

# Peer Pressure: How It Affects You

How you eat, exercise, and feel is influenced by your friends.

By Katrina Brown Hunt  
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Andrew Muir, MD](#)



Peer pressure is more than just someone handing you a cigarette or a drink and saying, "Hey, try this." It can affect almost anything you do -- and you may not even realize it.

When you're a teenager, friends play a huge role in helping you figure out who you are.

"It's really subtle," says Eileen Stone, an adolescent psychologist at Sanford Health in Fargo, N.D. "You can start the day one way, and after being with your friends, come home with almost a different personality. You can end up absorbing their attitudes, or the language they use, as you work on your own identity."

That can be a good or bad thing. If you're trying to make positive changes in your lifestyle -- such as eating healthier or exercising more -- keeping the right people around you can mean the difference between success and failure. Think about it: Do your friends make it easier or harder for you to make healthy choices? And if things aren't going right with your friends, can you fix it without feeling like you're creating a lot of drama?

Don't judge your friends -- after all, they're going through the same things you are. Instead, on a regular basis, "Take a few moments and connect with yourself, and think about how your friends make you feel," says Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist and professor at UCLA. "Ask yourself, 'Does this match who I want to be?'"

Consider these 3 areas: the way you want to eat, how much you want to exercise, and your general mood. Then figure out how peer pressure is helping or hurting your goals.

## Peer Pressure and Eating Healthier

A lot of hanging out with friends involves eating, like going out for pizza or getting snacks after school. Whether you're blowing off steam, celebrating something, or just killing time, food is an easy way to bring people together. But food outings can be challenging when you're trying to make healthy eating choices.

**Tough Situation:** Your friends want to get fast food after school. Whenever you go, everyone gets combo meals -- burgers, fries, big sodas. If you're trying to eat healthier, you might feel that by not getting the usual, you're opening yourself up for annoying questions: "Are you on a diet?" "Do you think you're fat?"

**Low-Drama Solution:** You don't need to make a big announcement about the fact that you're trying to eat better. "You want to protect yourself from the group mass-mentality where people are more likely to give you a hard time," says Reznick. "Instead, if you want to talk about your goals about eating healthier, pick just 1 or 2 trusted close friends who will back you up."

At the restaurant, though, think about ways you can steer the situation to healthier options. Maybe that's just getting a smaller order. "Maybe get a sandwich but no fries, or make your drink a diet soda," suggests Teresa Beach, a registered dietitian at Sanford Medical Center in Sioux Falls, S.D. "Or just say, 'I'm not hungry,' and make sure you have a snack before you go out with friends." You could also bring your own snack, and say you're saving money for something like a car.

Another idea is to think about suggesting activities where food isn't the only focus -- like getting a snack in the mall food court, but spending more time walking and shopping.

## Peer Pressure and Exercising More

When you're trying to improve your lifestyle, exercise is key. Nothing can discourage you, however, like having friends laugh at you for putting on sports gear. Sometimes, seeing you try something new can make your friends feel threatened, and that's why they laugh or make fun of you. "High school sports are exclusionary for most kids. Most kids are not going to be varsity athletes," says David Ermer, MD, a child psychiatrist for Sanford Health in Sioux Falls, S.D.

If you want to join a sport and your friends don't, do it anyway. Maybe you can find a fun activity that you also could all do together.

**Tough Situation:** You and your friends tend to spend afternoons hanging out at someone's house. Typically you play video games and watch TV. But you've decided you want to spend a few days a week exercising more instead.

**Low-Drama Solution:** "Kids get bored and they like to switch things up, so it's worth a try to get your friends up and moving," says Reznick. "Why not say, 'I'm putting on some music. Let's dance!'" And if that fails? Think about an activity you'd like to try, and ask a friend you trust to try it out with you -- whether it's going to a climbing wall, trying a yoga class, playing ball, or even just walking around the block a few times a week. "Finding someone else to do it with you is important," says Stone. "Kids who have a buddy for exercise will do it more, since they can support each other. You also get to socialize while you do it."

## Peer Pressure and Your Mood

Your friends' general attitude on life can rub off on you, and raise -- or dampen -- your mood. (To be fair, if they're bringing you down, they might not even be aware of it.) Sometimes it happens, says Stone, just because "people get kinda drained from being a part of the group -- trying to fit in, getting along. It can be exhausting."

Or it may have to do with the dynamics you and your friends share, or how good you all feel about yourselves. "If you're feeling down, you might surround yourself with people who aren't the most positive," says Ermer. "If they have their own emotional issues, they might be bringing you down to lift themselves up."

**Tough Situation:** You and your friends have fun by making fun of each other, which is hilarious -- until you're the subject of the trash-talking.

**Low-Drama Solution:** "Put yourself in the third person," says Ermer. "Ask yourself, 'Is that how I would treat someone else, without feeling bad?'" When something does happen that bothers you, "Say something about it, but without being angry, like 'I really don't appreciate your making fun of me,'" he suggests. A friend worth keeping will respect that.

## Peer Pressure and Your Mood continued...

Meanwhile, make a list of qualities you want and don't want in your friends (like "makes me laugh" or "a good listener"). If you find that your list doesn't match up with your current friends, brainstorm about where you can find more friends. Maybe through a club or class that focuses on your interests. Maybe do something you've always wanted to try, like checking out a skateboarding park.

"Or, if you're not sure what to do, try charity work," suggests Ermer. "People who want to do things for other people tend to be very accepting. Doing something positive for other people will rub off on you, too."

IMAGE PROVIDED BY:

Jose Luis Pelaez Inc / Blend Images

REFERENCES:

Eileen Stone, PsyD, child and adolescent psychologist, Sanford Health, Fargo, N.D.

Charlotte Reznick, child educational psychologist; associate clinical professor of psychology, UCLA; author, *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success*, Perigee Trade, 2009.

Teresa Beach, RD, LN, CDE, registered dietitian, Sanford Medical Center, Sioux Falls, S.D.

David Ermer, MD, child psychiatrist, Sanford Health, Sioux Falls, S.D.