

Peer Pressure

It's a hot afternoon in the middle of the summer. After a couple of hours in a friend's basement checking out her new PlayStation 4, she suggests that you hike out to swim in the old rock quarry. She texts a bunch of people and soon they appear, ready to head out. It seems like a great idea, except for one thing: even though lots of people do it anyway, swimming is not allowed in the quarry. Every couple of years, someone drowns or gets hurt diving off the rocks into the water. But your friends say that it is so so fun and besides, hardly anyone ever gets caught. When you express your hesitation about joining the group, someone says, "What are you worried about? It's really cool. Don't be such a dweeb."

It seems that once you hit middle school, situations like this arise all the time. Other kids are doing things that you know are dangerous or hurtful or just plain stupid; they expect you to go along and, if you don't, you risk being pegged as a loser. Ironically, you might be accused of failing to think for yourself, of going along with what "society" says is right. Peer pressure - the pressure from friends to do things that you know you shouldn't do or that you really don't want to do - can make you feel as if you are "damned if you do, damned if you don't". If you go along with your friends, you are betraying your own sense of right and wrong. If you don't go along with them, you risk being viewed as a coward or a spoiler. You might even begin to believe that your reluctance to go along with the quarry plan *is* a sign of cowardice on your part. After all, if everyone else thinks it's okay maybe it really is.

Peer pressure can exert so much pressure to conform to other people's desires that we lose our sense of what we want to do or think we should do. As a philosophical topic, peer pressure is understood as producing a conflict between the individual and his or her social group. Some philosophers think that we should strive to be real, independent individuals who do not care what other people think about us. Think about the kid (maybe it's you!) who doesn't take showers, wears the same old clothes every day, listens to music no one has ever heard of, refuses to use a cellphone and never goes anywhere without her pet snake wrapped around her neck. Should we admire her individuality or condemn her for refusing to care that her behavior has negative

consequences for other people? Some philosophers think that *conformity*, that is, people choosing to do things just because it's what others expect of them, necessarily undermines individuality. Other philosophers think that at least some degree of conformity is necessary for a good, well-ordered society.

In the film clips you are about to see, we will ask you to consider how your views about peer pressure are related to your views about conformity and individuality.