

*The Parent Pivot* is an innovative and resourceful guide for parents of young adults in emotional distress. With real world case examples and storytelling, *The Parent Pivot* provides parents with useful coping tools, informational resources, and a new relationship model for responding to the emotional distress of their young adult. More than anything, this marvelous book gives desperate parents some concrete measure of hope.

—**SHERRY CORMIER, PhD**, PSYCHOLOGIST, BEREAVEMENT TRAUMA SPECIALIST,  
CONSULTANT, AND AUTHOR OF *SWEET SORROW: FINDING ENDURING  
WHOLENESS AFTER LOSS AND GRIEF*

Reading every chapter, or even every page of this book, powerfully equips a parent (or an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or anyone who loves an emerging adult) with expert knowledge and evidence-based practice, enveloped in thoughtfulness and grace. The authors thoroughly understand the depths and intricacies of being a parent and offer a liberating yet intentional way of living for both the emerging adult and the self.

—**TES TUASON, PhD**, PROFESSOR AND PROGRAM DIRECTOR,  
CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING, BROOKS COLLEGE OF HEALTH,  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA, JACKSONVILLE

This book serves as an amazing resource for parents whose children are on the cusp of emerging adulthood during these especially challenging times. The authors address concerns of young adults ranging from daily stressors to unhealthy coping behaviors to serious mental health disorders. This book provides help and support in understandable and relatable ways. Most important, this resource equips you with the knowledge and skills necessary to care for yourself as you navigate the demands associated with your evolving role.

—**CLIFF MCKINNEY, PhD**, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,  
MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

This book is an exceptionally valuable resource for parents and caretakers who are trying to help their young adult children cope with emotional distress and more serious mental health disorders. The authors very clearly describe the challenges that can emerge during this critical developmental period and offer practical suggestions for how best to support their children. The authors have many years of experience and their expertise contributes to the credibility of the content of the book. The real-life case studies, the conversational writing style, and the focus of hope in the last chapter should appeal to parents who are struggling to help their children navigate a difficult period in their development.

—**ANN VERNON, PhD**, PROFESSOR EMERITA, UNIVERSITY OF  
NORTHERN IOWA, CEDAR FALLS

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## INTRODUCTION

# THE PIVOTING WHEEL

In a world rife with tension, disagreement, and chaos of many kinds, there is one thing most people will agree on: We want the best for our children. Many also come to realize that our parenting job doesn't end when our children become legal adults at age 18. Indeed, for many of us, our journeys become more complicated as our children strive to make their own way in the adult world. Most likely you were a hands-on parent for 17 years, and as such you exercised control over many of the decisions in your child's life and the choices they made. Now, however, they may legally take up the reins of their lives, making important decisions and leaving you on the sidelines. The adult world they are entering is complex and uncertain, full of possibilities and pitfalls. Likewise, as parents you are moving into uncharted waters yourselves. Psychologists have viewed the period between ages 18 and 29 to be a distinct stage of development characterized by multiple transitions. Individuals in this age group—whom we refer to interchangeably as *young adults*, *emerging adults*, and *adult children*—often undergo some form of psychological distress. Parents, whose lives are intertwined with their children's, also experience their own stress as their young adults are given the green light to govern their own lives.

This book is for parents whose emerging adults are experiencing some form of psychological or emotional distress; this can range from

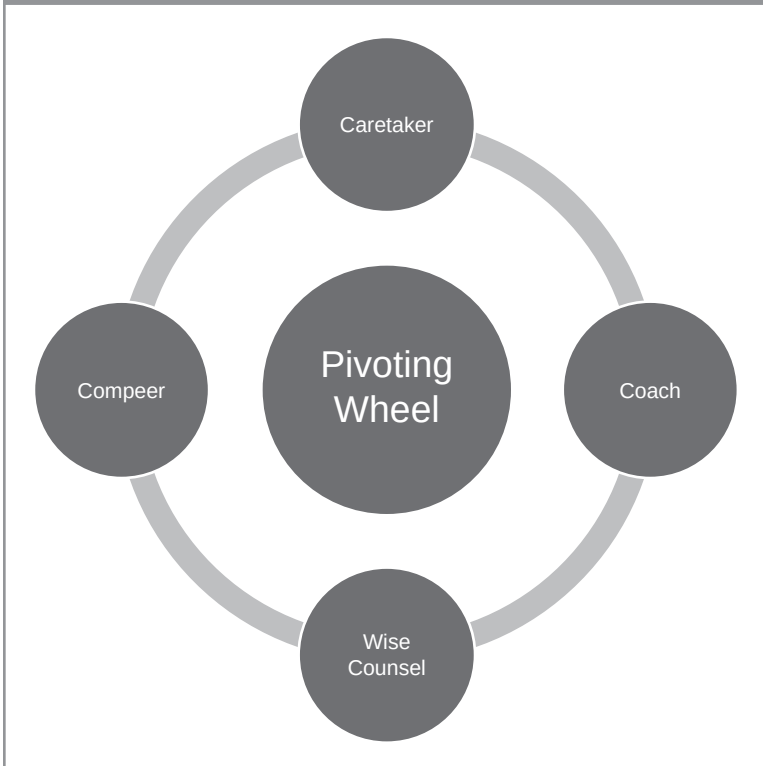
mild symptoms to more serious mental health disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder). Our book provides you with much needed information to assist you in understanding your adult child's symptoms and in navigating our current mental health system. Additionally, we address unhealthy behaviors (e.g., substance misuse, internet misuse, unhealthy eating and exercise) and high-risk behaviors (e.g., self-injury) that young adults may use to manage their distress. These maladaptive coping strategies create distress and fear in the parents and complicate their relationships and communications with their emerging adults.

As psychologists, the three of us have more than a century of combined professional work with young adults in clinical and educational settings as well as experience working with parents and other adults on wellness and well-being. We offer you our collective knowledge and experience to help you maintain your sanity while you grapple with the challenges and changes in your parenting role. We strongly believe that lifelong learning empowers each and every one of us. In addition, two of us have direct experience parenting young adults. Each of us has experienced, personally and professionally, the struggles young adults go through as they make decisions and move forward with their lives. We have also confronted the more serious challenges of young adults with mental illnesses that derailed their plans and threatened to stop their forward progress completely. In addition, we have encountered the tragic circumstances of young adults who make serious self-injurious gestures or die by suicide. The devastating impact on parents, other family members, and friends is very real. Such losses also take a toll on the mental health professionals who are either directly or indirectly involved. We are writing this book in the hope of assisting parents to find the help they need to support their young adults across a variety of circumstances, while not losing sight of their own needs or compromising their own well-being.

## THE PIVOTING WHEEL FOR PARENTS

*Pivoting* is the ability to shift course and move in a new direction as the situation demands. By the time you become the parent of a young adult, you have adapted or pivoted many times to suit the developmental phases and life circumstances of your child. From the day you brought your infant or child into your home you realized that your regular routine was no longer viable. You made the pivot to caretaker when you started to put the needs of your child center stage and move your own needs to the side. Sleep was one of the first disruptions in normal routine, and there were many others. As this little person began to grow and move around in the world, you continued to adapt to accommodate their ever-changing developmental needs. You learned the importance of communicating effectively, establishing boundaries, and setting rules and enforcing them with consistency. You also learned how and when to be flexible to accommodate the changing circumstances and needs of your child. As they grew, you likely gave your child increasing freedom and relaxed the need to control their every move. Some of the decisions you made during this time were relatively easy, while others were difficult and no doubt caused considerable stress for you. You learned how the demands associated with parenting quite often necessitate that you attend to your own self-care. If you are like many parents, however, you may have put taking care of yourself at the bottom of your to-do list.

As you will see, pivoting is about adapting to the situation rather than rigidly adhering to old patterns of behavior which are typically not effective in new circumstances. This process is fundamental to the work of a parent. By the time your child becomes a mature adult, you may make as many as four pivots in your parenting journey to accommodate developmental phases and life circumstances. It might help to envision a well-greased axle on a big wheel that allows you to turn readily to meet new demands for yourself and your young adult (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1. The Parent Pivoting Wheel**

As your child enters the stage of emerging adulthood, you may be ready to make a pivot from the *caretaker* role where you have been handling the physical and emotional needs of your young child to becoming a *coach* as your young adult heads out into the world. You pull back from hands-on caretaking and enter a new role of guiding and teaching your young adult as they mature and grow. You are no longer “doing for” but rather modeling effective behavior and actively guiding your adult child. *Wise counsel* is the third pivot point

in which you are more like an on-call consultant in your adult child's life. A wise counsel is available when their adult child approaches them for advice but emphasizes that the final choice rests with the young adult. The challenge for the wise counsel is to adopt a supportive and nonjudgmental tone and to respond to your young adult when asked for an opinion or advice. A wise counsel does not jump in and fix the problem. During the latter part of the emerging adult stage, it may be possible for parents to make yet a fourth pivot to that of *compeer* in which we enter a role as an equal with our offspring. Think of this as a combination of "companion" and "peer." Our use of the word companion is intended to mean a relationship of equals who enjoy each other's company, sometimes without having to say a word. We explain these pivots in greater detail in the coming chapters.

## WHEN DO I PIVOT?

As the parent of a young adult, you can determine the appropriate role for a given situation based on two factors: first and foremost is their level of functioning, and second is their level of distress. It is important to understand that your young adult may function fairly well even in the face of considerable distress. There isn't a simple formula here for knowing when to pivot. Please keep this in mind as we continue.

Generally speaking, functioning declines as distress rises. You may intuitively move toward the more hands-on role of a caretaker in this situation. On the flip side, usually the higher the young adult's functioning, the lower the level of distress. In this instance your instincts may tell you to back off and adopt the wise counsel or compeer role.

Things get tricky, though, when functioning and distress don't neatly line up. For example, even when your young adult is functioning moderately well, they may still be experiencing considerable

psychological distress. However, they might be able to hear what you have to say and make effective decisions. Conversely, your young adult could be functioning poorly with a relatively low level of distress.

Let's consider the decision of when to pivot by using a continuum as a tool. In Figure 2, you see a 10-point continuum that depicts a range of functioning from minimal to high. Based on Steinberg's (2023) work, at the high end of functioning known as *flourishing*, the young adult exhibits the following: a strong sense of engagement in daily life; strong connections with others; optimism and hope for the future; strong motivation and interest in work, academics, and hobbies; *grit* (i.e., perseverance when things get tough), and a sense of joy. At the lower end of this continuum, we see emerging adults who lack these same qualities; according to Steinberg, they are *floundering*.

Just as we offer a continuum for level of functioning, we offer a continuum as a tool to help you think about where your young adult may fall in terms of their psychological distress. In Figure 3, you see a 10-point continuum that depicts a range of distress from minimal to severe. Based on Kessler et al.'s (2002) work on the assessment of

**FIGURE 2. The Functioning Continuum**

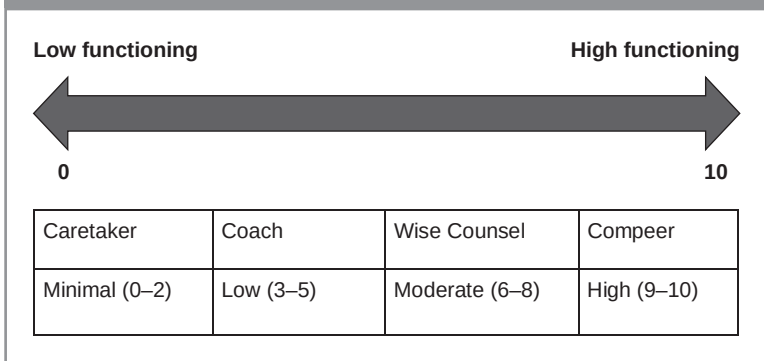
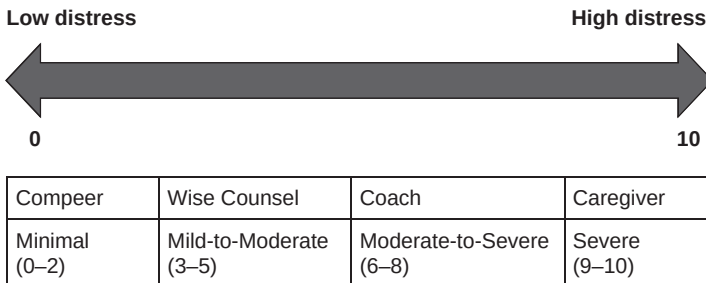


**FIGURE 3. The Distress Continuum**

psychological distress, at the severe end of our continuum, the young adult experiences excessive nervousness, restlessness or fidgeting, extreme tiredness, severe depression, hopelessness, and worthlessness. In such situations, the ability to think clearly and rationally is severely hampered by the distress, and your young adult is not able to hear what you have to say. In addition, their ability to function effectively at work or school is impaired. At the minimal end of the continuum, your young adult has little to none of these signs of distress. In such circumstances, they are handling their daily lives effectively and are likely able to engage in healthy interactions with you. They are also more receptive to new ideas.

Knowing when to pivot is not easy. There is no simple recipe or formula to follow. Instead, this process requires you to use your understanding of your adult child and the knowledge you will gain from this book to make an informed assessment of what your young adult needs at this particular stage in their life. It is also important to note that the process of pivoting is not a linear one. At any time, you can pivot to a previous point given the needs of the situation. Even as you pivot to wise counsel or compeer, caretaker and coach are viable pivots when necessary.

Imagine, for example, that your emerging adult develops a serious physical illness such as cancer. You are likely to pivot to caretaker initially until you have enough information and clarity to decide what to do next. You will also need the coach and wise counsel skills to help you. Remaining in caretaker mode can actually be detrimental to you and your adult child in such a situation. Obviously, decisions about when and which role to pivot to are not easy. A mental health issue is no different, and your ability to make necessary pivots is crucial—not only for your young adult but also for your own well-being. Regardless of which pivot you make in any given situation, respect and support of your young adult's autonomy and independence are essential.

When you make any of these pivots, you carry the skills from the previous roles with you; each skill builds on the previous ones. Developing these skills takes time, as parents need to master foundational skills first before moving on to more complex ones. This is quite similar to the way we learned mathematics in school. Remember early on how you were asked to recognize numbers and over time learned how to add and subtract, and then progressed on to learn more complex operations like multiplication and division? Algebra and geometry followed after the basics were mastered.

The needs of your young adult certainly impact your decisions regarding the pivots. But what about you, the parent? How might you influence what role you should play for a given situation? What if you are suffering significant distress watching your adult child suffer, and thus believe you need to step in and fix things? Psychological flexibility is necessary when your adult child is in emotional distress. You will need to develop the capacity to pivot to and from your parenting roles to engage in specific behaviors that may not be in your repertoire, while simultaneously self-regulating your own distress. We view your level of distress as more an indication of how much you need self-care, rather than what role is most beneficial to your

adult child right now. Self-care is always important, but it becomes even more important when you are struggling because of your adult child's emotional pain. Developing this self-awareness is crucial because addressing your own distress is vital to the pivoting process. The techniques we share for self-care will help you. Remember, taking care of yourself is vital, however, self-care is not something that most parents are inclined to do.

In the chapters that follow, we provide you with further information about your parenting roles and guide you through these pivot points. We offer tools for making your journey more doable. And most importantly, we discuss the challenges many parents face when their emerging adults exhibit signs of psychological distress, including more serious mental illnesses. As you pivot to meet oncoming changes and demands in both your life and that of your emerging adult, you improve your mental and physical well-being as well as overall resilience. Resilience, or the ability to adapt to changing situations, can be a powerful ally in your journey as a parent and a person.

## TWO COMMON THEMES

One theme you will notice throughout the book, which we have already introduced in the previous section, is the importance of taking care of yourself while you respond to the challenges of having a distressed emerging adult. That well-worn cliché of putting your own oxygen mask on first before turning to help your seatmate is essential to keep in mind. If you can't function, you will be of no use to your adult child. To that end, we also offer skills for handling your own stress and managing your well-being. Our overall physical, mental, and emotional well-being is often severely taxed, and stress levels may be off the charts at times as we continue to adapt our parenting to meet the needs of our adult children. This is especially true when our emerging adults show signs of something more than just

growing pains, and we as parents question whether there is something more serious happening with them. Our worry meter kicks into high gear and our well-being likely plummets while we navigate the complexities and challenges of parenting our adult children.

The second theme you will notice, which we also introduced in the previous section, is the use of a continuum approach throughout the book. We view behaviors and mental health issues not as either–or distinct categories, but rather in terms of degrees of health or functionality. This applies to your young adult’s behavior as well as your own. We live in a world that likes to box things into neat categories such as good versus bad or yes versus no. Such categories suggest there is a clear judgment in one direction or the other. Experience teaches us, however, that the lines between such distinctions are far from clear. Life is not black or white, and many of us are uncomfortable living in the “gray” area. We want clear, definitive answers, and such answers don’t often exist. Even in the mental health field, the professional guidelines outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) now apply this continuum approach in diagnosing mental health disorders. In other words, the focus is on the degree to which a person is impaired by their symptoms rather than the presence or absence of these symptoms.

We all encounter stress in our lives, and it often varies in intensity. On any given day, your stress may start out as minimal. As the day continues, and you are stuck in traffic and late for an appointment, it will likely rise. Once you are exiting the appointment and heading to lunch with a friend, it may subside a bit. It is fluid and not stuck in an on-versus-off mode. So, too, might your young adult’s behaviors fall on a continuum of functionality. Sleeping in on any given day is not uncommon for young adults, and few parents would bat an eye at that. However, sleeping in for 4 or 5 days in a row and missing work or classes may raise your level of concern.

To the question of “When should I worry?” we say there are no quick, easy, or definitive answers; each young adult and their circumstances are unique. However, we offer information to guide you in recognizing warning signs and red flags that indicate your young adult may be sliding down a slippery slope. We believe that behaviors, such as those resulting in impairment in daily living tasks (work, school, personal self-care), are the clearest markers of potential problems. The key is to catch the behaviors before they spiral into a more serious situation. The earlier the intervention, the better the prognosis and overall quality of life for parents, young adults, and family.

### SPECTACLES, LIGHTNING BOLTS, AND TOTE BAGS



Throughout the book, we present up-to-date information to empower you by helping you better understand what is going on with yourself as well as your young adult. Like the turtle who pulls his head into the shell when frightened, we sometimes also pull back in the face of new and unsettling information. We encourage you to lean into the discomfort you might feel and not shy away from what you might discover. Watch for the symbol of a pair of spectacles as a signpost for potentially complex material that may require a closer reading to fully understand.



It is likely you will experience discomfort with some of the material you read in this book. Just as we tell clients in their first session, therapy can involve uncovering deeper and sometimes unexpected and intense emotions. This is often unsettling, particularly early on in the therapy process. However, counseling can offer the chance to learn more effective strategies to manage your feelings while also gaining a new perspective on your situation. Likewise, you as a parent are apt to feel some distress as you work your way through the book. This is part of the process of learning new information and gaining a deeper

understanding of your young adult and their psychological distress. In addition, you may also be realizing some things about your own behavior, past and present, that could be upsetting for you. We offer calming techniques along the way to help you as you continue your journey through the book. We encourage you to have compassion for yourself as you continue through the book and make use of the calming techniques offered in the chapters. Like the lightning bolt in a thunderstorm, we can't predict when the jolt will hit you, however, we place a lightning bolt where we think a jolt is likely to occur.



Throughout the book, we help you fill up a metaphorical tote bag with tools to take with you on your journey as you move forward with your young adult. In our respective clinical work, each of us quickly discovered that although therapy takes time, our clients often wanted and needed a “to-go” bag at the end of each session, something tangible to take home. Therefore, each chapter includes several tools because we know that no single tool is sufficient to get any job done. You will see this symbol throughout the book to indicate the tools you can put in your tote bag as you move along.

Most artisans practice their craft by finding the right personal “fit” in terms of tools and working hard. Please note that while the tools we offer you are supported by research, some will be a better fit for you than others. We encourage you to read through all the tools; in time you will figure out which will work best for you.

## INTRODUCING OUR CASES

The power of stories has long been understood by people around the world. The field of neuroscience (study of the brain) with the use of brain imaging now adds scientific proof to the idea that stories have the power to both inform and transform us in profound ways. Brain scans of the storyteller and the listener show that their brains mirror

one another. Areas of the listener's brain that control perspective-taking are activated, something that does not happen when the individual is simply listening to a lecture of facts or statistics (Chang et al., 2024; Stephens et al., 2010).

As clinicians and teachers, we also deeply appreciate the power of stories and narrative in our work with clients and students. To engage you, our readers, more fully, we use the stories of four families throughout our book. We draw on our work with clients and incorporate their stories, all the while knowing these stories do not fully reflect the range of human experiences that exist in the world today. We have changed certain details in these narratives to protect the identities and to maintain the confidentiality of our clients and their family members. As you move from one chapter to the next, you will take the journey with our parents—Claire and Stan, Lucia and Arturo, Rachel, and Pete. You will temporarily inhabit their worlds offer a bird's-eye view of the many challenges that await our parents as their emerging adults experience mental health issues. Although we appreciate the vast diversity and complexity that exist in today's families, we hope you may find yourself identifying with aspects of our parents' experiences.

While some young adults launch successfully, others start off well initially and then fall backward. There is a third group that never gets off the ground. We want to introduce you to four young adults from different backgrounds who appear to be launching successfully. As you read the introduction by their mother or father, do you notice any signs, subtle or otherwise, that a storm could be brewing? As parents, we don't want to notice such signs, however, it is important to understand that what you may see initially is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the young adult's overall well-being or their progress toward adulthood. Let's listen as each parent introduces their adult child.

Anne's mother, Claire, said the following:

Stan and I celebrated Anne's graduation from high school because it meant a new beginning for her, and she was excited to move on with her life as a college freshman. Both of us were supportive of Anne's choice of history as a major, given her love of ancient history. At the same time, Anne and I had many conversations about possible career goals for history majors. I believed it was important for Anne to be aware of some future career options for whatever major she chose. I also talked with her about the importance of requesting academic accommodations or assistance for a learning disability, which was diagnosed in third grade. However, Anne refused to request help. I can't say I was surprised as Anne always struggled to accept the diagnosis of dyslexia, but I very much wanted her to have a solid academic support system in place. At first, college offered a very positive change for Anne. She lived on campus in a residence hall and cultivated friendships quickly. Her grades were good, and she kept her job at the local grocery store. Anne appeared content and happy during her first semester, and I felt relieved.

Daniel's father, Arturo, said the following:

What can I say about my son, Daniel? My family is from Guatemala. My father, Daniel's grandfather, emigrated here, and he and my mother settled in a part of town that is mostly Hispanic. It was a rough place to grow up. Lots of the kids who grew up around me turned out to be *pandillero* (gang members). My father was a no-nonsense, stern man, and he beat into me that I had to work hard. He helped me make a good connection so I got myself a job as an assembly-line worker at the auto plant, and I worked my way up from the bottom to line supervisor.

I met Lucia, and we got married and had our two kids when we were pretty young. I made up my mind that my son would go to college; no son of mine was going to have to struggle growing up the way I did. Daniel was such a good kid. He's always loved baseball. On his Little League team, he had to be

better than everyone on the team because I was the coach back then. He didn't want anyone on his team to think he had an edge with me being his coach and all. In high school, he was a "cleanup hitter" on the team, and I went to as many of Daniel's home games as I could—even switched my schedule around so that I could work nights. Daniel's *amá* and I are proud of how hard he's worked to overcome his ADHD to get into college. He wants to go pro but I told him he's got to have a career to fall back on just in case.

Jessie's mom, Rachel, said the following:

Jessie is a great kid. She had to grow up pretty quickly after her father was killed in Afghanistan. As my older child, she helped with her younger brother and took on a lot of responsibility at home. I work as an EMT and am called out for emergencies at odd hours, so she covered for me a lot. I really wanted her to go on to college after high school, but Jessie has always been self-directed, and she chose to work full time instead. She's been on her own for several years and has done very well. She's a manager now at Planet Fitness, and I am so proud of her. I guess not everyone has to go to college.

Ian's father, Pete, said the following:

As a single father with an adopted biracial son, I have walked a tightrope sometimes trying to make sure that Ian gets all the love and support he needs while trying not to "father hen" him. I am very proud of Ian, he graduated with high honors from high school and has completed his first year of college. He has always been a bit reserved, preferring to go his own way. Yet he had a great group of friends in high school, and I would say he was a popular kid. In my work as a high school physics teacher, I have seen a lot of young people take wrong turns and end up in trouble with the law or injured in some way. Ian bypassed the nastiness of that and worked hard to achieve the scholarships that helped him through his first year.

Clearly, these parents are proud of their young adults, and optimistic for their futures. They have all successfully graduated from high school and have plans for what they want to do. Anne, Daniel, and Ian are attending college, and Jessie has launched herself on a different path where she lives on her own and has responsible employment in a managerial position. For Claire, Stan, Arturo, Lucia, Rachel, and Pete, their parenting work has paid off, and they can begin to relax their efforts with their young adult. They may begin to dream of the possibility in the future of a friendship with their adult child. Such a new relationship might involve spending time together without an agenda or expectations. We continue to follow these parents and their young adults as we turn our attention to the process of pivoting.

## HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Our book is organized into three parts, with each section building on the previous one. If you've picked up this book, you might identify with the feelings of frustration, anger, fear, disappointment, among others, often expressed by parents of adult children who are struggling with the adulting process. Part I, "OMG! I Thought I Was Done," captures this sentiment. In these chapters, we discuss various factors that contribute to some of the commonly observed changes that occur in young people during the emerging adulthood stage. We offer our parenting model, which we call the "pivoting wheel" to help you conceptualize your various roles as a parent. The wheel is a tool to help you better appreciate and understand the fluid nature of parenting at this stage, especially in situations when your young adult is experiencing psychological distress. Our aim is to help you in thinking about when and how you might pivot to a role that best addresses the changing demands and circumstances you and your young adult may face.

Part II, “Upside Down and Inside Out,” refers to the upheaval you will likely experience when your adult child is in psychological distress. We aid you in better understanding the continuum of distress ranging from mild anxiety and depression to more serious mental health disorders. Here we empower you with information and skills necessary to engage effectively in difficult dialogues with your adult child. We also assist you in better understanding the complex process of getting a diagnosis if there is a mental illness and the sometimes nightmarish challenge of finding and getting into effective treatment. We provide you with practical advice to use in the selection of mental health care providers and evidence-based treatment approaches. We offer useful tips on how to respond if your adult child shuts you out of the process. We provide tools both for understanding and coping with feelings of loss that can be so overwhelming for parents.

Part III, “Right Side Up Again,” refers to the ability to shift from focusing on the needs of your distressed young adult to addressing your own self-care. When you are “right side up,” you are better able to achieve a healthy balance between caring for yourself and others, including your young adult. The lynchpin of self-care is a combination of building resilience and practicing self-compassion.

We conclude each chapter with “Points to Pocket,” a list of key takeaways we want you to grasp as you read the chapter. We are with you every step of the way with tools and assistance to help you deal with what you are feeling and manage the stress this experience can generate. As you learn to engage in compassion for yourself, you will be in a better position to help your young adult navigate their own troubled waters.

We strongly recommend that you read each chapter in order, as each chapter builds on the previous ones. Remember the symbols of the tote bag, lightning bolt, and spectacles as signposts along the way.

Are you ready? Pick up that tote bag and let’s begin.