



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Peer Pressure Begins in the Brain, Can Be Positive Force for Teens

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we look at what goes on in the adolescent brain that makes it difficult to resist the pull of their peers.***

It will surprise no one to learn there is a lot going on in the brain and body of a typical teenager. But you might not know there is a neurological cause and effect when it comes to peer pressure, the act of doing something you wouldn't ordinarily do in an effort to fit in with the crowd.

Succumbing to peer pressure is not just a matter of emotional maturity. Research has shown that teenagers and adults score about the same when asked hypothetical questions about how they would handle risk-and-reward situations. The difference is pronounced, though, when it comes to resisting social pressure. The brains of teenagers showed much greater activity than adults in two regions associated with rewards, the ventral striatum and orbitofrontal cortex, when they were being watched by same-age peers.

It seems the pressure to conform comes not only from the outside, but from the inside as well. This phenomenon combines with hormonal changes. Adrenal stress hormones, sex hormones, and growth hormones influence brain development as well, fueling a teen's desire to separate from parents and form bonds with peers of the same and opposite sex.

Of course, peer pressure doesn't have to be a negative influence on young people. Educators are studying the possibility of using positive peer pressure to help teens learn more efficiently.

"It stems from an adolescent's desire to fit in," said Harvard Graduate School of Education professor and developmental psychologist Nancy Hill. "And this desire to fit in might motivate the [young person] to do something they might not do on their own, even if no one is asking them to do that thing."

This knowledge could have practical implications in the classroom. Matthew D. Lieberman, author of the book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, suggested that history could be presented through the lens of psychological drives. Less interpersonal subjects, such as math, could acquire a social aspect through team problem-solving and tutoring.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Following are a few recommendations for what parents, caregivers, educators, and coaches can do to help adolescents navigate the challenges of peer pressure:

WHAT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN DO

- **Practice pressure.** Go through scenarios that might come up related to peer pressure and encourage the teen to think about the right decision and formulate a response.
- **Recommend reinforcements.** Ask the teen if there is a like-minded friend or two whom they trust to stand beside them during a stressful situation. Strength comes in numbers.
- **Stay involved.** Model good behavior and ask questions to stay on top of any emerging issues at school or among friend groups.
- **But not too involved.** Adolescence is a time for beginning to separate from parents, so allow the teen to go down their own path. Just be available to help and offer support when needed.

WHAT EDUCATORS AND COACHES CAN DO

- **Enter the friend zone.** Engage students about what attributes they seek in a friend and make a distinction between a mutual friendship and being part of a clique.
- **Don't let them hide.** Students might succumb to peer pressure to hide their insecurities or anxieties. Helping them feel more self-assurance will make going against the grain easier.

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).