

CHAPTER 26

Peer Pressure

No matter how much we like to think we are independent or different, we cannot avoid the fact that we care about the opinions of other people. That is natural. The more important a person is to us, the more his opinion matters. During childhood, our parents' opinion is the one that we value and that affects us most. Because we want to be loved and accepted by our parents, we try to do as we are told, conform to their mores, fulfill their expectations and make them happy.

As we grow older, we come to value the opinions of our peers — that is, those who are in the same age group as ourselves. It is then that we start to experience “peer pressure” to conform to the values, fashions, opinions, and mannerisms of our peers. Conflict often arises between the values of our parents and those of our peers. We ask ourselves, “Which values shall I adopt, those of my parents or those of my friends? In whose eyes is it most important for me to be accepted? Do I really know who I am?”

What is peer pressure?

Like most things in life, peer pressure can be good or bad. Good peer pressure may push us to conform to a higher standard than we might otherwise. Bad pressure, on the other hand, may push us to do something we feel is morally wrong. This pressure comes in many different forms, some subtle, some not. It may be expressed through looks and comments, or through actions such as ignoring a person or even ostracizing him. Occasionally peer pressure is enforced with the threat and fear of violence.

The reason why peer pressure exists is that individuals within a group wish to maintain a certain standard to which all the members of the group will conform. Without this conformity there will no longer be a group, since the members will no longer have a common identity.

Peer pressure may affect us in different ways. On the simplest level, we experience peer pressure in the way we dress. For example, a conventional businessman wears a suit and tie. If he turned up at the office one day without a tie, people would look at him as if he were undressed. Among our friends and associates, there is pressure to wear a certain kind of clothing — maybe jeans with a particular label, or a certain kind of footwear. We may feel uncomfortable being different from those we regard as our peers. The same applies in other areas. There is pressure to use a certain kind of language or to hold certain opinions in order to be accepted. This is where we are most challenged. Do we remain silent because we are afraid to contradict the views of our peers? How can we keep our integrity and not end up feeling one thing, saying another and doing still another?

Usually matters involving peer pressure are more complex than the externals of dress. In fact, peer pressure even influences the way the global community operates.

Governments are put under pressure by other governments to conform to certain universally accepted standards of human rights and international law. In a democratic society, the government needs to consider public opinion, for loss of the people's trust can lead to the loss of power.

Good peer pressure

Good peer pressure helps to maintain society. The members of every community are expected to behave in a certain way. For example, within the scientific commu-

nity there are standards that all scientists are expected to meet — in particular, intellectual honesty. It is a terrible crime for a scientist to falsify his results, since this misleads the whole community. Thus, there is considerable peer pressure for people to be honest. The findings of individual scientists are checked by their peers to make sure they are accurate. A scientist who is found to have cheated no longer will be respected, and his other work will also fall under suspicion. His name and reputation will be tarnished.

Within a community, people are expected to treat their neighbors in a certain way without being told,

reminded or asked outright. Imagine that a family blasted their radio at an intolerable volume every night from midnight until three in the morning. What do you think would happen? In what way would they be pressured by their neighbors not to behave in such a selfish manner? Should it be necessary to call the police, or do you think that this behavior could be corrected within the community? This is one of the

ways that peer pressure is good. It keeps people from acting as they please in ways that harm the community, and thus in many cases such pressure restrains people from hurting one another. Without such good pressure to behave in a certain way, society would quickly disintegrate into complete anarchy.

Evil prospers when good men do nothing.

— Edmund Burke

Bad peer pressure

Often we may feel pressured by friends or associates to conform by doing or saying things we know to be wrong. We may be expected to smoke, to drink, to behave in a certain way, to treat others disrespectfully, or to keep quiet when we know that something wrong is going on. Often bad pressure is exerted by people who are insecure. They know that what they are doing is wrong, but they feel that if they can persuade others to behave in the same way or implicate others in their bad activities, they will be justified. A person who refuses to “play the game,” however, is seen as a threat because he will not give up his higher standard. This makes the people who are involved in a wrong activity feel judged. Thus, much of the problem comes from the insecurity of those who don't know deeply who they are and so try to find their identity in a group. A person who doesn't conform not only threatens the group's identity but also unmasks the superficial identity of its individual members.

Although people of all ages have to deal with peer pressure, it is felt especially strongly by teenagers. Adolescence is a time of life that is exciting and filled with

possibilities. There are many things one feels newly capable of doing and wants to try. Relationships are able to grow to new levels, and one begins to discover who one is and what one's capabilities are. But this is also a challenging time, and important decisions have to be made. Some of these decisions can affect the rest of one's life, and can be made either deliberately or by default — that is, one either consciously decides to behave in a certain way or falls into a decision as a result of not thinking about it ahead of time.

An important thing to remember is that all teenagers are in similar circumstances. No matter how confident or secure one's friends and peers may appear, inside they are probably at least a little unsure of themselves. Everyone wants to look good in front of others; no one wants people to think that he or she is weak or insecure. Taking a look at the way you have handled peer pressure in the past may help you to decide how you would like to handle it in the future.

How should I handle peer pressure?

Like many people, you may be wondering how best to handle bad peer pressure. For each person and every situation, the response may be different. However, you may find the following ideas useful. The most important thing is to know yourself, who you are, what your values are, and to be determined to maintain your personal integrity and self-respect. Next is to recognize what is happening when you are being pressured. When we can see what is going on, it becomes easier to resist peer pressure.

If you feel that your friends may pressure you to do something you're not sure about, you may want to take time and think about your true feelings and beliefs. For example, if you know that some of your friends are planning a party and will be drinking alcohol, you may want to think about how you feel about drinking before you are ever in that situation. You may want to make a list in your mind of the pros and cons, or actually write them down on paper. If you have a good friend, you may talk to him or her about it.

For example:

What is the issue?

Drinking with my friends.

How do I feel about drinking?

BAD

- I hate the taste of liquor and beer.
- I hate it when one of my relatives comes over for dinner and gets drunk.
- I don't like the way other people act when they are drunk.
- I think people use alcohol because they don't think they can do without it.
- I want to be able to remember all the things I say and do at all times.

GOOD

- I'll be like everyone else at the party, and they won't give me a hard time about not drinking.
- I might feel more comfortable.
- I'd like to try drinking sometime just to see what all the talk is about.

How do I feel about my friends if they put pressure on me to drink? I don't feel too good about everybody drinking. I think we could have a good time together without alcohol. If they are really my friends, I should be able to just tell them how I feel, and they should be able to accept that, even if they don't agree with me.

What are the Possible Consequences of My Actions?

You may also consider the consequences of your actions. This may help you make quick decisions with a more level-headed approach. You may think: How will this affect me later? How will it affect someone else? What will happen if I don't go along with everyone else? Will my actions hurt any of my close relationships? What is the issue here?

Imagine for a moment that you are with a group of friends who are having a party at a friend's flat. They are playing drinking games, and they want you to join in. Most of the people playing are drunk already.

What might happen if you play?

- ✗ You might get drunk too and not be able to go home, even though your parents are expecting you.



- ✘ You might get sick from drinking too much.
- ✘ You might start acting stupid if you drink too much, and the other kids might notice.
- ✘ You might like drinking a lot and get into a habit that you really don't want to start.
- ✘ The other kids might think you are cool and respect you for your carefree attitude.

What might happen if you don't play

- ✘ You might get rejected by the others who are playing, and they might call you a little kid.
- ✘ You might feel uncomfortable being the only sober person in a room full of drunk friends
- ✘ You might be able to remain friends with all the other kids even though you'd rather not drink.

Thinking ahead is difficult, especially when you are in a new or unexpected situation. You may feel awkward and not know what to do, or you may not know how to reply immediately. You should take the time, even if only a few seconds, to think clearly about the implications and possible results of your actions.

Although it is difficult in pressing situations, you should try to be honest with yourself and others about your feelings. This is a big challenge, yet most people admire and respect those who are able to say what they really feel. You may even be the deciding influence for those of your friends who also are not comfortable with what they are doing. Perhaps they will follow your example. Being honest about your feelings takes a lot of courage. You have to be ready to hear your peers make fun of you or complain. They may want you to join what they are doing because they think, "It can't be so bad if everyone is doing it."

What can you say?

- ✘ "I feel really bad about doing this."
- ✘ "I don't feel good about this."
- ✘ "I don't feel comfortable doing this."
- ✘ "If I do this, I know I'll be sorry later."
- ✘ "I don't think this is right."
- ✘ "No, thanks."

Talking to an older person to whom you feel close — your parent, brother or sister, or other relative, or perhaps a teacher — may help. An older person can give you a different point of view because he is not directly involved in your situation.

And, although it may be hard to imagine, most of those older than you have been through something similar — perhaps exactly what you are facing. Make sure to pick someone you trust and respect, and let him know what you are honestly feeling. Such a person can encourage you and give you the support necessary to stand up to peer pressure.

A true friend helps you to be your best

My best friend has a boyfriend now, and every night it's the same thing: "Please come out with us. If my mom knows that I'm with you, she won't mind." I've even had to lie to her parents on the phone a few times to save her from getting in trouble. At first it didn't bother me, but sometimes I really feel like I'm being used, and I especially hate lying to her parents. I don't want to stop being friends with her. I would have a rough time in school without her, but I hate feeling so pushed to do and say things I don't feel are right, or just don't want to do.

— Valentina, age 14

If you find that what you value is very different from what your friends value, you may want to consider the reasons you are friends with them. Can you trust them? Can you talk to them about personal matters? Do they respect what you value? What do you have in common? What do you think is important in a friendship? Are they really friends?

Friendship is important to almost every person regardless of age, and so deserves serious consideration. In many cases, people have achieved great things because of their friends. They have found inspiration, support, understanding and closeness which cannot be found in solitude. But many good people also have been corrupted because of their friendships. What kind of friends do you think you have — the kind who help you to be the best you can be, or the kind who always seem to be doing something you don't like, or who do things that hurt you?

Although your friends may pressure you to do things that you don't feel are right, keep in mind that you can help them to do the right thing too, without acting like a know-it-all or having a holier-than-thou attitude.

Saying what you firmly believe and encouraging others to follow a high ethical standard may begin on a basic level (such as telling people how you feel about making fun of unpopular students), but through expressing your beliefs in minor situations you are creating a pattern that may influence many more people in a good way throughout your whole life. You can initiate peer pressure for goodness!

Many times a real friend may truly appreciate your concern and honesty.

Your friend may be getting involved in something that he or she feels doubtful about, and will be relieved to hear what you really think! In some cases it takes only one person expressing himself honestly to prevent a whole group of people from doing something harmful. Your other friends may just be going along because they are afraid of being rejected or disapproved of.

Your true friends are more concerned about you and how things will affect you than they are about what other people think, so don't be afraid to be honest. Those people who are true to you will respect what you feel and not pressure you to go along with something you know is wrong.



For Your Journal



Describe an occasion when you experienced bad peer pressure and how you felt about it afterward. What else might you have done?

Man's Search for Meaning

by Viktor Frankl

As the existence of each man is different from the existence of others, man himself is unique. ...

The uniqueness of each man and the peculiarity of each life are indispensable parts of the meaning of human existence. The peculiarity in question must be distinguished from a superficial difference to others, because the latter has no value in itself. The fact one person differs from another by fingerprints does not make them unique.

So when we say that due to its uniqueness a human life is not meaningless, we mean a different kind of uniqueness.

The existence of man as a personality means his absolute difference to others. For the peculiarity of each person means they are different from other people.

Thus man cannot be considered as an element of any system of a higher order — in this case he would inevitably lose the quality by which human existence is marked — the feeling of dignity. It is most clearly manifested in the phenomenon of the mob. A mob in itself has neither consciousness, nor responsibility. ...

Hiding and discovering in a mob, a man loses his most important quality — responsibility. On the other hand, when he takes up a task proposed by society, he achieves quite a different thing: His responsibility increases. A real community is in fact a community of responsible personalities; a mob is just a lot of depersonalized beings.

The really human begins in man when he acquires freedom to oppose the dependence on the depersonalized collectivism of a mob. For only there, in that freedom, in the feeling of his free and responsible existence, a genuine man appears.