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Feeling invincible: Researchers hope study on risky behavior will lead to intervention

By JANE PALMER - Monterey County Herald

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Pot smoking, drunken driving and casual sex are decades-old temptations for newly minted adults. But a recent study by CSU Monterey Bay researchers has identified that a desire for novel experiences isn't the only culprit behind this age group's attraction to high-risk behaviors.

"College students who engage in high-risk behaviors feel like they are invincible," said Robert Weisskirch, a human development professor at CSUMB and co-author of the study.

The study, which examined the behaviors of 1,690 college students in nine different U.S. colleges and universities, looked at the roles sensation seeking and feelings of invulnerability play in predicting young adults' involvement in risky activities. "The question is: How much does personality predict engaging in dangerous behavior and how much is a misperception of what is dangerous and what is not dangerous?" Weisskirch said.

Weisskirch hopes the results of the study -- that feelings of invincibility and misperception of danger play a significant role in risk-taking behavior -- will guide the design of effective intervention programs. Moreover, programs targeted specifically at the college-aged population are needed, he said.

While it had already been established that sensation-seeking behavior peaks in early adulthood, the new study shows that this age group also believe themselves immune to risk.

Weisskirch believes the key to managing behaviors such as casual sex, drunken driving and illegal drug use lies in highlighting the potential dangers and possible consequences of such activities. Weisskirch believes that it is the responsibility of adults and people who work with them to guide them.

Moreover, he believes that guidance should come in the form of education rather than restriction.

"It begs for more funding for intervention to support college students successful movement through to adulthood," Weisskirch said.

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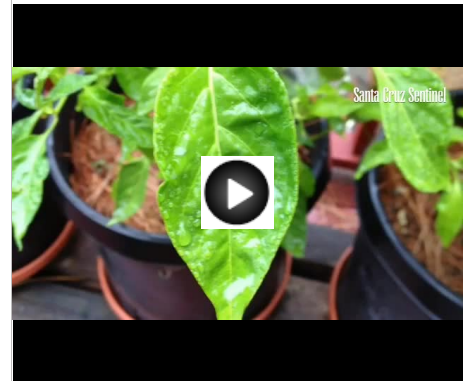
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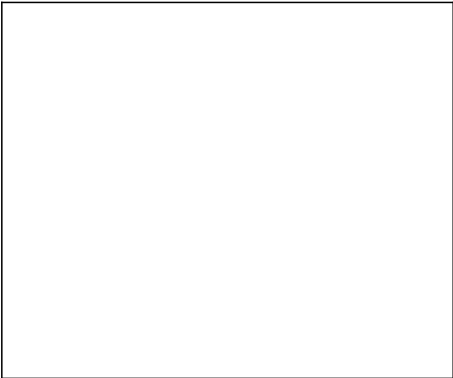
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