

The Adolescent Brain: How an Exciting Time of Growth Can Impact Our Counseling Work with and for Adolescents

SESSION 6



Some Differences between Adults and Adolescents

Adolescents:

- Lack experience and perspective.
- May think they are “immortal” (adults know they are not).
- May be more emotional and less inhibited than adults.
- May not plan well and are less concerned about the future.
- Think differently about social decisions. Peers are very important!
- Are less able to delay gratification. They may be impulsive.



Some Differences between Adults and Adolescents

Adolescents:

- Are just discovering who they are; identity is not well established.
- Experience constant biological/social change, which can cause stress.
- May develop intolerance for change.
- May have difficulty controlling their behavior.
- May experience inappropriate mood swings and angry outbursts.
- Can feel isolated and that no one understands them.



Have you ever wondered why? Recent discoveries from neuroscience reveal some answers!

Significant Brain Changes Are Underway

The prefrontal cortex is under development. This affects an adolescent's capacity to:

- Control risk taking and decision-making.
- Plan ahead (especially complex behaviors).
- Understand others and assess social interactions.
- Inhibit inappropriate behavior, especially social behavior.
- Understand oneself: Express one's personality or identity.
- The synapses or brain connections between cells that are not actively in use are "pruned" away. Those that are actively in use are strengthened.

Significant Brain Changes Are Underway

- The medial prefrontal cortex is more active in adolescents than adults during social cognition.
- Adolescents' ability to “read” or understand the emotional states of others by observing their responses is still developing.
- They may inconsistently take the perspectives of others into account when making decisions.

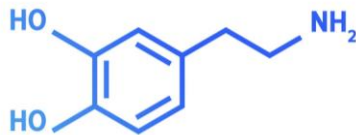
Significant Brain Changes Are Underway

- The limbic system is involved in processing emotions. It affects how we feel about or experience “rewards” (emotional).
- The limbic system in adolescents is very active. Adolescents are more focused on having fun and taking risks.
- The “rewards” of their peers’ attention and approval becomes very important.
 - Being egocentric, they may become self-conscious (thinking they are being judged or behaving as if they were on stage).

Brain Development Differences

Compared to adults, adolescents have increased sensitivity to dopamine. Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centers. It also helps regulate movement and emotional responses, and enables us to take action to move toward rewards.

- Increased sensitivity to dopamine in adolescents means:
- Increased sensation-seeking behavior
- Increased reward seeking
- Goal-directed **activity**: setting goals and working hard to meet them



Outside Forces Are Important

External factors (nutrition, socioeconomic status, discrimination, education) impact the growth, structure, and function of the brain.

Stress, trauma, and **adverse experiences** negatively impact:

- Learning
- Mental health
- Adoption of healthy behaviors
- Coping during emergencies/crises

Older vs. Younger Adolescents

Younger adolescents:

Are more focused on tangible problems, number of objects, etc.:
“concrete thinking”

Are moving toward more abstract thinking. They are increasingly able to:

- Develop assumptions about reality (hypotheses).
- Apply prior experience to new situations (consider solutions).
- Imagine the future consequences of current actions (develop a plan).

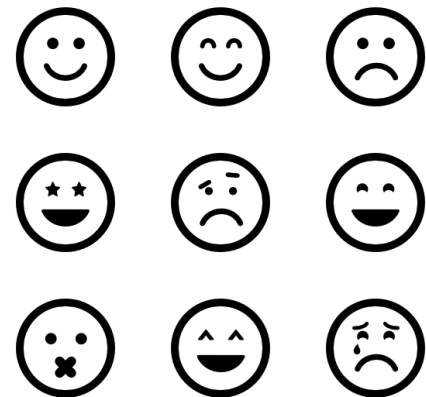
However, they may lack confidence and can make poor decisions.



Summary

Given stage of brain development, adolescents:

- Experience constant change. This may be stressful.
- Move from “concrete” to abstract, hypothetical thinking.
- Are increasingly sensitive to dopamine, seeking sensations, risks, and rewards from new activities. They may see risk as exciting.
- May be emotional and uninhibited.
- May have difficulty planning and making decisions.



Summary

Given stage of brain development, adolescents:

- Can be less able to delay gratification and are impatient in social interactions.
- Are often egocentric and self-conscious.
- May have difficulty understanding others and assessing social interactions.
- Can be unpredictable. They may react and control their responses at different rates.
- Are highly influenced by their peers and other external forces (education, poverty, discrimination, trauma, or adverse events).
- Establish patterns of thinking and behavior that last into adulthood.



What do we need to do as counselors working with adolescents in the VMMC setting?

- Support them with interactive counseling to make their own decisions at their own pace.
- Protect them from possible dangers of risky practices/behaviors in context of VMMC (wound care, unprotected sex, etc.).
- Never suggest that their development is incomplete or that teens cannot self-regulate.
- Give them respect and praise for their developed strengths. Support them in less well-developed areas.
- **Above all, support HIGH EXPECTATIONS for them to live up to!**



Questions

Are there any questions?