

The Harm in Following the Crowd: Peer Pressure

In order to make great decisions and become someone others admire you must develop the insight and foresight of who you hang around with. Even more important, you must understand who influences and leads you. Guys and girls have been led down the wrong path by their so called, "best friends". Many girls have had their lives ruined by the boyfriend who wanted sex but talked of love.

As you go through these next few chapters try and identify people who are in your life but don't have your best interest at hand. They are causing you to do more negative things than you are causing them to do positive healthy activities.

Harmful peer pressure is very real. You feel it every day when someone gives you messages like these:

- To be in with the "right" crowd you have to do drugs.
- Cheating is okay. After all, even the teachers expect it.
- Getting good grades means you are a Goody Two-Shoes.
- Spending time with your family is dumb. They aren't important.
- No one likes teachers. They just don't count.
- Cool people don't ask questions in class.
- Don't worry about doing what's right. Have some fun. Don't be old-fashioned by believing that stuff.
- Prove you really love me by having sex with me-I'm using protection.

The list could go on and on.

Whenever you do something wrong or don't do something good because you are afraid of what others will think or do, you are a victim of negative peer pressure. What others think has made you captive to their ideas, unable to think for yourself and seek the best goals in your life.

What Price Are You Paying?

Most people assume you have to give in to negative pressure in order to be "normal", "fit in", or be "popular". I disagree. So often I've seen teens that gave in to the pressures of so-called friends-and paid the price. Look at some of the hurt peer pressure can cause.

Being part of the crowd will never make you a leader in your school, a person people remember with pride, or a success in the future.

- Chet didn't want his friends to think he was too smart, so he didn't do his best on tests. When it came time to apply to college, he couldn't make it into the school of his choice.
- Kyle stole a ten-dollar cassette and landed himself in the juvenile home for a year and a half.
- Richard got drunk at a party. His friends told him to have sex with a girl at the party. Today she's pregnant with his child, and he hardly even knows her.
- Sharon didn't even like booze. Her parents were alcoholics, and she knew where drinking could lead. But when her friends wanted to drink at a party, she went along with it. Every time she drinks now she does something stupid and hurts someone.
- Marcy is only eighteen and has had two abortions. Now she has nightmares and can't forget how she took the lives of her babies. When she gave in to her boyfriends' pressure to abort the children, she never knew about the pain she'd feel today.

Being part of the crowd will never make you a leader in your school, a person people remember with pride, or a success in the future. It could cause you a lot of heartache and leave you with many regrets. That's why I want to give you some tools that will help you identify negative pressure and avoid its consequences.

Your Negative Pressure Toolbox

When you face a decision and need to know if you are looking at negative pressure, ask yourself the following six questions:

1. Is it based on truth? So much peer pressure is based on lies or false assumptions. Many times students stay in cliques that are bad for them because the leader of the group has convinced them that if they go against them they will lose all of their friends. Girls have sex because they confuse lust and excited hormones with love.

But the truth will not cause you harm in the long run. It will not sway you to make a decision that will bring you pain forever, and it will not distort what is real.

When you don't follow the crowd, you can often be sure you are following the truth. Going the opposite way of most people might make you a leader. When you live up to what is right, honest, and good, you will feel positive about yourself.

2. Would I do this if my parents or a teacher were here? The fact is that you have to live with yourself all the time. But if you knew your parents could see you right now, would you do this thing? Would you drink that? Would you go to this place? If the answer is no, you can be sure you are making a poor decision.

Feeling bad about what you do is very healthy. It can keep you from doing wrong or repeating a mistake. Make use of this warning system in your life.

3. Do I feel good about myself after I do this? All the time I hear from teens how awful they feel after they've had sex and their boyfriends are gone. How terrible they feel after they've used the drugs or drunk the booze.

Minimize regrets in your life by not repeating the mistakes that cause them. If it's wrong, don't do it.

4. *Would I want this activity written up in the newspaper?* If everyone could read about what you've done, would you feel good-or miserable? Answering this question truthfully could eliminate many things from your plans.

While you try new things and seek excitement, be careful that you will not regret your fun. Don't do wrong just because it is popular and common. You are too special to make that mistake.

5. *Does this activity show true concern for others?* Selfish activities will not make you a better person. Anyone who wants to take, take, take shows little concern for you and will not improve your life. You do not need such friends. Avoid people who want to gossip, put others down, and have a level of anger that is passed on to others. In your own actions make certain you help others, reach out to hurting people, and think how what you say could hurt or help them.

6. *Would my future be better if I did this?* When I speak at schools, I ask teens to name someone who used alcohol and improved his life from that use. No one has given me a good answer for my question. Alcohol has never bettered a person. It only tears down dreams, futures, families, and hopes. It only makes people worse. Drinking can never brighten your future.

Then I ask teens to name someone whose premarital or extramarital sex has improved his or her life. No one can give me an answer for that either.

I have poured my life into this book and I want you to find the truth about your life through it. Please don't take the easy road out. Walk the path that is seldom walked - the one that has brush on it and that few people go down. It is a narrow path, but it is exciting and wonderful, as well as tough. You have to stand up in order to see over the branches and see that there is a light at the end of this path. Though few will travel it, you can be one of those few.

Write the five questions below on a 3 x 5 card and put it where you'll see it every day.

When you have asked these questions, you can also ask yourself, *What are the consequences of this for me?*

Could this activity kill me?

Could it ruin my dreams?

Could it tarnish my feelings about myself?

Could I lose the respect of others?

Could I hurt my reputation?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, the activity is not worth it. Though you may avoid paying the price in the short run, you are going to pay in the future. It isn't over till it's over. When you know a super stud who has sex with every girl he can get his hands on, you may not know he has AIDS-until ten years later. (And if he doesn't get AIDS he'll be haunted by the memories of all his past sex partners every time he has sex with his wife.) Someone who speeds may not get caught, but one day he may lose his life in an accident, or spend his life in a nursing home because doctors can't fix the damage the accident did to his body. Look beyond the fun today to the future you have tomorrow.

Peer pressure isn't just what happens to *you-you* may do it every day to others.

Don't Be Part of the Problem

You have felt the sting of negative pressure. People have tried to make you do things their way, go along with what's wrong to make them feel right, or follow their leadership when they didn't have your best interests at heart. But maybe you have also led others to do wrong by pressuring them.

"I really messed up!" Len admitted. "Just after I met John, I insisted that my friend Tom hang around with him, too. John was new to our school, and I thought he needed friends.

"After a few days, Tom pointed out that John wasn't very honest. When our math teacher gave a quiz, John hadn't studied, so he wanted to see Tom's answers before he handed in his paper. I thought it would only happen once, and I told Tom not to make too much of it.

"Tom didn't say a lot about John after that. They weren't close. But when we went out, the three of us usually went together.

"Tom's brother Stu came with us a few times. He and John really hit it off. Until later I didn't find out that there was a lot more about John that I didn't know. He was involved with a car-theft ring, and he was looking for more kids to get involved. From the start he'd known that Tom and I wouldn't go for it, but he knew he could meet people through us.

"Stu got involved in the ring and got into a lot of trouble. How I wish I'd listened to Tom and never insisted that they stay friends!"

Pressuring people can lead to plenty of trouble. Len didn't intend to hurt anyone-he only wanted to help a new teen in his school. But in his "love me, love my friend" attitude toward Tom, he was exerting peer pressure on his friend.

Peer pressure isn't just what happens to *you-you* may do it every day to others, too. How do you feel in the following circumstances?

In a conversation, people do not see things your way.

You and your friends don't dress in the same styles.

Your friends go places with people who aren't your friends.

Your group doesn't get involved in all your after school activities.

Do any of these situations make you feel uncomfortable? When you feel this way, what do you do? Do you push your best friend to join your team, even when he doesn't want to? Do you make fun of someone who doesn't wear the latest fashions? If so, you are pressuring them to do things your way. It's a form of bullying.

Everyone pressures other people at some time. Often it's a passive pressure to agree, join in, and have fun. Sometimes we get mad when others don't do things our way or see eye to eye with us. As much as possible, we need to understand that people are individuals. We should be sensitive to our friends' needs to do things their own way, get involved in ideas and activities that can help them for the future, and become the best people they can be.

As long as your friends are moving forward, doing the things that will improve their futures, don't pressure them to follow your path. It's when you see them making mistakes that can hurt their lives that you need to lovingly confront them and gently pressure them to do the good things that will build their lives.

Remember, the people who pressure you can have your good at heart. Make the pressure you put on others' lives the kind they will thank you for in the end. Stand up for others because they are worth it, too.

"Later I found out that Tom stuck with me because he did not want John to hurt my life," Len shared. "When I found that out, I felt so humbled. Tom and I are working now to help Stu out of his trouble. I feel as if it's my fault he met John, and I want to help him find better friends."

CHECKPOINTS

Review or discuss this chapter using the following questions.

1. What is negative peer pressure?

2. What are some questions you can ask yourself when you face negative pressure? Which ones would be most effective for you?

3. What five questions will help you identify the consequences of giving in to a specific pressure?

4. How have you exerted negative peer pressure on someone? What was the result?

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