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## Retreat aims at young men's 'failure to launch'

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(11-12) 10:38 PST GOLD LAKE, Colo. (AP) --

They don't HAVE to get up.

"Get out of bed, don't get out of bed," they're told. "But if you don't, you don't progress. It's up to you."

In fact, by 8:30 a.m. breakfast, most of these young men's beds are made, sort of, and they've either been to a yoga session, or for a walk around the lake in this remote mountain retreat.

The aim here starts out that simple: Get up. Clean your room. Hold meaningful conversations. Resolve your differences.

Eventually, it moves on to setting some goals: Staying in school, getting a job, or both. Moving out of their parents' homes when they leave this place is a hope for many.

They are the most basic of goals, a rite of passage for any young adult. But experts say more young people today — especially young men like the ones who come here — lack the will, or perhaps even the know-how, to achieve them.

They are the modern-day lost boys, who suffer from "failure to launch," a term made popular by a movie of the same name. While at least one critic deemed that film "completely unbelievable" at the time, five years later real life is imitating fiction.

Federal statistics show that young men are, for instance, nearly twice as likely to live at home with their parents than young women their age. They're also less likely to finish college, or to have a job. The struggling economy has only made things worse.

"We see more failure to launch because there's less to launch into," says Joshua Coleman, a psychologist who is the co-chairman of the Council on Contemporary Families, a nonprofit organization that tracks trends in American families.

These days, even young men from families with means who get into good schools — like those who come to

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this residential program in the mountains northwest of Boulder — are having a hard time getting a foothold.

"They are depressed, anxious, overwhelmed and underprepared," says Joseph DeNucci, one of the founders of this program, called Insight Intensive at Gold Lake.

He calls it "an epidemic."

With his broad Brooklyn accent, DeNucci stands out in a place like this, a former retreat for the wealthy on a private lake. He developed swanky spas in Arizona and elsewhere. But he had always longed to do something for young men who struggled to find their way, as he had in his teen years. He sold his spa in Arizona and, with other investors, bought the land and buildings to create this different kind of retreat.

"For years, we've been sending people to 12-step programs. But this 18- or 19-year-old who's smoking pot, playing World of Warcraft and sitting on the couch in his parents' home — is he an addict? No. He might be working on being an addict," DeNucci says.

But there's something more going on, he says.

These young men also might have issues with depression and anxiety, though the program does not accept those who have severe psychiatric problems or who've used hard drugs or abused prescription painkillers. Nor can they have a history of violence or a criminal record.

For these guys, the key issues are an absence of motivation, and the lack of what DeNucci and his staff call "an early adult life plan."

The Insight program, which has space for no more than 25 young men, ages 18 to 23, involves a stay of three to four months at a cost of \$350 a day. That's usually paid by parents who are at their wits' end — but who also may unwittingly be part of what is surely a multi-layered problem.

At breakfast in the main lodge, a tall, scruffy-haired young man sits quietly, looking a little dazed. His time at Insight is about to come to an end and, in the afternoon, one of his mentors will be driving him to Boulder, an hour away, to look for an apartment.

The 22-year-old wants to get a job, maybe at a coffee house — and to teach guitar lessons. He's going to try to go back to school.

"I'm nervous about going off into the world," he says, speaking — as all the young men did — on the condition that names not be used to maintain the therapeutic program's strict code of confidentiality.

Before he came here, he was living in Virginia in an apartment that his dad paid for. He'd dropped out of university and didn't make it at community college, either.

"I'd start off really strong. Then one bad thing would happen — I'd miss class or wouldn't turn in an

assignment," he says. So he'd stop going because he couldn't face his teachers.

"I didn't want to disappoint anybody."

For him, marijuana and alcohol were part of the problem. He says he also always had a hard time living up to the expectations of his father, who sells insurance and who is divorced from his mother, a musician like her son is. Even before college, he says he "had to fail out" of an all-boys' prep school that his father wanted him to attend. He hated it that much. It wasn't "him."

It is a common sentiment: A few of the guys talk about wanting the chance to break free to be themselves. And yet they seem afraid to take the leap from the cocoon their parents have provided.

In essence, they say, adulthood just doesn't look that appealing. Some call it downright hopeless.

One 21-year-old New Yorker who's been at Insight for a few weeks puts it this way: "If I don't try, I can't fail."

Therapists who've been dealing with "failure to launch" more and more in the last five to 10 years name any number of factors that have contributed to the phenomenon.

"I could go on and on about kids in third grade with four tutors — or parents doing the homework for them. At every turn, the parents are there trying to put some kind of helmet on their kid, metaphorical or otherwise," says Michael Simon, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Oakland, Calif.

These parents are well-meaning, he says — but they end up short-changing their children because they don't know how to fail, or to bounce back from failure.

Certainly this affects both young people of both genders, but experts say there are other factors that further hinder boys' ability to transition to adulthood.

In his book, "Boys Adrift," Dr. Leonard Sax blames everything from an educational system that he believes is geared more toward girls' style of learning to video games and online porn that are overtaking the lives of too many boys.

"For many of them, the virtual world has become more enticing than the real world," says Sax, who's seeing more young male patients who tell him they prefer online porn to dating women in real life.

Tracy Markle, the clinical director at Insight, says she and the rest of the staff certainly see more young men dealing with issues related to Internet games, porn and online gambling. But she doesn't necessarily agree that they prefer it to the real world.

"Clients say, 'I really want real-life friends,'" she says. "I hear that more and more."

So that is one of many things the young men work on at Insight — learning how to balance their online and

offline worlds.

At lunch, DeNucci sits down with the guys — some of whom have been working on academics and fitness in the morning while others have been in group therapy.

They have been eased into this routine. At first, the goal is to get them to go to sleep when the clock still says "p.m." and to rise when it says "a.m." — something most of them weren't doing at home.

They also get used to sharing their living quarters — three-bedroom cabins housing six — and pulling their weight, by doing tasks such as their own laundry.

As they show they can be responsible, they work their way up in levels within the system. Eventually, they write a life plan, then take basic steps toward achieving it — putting together a resume' and applying for a job or an apartment with the help of a life skills coach.

"This is practice. This is training," David Krayeski, Insight's program director, says, comparing it to preparing for a race. "These are guys who've been paralyzed, for lack of a better term. So we have to get them moving."

Many of the young men also work — as kitchen or ranch hands, or on the housekeeping staff.

"You'd be surprised at how many choose housekeeping," DeNucci says, recalling one client from a wealthy family who confessed, "I have to learn how to clean."

Not everyone likes being in this place, DeNucci recognizes. "But I think they all know, at some level, that something has to change," he says.

"I don't want to be here," says another 21-year-old New Yorker. "But my dad said, `Either you go, or you're cut off.'"

He had dropped out of school and lost a job in [real estate](#). Eventually, he says he was caught writing himself checks out of his father's checkbook.

It would be difficult for many people to look at this setup — rustic, but comfortable with its wood-paneled walls, stone fireplace, sauna and massage rooms and outdoor hot tubs — and not think these guys are being coddled.

Several have "[education](#) consultants," paid for by their parents. A couple have come to this program from therapeutic wilderness programs in exotic locations like Hawaii.

These are the guys that society would say have no reason not to thrive. As Coleman from the Council on Contemporary Families notes, disadvantaged youth are failing to launch in much greater numbers — and have far less opportunity.

The staff doesn't see it as coddling, though. The days here are long and the personal issues the residents deal with are intense and real, they say.

"It's about getting them an identity that is separate from their parents," says Markle, the clinical director.

And, DeNucci adds, to help them define what it means, for them, to be a man.

It starts with little things.

One shy young man who came to the program recently tells how he's started taking guitar lessons. As he talks, he hardly makes eye contact. But it is a big deal that he's even having the conversation.

DeNucci recalls meeting him for the first time with his father over breakfast in Boulder.

"The kid's sharp as a tack, but the dad's answering all the questions for him," DeNucci says. "I had to say, 'I'm sorry. Can you let your son answer? I'd like to hear what he has to say.'"

When feasible, the young men have weekly therapy sessions with their parents, by telephone or online video conference — one of the most difficult requirements for most of the young clients.

Sometimes, problems are tied to the parents' divorce or to a young man being adopted. The conversations often have to do with control and expectations.

"For a lot of these families, success is power," Markle says. "If you don't have it, you're nobody. That's the message."

Mary Kral, a San Francisco Bay area woman whose son attended Insight last year, said a lot of the issues the two of them discussed had to do with her absence as a working, single mom. The conversations caused her to think about what she would have done differently.

"I'm disappointed that I couldn't be there more," she says. "I also would have instilled more structure.. My boys would have had chores."

Since leaving Insight late last year, her son, now 22, moved to Boulder and got a studio apartment. Keeping a job has been a struggle, but he's continuing to work with his therapist and mentor from Insight, as all the young men do after they leave.

"I do see a lot of positive, long-lasting change," she says. "I have hope.

"I have to."

It remains to be seen whether a program like this — a rarity for its specific focus on "failure to launch" — will have long-term success.

Sax, the author of "Boys Adrift," is skeptical. He thinks the true solution is to catch these young men when they are boys — to find them schools with programs that engage them and to limit their access to video games, for instance.

Others fear things won't truly improve for these struggling young men until the economy rebounds.

DeNucci says that gives him all the more reason to push the three-word mantra he wrote when he opened this place last year: "Competence, Confidence, Clarity."

It is a message that keeps a steady stream of young men filing in and out of this mountain hideaway — and that gets them out of bed in the morning while here.

It's a start, if nothing else.

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Online:

Insight Intensive: <http://insightintensive.com/>

Council on Contemporary Families: [www.contemporaryfamilies.org/](http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/)

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