

Managing peer pressure

Use this resource to explore how various relationships can impact negatively on the things you want to achieve and the changes you want to make.

Being part of a wider social group and having various different relationships is normal. In fact we thrive off such relationships as we all want to feel as if we belong, and are accepted and valued by others. These relationships can both positively and negatively affect us.

Negative impacts can occur when we:

- a) **become influenced to do something we usually wouldn't do**, e.g. drinking more alcohol than we usually would, or having dessert after dinner, or
- b) **when we're stopped from doing something we'd like to do**, e.g. not exercising because a friend wants to hang out or not eating certain foods because your partner doesn't like it

So why is it that we feel pressure to do things we don't want to do, and/or not do the things we want to do?

Well... It all comes down to acceptance.

We all want to be accepted by others. Therefore when we are pressured to do something we often do it out of the fear that if we choose an alternative, the relationship will somehow become strained. This in turn would challenge how accepted we felt by a specific peer or group of peers. This becomes even more relevant when historical or entrenched peer behaviours are challenged or changed, e.g. forfeiting your long standing Friday night drinks to go to the gym.

The pressure we feel can come in a variety of forms. Some common ways we feel pressure are as follows:

- **Directly.** This refers to direct pressure placed on you by a specific person or group. E.g. someone tells you what you should or shouldn't be doing regarding eating a certain way. They might do this by pressuring, suggesting, judging or criticising.
- **Indirectly.** This refers to pressure that isn't necessarily that obvious. E.g. the pressure to drink heavily with a certain group of friends because 'that's what you always do'. Or feeling pressure to eat everything on your plate when you eat at grandmas. She may not directly tell you to finish everything but that has been the long standing expectation therefore you feel pressure to do it.
- **Individual.** This refers to the pressure we feel within. Sometimes if we feel different from friends or groups we change our behaviour to align ourselves to the group behaviour. This way we feel like we will be more accepted. E.g. the pressure to go to coffee group instead of going to the gym, or feeling that you should stop losing weight as all of your friends are overweight and you don't want to be too different.

So what can we do to manage negative or not so helpful pressure from others?

Sometimes making the decisions that are best for us can be challenging. You would think making healthy, positive decisions would be easy, however when we make decisions we often weigh things up in the context of our relationships and the people around us. What is most important is that you ensure you do what is right for you. But as we have discovered this can be challenging.

Some tips on how to manage pressure from others have been included below:

- **Say no!** This seems simple but in actual fact can be one of the hardest words you will ever have to use. You will often find that once you build up the courage to say no and stick with what you believe in or want to do, the world doesn't fall apart. In fact, calmly explaining why you don't want to be a part of something can earn you more respect than if you go along with it.
- **Don't show weakness and stand your ground!** In the same way a wild animal will identify weakest in its prey, so will friends pick up on, and exploit weakness in you. If you are hesitant or unsure when being pressured to do something, the pressure will only get worse until you have no choice but to submit. Be assertive and confident with your reasons for not doing something or choosing to do something else. It's easy to influence someone who is unsure but much more difficult when they have already made up their mind.
- **Find and value common interests.** Spending time with people who like doing similar things is one way to avoid feeling pressured into doing things you don't really want to do. While spending time with certain friends and groups may be exciting or adhere to a certain image, these groups may not actually be helping you achieve the things you want to achieve.
- **Have a clearly defined idea of where you want to be.** Having a clearly defined reason for why you don't want to do something, or not do something, will prevent most people from continuing to pressure you. If you don't have a good reason then you will leave yourself open to on-going pressure. Sometimes "I don't want to" just doesn't cut it. Think about your reasons so when you need to explain them to someone you can do so clearly and succinctly.
- **Put plans in place.** It is much more difficult to succumb to pressure when you have made other commitments. Even more so when you are accountable to others e.g. I'm going to the gym with Nick so I can't make it. When you are just thinking about going you can still be easily swayed. However knowing that you have somewhere to be makes saying NO a lot easier.
- **Be aware of agendas.** Sometimes when you're pressured to do something by others it's not actually about you, but rather it's about your friend(s) not wanting you to change. When others we are close to make changes we often start asking questions of ourselves which can be quite uncomfortable. Consider the following example. Your overweight friend pressures you to go to the movies instead of the gym. This situation could actually be more about your friend not wanting you to change. If you lose weight then they might feel pressure to take action themselves. The thought of this might be too intimidating or scary for them to deal with. Instead of having to address the issue they try and hold you back so they don't feel they have to.

NOTE: Like anything new, being assertive and not giving into pressure from friends can be tough. It may sound cliché but if your friends are 'true friends' then they should accept you for who you are and who you want to be. If not maybe it's time to meet some new people?