

Making the Choice to “Start Over”

“Secondary virginity,” “Renewed Virginity,” “Recycled Virginity,” “Abstinence,” or “Celibacy until Marriage”...whatever the title, the commitment is the same. It is a decision to stop sexual activity and to abstain until marriage. Many abstinence programs present this option, and abstinence educators report that many teens choose this opportunity to make a fresh start. For teenagers, saying “no” to sex is saying “yes” to mental, emotional and physical freedom to focus on developing their musical or athletic abilities, preparing for college, training for a military or technical career, etc. Making this choice requires strength of character that is not commonly exercised in today’s culture. Character traits such as self-control, integrity, and delayed gratification are essential for making a commitment to cease sexual activity and abstain until marriage. As these character “muscles” are developed, a person’s ability to make positive choices in various aspects of life including achieving career goals, managing money, sustaining relationships and healthy living, are also enhanced.

The Motivation to Start Over

The decision to cease sexual activity can stem from one or more of the following reasons:

- 1.) Knowledge concerning the potential consequences involved in sexual activity outside of marriage and realization that the risks outweigh the benefits
- 2.) An experience involving emotional trauma or a physical consequence (STD or unplanned pregnancy) as a result of a sexual relationship
- 3.) Recognition that sexual activity outside of marriage is unacceptable behavior according to parental values and/or their religious beliefs

How to Succeed in Abstaining

The skills taught in an effective abstinence education program to assist youth in maintaining an abstinent lifestyle are fundamental guidelines to follow when choosing to *stop* sexual activity. Goal setting, communication and refusal skills, dating guidelines, etc. are all key principles in development of positive relationships and healthy lifestyles. However, when an individual wishes to *change* a behavior, additional assistance may be needed.

Choosing an approach to cease sexual activity can be similar, in many ways, to the interventions suggested for smoking cessation or other substance abuse. All involve behavioral change. However, sexual abstinence poses a unique challenge because for the vast majority of people it is not usually an addictive behavior, and is not an activity to be avoided for life.

The 12-Step Program (paraphrased in bold type) is a widely accepted effective behavioral change approach originally used by Alcoholics Anonymous and adapted for recovery from numerous other addictions. It can also be adapted to sexual abstinence (see comments in italics).

1. Admit that the current behavior is a problem.

Personally acknowledge that you are making a change—“a new beginning”-- and choosing not to engage in sex outside of marriage. Begin a journal where you can record and date your decision to abstain. Describe the events leading up to this choice, making certain to list negative consequences (either physical or emotional) that you might have experienced as a result of the previous behavior. You may also want to describe what might happen if the behavior persists. In

addition, describe how making this change will be personally beneficial, both in the present and future, to you and to others. Be sure to include your life goals and dreams as you record your reasons for abstaining. When changing a behavior, it is important to focus on the positive new behavior or activity, and not dwell on what you are giving up. Review your journal regularly as a tangible reminder of why you've made this decision.

2. Believe there is hope for change.

To change your life, you must change the way you think. Thoughts impact feelings which impact behavior. An erroneous thought will leave you "stuck." You must believe you can change.

Every day, someone decides to lose weight, stop smoking, begin an exercise program, etc. Due to the personal nature of the topic, we are less likely to hear about people choosing to change their sexual behavior. However, many are making this choice, recognizing that humans, unlike animals, have the ability to control their sex drives.

3. Make a decision and take responsibility.

It is important to make a written and verbal pledge to abstain. Identify at least one trustworthy person who is committed to supporting your decision, and who will hold you accountable. Talk about the practical steps you will take to avoid the previous behavior. (Write them in your journal) Encourage this person to ask you specific questions about how you are interacting with the opposite sex and any sexual thoughts you may be having. Be honest in your response. If you've acted in ways that have, or could lead to sexual temptation or activity, then admit it and discuss what you are going to do to change your behavior and avoid future occurrences. Resist the temptation to blame others for any compromise you may have made.

4. Acknowledge the influence of family patterns and dysfunctional culture.

Be aware that the attitudes reflected in your home and social circles impact what you believe and how you act sexually. If you grew up in an environment, or hang-out with friends who think sexual promiscuity is acceptable behavior, you must make a conscious effort to reject those attitudes. As you become more sensitive to permissive messages and attitudes communicated through friends, music, movies, etc., you may find it necessary to make changes that will better support your new goals for a positive, healthy future.

5. Tell others about the decision to change and seek support.

Make friends and dating partners aware of your decision to abstain. Associate with people who support your decision and/or who are abstaining as well. Identify situations or people that foster feelings of temptation or vulnerability, and avoid them. Identify others who have abstained until marriage as role models or mentors.

6. Be ready and willing to let go of old patterns.

Review the guidelines for healthy dating/relationships. Find non-sexual ways to express love and appreciation. Set physical intimacy boundaries in advance of interactions with the opposite sex. When dating, avoid intense hugging,

passionate kissing, and anything else that leads to sexual thoughts and behavior. Avoid viewing sexually explicit material.

7. Learn to ask for help.

When temptation or loneliness occurs, ask family or friends to help you to channel your thoughts elsewhere. Reread your journal to remind yourself of past successes or strategies for overcoming these feelings.

8. Make a list of harm done and seek ways to make restitution.

Get tested to be sure you do not have a sexually transmitted disease. If you test positive, notify all sexual partners so that they can be tested as well. Seek counseling to address any emotional trauma experienced as a result of sexual behavior. If you have a relapse and engage in sexual activity, or have a close call, re-commit to abstain and if appropriate get re-tested. Describe the event in your journal and discuss with a confidante what led to the relapse and lessons learned about what you will need to do to avoid future temptation.

9. Where possible, make amends with past sexual partners.

If appropriate, tell your sexual partner that you made a mistake, are choosing to abstain, and ask for forgiveness for any harm done to them.

10. Commit to continue the process of change, knowing that it takes time.

Don't expect that sexual temptation will go away quickly, or that it ever goes away completely. In time, the temptation will lessen. Abstinence until marriage is a lifestyle. You may have a close call or a setback along the way, but you have not failed unless you quit trying. Just start over again and re-commit.

11. Strengthen connection with positive influences and spiritual practices.

Be careful about what you watch, listen to, and whom you hang around because they can provoke sexual thoughts or encourage sexual involvement. Also, if you have religious beliefs, pray, rely on your faith and seek prayer from those who believe as you do to sustain you in your commitment.

12. Encourage others who are trying to change as well.

Be a leader and not a follower. Let others know of your commitment and then challenge or encourage others who are unmarried to abstain. You can be that special friend or accountability partner!

Acting on Emotions: A Challenge for Teenagers

Abstaining from sexual activity is the right thing to do, but CAN teenagers who have already engaged in sexual activity make the change? The answer is yes. However, due to differences in cognitive development which impacts thought processes, the approach for reaching teens is different from adults.

Over the past 25 years, neuroscientists have discovered a great deal about the architecture and function of the brain. With the advent of new imaging techniques, researchers are able to examine human brain development over a lifetime. Recent discoveries suggest that adolescent brains do not mature at the rate anticipated by Piaget, and actually function differently than adults for a much longer period than was originally thought.

Historically, there have been numerous theories regarding cognitive development and its impact on the way people learn and behave. Jean Piaget (1896-1980), a renowned Swiss biologist and psychologist, constructed a highly influential model of child development and learning. Piaget's theory is based on the idea that the developing child builds cognitive structures--in other words, mental "maps," schemes, or networked concepts for understanding and responding to physical experiences within his or her environment. Piaget further attested that a child's cognitive structure increases in sophistication with development, moving from a few innate reflexes such as crying and sucking to highly complex mental activities.

Piaget outlined several principles for building cognitive structures. During all development stages, the child experiences his or her environment using whatever mental maps he or she has constructed so far. If the experience is a repeated one, it fits easily--or is assimilated--into the child's cognitive structure so that he or she maintains mental "equilibrium." If the experience is different or new, the child loses equilibrium, and alters his or her cognitive structure to accommodate the new conditions. This way, the child erects more and more adequate cognitive structures.

Piaget's theory identified four developmental stages and the processes by which children progress through them. At Stage three, *Concrete operations (ages 7-11)*--As physical experience accumulates, the child starts to conceptualize, creating logical structures that explain his or her physical experiences. Abstract problem solving is also possible at this stage. At Stage four, *Formal operations (beginning at ages 11-15)*--The child's cognitive structures are like those of an adult and include conceptual reasoning. Thus, according to Piaget's theory, teenagers should be expected to have the cognitive ability to reason conceptually at a level similar to adults. According to recent brain research, in observing the frontal part of the brain (which has been known to underlie thought and anticipation, planning and goal-directed behavior, judgment and insight) and attempting to understand the relationship of this area to the more inferior or lower part of the brain (which has been associated with emotion and "gut responses") it is quite well known that there's a distinct relationship between these two parts in the adult brain. In contrast, in an adolescent or younger brain, the relative activation of the prefrontal region is less than for adults. Unlike the adult brain, the more emotional region (or the "gut response" region) has more activation. Therefore, when observing the response mechanisms in adults and adolescents, the regions of the brain react differently.

What effect does this have on teen decision-making?

This discovery is an important finding in understanding adolescent behavior. The teen brain, as compared to adults, is responding differently to the outside world, because the area of the brain representing the "gut reaction" responds to a greater extent. That is due to the frontal region not interacting with the emotional region in the same way as adults. Because the frontal lobe (that part of the executive region of the brain) is not always functioning fully in teenagers, we are provided with a possible explanation as to why teens are far less likely to consider the risk and more apt to react purely out of emotional impulse when faced with sexual temptations. Recent surveys have revealed that 72 percent of girls and 55 percent of boys who engage in sexual activity report regretting the decision. This may suggest that many may have acted impulsively without considering the long-term effects.

Helping Teens Succeed

It is obvious that teens choosing to stop engaging in sexual activity need assistance to navigate through the daily maze of sexual temptations via interactions with their peers, exposure to the

media and dating. Given the available evidence regarding the level of maturity of their reproductive, emotional and cognitive development, it is apparent that encouraging and equipping them to exercise self control and to delay gratification is the healthiest choice and is critical to their success in resisting sexual temptation. Recognition of teens' propensity to respond emotionally also provides an opportunity for motivation through emotional stimuli. Educating them about the physical consequences of sexual activity is necessary and inevitably invokes a level of emotional response when illustrating the effects of STDs and unplanned pregnancies. However, recent discoveries may warrant expanding the discussion of the emotional consequences. Clearly emphasizing that sex is not just physical, but emotional just may trigger the mental connection that sparks the internal fortitude needed to enable those teens that choose abstinence to stay the course.

Sharing Success and Resources

If you have a "cessation" model that you are successfully implementing, we'd like to hear from you! Please send the information to us, and we'll post it on our website. We'd also like your feedback on our 12-step cessation model. Emails can be forwarded to the attention of moliver@youthdevelopment.org or lkelly@youthdevelopment.org.