

# Is Abstinence Really Possible?

Is it possible for today's teens and young adults to remain sexually abstinent? Is it an out-of-date teaching or expectation? Before I explore these questions, I will give my definition of sexual abstinence. Sexual abstinence is not having sex in any form (emotionally or clinically) before marriage. Wikipedia gives this definition: "Sexual abstinence or sexual restraint is the practice of refraining from some or all aspects of sexual activity for medical, psychological, legal, social, financial, philosophical, moral, or religious reasons."

Here is one reason sexual abstinence has not worked very well in our society where most people claim to be Christian. Religious parents and leaders have mostly taught sexual abstinence only in the context of spiritual purity—a Divine expectation. "This is what the Bible says, and therefore, do not do it." That's about the limit to the teaching. While the teaching of sexual abstinence is ideal, the method of "Do what the Bible says" really does not provide enough knowledge to assist the individual when navigating natural emotional and physical sexual desires. Many religious leaders ignore the reality of natural drives or desires of the budding young adults. Many make our teens feel that sexual desire itself is really wrong when not in a marriage.

Over the past fifteen years, I have conducted numerous seminars for teens and young adults on sexual abstinence. I called these seminars "The Foolishness about Abstinence." Although I am a promoter of sexual abstinence before marriage, the seminars were designed to help the participants to think clearly and objectively about their sex drive and the purpose of sex. One of the features of the seminars was to have the participants fill out a "Sexual Attitude Questionnaire." Over a ten-year period, I have accumulated about 1000 respondents to the survey. One of the key questions was: "Have you had sexual intercourse at least once?" In every seminar setting, fifty percent of the respondents indicated that they had sexual intercourse at least once. Note that these were teens who attended church regularly and were taught to abstain.

A part of my seminar presentation to the teens and young adults on sexual abstinence, I would also examine the impact of the "Abstinence Pledge" that started in the 1993 in the United States by the Southern Baptist Convention and has circled the globe. It was first called the "Virginity Pledge." As a parent of teenagers at that time, my two children also signed the pledge. Here's the Abstinence Pledge: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a Biblical marriage relationship." Millions of teenagers around the world have signed the pledge. It was done as a means of getting a commitment from teens to reserve their sexual activities to post-wedding day. Has the use of the Abstinence Pledge been effective over the years?

Washington Post Newspaper on March 19, 2005 reported some startling overview of the effectiveness of the Abstinence Pledge. The report was written by staff writer, Ceci Connolly. She said: "Teenagers who take virginity pledges --public declarations to abstain from sex -- are almost as likely to be infected with a sexually transmitted disease as those who never made the pledge, an eight-year study released yesterday found. Although young people who sign a virginity pledge delay the initiation of sexual activity, marry at younger ages and have fewer sexual partners, they are also less likely to use condoms and more likely to experiment with oral and anal sex, said the researchers from Yale and Columbia universities." This report confirms my findings that sexual abstinence teachers have ignored the reality of the power of the sex drive in teens and did not present a more comprehensive approach to sexual abstinence.

Here's another report. Peter S. Bearman, Professor at Columbia's Institute for Social and Economic, Research and Policy. He indicates the following: "The sad story is that kids who are trying to preserve their technical virginity are, in some cases, engaging in much riskier behavior. From a public health point of view, an abstinence movement that encourages no vaginal sex may inadvertently encourage other forms of alternative sex that are at higher risk of STDs."

Here is a bright spot with the use of the Abstinence Pledge. According to the research "Teens who make a virginity pledge are far less likely to be sexually active during high school years. Nearly two-thirds of teens who have never taken a pledge are sexually active before age 18; by contrast, only 30 percent of teens who consistently report having made a pledge become sexually active before age 18." That's good news about the use of the pledge.

Don't get too excited. Something has to change regarding the teaching methods and information about sexual abstinence. First, it is my strong view that sexual abstinence is possible. Second, it is ideal and rewarding of waiting until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. Third, it is imperative that we talk with our teens frankly about their sexual drives, passions, and urges. Let them know that sexual urges are normal. Talk with them about the advantages of waiting. Fourth, be wise to let them know that it is best that they always have their heads on their bodies. Do not allow the urges to dictate to their behavior or cause them to act impulsively. That's how you get pregnant. If they feel they must engage sexually, they must plan not to let the moment destroy their lives. Use protection. Avoid pregnancy. Avoid being promiscuous.

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