

Are You Following the Herd?

MAY 2017

HOLLY CORBETT

Raise your hand if you've ever showed up at school wearing the same sneakers as your friends. Now think about your usual table in the cafeteria: are there traits or behaviors – a hairstyle, some slang, a go-to snack- that connect you all, like an IRL tribe of the twinning emoji?

“If one person brings a certain food for lunch, it catches on, and suddenly everyone is bringing it,” says Sarah disanto , 14, an eighth-grader in West Hartford, Connecticut. “Last year, it was dried seaweed; this year it's fruit snacks. It sounds dumb, but it's so true.”

Psychologists have long studied how being part of a group -whether that's your closest crew or a crowd of strangers-influences your behavior. They call this **herd mentality**, and while the way it guides your preferences for shoes and snacks may be harmless, understanding its role in bigger decisions can be a life saving skill. That's because a body of research shows that teams take more dangerous risks- driving recklessly, trying drugs - when they are part of a group.

You've been conditioned to think of peer pressure as taunting, like ‘do it!’ or ‘you're a loser if you don't,’ says Oscar bukstein, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “But the most dangerous kind of peer pressure is the influence you don't really notice.”

Maci Smith, 17, found out the dark side of herd mentality the hard way. As she followed her friends off her Florida High school’s campus one breezy afternoon last fall, her mind was focused more on the lunch waiting for her at a nearby fast-food restaurant than on the serious rules she was breaking. “All my friends were going,” Maci says. “I thought, it must not be a big deal.” But Maci was wrong. A teacher spotted her and reported her for violating the school’s strict closed-campus rule - an offense that landed the teen an in-school suspension, which will stay on her permanent record. “Looking back, it was so dumb,” she says.

So why would Maci decide to cut school rather than cut rank? Two words: **primal instincts**. Humans are social animals, and much like the sheep on the previous pages, you are naturally driven to travel in packs. In ancient times, being part of the group gave you an **evolutionary** advantage- if you were a straggler, you might not survive an enemy attack. Substitute a clique of mean upperclassmen in the cafeteria for giant cave Lions in the wild, and you get the idea. It's still safer- even in our present day, civilized society- to surround yourself with serious backup.

But that's not all: “as a teen, you're especially **susceptible** to herd mentality,” says psychologist Lawrence Steinberg, author of **age of opportunity**. The section of your brain involved in decision-making is still developing, while the part linked to social activity is super-active. That means you're wired to pay more attention to the rewards of belonging to the group - even if the group is doing something like shoplifting or cutting class - then to the risks of getting caught.

That was definitely true for Maci: “half of the school must have been leaving campus- I really thought no one would miss me.”

So what can you do to truly own your decisions without letting the group influence creep in? The first step is recognizing that herd mentality happens, even to you. Eli, a high school sophomore in New York City, says he has slowly recognized the subtle forces of his school's social scene at work after attending a few parties - and they weren't what he thought they would be. “I started to realize that no one's ever directly pressuring anyone else to drink- I've never even seen that happen once,” he explains. “Everyone’s just doing it because everyone else is. I have no doubt that if the majority of people weren't drinking that would catch on too.”

Which brings us to an important self-test: if you're feeling a strong drive to copy the crowd at a party, pause for five seconds- step outside, run to the bathroom, whatever- and get in touch with your inner instincts. Would you still be doing this if no one else was? Are you OK with the worst-case scenario consequences?

Even better, have a plan before you even put yourself in that scenario. Eli says he'll say things like, “I've got a big track meet tomorrow,” when friends are passing around drinks. “you'd think it would be a big deal but nobody calls me out on it. and some people even start copying me and saying it too.”

That's the secret power of the pack: it works both ways. When you stand up and do the right thing - whether that's calling out a mob of mean commentators online or launching a fund-raising campaign - people will start to follow you.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING PROMPT IN A JOURNAL RESPONSE ON LOOSELEAF PAPER:

First, describe some of the things the pigs have been doing that go against Animalism. Then write a reflection on why you think none of the other animals are doing anything about it. In your response consider whether you think herd mentality plays a role.