

Practicing Abstinence

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Abstinence is the surest way to avoid HIV/AIDS, other STIs, and unintended pregnancy. If young people choose to remain abstinent or practice “secondary abstinence,” help them develop a strategy to do so. Secondary abstinence refers to choosing abstinence after previously engaging in voluntary or coerced sex. Review these strategies with your clients:

Be clear about why you want to wait.

- ◆ List your reasons. Talk them over with someone who supports you.
- ◆ Check your list from time to time to remind yourself.

Have a plan.

- ◆ Know what situations might make it hard to stick with your choice.
- ◆ Decide ahead of time what you will do to avoid or deal with difficult situations, such as leaving when you are being pressured to have sex.
- ◆ Instead of having a sexual relationship with someone you are interested in romantically, think of other ways to express your feelings.

Be impressed with yourself.

- ◆ It can be hard to go against the crowd and make your own choices.
- ◆ Give yourself credit. You deserve it.

Get support.

- ◆ Hang out with friends who know about and respect your decisions.
- ◆ Avoid people who might pressure you.
- ◆ If pressured, tell someone in authority.

Practice communication skills.

- ◆ Learn to say “No!” with conviction.
- ◆ Give a reason, such as, “I’m not ready.”
- ◆ Turn the tables: “You say that if I loved you I would have sex, but if you really loved me, you wouldn’t insist.”

Role-Play: Practicing Abstinence

You might help your clients practice what to say if someone is using the following arguments to pressure them to have sex.

If their partner says:

They can say:

“If you have sex, you will be more popular, beautiful, or manly.”

“That’s not true. Deciding not to have sex won’t make me less of a woman [or man]. It’s my own choice, no one else can make that decision for me.”

“If you do not have sex, people will think you are homosexual.”

“That’s crazy. Lots of people, gay and straight, want to wait to have sex.”

“Everyone in the movies and on television is having sex. Why can’t we?”

“Sure, the movies show how fun sex is, but they don’t show the consequences. They don’t show the girl who had to drop out of school because she was pregnant or the boy who got an STI.”

“You should have sex for the first time just to get it over with.”

“Why should I want to just get it over with? I want sex to be special, with someone I really care about.”

“There is no good reason to wait to have sex. You should do it now.”

“There are a lot of good reasons to wait. I don’t want to worry about getting pregnant or getting HIV or some other infection. I’m just not ready to have sex now.”

Adapted from *Abstinence Focus Poster No. R045*. Scotts Valley, CA: ETR Publishing, 2002; Grossman L, Kowal D. *Kids, Drugs, and Sex, Preventing Trouble*. Brandon, VT: Clinical Psychology Publishing, 1987.