

Coping with Peer Pressure

This pamphlet has been produced by Clyst Vale Community College Counselling Service and is intended to provide useful information to a young person experiencing peer pressure. It is not a definitive guide.

In a school like Clyst Vale Community College you will find yourself among more than 1000 other students. This can be a very challenging experience!

Human beings are known as 'social' animals. This means we actually do well in groups and can find being on our own very disturbing. As a social animal we can experience a very strong desire to belong to a group. This also means we can fear being ignored or made fun of, in case we end up rejected and out of the group. Peer pressure is what we sometimes experience as we try to remain in the group, to be seen as belonging to the group and to be valued within that group.

What does the 'peer' bit mean?

'Peer' means the people around us who we identify with as being similar to us.

Why is it called a 'pressure'?

The word pressure suggests a force is present acting upon us. With peer pressure we can feel a strong 'force' that makes us want to be accepted by others around us.

Who feels peer pressure?

We all do! Even the adults working at Clyst Vale feel peer pressure. They usually want to be liked by other adults in the school and to be seen as valuable within the group of staff.

Is peer pressure bad?

No, peer pressure doesn't have to be a bad thing. In fact it can play an important role in helping us achieve. For instance, you may belong to a group that really want to do well in maths. Peer pressure in a group like this may help you work harder to be good at maths.

So its all good then...?

Sadly, no, peer pressure is not always a good thing. Imagine belonging to a group of friends. Perhaps someone in that group owns the latest games console. Your group of friends chat about how great it is, how fast it works, the beauty of the graphics and the new exciting games that come with it. Now someone else in the group buys the same console. In order to feel the same, we may begin to feel we need to have that console too.

This is peer pressure acting upon us. Advertisers know all about peer pressure and use it regularly in their adverts, to try to get us to buy more things. In fact we can find ourselves feeling really miserable if we don't own that same console. The more people in our group that own one, the more strongly we can feel the pressure to own one too.

Now imagine another group of friends. Someone decides to bully a person. In order to feel we belong, we might feel we ought to bully that person as well. Before long, the whole group is bullying that one person. Peer pressure can be a very destructive force at times.

Resisting Peer Pressure

There are times when we need to resist peer pressure, to not do what others are doing. This can be a very difficult and painful thing to do. It can take a lot of courage too. Remember, as social animals we all want to belong to a group. When we resist peer pressure we may start to risk our place in the group.

A very well known example of resisting group pressure is the 'Just say no' to drugs campaign. The government hope this message will help young people resist peer pressure to try drugs. The truth is we can all resist peer pressure, though sometimes it's a bit easier if we have help.

Peer pressure and young people

It is a well-known fact that young people are very sensitive to peer pressure.

Because young people are in the process of learning about mixing with others, they can feel a greater need to belong and be accepted. They don't like to get it wrong. Some students, despite peer pressure, manage to avoid doing things they don't agree with or don't want to do. How do they resist peer pressure?

Being self-confident

Being confident in yourself can really help you resist peer pressure. Believing in your own self worth, not feeling the need to be liked by others in order to like yourself, is very helpful.

Being assertive

Being assertive, which does not mean aggressive, is also another good technique to avoid doing things you don't want to do. There is a leaflet on the teen health website about this. Come and see one of the counsellors if you'd like to improve your assertiveness skills.

Listening to yourself

We usually have a pretty good sense of what is right or wrong. We need to listen to this part of us and check it out when we feel peer pressure. If we feel we're being asked to do something wrong, then we need to resist and say no.

Talk to a friend

Often, if you sense something is wrong, other people will be sensing it too. Check it out with a close friend and see how they are feeling. If they have the same feeling as you, then you're not alone and you can begin to exert a new positive peer pressure!