**Section: Feature**

**Rising Above Conformity**

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**Conformity**. Definition: Noun. Behaviour in accordance with socially accepted conventions.

In high school, I took my first ever psychology course and I learned about the famous conformity experiment conducted by Solomon Asch. In this experiment, a group of eight people were shown two groups of vertical lines: Group A contained a single line while Group B contained multiple lines of variable lengths. The participants were then asked to pick the line from Group B that was the same size as the line in Group A. Here's the catch: Out of the eight “participants”, seven were confederates of Asch whose actions were carefully scripted. However, one participant was “blinded”, being told that this was a research project to test a person's perception and vision. In reality, it was an experiment on conformity and social pressure. 







The results were absolutely intriguing. The answer was always obvious: one line from Group B was *clearly* the same size as the line in Group A. However, 75% of the participants chose the incorrect line at least once. Why? Because all of the other seven "participants" chose the *same* incorrect line. In the control group, with no pressure to conform to confederates, less than 1% of participants gave the wrong answer. It is clear, then, that the actual participant was heavily influenced by group pressure, to the extent where they gave a clearly wrong answer just to be in sync with everyone else present in the room.

Human nature really is fascinating. Why would we change our thoughts, behaviour and words just to be in compliance with the world? Is the world necessarily going in the right direction, especially when we have been warned by Allah Almighty and His beloved Prophet (PBUH) of the social degradation that is slowly occurring within our societies, cultures and religion?

It can all be a little overwhelming. But that is where awareness, knowledge and wisdom come in. As Nargis Naqvi mentioned in her book *The Perfect Muslim Child*, "We are so perfect in our creation that we can actually make the conscious decision to fix what we have wronged and help others fix it as well."

So yes, conformity is a real monster lurking in our nature, but we can keep it trapped under our beds – and the only way to do that is through realization. Even though Mr. Asch conducted his experiment in 1951, it is still valid today. Not only have psychologists repeated the study with similar results, but it is quite evident on even the smallest levels.

When we blast inappropriate music in our cars. When we put on those "fashionable" and "trendy" clothes. When we go for that university and career that will please others around us. Most of us end up giving in to what *others* want and desire, to *fit in*. Alas, instilled within us is the need to belong with our peers so we don't stand out.

However, deep down, we also have a desire to be our true selves. Taking a page from the psychology textbook again, *cognitive dissonance* is a term for the mental stress that occurs when one’s actions contradict one’s beliefs. Whether it’s joining in with your friends when they’re making fun of someone, or going out to a party you know you shouldn’t be at, your brain has a psychological response when you do something you know is against your true self. These two instincts, wanting to be ourselves and wanting to fit in, are constantly at war within us.

We should have a strong desire to be our true selves and stand up for being different. However, it is important to mention here that there is a fine line between being unique and being rebellious. Sometimes that line is blurred when we force ourselves to be different. It should come naturally to all of us, in the form of intuitions regarding what we want from God. Ignoring those intuitions for the sake of friends and society will lead us down a path of unhappiness. We should overcome our weaknesses and stand against the influence of others in order to be comfortable in our skin.

I must admit, this feat is neither simple nor easy. But if we are brave enough to shun the fear of potential (and temporary) loneliness, the leaders within us will surface. If we do it for the right reasons; those that are ethical, moral, and humane, we will always succeed in this world and the hereafter. More importantly, God will be on our side, and indeed that is best thing for us. But if we care more to have friends around us, we must remember that such friendships are fragile. They won't last long and we would have given up a lot of our great personalities by trying to be like them.

When we follow convention, we are like the fish that follow other fish in the river and fall into the deep ocean. Instead, we should be the kind of fish that try to keep swimming upstream in order to stay in the fresh water.

In the end, we must realize collectively as an Ummah that in an ugly and corrupted world, a world that is astray, we can individually make a difference by doing the right thing and leading by example. We have all heard this over and over again, but it is worth repeating, that you and I can become a beacon of hope in this evil darkness.

Rising above conformity is a bigger step than we give it credit for.