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Confronting Prejudice

Confronting your own prejudices is without a doubt one of the most difficult yet admirable things an adolescent can do. During the teen years, you will often find yourself struggling with strong stereotypes and deeply ingrained biases that you grew up with. And no matter what your head and heart tells you to do, it is often difficult to do or say the right thing.

On the other hand, facing your own bigotry and doing something about it is important if you are to be successful in today's world. It is estimated that within the next 10 years minorities will become the majority in 50 of our largest cities. You will have to accept diversity in people - not only because it is fair - but because your very way of life will depend on it. With minorities comprising the majority of the work force beyond the 21st century, as future adults, you will find yourself working and socializing with people of all races, religions and ethnic backgrounds. Your success may depend on a better understanding of both the diversity and differences of all people.

You were not born to dislike your society's minorities, be they African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Jews or Anglos. As you were growing up, the idea of what is "good" or "normal" became influenced by the people around you - primarily your parents, relatives and other kids. You might have noticed that your parents would not associate with certain racial groups or you overheard friends tell demeaning ethnic jokes. Certain emotional, derogatory words, such as "kike," "dago," "wop," "spick," "nigger," "whitey," "cracker" or "redneck" used in conversation by your parents or relatives may have crept into your vocabulary. You also learned bias and bigotry by watching television and going to the movies where ethnic and racial groups were often placed in stereotyped roles. Cowboy and Indian films, for example, might portray Native Americans as savages. TV shows frequently depicted Asians as tricky, Hispanics as lazy, Jews as wealthy, African-Americans as shiftless, Anglos as preferred and women as sex objects.

Prejudice about race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and physical ability harms everyone. The damage to the victim is obvious. But you also suffer. First, it makes you struggle with something that you know is wrong and unfair. Furthermore, prejudices cause you to develop confusion, poor judgement, mistrust and guilt. Self-esteem and self-worth will suffer, and you will not be able to benefit from the teachings and experiences of different people. Remember, in the long run, discrimination will hurt the perpetrator as much or more than it hurts the victim.

Where do you begin?

The first step is to get inside your head and explore your prejudices. Most teens have given this matter at least some measure of thought. At one time or another, you probably said to yourself, "how would I feel if this happened to me?" "What would I do if someone wanted nothing to do with me because of my religious or ethnic background?"

The next step is to get inside your heart and explore the impact of your prejudices. If you have been fortunate enough to be in your society's majority, you probably have never given much thought to what it is like to be the target of unfair discrimination.

Which brings us to the final step. Take an active role in becoming an unbiased adult. Actions speak louder than words. Sometimes taking a stand means taking a risk, but this is one risk you should not ignore taking. By eliminating your prejudices, you will become a more respectful and responsible citizen. More important, you will give yourself the best chance for happiness and success in your own life. Here are some suggestions:

- * Accept each person as unique and special. Let your friends know that you recognize and appreciate their individual qualities

- * Become sensitive to other people's feelings. Learn the points of view of other people.

- * Understand that prejudice and discrimination are unfair. Make it a firm rule that no person should be excluded from your peer group on the basis of race,

religion, ethnicity, accent, gender, disability, sexual orientation or appearance.

- * Teach your friends respect and an appreciation for differences by providing opportunities for interaction with people of diverse groups.

- * Point out instances of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Your critical thinking ability may be the best antidote to prejudice.

- * Create positive change. Respond to prejudiced thinking or acts of discrimination when you observe them. Painting over racist graffiti, writing letters to a television producer who promotes stereotyped programming or confronting a peer's discriminatory behavior are all appropriate actions.

- * Take appropriate action against prejudice and discrimination. For example, if a friend uses bigoted language, you should not ignore it. A simple phrase will do: "Please don't talk that way around me." or "That kind of joke offends me."

- * Expose yourself to after-school activities that include a mix of individuals from various races, religions and socioeconomic backgrounds.

- * Remind your friends that what's important about a person is what's inside, not outside. Help them look beyond the surface in understanding others.

- * Take pride in your own cultural heritage and share it with your friends.

- * Visit museums, festivals, ethnic restaurants and other places that expose yourself to different customs and lifestyles. If one is not available in your area, go to the web site of the Florida Holocaust Museum and take a virtual and audio tour to learn what can happen when bigotry and prejudice are not challenged.

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