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Psychological Mechanisms of Risk Taking in University Students

Adolescents and emerging adults take more risks than other age groups. Two different theoretical accounts have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. First, dual process accounts attribute increased risk-taking to a combination of strong motivational and suboptimal cognitive control processes, which explain risky behaviors as irrational: young people know the risks of smoking, binge drinking and unsafe sex, but were overwhelmed by salient stimuli and could not control themselves. The alternative account views risky behaviors as goal-directed, with (long-term) health goals being less important than developmental goals related to the age, such as making friends, finding a partner, etc. I will argue that risk taking in university students is typically better understood by the second mechanism, and discuss implications for interventions.