-skill that strengthens an individual's intrapsychic foundation, enabling them to approach love, sex, and commitment with a growth mindset, viewing an intimate relationship as a “classroom” of sorts. When emerging adults practice Relational Self-Awareness, they begin to view intimate relationships as offering not just emotional and sexual intimacy and connection, but also possibilities for increased maturity, resilience, and healing.

This approach was derived over 20-plus years of serving diverse students who bring widely differing needs, identities, and experiences into the classroom. Relational Self-Awareness is composed of five pillars. Pillar 1 is creating narrative coherence (Self-Reflection). Pillar 2 is integrating cultural identities (Self-Knowledge). Pillar 3 is nurturing sexual maturity (Sexual Self-Awareness). Pillar 4 is navigating relational ruptures (Self-Expression). Pillar 5 is cultivating resilience (Self-Expansion). In the first author's experience, relationship education that is guided by the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness helps emerging adults think, feel, and behave in ways that support them becoming healthier intimate partners.

Relational Self-Awareness is informed by Integrative Systemic Therapy (Pinsolf et al., 2018). Integrative Systemic Therapy is the model of psychotherapy that the first author has been studying, teaching, and practicing for more than two decades. Integrative Systemic Therapy has identified *action*, *meaning*, and *emotion* as nonspecific treatment dimensions that account for outcome, mutually interact and influence client functioning, and operate as powerful change entry points for integrative therapists (Pinsolf et al., 2018). Each pillar of Relational Self-Awareness addresses action, meaning, and emotion to help emerging adults improve how they behave, think, and feel in their relationships and to provide relationship educators flexible curricular entry points.

The present paper has two purposes: (1) to help relationship educators better understand the larger relational landscape that emerging adults are traversing and (2) to introduce Relational Self-Awareness as a powerful map for navigating this landscape. The first part of the paper reviews four macro themes that shape and contextualize emerging adults' experiences with intimate relationships: the impact of global upheaval, the impact of the changing nuclear family system, the impact of today's sex education, and the impact of modern dating. The second part of the paper defines the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness and offers suggestions for how relationship educators can incorporate each pillar into their curricula. The paper concludes with clinical implications and future directions.

## THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN LOVE

Emerging adults need to be understood within a larger context, and they need to be able to understand themselves as existing within, and influenced by, forces larger than themselves. This part of the paper highlights four macro themes that shape how today's emerging adults imagine what is possible for themselves. In order to highlight how relevant these themes are in the lives of emerging adults, each theme is introduced with a quote from one of the first author's former students.

The intention of this part of the paper is to help educators utilize *dynamic sizing* (Sue, 1998) when working with emerging adults, discerning the degree to which a particular emotional response, schema, or behavioral pattern reflects an individual's idiographic experience versus their cultural location and larger context. Because today's emerging adults are "digital natives" whose experiences are inextricably bound with technology, the impact of technology is woven throughout these four themes rather than offered as a stand-alone theme.

### **"Our parents and grandparents broke the world": The impact of global upheaval on intimate relationships**

A student enrolled in the undergraduate course, "Building Loving and Lasting Relationships: Marriage 101" seamlessly connected the impact of global forces on individuals' love lives: "Our parents and grandparents broke the world, and then they wonder why we are scared to grow up and get married." Although the Marriage 101 has been taught for over twenty years, in recent years, students are far more likely to explicitly name the ways in which current events affect their love lives. This reflects an increase in the social consciousness in this younger cohort of emerging adults as evidenced, for example, by the fact that 50%–55% of voting-eligible young people (ages 18–29) voted in the 2020 election versus 42%–44% in the 2016 election (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020). This increased social consciousness is understandable given global upheaval in the forms of political polarization, eco-anxiety, income inequality, rising authoritarianism, a global pandemic, and (in the US)

a long-overdue reckoning around race. Perhaps something as steady as marriage, or even a committed intimate relationship, feels antithetical to the uncertainty of the present moment.

The global forces impacting all of us weigh heavily on the mental health of young people. Suicide is the second leading cause of death (Curtin & Heron, 2019) for Gen Z (those born between 1997 and present) and data indicates the mental health crisis for Gen Z may be worse than for Millennials (American Psychological Association, 2020). Those who occupy marginalized identities are hit the hardest. For example, rates of depression and anxiety spiked for Black Americans in the days following George Floyd's murder but remained relatively unchanged for the rest of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Economic uncertainty affects the relationship trajectories of emerging adults as well. As employment rates decrease for young adults, particularly young men, emerging adults have been forced to delay certain developmental activities such as moving out of a family home and beginning a career (Twenge, 2020).

The inextricable connections between individual well-being and the larger cultural ecosystem create conditions that render intimate relationships more or less tenable for emerging adults, and those who interface with emerging adults must bring this awareness into relationship education. The larger mission of supporting healthy intimate relationships involves *both* readying the individual *and* creating a climate conducive to stability, commitment, and care. Relationship educators surely cannot be tasked with “fixing” these macro systems, but by keeping this larger context in mind, relationship educators can teach with compassion for the difficulties faced by today's emerging adults.

### **“My mom taught me to never trust a man”: Impact of the changing nuclear family system on intimate relationships**

In a classroom conversation about intergenerational transmission of beliefs and expectations regarding love and sex, an undergraduate student shared, “My mom was really hurt by love, and she raised me to never ever trust a man.” Our families of origin are our original “love classrooms” (Solomon, 2017) providing us with countless messages, explicit and mostly implicit, about affection, conflict, communication, traditions, gender roles, power, emotion, commitment, loyalty, boundaries, dependence, independence, and interdependence, all of which are transmitted across generations (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Glass et al., 1986; Willoughby et al., 2012). In the next section of the paper, ideas are offered for how to help emerging adults make sense of the lessons they gleaned from their original love classroom, but in this section, what is highlighted is the unique challenge of teaching relationship education in light of the changing face of the nuclear family.

The US currently has the fourth highest divorce rate in the world (OECD, 2019) and the highest rate of children living in single-parent households (Kramer, 2019). Many of today's emerging adults were raised by people who felt disillusioned about and/or deeply wounded by love. Many of today's emerging adults have had front row seats to divorce, via their parents, relatives, and/or close friends, and many have never had an “up close and personal” view of an intimate relationship of any kind. The ways in which a significant adult makes sense of their own intimate relationship journeys has a profound impact on the next generation. Siegel and Hartzell (2004) said of intergenerational patterns, “History often repeats itself, and parents are vulnerable to passing on to their children unhealthy patterns from the past. Understanding our lives can free us from the otherwise almost predictable situation in which we recreate the damage to our children that was done to us” (p. 3–4).

When parents do their own internal work to integrate their relationship history so they can hold a “thick narrative” (Freedman & Combs, 2002) rather than getting lost in blame and/or shame, emerging adults are gifted a kind of narrative coherence that can help them learn from

their parents' experiences while holding their own experiences as separate. When parents have *not* done their own healing work and remain stuck in blame and/or shame, emerging adults will need time and space to create their own thick narratives of what they saw in their families of origin.

Recent longitudinal data suggest parental divorce may have a direct effect on emerging adults' marital beliefs (Willoughby et al., 2019). As research continues to clarify how individuals internalize their attachment figures' relational experiences, including relationship dissolution, educators working with emerging adults would do well to honor this complexity and remember that what is most important is helping emerging adults develop the Relational Self-Awareness they need to navigate their relationship trajectory in a way that allows them to feel competent and optimistic, even if (especially if) their parents have struggled.

It is likely that many of today's emerging adults do not think less of marriage, but rather take it more seriously. Today's emerging adults are often described as reluctant to make life decisions, whether that is about a career or an intimate partner (Jay, 2012). Given how much the intimate relationship landscape has changed in just the last two decades, even emerging adults with happily married parents may feel their parents' love story is impossible to emulate in today's harsher climate. Those who grew up without the modeling of a thriving intimate partnership (because they were raised by a single parent, they watched their parents get divorced, or they saw their parents endure an unhappy marriage) may feel as if they are flying blind. Relationship education should include opportunities to explore the impact of early messages with the goals of illuminating invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984) and promoting both separateness and connection, that is, differentiation.

### **“Learning about sex was learning about fear”: The impact of today's sex education on intimate relationships**

In talking with emerging adults about the sex education they received in school, at home, and/or within their religious institutions, the overarching theme is this: I learned to be afraid and ashamed. As one student said, “For me, learning about sex was learning about fear! I knew about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) before I really understood what sex even was.” Although 39 states plus the District of Columbia mandate sex education and/or HIV education, only 17 of those states require that education to be medically accurate (Sex & HIV Education, 2020). Less than 20% of middle schools and <50% of high schools teach all of the key CDC topics for sexual health education (2018, School Health Profiles). Nearly half of adolescent females and more than half of adolescent males did not receive information about birth control before they experienced sexual intercourse (Lindberg et al., 2016). Despite evidence that comprehensive sex education impacts sexual decision-making in a way that reduces harm (Kohler et al., 2008; Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012; UNFPA, 2015), sex education has become less about public health and psychology and more about politics and ideology.

Only 6.7% of LGBTQ + students received sex education that included positive representations of LGBTQ + topics despite evidence that 85% of parents of high schoolers (and 78% of parents of middle schoolers) support including discussions of sexual orientation in sex education (Let's Talk Poll, 2015). Sex education that is inclusive of LGBTQIA + students helps everyone. Queer students feel seen, valued, and prepared to make healthy choices, and heterosexual students have an opportunity to normalize differences, inviting them to be more compassionate with the myriad ways that we all exist outside of dominant paradigms.

Today's emerging adults, who are digital natives, likely received some or all of their sex education from pornography, as teens are more likely to turn to porn for sex education than a trusted adult (Rothman et al., 2020). Over half of college-aged people use porn to fill information gaps (Sharma et al., 2019), but porn literacy has yet to be integrated into sex education for

adolescents. Stakeholders who are invested in helping emerging adults become sexually and relationally self-aware should invite critical thinking about one's relationship with pornography, including understanding that most porn is for commercial not educational purposes.

Sex education that provides information designed to reduce risks like unplanned pregnancy, sexual assault, and sexually transmitted infections is necessary but insufficient when it omits exploration of the intrapsychic and relational aspects of sexuality and romantic relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2017). Emerging adults likely carry the echoes of early messages about sex that were imbued with heteronormativity, negativity, and fear. These internalized messages compromise the development of Relational Self-Awareness needed to answer essential questions like, "What role do I believe sex plays in an intimate relationship?" "How do I know when I'm ready to engage sexually with someone?" and "How can I advocate not only for my safety but also for my pleasure?" Emerging adults deserve time and space to fill in knowledge gaps and get to know their sexual selves.

### **"I want to be strong for my next breakup": The impact of modern dating on intimate relationships**

A student shared that she had registered for the Marriage 101 course because she wanted to be strong for her next breakup. Far from being cynical, this student was reckoning with the realities of modern dating and tapping into her resilience. Between the delayed entry into marriage, the greater acceptance of sexual activity outside the context of marriage, and the ubiquity of dating apps, it likely that emerging adults will likely "co-author" more than one love story and will therefore benefit from learning how to use Relational Self-Awareness to begin—and end—an intimate relationship.

Dating apps have become normative for all demographics, including emerging adults. Niche dating sites (sites that allow users to filter along a number of demographic and values-based variables), which have become more popular in recent years (Smith & Anderson, 2016), help users identify people with similar values and/or interests. For example, those who opt for apps devoted to political ideology are motivated by perceptions of increased trustworthiness of those who are similar and therefore expect higher relationship satisfaction (Hernandez & Sarge, 2020). Yet, swiping to find someone who is the "right" fit can foster an objectification mindset and decrease commitment to one partner (Finkel et al., 2012). Emerging adults need a clear sense of what matters to them to avoid searching for love with a consumer mentality (Doherty, 2013).

Although ending a relationship by cutting off contact is not new, ghosting, "the unilateral dissolution process of ceasing communication through media" (Lefebvre et al., 2019), is common (Freedman et al., 2019) and takes on particular salience in a low accountability dating climate. Implicit theories affect how people experience their close relationships (see for example Canevello & Crocker, 2011), and the salient distinction is between growth beliefs (relationships require emotional effort and communication to be successful) and destiny beliefs (relationships are either going to work or not work; Knee, 1998). Individuals who bring growth beliefs to their intimate relationships feel more negatively about ghosting and are less likely to ghost than individuals who bring destiny beliefs (Freedman et al., 2019). Ghosting behavior reflects and perpetuates cynicism and low accountability in the dating world, but Relational Self-Awareness can help emerging adults practice empathy and assertive communication in ways that reduce harm and leave them feeling proud of their dating behavior. The first author often encourages students in the dating world to commit to "leaving people better than you found them!"

For some, relationship dissolution can lead to psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and risk of self-harm (Field et al., 2009; Simpson, 1987; Studley & Chung, 2015), but individual

characteristics shape how a breakup is experienced. For example, sexual conservativeness predicts greater depression post breakup in college students (Liang & Horn, 2020) while a secure attachment style can buffer the upheaval of a relationship ending (Madey & Jilek, 2012). Emerging adults need support and skills to help them navigate heartbreak and recover in ways that minimize harm and maximize the potential for post-traumatic growth (Lewandowski & Radice, 2012; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) especially because integration of a breakup affects later relationship experiences (Kansky & Allen, 2017).

Relationship educators are encouraged to keep in mind the larger contexts in which emerging adults are experiencing intimate relationships by attending especially to the impact of global upheaval, the impact of the changing nuclear family system, the impact of today's sex education, and the impact of modern dating. By centering Relational Self-Awareness, educators can provide emerging adults with the tools and perspectives they need to understand themselves as they explore dating, breaking up, and committing in this complicated time.

## RELATIONAL SELF-AWARENESS

Relational Self-Awareness (Solomon, 2017) is a meta-skill informed by Integrative Systemic Therapy (Pinsof et al., 2018) as both use trans-theoretical constructs to organize disparate ideas from the field into a usable approach. This section of the paper operationalizes the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness: Self-Reflection, Self-Knowledge, Sexual Self-Awareness, Self-Expression, and Self-Expansion. Each pillar is defined, core skills are identified, and curricular possibilities are offered. Table 1 provides a summary.

Relational Self-Awareness draws especially from narrative, family systems, and psychodynamic approaches to understanding individuals and couples, and each pillar serves as a way of integrating material from multiple theories into a more compact, salient, and clinically applicable package. The first author, who is experienced in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), created this approach in an iterative way, blending “data from the field” and literature review. She has spent thousands of hours of in formal, informal, and clinical conversations with emerging adults about their experiences with love, sex, and intimacy, so these “participants” are, or have been, undergraduate and graduate students, clinical supervisees, research assistants, research mentees, and therapy clients. In tandem, she and her team have been conducting exhaustive reviews of the literature on relationships and human development, identifying common factors that cut across different authors’ writing and theories. The recursive process of integrating literature review and “data collection” yielded the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness.

### Creating narrative coherence: Self-Reflection

Telling stories about who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be is the foundation of the narrative branch of personality psychology, the field of narrative therapy, and more, which is why the first pillar of Relational Self-Awareness is *Self-Reflection*. This pillar centers on inviting emerging adults to view the self as a story (McAdams, 2006). Our past travels with us, forming the lens through which we experience our intimate relationships. Relational Self-Awareness expands as emerging adults “story” their lives, weaving together past and present to guide affirming and healthy choices going forward. Relationship education can help emerging adults better understand their “love template” (Solomon, 2017), which is the internalized map of relational attitudes, beliefs, and expectations related to love, sex, and intimacy, gleaned largely from experiences in their original love classroom (their family of origin), that shapes how the individual experiences and makes sense of their romantic relationships. The goal is

**TABLE 1** The five pillars of relational self-awareness

Relational self-awareness pillar	Summary	Curricular/clinical application
Pillar 1: Self-reflection (creating narrative coherence)	Understanding the self in the context of the family system in order to understand how roles and dynamics shape relational experiences and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying patterns and dynamics in family of origin</li> <li>• Creating a genogram</li> <li>• Conducting a Love Template Interview with attachment figures</li> </ul>
Pillar 2: Self-knowledge (integrating cultural identities)	Locating the self at the intersection of cultural identities in order to understand how these identities shape relational experiences and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing a Social Identity Wheel</li> <li>• Exploring cultural self-awareness centered on privileged and marginalized identities</li> </ul>
Pillar 3: sexual self-awareness (nurturing sexual maturity)	Filling in gaps in understanding of sexual health so that sexual choices are respectful and celebratory of self and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing remedial sex education</li> <li>• “Re-parenting” younger self with respect to sex education</li> <li>• Practicing sexual communication</li> </ul>
Pillar 4: Self-expression (navigating relational rupture)	Practicing internal emotion regulation and taking a systemic approach to relational dynamics in order to feel empowered during inevitable relationship conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about mindfulness and emotion regulation skills</li> <li>• Mapping a vulnerability cycle</li> <li>• Engaging in a conflict role play</li> </ul>
Pillar 5: Self-expansion (cultivating resilience)	Shifting to growth beliefs about relationships in order to meet relationship ebbs and flows with curiosity and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examining relationship with phone</li> <li>• Practicing self-compassion</li> <li>• Learning about apology and forgiveness</li> </ul>

for the individual to develop language for how their family of origin “did” love and to make implicit messages explicit. Developing insight into the impact of early experiences is less about blaming one's parents for one's relationship challenges and more about “waking from the spell of childhood” (Fishbane, 2005) in order to feel empowered and accountable in the present.

For years, undergraduate students and first year marriage and family therapy graduate students have been completing a Love Template Interview assignment in which they become ethnographers within their own family systems. Table 2 offers ten sample questions from the interview protocol. The class spends time talking about how to prepare for the interview, how to conduct the interview, and how to take care of oneself after. The interview protocol is structured enough to give students some direction but flexible enough for students to adapt to their unique family constellation, relationship dynamics, and current readiness to engage in potentially charged conversation. The protocol contains elements of the life story interview (McAdams, 2006) including inviting the participant(s) to imagine their life as a story and give each chapter a title. Love Template Interviews can be profoundly evocative and clarifying for emerging adults, and some potential benefits include: highlighting (and therefore loosening the grip of) invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984), increasing empathy for attachment figures by situating them as their grandparents' children (Fishbane, 2005), shifting the relationship from parent–child toward adult–adult, and creating opportunities for accountability and therefore forgiveness.

## Integrating cultural identities: Self-Knowledge

As José Ortega y Gasset says, “I am I plus my circumstances.” Because cultural context profoundly shapes one's experience of self and other and understanding how experiences of privilege and marginalization shape expectations, beliefs, and behaviors, the second pillar of Relational Self-Awareness is, *Self-Knowledge*. Romanticized ideas about love (e.g., love is blind, love can conquer all) eschew the reality that power dynamics are inevitable and may prevent individuals from developing the skills they need to notice and talk about how culture and identity are forever entwined. One in six new marriages bridges a significant cultural difference (Livingston & Brown, 2017), and because hierarchy is built into cultural difference, couples should consider ways to acknowledge and navigate the impact of individual identity on relational dynamics.

Even couples that appear culturally homogeneous can engage in dynamic sizing, exploring with curiosity the degree to which a misunderstanding or disappointment reflects individual

**TABLE 2** Sample questions from the love template interview

1. Think about friends, family, or people you know who have particularly good relationships and think about those whose relationships do not seem as happy. What do you think are some differences between these two groups of relationships?
2. Do you think marriage is becoming obsolete?
3. How have people's attitudes about love changed from when you were a kid until today?
4. What do you feel are the essential ingredients for success in a healthy intimate relationship? (Ask for details about why each of these ingredients is important)
5. What do you think I've learned from you about being in an intimate relationship?
6. What do you want for me in my own intimate relationships?
7. How do you see me as an intimate partner?
8. Given what you know about me and about my relationships so far, what do you think I should watch out for in choosing a partner?
9. Have you ever gone through a “bad” breakup? If so, what helped you recover from it? What did your broken heart teach you about yourself? About love? About life?
10. Do you see any common themes or patterns in your romantic relationships? If so, what?

differences, familial differences, and/or cultural differences, and all couples can explore the impact of gender role socialization. Intercultural couples need to be able to talk about how their differences affect each of them internally, how they shape the space between them, and how they affect their relationship with their indirect systems (Pinsof et al., 2018) like their friend groups and families of origin. For example, if a BIPOC partner experiences a micro-aggression (in an interaction with their non-BIPOC partner or elsewhere like at work or on public transportation), it is important for the BIPOC partner to be able to turn toward their non-BIPOC partner to talk about how it felt. When a BIPOC partner feels their partner's empathy, trust deepens.

Efforts to help emerging adults expand cultural self-awareness should take an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989), as one person may occupy both marginalized and privileged identities (for example a heterosexual Black man, a gay white woman). Having emerging adults complete a wheel of identity exercise (e.g., The Social Identity Wheel created by the University of Michigan's LSA Inclusive Teaching) (Inclusive Teaching University of Michigan, n.d.) can be helpful as well as identifying the degree to which their family system operated from an individualistic versus collectivistic orientation.

Because the zeitgeist continues to shift and change, it is helpful to invite emerging adults to become lifelong learners. In order to develop awareness about how privilege, marginalization, and oppression shapes one's lens, additional resources like podcasts, books, and films can be helpful as well as finding ways to get involved in social justice efforts. For those needing to attend to the marginalized aspects of their identity, learning about racial trauma, the impact of gendered violence, etc. can help emerging adults practice healthy boundaries, identify allies, and advocate for inclusion, equity, and justice for themselves and others (see for example Mosley et al., 2021).

## Nurturing sexual maturity: Sexual Self-Awareness

It was outlined earlier in this paper that both the formal sex education (school, religious institutions) and the informal sex education (pornography, family, friends, and media) of emerging adults tend to be inaccurate, inadequate, and incomplete, so the third pillar of Relational Self-Awareness is, *Sexual Self-Awareness*, to address the need for remedial sex education and guidance toward medically accurate information about sexual health. Research has found that gender role expectations play out most powerfully and rigidly in the domain of a romantic relationship (Rohlinger, 2002), so efforts to expand sexual self-awareness are enhanced by exploring how internalization of sexual scripts compromises sexual communication, sexual health, and sexual pleasure. Sexually self-aware emerging adults are able to attune both to themselves and to their partners and can identify sexual boundaries, communicate them to a potential partner, and advocate for their sexual desires and needs.

Relationship educators can ask emerging adults to tell a story about their sex education from both formal and informal sources to help emerging adults understand the implicit and explicit messages they internalized before they were able to choose for themselves. The first author has found that it can be healing to invite emerging adults to imagine what they would tell their younger (child or adolescent) self. This “reparenting” exercise could be done in an empty chair format, or as a guided meditation, role play, or journal entry. Queer emerging adults can offer themselves the inclusive and affirmative “talk” they never received, and emerging adults who inherited shame-heavy and fear-based sex education can offer themselves a more compassionate vision of sexual health.

Talking with a potential or current partner about sex is a common growing edge for people of all ages. In relationships that were over a decade old, partners understood only about 60% of what their partner liked sexually and only around 20% of what they did not like sexually

(Miller & Byers, 2004), and being able to talk about sex is tied to increased sexual desire, sexual arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and erectile function, and less pain (Mallory et al., 2019). The first author has found it helpful to have small groups brainstorm responses to hypothetical situations in which sexual communication is required.

## Practicing emotion regulation: Self-Expression

Because the research clearly demonstrates that a couple's ability to navigate inevitable moments of rupture is predictive of relationship satisfaction and viability (Gottman & Gottman, 2015), the fourth pillar of Relational Self-Awareness is *Self-Expression*, which prepare emerging adults for the inevitability of conflict. This pillar helps emerging adults hold both the intrapsychic and the interpersonal aspects of conflict, which fits with the finding that “conceptualizing difficulties in relational terms” is one of the common factors in couple therapy (Davis et al., 2012).

The intrapsychic aspect of this Relational Self-Awareness pillar centers on taking responsibility for one's reactivity, which grows and reinforces emotional maturity. Emerging adults need to understand the neurophysiology of emotional activation (fight, flight, freeze, and fawn), learn to notice when they have become triggered, and practice emotion regulation (taking a time out, breathing techniques, and grounding practices). The bridge between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal is the story an individual tells about a relationship problem. Research has found that viewing conflict from the perspective of a neutral third party slowed relationship decline and helped couples find conflict less distressing (Finkel et al., 2013). Being relationally self-aware means taking a systemic view of a conflict. The first author has found that vulnerability cycle mapping (Sheinkman & Fishbane, 2004) is a powerful tool for helping emerging adults develop a mental frame of conflict that captures both intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics.

This intrapsychic relational frame readies emerging adults to navigate the interpersonal aspect of conflict—how a couple talks together about a misunderstanding or frustration. When individuals bring a relational frame to the conversation, they are better able to bypass the dead ends of blame and shame and feel empowered to advocate for themselves while holding concern for their partner and for the relationship (Fishbane, 2011).

The first author has found that conflict role plays help emerging adults practice both the intrapsychic and the interpersonal aspect of empowered communication. Using a fishbowl style set up, a pair of participants can engage in several rounds. For the first round, both participants practice unhealthy conflict tactics, for example engaging the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt, (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). For the next round, one participant shifts to using healthy conflict tactics while the other attempts to remain stuck in unhealthy patterns. For the final round, both participants practice healthy conflict tactics. The rest of the group can provide in-the-moment “coaching” and the group can discuss at the end. This process helps participants identify their “dirty tricks” and highlights how changing one part of the system impacts the full system as it is difficult to stay nasty in the face of someone's empathy and patience.

The Self-Expression pillar of Relational Self-Awareness invites educators to ensure that conflict management skills are layered onto a foundation of emotion regulation and systemic thinking. The first author has found that a savvier understanding of relationship conflict inoculates emerging adults against the dissatisfaction that tends to accompany low accountability “situationships,” by helping them learn how to assess early relationship dynamics, take responsibility for their part of “the dance,” and feel clearer about whether to deepen into commitment or move on.

## Cultivating resilience: Self-Expansion

Psychological models as disparate as Positive Psychology, interpersonal neurobiology, and contemplative practice each contain at their core the idea that a growth mindset is key both for helping individuals show up as their best selves in relationships and for creating relationships that last. Based on these models, the fifth pillar of Relational Self-Awareness is *Self-Expansion*, which helps emerging adults remain resilient in the face of relationship ebbs and flows by nurturing presence, empathy, self-compassion, and the ability to apologize and forgive.

When individuals who adopt growth beliefs about relationships (successful relationships take work) are compared to those who adopt destiny beliefs about relationships (relationships are either meant to be or not), the latter tend to focus on short versus long term dating goals, put less effort into building relationships, experience less overall satisfaction, and they are more likely to break up (Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004; Knee et al., 2003). As the first author says during the opening lecture of the Marriage 101 course, “Love will grow your ass up!” which is an attention-grabbing way of inviting emerging adults to view romantic relationships as a “classroom” of sorts, a crucible for growth, learning, and healing (Schnarch, 2020). The essential intrapsychic skills here are mindfulness and self-compassion, as these lay the groundwork for the relational skills of offering heartfelt apologies and practicing forgiveness.

In the digital age, individuals are at risk of feeling both more connected and less seen. As Turkle (2012) says, “Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection” (p. 12). Relationship educators can invite emerging adults to explore the relationship between themselves and their phones. One helpful tool can be doing a functional behavior analysis to better understand how an individual feels before, during, and after checking the phone. By highlighting both helpful and detrimental aspects of the relationship with the phone, emerging adults can bring awareness and choice to when and how they use their phone to engage rather than avoid.

Self-compassion practices can help emerging adults recover from breakups, ascertain the potential of a new relationship, and deepen into a committed relationship. One simple practice to boost self-compassion is placing a photograph of oneself as a child in a prominent place (or on one's phone) so the emerging adult can ask, “Would I talk to this ‘little me’ the way I’m talking to myself right now?”

A final line of self-inquiry relates to inviting the emerging adult to examine the messages they have internalized from their family and from the culture at large about forgiveness and apology. If the emerging adult grew up in a family system that clung to icy silence or that forced apologies, in-session roleplay can teach the skill of offering apologies and can invite discussion about when and how to forgive. When emerging adults attend to the Self-Expansion pillar of Relational Self-Awareness, they gain a sense of pride about becoming better able to approach romantic relationships with presence, patience, and equanimity.

## CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this paper centers on bringing clinical wisdom to relationship educators, the ideas presented in this paper can guide clinicians who are working with emerging adults. Clinicians can keep the four macro factors in mind to guide dynamic sizing that can help emerging adults make sense of their individual experiences within the zeitgeist. In many ways, the five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness reflect best practices in psychotherapy: exploring the role of the past, practicing emotion regulation, becoming more introspective, etc. But in her experience training clinicians, the first author has found that it is easy for even senior clinicians to get

more focused on helping clients “size up” a new partner than on using dating experiences to cultivate self-awareness and maturity.

Clinicians would do well to help their emerging adult clients approach dating with a growth mindset, using their experiences to clarify their boundaries, expectations, and needs. Dating, becoming sexually intimate with someone, committing, and breaking up are all crucibles for cultivating Relational Self-Awareness and becoming what one is seeking. Framing therapeutic work through the lens of Relational Self-Awareness, including modifying the exercises mentioned here for use in a clinical setting, can help emerging adults cultivate the resilience and internal fortitude that are the foundations of a healthy intimate relationship.

There are a number of future directions that work around Relational Self-Awareness. The five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness can be applied to developmental stages beyond emerging adulthood. Relational Self-Awareness can become the basis for a psychoeducational relationship education curriculum for emerging adults. The five pillars of Relational Self-Awareness can also be used to track the outcomes of existing psychoeducational curricula. There are additional research directions that can be taken in relation to the existing undergraduate course including collecting pre- and post-data on enrolled students, publishing a case study of a student or students in the course, and a study of student experiences with the Love Template Interview.

## CONCLUSION

This time of global upheaval is an isomorph of our shifting expectations for intimate relationships and marriage. Marriage has long been held up as a love story's only “happy ending,” and marriage has historically been defined as one man and one woman in a sexually exclusive relationship for life. Marriage has historically been an arrangement designed to provide for people's basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, community), but today's couples expect their marriages to fulfill a multitude of emotional, relational, social, and sexual needs (Perel, 2006) and to be containers for our self-expression as well (Finkel, 2017).

Today's emerging adults can create intimate partnerships that are suited to their unique identities, desires, and needs, which is both a privilege and a responsibility. LGBT couples are more visible and integrated than at any other time, marriages that cross cultural lines are increasingly common (Livingston, 2017), and almost half of the households in the US have a sole or primary female breadwinner (Wang et al., 2013). There is more curiosity about consensual non-monogamy (CNM) today with 21% of people expressing that they have practiced CNM, and more people are currently in a CNM relationship than at any single point in time (Hauptert et al., 2017). The shift away from role-to-role intimate relationships and toward soul-to-soul intimate relationships is liberating and creates the potential for deepened intimacy (“into me see”), but these elevated expectations necessitate an elevated skill set, making Relational Self-Awareness mandatory, not optional.

When, how, and with whom emerging adults partner are complex and multiply determined developmental, emotional, economic, and culturally contextualized decisions. Relational Self-Awareness helps emerging adults become what they are seeking. The degree to which an emerging adult is able to practice Relational Self-Awareness is the degree to which they are able to “decide not slide” (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014), choosing a course of love that suits their unique life story, supports their individual emotional health, and creates the foundation for a happy and healthy intimate relationship.

## REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association (2020). *Stress in America: A national mental health crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/sia-mental-health-crisis.pdf>
- Arnett, J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. Oxford University Press.

- Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (1993). Mothers, children, and cohabitation: The intergenerational effect of attitudes and behavior. *American Sociological Review*, *58*, 233–246. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/profiles/index.htm>
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (1984). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Routledge.
- Canevello, A., & Crocker, J. (2011). Changing relationship growth belief: Intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of compassionate goals. *Personal Relationships*, *18*, 370–379. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01296.x>
- Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2020). *Election week 2020: Young people increase turnout, lead Biden to victory*. Retrieved from <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/election-week-2020>
- Centers for Disease Control (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/profiles/index.htm>
- Chan, A. E. (2018). Curriculum review: Relationship Smarts Plus 4.0. *Journal of Youth Development*, *13*(4), 196–200. <https://doi.org/10.5195/JYD.2018.618>
- Cherlin, A. (2010). *The marriage go round: The state of marriage and the family today*. Vintage.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *1*(8), 139–167. Retrieved from <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>
- Curtin, S. C., & Heron, M. (2019). *Death rates due to suicide and homicide among persons aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2017*. NCHS Data Brief, no 352. National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db352-h.pdf>
- Davis, S. D., Lebow, J. L., & Sprenkle, D. H. (2012). Common factors of change in couple therapy. *Behavior Therapy*, *43*(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2011.01.009>
- Doherty, W. (2013). *Take back your marriage, second edition: Sticking together in a world that pulls us apart*. Guilford Press.
- Field, T., Diego, M., Pelaez, M., Deeds, O., & Delgado, J. (2009). Breakup distress and loss of intimacy in university students. *Adolescence*, *44*, 705–727.
- Finkel, E. J. (2017). *The all-or-nothing marriage: How the best marriages work*. Dutton.
- Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *13*(1), 3–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612436522>
- Finkel, E. J., Slotter, E. B., Luchies, L. B., Walton, G. M., & Gross, J. J. (2013). A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time. *Psychological Science*, *24*(8), 1595–1601. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612474938>
- Fishbane, M. D. (2005). Differentiation and dialogue in intergenerational relationships. In J. Lebow (Ed.), *Handbook of clinical family therapy* (pp. 543–568). Wiley.
- Fishbane, M. D. (2011). Facilitating relational empowerment in couple therapy. *Family Process*, *50*, 337–352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2011.01364.x>
- Franiuk, R., Cohen, D., & Pomerantz, E. M. (2002). Implicit theories of relationships: Implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity. *Personal Relationships*, *9*, 345–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.09401>
- Franiuk, R., Momerantz, E. M., & Cohen, D. (2004). The causal role of theories of relationships: Consequences for satisfaction and cognitive strategies. *Personality and Social Relationship Bulletin*, *30*, 1494–1507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204264894>
- Freedman, G., Powell, D. N., Le, B., & Williams, K. D. (2019). Ghosting and destiny: Implicit theories of relationships predict beliefs about ghosting. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *36*(3), 905–924. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517748791>
- Freedman, J. H., & Combs, G. (2002). Narrative couple therapy. In A. S. Gurman, & N. S. Jacobson (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (3rd ed., pp. 308–334). Guilford Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. Sociology Press.
- Glass, J., Bengtson, V. L., & Dunham, C. C. (1986). Attitude similarity in three-generation families: Socialization, status inheritance, or reciprocal influence? *American Sociological Review*, *51*(5), 685. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095493>
- Gottman, J. M., & Gottman, J. S. (2015). Gottman couple therapy. In A. S. Gurman, J. L. Lebow, & D. K. Snyder (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (5th ed., pp. 129–157). The Guilford Press.
- Hauptert, M. L., Gesselman, A. N., Moors, A. C., Fisher, H. E., & Garcia, J. R. (2017). Prevalence of experiences with consensual nonmonogamous relationships: Findings from two national samples of single Americans. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, *43*(5), 424–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2016.1178675>
- Hernandez, T., & Sarge, M. A. (2020). Plenty of (similar) fish in the sea: The role of social identity and self-categorization in niche online dating. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *110*, 106384. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106384>
- Inclusive Teaching University of Michigan (n.d.) *Social identity wheel*. Retrieved from <https://sites.Lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/wp-content/uploads/sites/853/2021/03/Social-Identity-Wheel.pdf>
- Jay, M. (2012). *The defining decade: Why your twenties matter—and how to make the most of them now*. Twelve.

- Kansky, J., & Allen, J. P. (2017). Making sense and moving on: The potential for individual and interpersonal growth following emerging adult breakups. *Emerging Adulthood*, 6(3), 172–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696817711766>
- Knee, C. R. (1998). Implicit theories of relationships: Assessment and prediction of romantic relationship initiation, coping, and longevity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 360–370. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.2.360>
- Knee, C. R., Patrick, H., & Lonsbary, C. (2003). Implicit theories of relationships: Orientations toward evaluation and cultivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7, 41–55. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0701\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0701_3)
- Kohler, P. K., Manhart, L. E., & Lafferty, W. E. (2008). Abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education and the initiation of sexual activity and teen pregnancy. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 42(4), 344–351. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18346659>
- Kramer, S. (2019). *S. has world's highest rate of children living in single-parent households*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/>
- Lefebvre, L. E., Allen, M., Rasner, R. D., Garstad, S., Wilms, A., & Parrish, C. (2019). Ghosting in emerging adults' romantic relationships: The digital dissolution disappearance strategy. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 39(2), 125–150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618820519>
- Let's Talk Poll (2015). *Center for Latino adolescent and family circle magazine*. Planned Parenthood Federation of America.
- Lewandowski, G. W. Jr, & Radice, G. M. (2012). Relationship dissolution in nonmarital romantic relationships. In M. A. Paludi (Ed.), *The psychology of love* (Vol. 1–4, pp. 89–106). Praeger/ABC-CLIO.
- Liang, Y., & Van Horn, S. (2020). How do romantic breakups affect depression among American college students? The role of sexual conservativeness. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–11. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1784180>
- Lindberg, L. D., & Maddow-Zimet, I. (2012). Consequences of sex education on teen and young adult sexual behaviors and outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 51(4), 332–338. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2012/10/consequences-sex-education-te>
- Lindberg, L. D., Maddow-Zimet, I., & Boonstra, H. (2016). Changes in adolescents' receipt of sex education, 2006–2013. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 58(6), 621–627. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.02.004>
- Livingston, G. (2017). *In U.S. metro areas, huge variation in intermarriage rates*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/18/in-u-s-metro-areas-huge-variation-in-intermarriage-rates/>
- Livingston, G., & Brown, A. (2017). *Intermarriage in the U.S. fifty years after Loving v. Virginia*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/>
- Madey, S. F., & Jilek, L. (2012). Attachment style and dissolution of romantic relationships: Breaking up is hard to do, or is it? *Individual Differences Research*, 10(4), 202–210.
- Mallory, A. B., Stanton, A. M., & Handy, A. B. (2019). Couples sexual communication and dimensions of sexual function: A meta-analysis. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(7), 882–898. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1568375>
- McAdams, D. (2006). The role of narrative in personality psychology today. *Narrative Inquiry*, 16(1), 11–18.
- Miller, A. S., & Byers, S. E. (2004). Actual and desired duration of foreplay and intercourse: Discordance and misperceptions within heterosexual couples. *Journal of Sex Research*, 41(3), 301–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490409552237>
- Mosley, D. V., Hargons, C. N., Meiller, C., Angyal, B., Wheeler, P., Davis, C., & Stevens-Watkins, D. (2021). Critical consciousness of anti-Black racism: A practical model to prevent and resist racial trauma. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 68(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000430>
- Nielsen, A., Pinosof, W., Rampage, C., Solomon, A. H., & Goldstein, S. (2004). Marriage 101: An integrated academic and experiential undergraduate marriage education course. *Family Relations*, 53(5), 485–494. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00057.x>
- OECD (2019). *SF3.1: Marriage and divorce rates*. OECD Family Database. Retrieved from [http://www.oecd.org/social/family/SF\\_3\\_1\\_Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_rates.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/SF_3_1_Marriage_and_divorce_rates.pdf)
- Perel, E. (2006). *Mating in captivity: Unlocking erotic intelligence*. Harper.
- Pinosof, W. M., Breunlin, D. C., Russell, W. P., Lebow, J. L., Rampage, C., & Chambers, A. L. (2018). *Integrative systemic therapy: Metaframeworks for problem solving with individuals, couples, and families*. American Psychological Association.
- Rhoades, G. K., & Stanley, S. M. (2014). *Before "I do": What premarital experiences have to do with marital quality among today's young adults*. The National Marriage Project.
- Rohlinger, D. A. (2002). Eroticizing men: Cultural influences on advertising and male objectification. *Sex Roles*, 46, 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016575909173>
- Rothman, E. F., Daley, N., & Alder, J. (2020). A pornography literacy program for adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(2), 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305468>

- Scheinkman, M., & Fishbane, M. (2004). The Vulnerability Cycle: Working With Impasses in Couple Therapy. *Family Process, 43*(3), 279–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2004.00023.x>
- Schnarch, D. (2020). *Intimacy and desire: Awaken the passion in your relationship*. Sterling Publishers.
- Sex and HIV Education (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.gutmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>
- Sharma, M. K., Anand, N., Thamilselvan, P., Suma, N., John, N., Sahu, M., Chakraborty Thakur, P., Baglari, H., & Singh, P. (2019). Is porn use becoming a modality of sex education among teenagers? A case study. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 45*, 18–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2019.08.001>
- Siegel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2004). *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*. J.P. Tarcher/Penguin.
- Simpson, D. M., Leonhardt, N. D., & Hawkins, A. J. (2018). Learning about love: A meta-analytic study of individually-oriented relationship education programs for adolescents and emerging adults. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(3), 477–489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0725-1>
- Simpson, J. A. (1987). The dissolution of romantic relationships: Factors involved in relationship stability and emotional distress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53*, 683–692. <https://doi.org/10.1037/00223514.53.4.683>
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2016). *5 facts about online dating*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating/>
- Solomon, A. H. (2017). *Loving Bravely: 20 lessons of self-discovery to help you get the love you want*. New Harbinger.
- Studley, B., & Chung, M. C. (2015). Posttraumatic stress and well-being following relationship dissolution: Coping, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms from past trauma, and traumatic growth. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 20*, 317–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2013.877774>
- Sue, S. (1998). In search of cultural competence in psychotherapy and counseling. *American Psychologist, 53*(4), 440–448. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.53.4.440>
- Tashiro, T. Y., & Frazier, P. (2003). “I’ll never be in a relationship like that again”: Personal post-traumatic growth following romantic relationship breakups. *Personal Relationships, 10*, 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.00039>
- Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
- Twenge, J. M. (2020). Possible reasons US adults are not having sex as much as they used to. *JAMA Network Open, 3*(6), e203889. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.3889>
- Ueda, P., Mercer, C. H., Ghaznavi, C., & Herbenick, D. (2020). Trends in frequency of sexual activity and number of sexual partners among adults aged 18 to 44 years in the US, 2000–2018. *JAMA Network Open, 3*(6), e203833.
- UNFPA (2015). *Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education: A global review*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Retrieved from <http://www.unfpa.org/publications/emerging-evidence-lessons-and-practice>
- United States Census Bureau (2019). *Historical marital status tables estimated median age at first marriage by sex: 1890 to the present. (Table MS-2)*. The United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>
- United States Census Bureau (2020). *Measuring social and economic impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic [Household Pulse Survey]*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html>
- Wang, W., Parker, K., & Taylor, P. (2013). *Breadwinner moms: Mothers are the sole or primary provider in four-in-ten households with children; public conflicted about the growing trend*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>
- Weissbourd, R., Anderson, T. R., Cashin, A., & McIntyre, J. (2017). *The talk: How adults can promote young people’s healthy relationships and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment*. Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/thetalk>
- Willoughby, B., Carroll, J. S., Vitas, J. M., & Hill, L. M. (2012). “When are you getting married?” The intergenerational transmission of attitudes regarding marital timing and marital importance. *Journal of Family Issues, 33*(2), 223–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11408695>
- Willoughby, B. J., James, S., Marsee, I., Memmott, M., & Dennison, R. P. (2019). “I’m scared because divorce sucks”: Parental divorce and the marital paradigms of emerging adults. *Journal of Family Issues, 41*(6), 711–738. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19880933>

**How to cite this article:** Solomon, A. H., Martinez C. J., & Wren J. E. (2021). Becoming what you are seeking: Building Relational Self-Awareness in emerging adults. *Family Process, 00*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12697>