

## ***Conformity and the Groupthink Mentality***

### **What is “groupthink?”**

Groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” (9). Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanize other groups. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making. (emphasis added)

Janis, Irving L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

**Question 1:** How do the underlined portions of the text above contribute to oppression, discrimination or the mistreatment of others? Explain in the space below.

Groupthink is one of the most troublesome downfalls of organized society. Today, it manifests itself on a sliding scale of severity, ranging from genocide to bullying to superstition to fashion fads to the “Digg mentality” of news reporting. Still, most of us refuse to believe that our opinions, perception and worldview are being in any way shaped by those of others. And yet they are. Even subcultures, the very essence of which is to stand out, are founded on [group conformity](#) — or, as James Thurber famously puts it, “why do you have to be a nonconformist like everyone else?”

What’s perhaps most interesting about conformity is how our own relationship to it changes throughout the course of our lives. We spend our teenage years trying, desperately, to fit in, only to mature into trying, just as desperately, to stand out — a point eloquently echoed by one Etsy employee in his recent [contribution](#) to the tremendously important [It Gets Better Project](#).

For more on the subject, we highly recommend *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in*

*Cultural Anthropology* — an anthology of 37 articles that examine the role of conformity in complex societies, a timely read the insights from which help glean a deeper understanding of everything from the recent Wikileaks scandal to Bieber Fever.



***“As much as conformity is the currency of teenage years, an incredible thing happens afterwards and, all of a sudden, individuality is the currency.”***

### **What are the symptoms of groupthink?**

1. Illusion of invulnerability –Creates excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks.
2. Collective rationalization – Members discount warnings and do not reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Members believe in the rightness of their cause and therefore ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – Negative views of “enemy” make effective responses to conflict seem unnecessary.
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group’s views.
6. Self-censorship – Doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not expressed.
7. Illusion of unanimity – The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous.
8. Self-appointed ‘mindguards’ – Members protect the group and the leader from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group’s cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions.

**Question 2:** How does the groupthink mentality relate to the story of Anne Frank and the Holocaust?

Explain your answer thoroughly, and be sure to include information from the symptoms of groupthink above (i.e., what symptom(s) relate to the story or the event?).

**Question 3:** How does the groupthink mentality relate to any of the essential questions from our unit?

Choose an essential question and explain how the information you’ve read and viewed relates to the question.

**Question 4:** Are there instances of groupthink and examples of conformity around you? Identify the examples in your own life and especially point out negative or dangerous examples. Next, think about the factors in teens’ lives that contribute to groupthink. What technologies and other factors push kids toward conformity? How can young people stand up against groupthink and conformity?

**Question 5:** What can be done to overcome dangerous groupthink mentalities that cause discrimination and harm to others? Consider what factors *contribute* to groupthink mentalities and think of ways to overcome those factors. (essential question #3)