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# SECONDARY VIRGINITY

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PHOTO BY ESPIE STEWART/A.L.L.

**S**EXUAL ABSTINENCE is the healthy choice for teenagers. It's the healthy choice not only because it promotes teens' physical health by letting them avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), including AIDS; it also promotes mental and spiritual health.

Many teens, however, have made the wrong choice and are sexually active. According to a 1994 statement by the Alan Guttmacher Institute\*, 70% of

\*The research arm of Planned Parenthood; because Planned Parenthood receives government funds for programs they claim will combat teen pregnancy, they have no incentive to understate teen sexual activity.

teens are still virgins by their 16th birthday. This leaves some 30% of 16-year-olds sexually active.

Why are these teens sexually active? A closer look at what has been published on the subject shows that four important features stand out:

- Statistics on "sexually active" teens usually include anyone who has ever had sex, whether or not they are currently sexually active.
- Sexual activity by youngsters is usually associated with psychosocial problems such as violent behavior, drugs, alcohol abuse, poor school performance, and divorced parents. Sexual activity is a symptom of a deeper problem.

- Large numbers of teens are sexually active under coercion. According to the same Alan Guttmacher Institute report, seven of ten girls under 14, and six of ten under 15, have had sex involuntarily, often with older men.
- Sexual abuse is linked to teen sexual activity. The Alan Guttmacher Institute reported in 1992 that a large number of teens who became pregnant had experienced sexual abuse at some point: 55% had been molested, 42% had been victims of attempted rape, and 44% had been raped. This high prevalence of sexual violence was an unexpected and troublesome finding. It suggested that sexual abuse as a key factor influencing high-risk sexual behavior has been overlooked.

Most sexually active teens would prefer not to be so. A 1994 Roper Poll found that 62% of sexually active girls wished they had waited until they were older before having sex.

If we consider that most sexually active teens are so because of rape, peer pressure, loneliness, experimentation, and other problems; and that the consequences of teen sexual activity are always destructive (pregnancy, STD's, AIDS, guilt, abandonment, anxiety and disillusionment, to name a few); it is not surprising that at some point many of them will regret having been involved in this kind of behavior, and will want to change.

This is where the idea of secondary virginity comes into place. It is a firm yes. It tells the youngster: you can change, redirect your life, pick up the pieces and live in abstinence again. It is not a medical term and will not be found in a dictionary. Physiologically, once virginity is lost, it cannot be regained. However, psychologically and morally, it can. It makes sense: if virginity is abstinence before ever having engaged in sex, secondary virginity is abstinence *after* having engaged in sex. The key word is *abstinence*, a realistic and attainable goal in both cases. Young people like the term. They want to be supported in choosing abstinence. They like to know they can discontinue having sex.

This is analogous to stopping alcohol abuse, quitting smoking, or getting off drugs. "Once a junkie, always a junkie" is simply not true. Everyone engag-

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ing in these kinds of behavior is encouraged to stop. A number of rehabilitation and support groups are available to them, many of them publicly funded. Why should it be any different with harmful sexual

behavior? Although sex is a natural and creative human function, in teens it is just as destructive as drugs or alcohol, because teens are not ready for the responsibilities and consequences associated with sex.

Accordingly, the decision to stop being sexually active deserves the same kind of encouragement and support that we give to people who want to abandon other kinds of destructive behavior.

How does secondary virginity work?

- Teens must know that this option is available and that it works.
- Teens must make a personal decision to change and to break away from the past.
- Teens must not be surprised or give up when they have setbacks; they must get up and try again.
- Teens must still take responsibility for their past behavior, and any consequences (a child, an illness) brought about by it.

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Continuing strong support is essential for two reasons:

- To resist pressure, scorn, ridicule and opposition from those who do not believe that one can change, or who do not want one to change. Unfortunately there is a tremendous amount of opposition to secondary virginity by many adults and by some teens. Young people who choose secondary virginity need much courage to say, "I did this, but I don't have to continue if I don't want to, and you are not going to make me feel bad about it." They also need courage to acknowledge and accept the fact that being sexually active was a mistake.
- To be able to change a lifestyle, make new friends, develop new interests, express and communicate love in non-sexual ways, and have the fortitude to wait.

Teenagers who choose this path, as well as those who support them, must have the conviction that indeed, sex is great, so great that it is worth waiting for—until marriage.

To sum up, virginity until marriage is the first choice in sexual matters; secondary virginity is the next best choice, for the same reasons: respect for self, for the future husband or wife and future children, for family, for society, for God's plan for us.

In this area, psychology, medicine and morality go hand in hand: sex within the lifetime marriage commitment is the only sex that fulfills its purpose. **C**

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