

Young people's feeling of invulnerability has drawbacks - and benefits

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A new study led by Patrick Hill, a postdoctoral research associate in psychology, suggests that feeling invulnerable to depression, low self esteem and other issues safeguards young people's emotional health during the turbulent years of adolescence and perhaps into adulthood. Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

(Medical Xpress) -- A sense of invulnerability isn't a hallmark of youth as many adults may believe nor is it necessarily detrimental, a new study suggests. However, feeling immune to the problems and threats that affect others can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether people believe they're exempt from psychological risks or physical harm.

While feeling invulnerable to physical danger can lead adolescents into

risky behavior and negative outcomes such as substance abuse, perceiving themselves as impervious to self-doubt, depression and other mental and emotional difficulties that affect their peers has positive implications – promoting well-being, healthy adjustment and coping during the turbulent years of adolescence and perhaps across the lifespan, the study authors said.

Using the Adolescent Invulnerability Scale, nearly 250 seventh and eighth graders rated how susceptible they felt to physical risks and psychological or personal distress. Participants also were assessed on depressive symptoms, delinquent behavior and their alcohol, tobacco and drug use.

The study provides “a nuanced look at invulnerability,” confirming that it confers benefits – in addition to posing risks – for early adolescents, said Patrick Hill, a postdoctoral researcher in psychology at the University of Illinois and the lead author of the study, which appears in the August edition of the *Journal of Early Adolescence*.

Hill began collecting the data during graduate school at the University of Notre Dame and completed the work at Illinois. Psychologists Peter M. Duggan, of Ball State University, and Daniel K. Lapsley, of Notre Dame, are co-authors of the study.

Lapsley began developing the scale more than a decade ago, and he and Hill used it in a 2010 study of 18-25 year-olds’ emotional adjustment and risk-taking behaviors.

“We viewed it as particularly important to focus on this early adolescent period to see if it is the case that invulnerability could be protective,” Hill said. “It should be most protective during those periods in which themes of separation are most at play.”

The adolescents' results mirrored those of the young adults in the prior study. High scores in danger invulnerability predicted greater levels of maladaptive behaviors – delinquent acts and drug abuse as well as depressive symptoms, interpersonal problems and self-esteem issues. However, children with high scores in psychological invulnerability were better adjusted, less prone to depression and reported better mastery and coping overall.

“(A) sense of invulnerability may in fact benefit adolescents, because it promotes positive coping and adjustment during the travail of ego and identity formation ... and may in fact be adaptive whenever one encounters a turbulent life transition,” the researchers wrote.

“Psychological invulnerability can be a very protective factor with respect to bolstering one’s self-esteem, helping out with coping during the transition from adolescence into adulthood and helping make the kinds of important life decisions that people without an inflated sense of self may have difficulty doing at times,” Hill said.

“As we’re starting to separate from our parents and make decisions on our own, the separation/individuation process can be a very arduous task that often leads to maladaptive outcomes. You start making decisions on your own, you’re going to make a lot of mistakes. And some individuals may get hung up on the fact that they’re making so many mistakes and may feel less adept in the future. They may get depressed or start to doubt who they are.”

The researchers suggest that rather than trying to deter adolescents from feeling invulnerable altogether, interventions should attempt to imbue a sense of psychological invulnerability and promote strong self-worth to help children be less susceptible to their peers’ influence.

Despite stereotypes, folk psychology and the suspicions of some

exasperated parents, a sense of [invulnerability](#) isn't universal among youth. Most teens don't consider themselves impervious to risks or consequences, "in part, discounting beliefs that adolescents as a whole are reckless," the researchers wrote.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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