

CHAPTER 3

Me in a Group

We are constantly reminded that our daily lives take place within groups and around other people. Some groups consist of peers, some are close and others are not, some are pleasant and others are not. At home, in class, on the street, the grocery store and many other places we encounter people with whom we communicate and form relationships. We constantly find ourselves in group situations or surrounded by people. Of course, sometimes we seek solitude and long to spend some time alone but, generally speaking, we find that we cannot live without other people.

Let us look at the phenomenon of groups. The subject of group dynamics has always been of great interest, but only in the 20th century, especially in the last few decades, has the group become the object of scientific study. Scientists have formulated a lot of questions. Here are some of them:

- ✗ What kind of groups are there and what differences are there among them?
- ✗ How are groups formed and what makes people remain in a group?
- ✗ How do people communicate within a group?
- ✗ How does a group change the behavior of its members?
- ✗ How do different groups interact with each other?



Let us make it clear that we are speaking of small groups, i.e., groups in which members can constantly meet each other, communicate and interact. The minimum number of people that constitutes a group is two, such as: partners in a game of chess, two friends, etc. The maximum varies and primarily depends on the circumstances. Some examples of small groups are: a family, a school class, a football team, etc. As for large groups, they function quite differently and are based on some common feature, such as citizenship in a nation, senior citizens, youth, women, inhabitants of a state or province, people of one religious persuasion, people of a certain race, etc.

In reality each of us belongs to several groups at once. What does it mean to us?

1. Within a group we communicate, i.e., exchange information, thoughts, ideas. We enrich our spirituality, feel empathy and make friends.
2. Within a group we express ourselves. The group appreciates and encourages us. We feel free to boast of what we have got or what we have done.
3. A group protects us from pressure from outside. There is a sense of closeness.
4. Within a group it is much easier for us to feel free in our behavior, as long as the others behave similarly or, at least passively, approve of our behavior.

These are some positive aspects of being in a group. But there are negative aspects as well. More than 40 years ago American scientists showed experimentally that a person acts differently within a group than outside of that group. This phenomenon is called group pressure. Experiments were usually conducted in the following fashion: prior to a group gathering the investigator tells all or some members of the group to make deliberately wrong statements. The persons whose behavior is under study do not know this. For instance, in reference to a blank screen, the investigator may say: "A black dot has appeared on the screen.

Where is it?" Two or three members of the group answer, "It is in the upper right corner of the screen. Now it is moving towards the center. Moving down..." Although not true, other members of the group tend to stop believing their own eyes. Some people even "see" the non-existent dot. Many such experiments have been conducted, and it was demonstrated that only a few people were able to stand their ground. Such people, called "non-suggestible", make up 25-30% of the population.



However, such experiments are not absolutely necessary. Probably you yourself have noticed how people's behavior often changes when in a group. They act in such a way to attract the attention of other group members. Within a group an idea may arise to do something socially unacceptable, even criminal behavior, which the group members would be unlikely to do when alone. There are other negative aspects as well that can certainly influence an individual. For instance, we can easily become dependent on a certain group. We connect our self-esteem and self-respect to how other members of the group perceive us. Rumors are also a common thing in groups. Members of a group act on information that circulates within the group, no matter whether it is true or not. This is how rumors spread and how a common opinion can sometimes develop into a group mentality. Oftentimes everyone's sense of responsibility decreases because all within the group are waiting for someone else to take initiative.



Thus, a group can have either a positive or negative impact depending on its purpose for existence. For example, some clubs exist for the sake of some socially significant goal and perform actions which are valuable for other people. Unfortunately, there are other groups (gangs, Mafia) which come together for the sake of socially inappropriate behavior. In these cases their unity becomes a negative factor both for the members of the group and for the society.

One more point. We can be influenced only by a group that we value and is important to us. Then, we value membership in and the opinions of the group. This is usually our peer group. Our peers can exert considerable influence on us and steer us into certain directions in life. That is why parents want their children to make friends with those who can be a good influence on them. Parents try to isolate their children from "bad influences". But they do not always understand that friends are not chosen in response to orders. You know that your choice of friends is influenced by whom you feel drawn to or admiration for. Each of us tends to choose friends who accept us the way we are. While the group may help us to develop our self-esteem, it often can be in a negative direction. Group influence is so strong that it can be difficult to get back on the right track. This is a very common obstacle and challenge in the development of teenagers.

Therefore, let us remember this when we discuss different problems of communication— whether with parents, teachers, friends or classmates. It's true that communication and life in a group play an important role in our development as human beings. All of us are interested in our future—what kind of people we'll become and how our relationships with others, especially those who are closest to us, will grow.



Something to think about



- Is it important for a person to have already determined his values before he becomes part of a group?
- In what ways can a group influence someone in a bad way if he has not already decided for himself what actions are good and what bad?
- In what ways may a group influence someone for the better?
- Can you think of any situations in which a person who is unsure of his own values may be persuaded by a group to do something which is wrong?

For Your Journal



Imagine that you can create any type of group you would like. You are the leader and founder of your group. What type of group would you create? What would the members of this group do? How would this group influence other people (people who are not a part of the group)?

See the Appendix for the psychological test pertaining to this lesson.