

THE MASK WE WEAR

“Be a voice, not an echo” – Albert Einstein. How many times have your plans been disrupted by the whispered words, “Everyone’s doing it”? More importantly, how many lives have been negatively impacted by peer pressure? Peer pressure, every time we speak of peer pressure, we think of peer group influence, but we don’t realize it is a force that makes us wear a mask without even realizing we’ve put it on. From the way we dress to how we interact, it shapes us to conform to the looks of others. But what is that mask?

Peer pressure is a strong influence on a person to change their attitudes, values, or behaviours to imitate others. To me, it is not just an external influence that shapes our behaviour; it also causes us to conceal our genuine identity. It’s not just about wanting to fit in; it’s also about fearing being seen as different, which can lead to losing one’s real character. However, peer pressure has both positive and negative effects on people. While peer pressure can on one hand bring positive outcomes like encouraging healthy habits, boosting academic performance, and enhancing personal growth, on the other hand, it can also increase the risk of engaging in risky behaviours, lower self-esteem, and lead to violent behaviours.

I still vividly remember an embarrassing day in my first year of university. I was in line at the cafeteria when I felt the weight of peer pressure. As I approached the front of the line, I quickly grabbed my old phone from my pocket, hoping to avoid being seen without one. I tried to unlock it discreetly, but my outdated pattern lock and lack of fingerprint recognition made me feel like an outcast. As I fumbled with my phone, a group of trendy teenagers approached, effortlessly unlocking their phones with face recognition. I felt like a relic from the past. In a desperate attempt to fit in, I pretended to unlock my phone with face recognition too. The humiliation didn’t end there. When I tried to make a transfer using my monetary service app, only to realise everyone around me was using bank apps. In a moment of foolish pride, I added a zero to my transfer amount, hoping to amaze the guys behind me. Shockingly, the POS machine had the last laugh. As I attempted the transfer, it displayed the dreaded message, “Insufficient funds.” The guys, having seen what I did, burst into laughter. I felt embarrassed. I had tried to fake my lifestyle to fit in.

Peer pressure pushes us to adopt a different way of life and view of ourselves. It makes us put on a mask to show our friends, colleagues, and pals that we belong. Negative peer pressure can be attributed to three major causes. They are: desire to belong, fear of being excluded, and lack of self-confidence. Many youths today are forced to fall under the influence of their peers because they need to blend in and not be called outcasts. They forget that being “unique” is valuable. Nowadays, not having the latest iPhone is often perceived as using a toy, and that is why people habitually sacrifice their time and resources in pursuit of the latest gadgets, forgetting that it is all vanity.

Similarly, fear of being excluded is a powerful motivator. A survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2019 found that 71.5% of Nigerian youth ages 15-34 reported feeling pressure from peers to engage in risky behaviours. Also, another study conducted in 2017 by the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) discovered that 61.1% of public secondary school students felt pressure to engage in examination malpractices. There is no doubt that students do this in order not to be tagged “junior.” Individuals tend to worry about being rejected, ostracised or excluded. So they begin to

adopt certain behaviours, attitudes, or beliefs to avoid being different. They begin to hide their true selves, participate in unwanted activities, and compromise their values only to make sure they aren't shortlisted as outsiders. People with fear of being excluded feel anxious, worried, and stressed.

Furthermore, we wear a mask when we are unconfident of our faces. Negative peer pressure can be like a canker worm eating through the fabric of our youths when people are caged by low self-confidence. They always seek validation when they are always scared of being rejected. They lack trust in themselves. Victims of peer pressure always compare themselves with others on criteria like physical appearances, for example, facial feature; social media presence, for example, number of followers; material possessions, for example, clothing.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome negative peer pressure. Developing a strong sense of self is crucial. To all reading this, the best portrait you can ever paint is the one you create when you look in the mirror. Establish a clear identity and values to make decisions that align with your beliefs. Also, surround yourself with positive vibes and spend time with supportive friends and family who encourage positive choices. Build your self-confidence, focus on your strengths, and use them to accomplish your goals. Be yourself! Why fit in when you were born to stand out? Only dead fish go with the flow. Shed away the mask you wear when you hide who you are. Being different doesn't make you strange; it makes you exceptional, extraordinary, irreplaceable, matchless, peerless, one of a kind, special, one in a billion, original, genuine, unmatched, unparalleled, unequalled, unsurpassable, and unique. Put off the mask and cherish your face.

I hope I have conveyed a message: "The greatest prison people live in is the fear of what people think about them." So, develop skills and confidence to not only resist pressure but bring out the best in yourselves. We shouldn't let our peers influence us in deciding who we are. I wore the mask of peer pressure before, but I broke free to find my true path. What's holding you back from removing the mask you're wearing and revealing your true self? Let the inner you bloom and flourish!

-Ngorka Donald Chukwuma

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