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Making the Most of Your Teen Years

One of the biggest jobs you'll have as a teen is to grow up. Not that you shouldn't have help from your parents, teachers and others. It's just that only you can find out who you are and where you want to go in life. If you don't do that now, while you're still in the process of growing up, it won't be any easier or better later on.

What we'll be discussing here are some of the feelings and situations you may be experiencing—understanding them, dealing with them, and making them work for you.

The Importance of Others

Your self-esteem is what you think of yourself—how much you like or dislike who you are. But while this feeling is your own, it is greatly influenced by others. Have you ever noticed that the way you feel about yourself depends upon how others, especially your friends, react to you?

If you go to school looking not-quite-right, for instance, does it seem as if everyone notices? Or if a teacher makes you feel dumb, does it seem like you've always been stupid and always will be?

Believe it or not, it's not uncommon or weird to feel that way. Most young people see themselves as they imagine others see them. If you think those who are important to you like the way you look and think, you will feel like a worthy person. If, however, you get the opposite message—that others don't like how you look, act or think—you will feel worthless. And we all know, at least to some degree, how terrible that is.

Growing Despite Insecurities

"Most of us can sit and listen to a whole string of compliments in a row, hear something negative from one person and remember only the negative," says author Sidney Simon.

Why is this? Well, since we're just finding out who we are, we have doubts about our quality as persons. When we hear criticism about ourselves, we start believing there is more bad than good in us. If we already knew and liked who we were, criticism wouldn't hurt us so badly. We would know that we were still good people, despite our faults or others' criticisms.

But How?

In order to fight these feelings and bolster your self-image, you might try to:

- ▶ Take the time to feel good about yourself. At the end of the day, for instance, think about the things you did well and of the positive ways you may have affected situations or people.
- ▶ Say something positive—something you really mean—about someone else. If a classmate has helped you with a math problem, for example, let that classmate know that his or her knowledge and patience has really helped you.
- ▶ When you start thinking negatively about yourself, turn those thoughts around and use that energy in a positive way. Instead of feeling defeated by that tough math problem, try to understand your classmate's explanation and take that knowledge with you as "ammunition" in attacking the next problem.

Why It's Important

Without adequate self-esteem, teens may find themselves in unwise and difficult situations. They may become extremely shy, feel excessively awkward with others, or blindly follow the crowd just to be "in." Low self-esteem may even contribute to more serious difficulties, such as pregnancy, alcohol or drug abuse, or dropping out of school.

None of these situations benefits teens. They are problems—problems that may result when a teen questions his or her value as a person. Studies have shown that people commit cruel or stupid acts because they think that's the kind of person they are. Such activity is what they expect of themselves, and what they think others expect of them.

Teens may also find themselves in these situations when they don't know themselves—what they value and how they feel about certain things—and merely follow others.

It has been found that people who have a generally low opinion of themselves are more likely to follow the crowd than those with high self-esteem. If people do not like themselves, they don't put a very high value on their own ideas. So those with low self-esteem are most likely to cling to a crowd that accepts them. "In short, we like to be liked—and the more insecure we feel, the more we appreciate being liked and, consequently, the more we like someone who likes us," says Eliot Aronson in *The Social Animal*.

What all this means is that when you're faced with those difficult situations mentioned earlier, you have to like yourself enough to stand up for what you believe. You have to think you are worth fighting for.

The Physical Side

While you're growing up inside—finding out what you think about things, what you like and don't like—you're also growing up outside. Your body is going through some changes that may seem pretty awful at first. Until your body has fully developed, all the changes may not look that great to you.

Although these changes are perfectly natural, it may take each person a while to adjust to them. Most teens go through a period of embarrassment and awkwardness with their new appearances. For instance, girls who develop early may find they are giggled at for their new curves. Or boys may suddenly find themselves with hands and feet that are bigger than the rest of them, making them seem clumsy.

How teens feel about their bodies determines how they feel about themselves in general, so physical appearance is important to them. But you're giving it too much importance if you let the way you look determine what you do and how you do it.

Sexuality

Your developing body not only looks different, but also it feels different. Your sexuality has become a primary part of who you are and you're very likely experiencing the drives, feelings and fantasies that go with it.

Dealing with these feelings in a way that meets your developing moral and religious convictions is a challenge. You may sometimes feel pressured into acting in ways that are uncomfortable to you.

So that you don't end up regretting your actions, it's important to know yourself and your feelings well. That way there won't be any questions as to what you should do when certain situations arise. A major mark of maturity is recognizing emotions and being able to act on what you believe.

What's Involved

With all these changes in your body, feelings, relationships and experiences, arranging them so that you like yourself may seem a gigantic task. It is, but not an impossible one if you understand what's involved and why.

The idea is to develop what the experts call a "positive ego identity." What this means is that as you grow up you need to like the person you're becoming. No one likes himself or herself all the time, but the important thing is to like yourself more often than not.

To do this, Erik Erikson, one of the experts, says teens must find the beliefs, standards and lifestyle that are best for them. This involves a commitment to both an occupation and to personal beliefs, such as religion, politics and ethics. Once you make these commitments, you have taken a major step in forming your identity. This doesn't mean you won't have other problems as you grow into adulthood. But an all-important basis for your positive development has been established.

Our Changing Selves

The hard thing about this is that *you* have to do it. That's the way it should be. You can't really find out who you are until you start making independent decisions and choosing your own ways of behaving. Not that you should be free to do whatever you please—no one in society has that right without having to pay the consequences. But your parents' and teachers' guidance and discipline may actually help. In making decisions within certain guidelines—which is what adults must do, too—you learn to be responsible and independent. You learn to make your own choices. You learn to be yourself and like it!

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