A facilitator’s guide for teenagers
life skills

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UNICEF
United Nations Children’s Fund
NEPAL
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introduction

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What are life skills?

A 13-year old boy turned to drugs when he broke up with his girl friend.

A 15-year old girl committed suicide when she discovered she was pregnant.

A 16-year old boy lost interest in life because his father forced him into studying medicine when he wanted to be a computer scientist.

A 14-year old girl’s dream to become a teacher burst like a bubble when her parents asked her to quit school and marry a stranger a few months later.

Could some of these tragedies have been prevented if teenagers in Nepal were equipped with the ability to deal with the problems and demands of their daily lives?

Had that boy been able to cope with his emotional pain after breaking up with his girl friend, perhaps he would not have taken to drugs?

If that girl had persuaded her boyfriend to wear a condom, perhaps she would not have lost her life?

That boy was aware of the harmful effects of drugs. Although he knew he should not take them, he did not have the will to say “No” when he was struck with grief and a friend offered them to him. The girl too, unwilling to have sex before marriage and aware of the advantages of condoms, was too afraid of offending her boyfriend. She did not know what to do when the boy made advances...

That boy and girl both had the right knowledge and attitude. However, their behaviour did not follow their minds. Haven’t we all had the “I know...but I can’t help it!” experiences? Right information and good attitude do not necessarily lead to responsible behaviour. What are missing are skills, the ability to act.

Life skills enable us to translate knowledge, attitude and values into actual abilities – ie. “what to do and how to do it.” Life skills are a set of core abilities sometimes described
as emotional intelligence. The ten generic life skills are: self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, the ability to manage emotions and cope with stress, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving.

All of the ten skills are interdependent and none of them stand alone. For example, for communication skills – in order to decide what to say and how to say it effectively – one needs self-awareness and empathy. One even needs to think creatively and critically. Those “skills” or put simply, abilities, are mechanisms that help us conduct a conversation, make a pitch, and put a point across without ever noticing it. To cope with emotions, you need to talk to your best friend. When you make a decision, you need to communicate with the people concerned with that decision and try to persuade them to accept it.

These skills are inter-related and reinforce each other. Together, they are responsible for our psychosocial competence, building our self-esteem and self-efficacy, to nurture holistic self-development.

Let’s take a look at the relationship between those skills:

1. **Why is self-awareness important?**

   ![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

   - **Self-awareness** leads to managing emotions and coping with stress.
   - Self-awareness is the ability to understand our strengths, weaknesses, values, outlook, character, our needs, desires, aspirations and ourselves. Getting to know ourselves is perhaps the most difficult thing to do. It takes courage to face the truth about ourselves, our appearance, shortcomings, about things that we are good at and those we cannot accomplish.

   Self-awareness is the foundation for all the other life-skills we need to develop and essential to managing stress and emotions. To cope with emotional changes, we need to be aware of our emotional reactions and how they affect our behaviour. Awareness provides us with choices on how to react, rather than allowing them to govern our behaviour, which may lead to unpleasant consequences. Likewise, we have to be aware of how stress can affect our lives. We need to know what sort of harmful effects it can have on our mental and physical health. To do so we must discover the sources of stress, before we can take action to mitigate its impact on us.

2. **Relating to others:**

   ![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

   - **Empathy**
   - **Effective communication**
   - **Interpersonal relationship**

   It’s not enough just to know yourself well. To have a successful relationship with our loved ones and society at large, we need to understand and care about other peoples’ needs, desires and feelings.
Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, our communication with others will amount to one-way traffic. Worst, we will be acting and behaving according to our self-interest and are bound to run into problems. No man is an island, no woman either! We grow up in relationships with many people – parents, brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts, classmates, friends and neighbours.

When we understand ourselves as well as others, we are better prepared to communicate our needs and desires. We will be more equipped to say what we want people to know, present our thoughts and ideas and tackle delicate issues without offending other people. At the same time, we will be able to elicit support from others, and win their understanding.

Effective communication entails timely exchange of our thoughts and feelings, in particular, the courage to seek help or advice when we face difficult decisions or issues that others consider embarrassing to raise.

However, it is not always easy to express our opinions, desires, needs and fears to other people, especially our parents. Afraid of being admonished, or allowing negative reactions to run wild in our imagination, we tend to refrain from telling others our true feelings. We mentally defeat ourselves before taking a single step forward. When we keep worries and problems to ourselves, they do not evaporate. Rather, they accumulate like snowballs rolling down the mountainside. The longer we drag on, the bigger the snowball becomes and the harder it is for us to resolve the problem.

Healthy interpersonal relationships build on effective communication. When we are willing and able to express ourselves and share our thoughts with others, many of our misunderstandings will be cleared up. Relating to others in a positive and encouraging way is the engine that sustains a smooth and strong relationship.

3. Making effective decisions:

Critical thinking enables us to analyse information and experiences objectively, and assess the factors that influence the way we think and act. Creative thinking helps us respond adaptively and flexibly in our everyday situations. It is about looking beyond our direct experiences, exploring available alternatives and the various consequences of our actions or non-action.

Creative and critical thinking pull us through crucial life decisions. They help us ask important questions such as: What options do I have? What can each option lead to? Is this really what I want? Decision-making requires the assessment of different options and their possible outcomes, rather than simply yielding to our own desires or pressure from others.
Creative and critical thinking also enable us to deal constructively with problems in our lives. Problems are not to be avoided or feared. Problems are part of life, and are there for us to solve, not evade. Problems left unsolved can bring mental stress and eventually affect our health. Problem solving skills empower us not only to confront our problems, but can in fact turn them into opportunities.

Mahesh is a smart, energetic boy, who has a dream. At grade 10, he aspires to work in a hotel and become a hotel manager one day. His father on the other hand, wants to have a doctor in the family. Since Mahesh’s two elder brothers have chosen other careers, Mahesh becomes his father’s only hope. However, Mahesh is not at all interested in medicine. What should he do?

Let’s see how life skills can make the difference in Mahesh’s life.

**Scenario I. If Mahesh does not have life skills...**

Mahesh is in the doldrums. He wants to talk to his father, but is afraid his father will lose his temper, which will get him nowhere. He knows he will not be able to persuade his father to change his mind, so what is the use of talking to him? After all, his father has always been the authority in the family. He decides everything.

Mahesh is dejected. Nevertheless, he goes ahead and enrols at medical college but finds himself suffering everyday. The lecturers are boring, so are the textbooks. His mind often drifts away from the lecture to the girl sitting nearby, or to the birds chirping outside.

When his classmates are preparing for final exams, Mahesh simply cannot care less. Naturally, he fails in two subjects. When he returns home, his father admonishes him.

Mahesh increasingly feels that life is meaningless. All that matters is whether his father is happy. What is he living for? He is depressed. One day, two classmates stop him in the campus and say: “Mahesh, you look so unhappy. There must be something bothering you. Why don’t you try this magic stuff? Take it and all your worries will vanish, believe us.”

Mahesh tries it. He feels light, as delightful as a bird in the sky. So he tries more and more and more. He is soon hooked on it and becomes a drug addict.

**Scenario II. If Mahesh has life skills...**

When his father tells him he has to study medicine, Mahesh begins to think: “I am not interested in medicine at all and I am not good at biology or chemistry (self-awareness). If I obey my father now, then fail the exams later on I will definitely disappoint him. The question is whether I would rather upset him now or later. In the past 17 years, I have always done what my father wants me to do. This time though, his decision will affect my future career. My life and happiness now depend on whether I am able to pursue something of my interest, rather than his. If I don’t defend my dream, I will be miserable for the rest of my life (critical thinking and decision making).”

Mahesh continues to tell himself: “I know if I talk to him now, he is bound to blow his top...... Maybe I should ask my elder uncle to help me. He is the most knowledgeable person in the family, he is more open-minded than my father, and cares about me. I think I can persuade him (creative thinking).”
Mahesh’s uncle is the most respected figure in the family. He is the only person that can influence his father’s opinion. Mahesh begins to raise the problem with him. His uncle intervenes by helping Mahesh’s father assess his son’s strengths and interests. “Do you want Mahesh to be happy? Or do you want him to suffer? Is gaining face for you more important than your son’s happiness? Furthermore, Mahesh will not excel as a doctor if he is not interested in medicine,” the uncle reasons with him. Finally, Mahesh’s father eventually changes his mind.

Now that Mahesh is able to enter college to study hotel management, he puts in his best effort. He cherishes the hard-won opportunity and wants to prove to his father, and more importantly, to himself, that he has made the right decision. He enjoys his classes, and five years later, he is recruited by the best hotel in Kathmandu. Mahesh is confident he will be promoted to the rank of hotel manager one day...

Creative thinking is, of course, not limited to finding an authoritative figure to convince your father, as in the case of Mahesh. For those without such an uncle, there are many other ways you can explore, as long as you are willing to face problems head-on, and not escape from them.

Life skills help us sail through the most crucial moments. The psychosocial competence to deal with demands, stresses and conflicts have a lot to do with teenagers’ ability to handle difficulties, overcome emotional disturbances and understand how one feels when caught in a particular situation. The degree of competence most often goes hand in hand with the level of self-confidence, derived from self-awareness, the ability to adopt a positive outlook, to look at the positive side of a problem and work towards a solution.

Life skills and HIV prevention

By the end of the first decade in 21st century, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) may become the Number One killer of Nepalese in the 15 to 49 age group. This stunning projection, a conservative estimate of USAID/Family Health International, is based on Nepal’s current HIV prevalence among the adult population.

Though much lower than nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nepal’s HIV prevalence of 0.29% ranks second highest in South Asia, after India’s 0.7%. According to WHO-UNAIDS latest estimates, some 33,500 Nepalis were living with HIV/AIDS by the end of 1999. Among the reported cases, nearly 60% are under the age of 30 and over 10% are adolescents.

Based on UNAIDS postulates, Nepal has entered a concentrated epidemic which, if not controlled, will experience an explosive rise in the next decade. The spread of HIV/AIDS reaches a “generalised” epidemic level when more than 1% of the total population are infected.

The dominant route of transmission is heterosexual, through unprotected sex. The most vulnerable groups are sex workers and their clients. However, injecting drug use is fueling the rapid spread of HIV in Nepal. HIV prevalence shot up from 2.2% in 1995 to nearly 50% by 1999 among injecting drug users (IDUs), who numbered around 20,000 as of 1999. More than half the country’s 50,000 drug users, including non-injecting drug users, are in the 16 to 25 age group. A quarter of them started taking drugs at the age of 15.

The transmission of HIV in Nepal follows a pattern quite common to other developing
countries. It points to the urgent need for intervention in attitude and behavioural change, focusing on factors that lead young people along the perilous path of intravenous drug use and unsafe sex. A country beset with malnutrition, diarrhoeal diseases and high death rates among children and women, the AIDS epidemic will burden Nepal’s already inadequate health system. It will also heavily tax its already stretched resources to cope with the costly disease. Prevention is the strongest weapon to curtail HIV’s further grip on a least developed country like Nepal, which is the strategy UNICEF pursues in its effort to protect the young.

1. Who are at risk?

Adolescents, among them drug users, school children and disadvantaged children, are the primary target of UNICEF interventions. Girl children approaching matrimonial age and women whose partners belong to high-risk groups are an additional target of assistance.

Among adolescents at high risk are IDUs. A rapid assessment by NCASC cited peer pressure, curiosity, frustration and an uncertain job prospect as major factors that drive young people, mostly male, into drug use. Among HIV positive drug users are children of middle-class families, students, street children, rickshaw pullers, vegetable vendors and odd job holders. The surge of HIV prevalence among injecting drug users is a phenomenon that merits the closest attention in the next few years.

Adolescent girls and women of reproductive age in districts with a high rate of seasonal labour migration are also important target groups. In a conservative culture that inhibits open discussion of sex, girls and women often find themselves in a powerless position to negotiate with their partners about safe sex. Compounding the situation is the widespread ignorance of HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission. In urban areas where HIV awareness is higher, commercial sex workers often report they are unable to bargain with their clients over condom use. Gender discrimination and poverty intensifies female’s vulnerability towards HIV/AIDS.

Further, girl children from marginalised communities are often driven into the sex industry, usually the only means of generating income for their families. With little bargaining power, these young sex workers often yield to their clients’ demand for unsafe sex. A recent FHI survey found nearly 4% of female sex workers in the Terai region were HIV positive, and almost 20% suffer from untreated STDs.

2. Why life skills?

The development community in Nepal feels strongly that the prevention of HIV/AIDS is more than a public health concern. Effective prevention does not only entail informing high-risk groups about safe sex and the use of clean needles for drug injection. It calls for an investment in teenagers’ positive self-development. Equipping them with a set of essential skills will help prepare them for a healthy lifestyle that reduces the likelihood of risky behaviour.

Psychological push factors such as the inability to tackle emotional pain, conflicts, frustrations and anxieties about the future, peer pressure and sexual curiosity, are often the driving force for high-risk behaviour. Despite the pull of factual information, however creatively rendered, is ineffective against the overpowering influence of the external environment.
The host of factors that induce high-risk behavior such as alcoholism, drug use and casual sex are boredom, rebellion, disorientation, peer pressure, and curiosity about sex and drugs. These factors come into play under a strong culture of sexual inhibition, biases against female, the lack of supplementary learning in school about responsible relationships, gender equality, decision-making and negotiation, conflict resolution and problem solving skills.

Teenagers are a neglected age group in Nepal. The growing number turning to drugs is an alarming sign that points to the need for a new form of education. Life skills are an effective tool to empower young people to act, take initiative and take control. The variety of life-skills introduced will complement what is lacking in the current school system and society as a whole.

Promoted jointly by UNICEF and WHO, life skills lay the foundation for mental well-being. They contribute to the prevention of risky behaviour before it becomes entrenched and difficult to change. Building on the foundation are specific problem solving skills, especially in tackling peer pressure for drug use, or negotiation about safe sex. These have proven effective, even though results are not achieved overnight! Life skills, like education, are competencies built over time. They see an individual through their lifetime, in particular, behaviour that may be proven too costly.

3. UNICEF’s communication strategy

In the first step towards identifying the best mode of intervention, UNICEF commissioned a study to gain insights into who is doing what in HIV/AIDS in Nepal. The study provides a clear picture of the work of major organisations. It details their areas of strength and intervention, including their views on the form of support UNICEF could introduce in partnership with local organisations, government departments and donors. Most regard communication and peer education targeting teenagers, both in-school and out-of-school, emphasising empowerment with life skills, as the most suitable form of intervention. Most current programmes focus on adult sexual behaviour, rather than that of teenagers or their likelihood of either taking up substance abuse or engaging in premarital sex as young as 13 years of age.

Based on the study, UNICEF has taken steps to formulate a Communication and peer education strategy for young people. A Knowledge, Attitude, Practice and Skills study was launched, in the form of a quantitative and qualitative survey of 1400 teenagers in seven UNICEF-assisted districts. The KAPS aims to construct a strong profile of the target groups’ general outlook, problems at school, risks in the street, problems with peers, parents, friends, how they feel about themselves, how they resolve conflicts, and what their aspirations are, etc.

The KAPS has provided a baseline for producing a facilitator’s guide and year-long weekly, interactive radio programme called: “Chatting with My Best Friend” in the year 2000-2001. The programme will be transmitted through Radio Nepal and FM services to reach the entire country.

The year-long radio show, “Chatting with My Best Friend” (“Sathi Sanga Manka Kura”), is an attempt to impart life-skills to teenagers. The show is designed to interact with teenagers as another peer who speaks to their mind. It helps break the silence surrounding physiological and emotional curiosities that come naturally with puberty. The assumption is that when young people are
able to rise above emotional impasses arising from daily conflicts, entangled relationships and peer pressure, they are less likely to resort to drugs and other high-risk behaviour that lead to HIV/AIDS.

An HIV communication specialist has been brought on board to lead and work with a team of young producers to design a programme format appealing to Nepalese teenagers. Five of the young producers, ages 19 – 27 have been selected to go on to host and produce the radio show. Each half-hour episode combines music with drama and chat between a young female and male host.

The KAPS findings are incorporated in all of the chat topics and in the drama development. Stories such as a quarrels next door, boy-girl relationships and how to persuade parents to accept your goal, are conceived out of real-life situations that subtly lead teenagers into a process of self-reflection and self-discovery. Woven into the story lines are analysis and orientation towards common problems among adolescents eg. inertia, escapism, getting stuck with frustrations, and peer pressure that often drive young people into high-risk behaviour, especially substance abuse.

Keeping in mind the rebellious nature of teens, the central approach of the communication intervention emphasises the disposition towards listeners as a non-judgmental peer rather than put them off with “do’s” and “don’ts”. Interaction with listeners through write-ins and listeners’ groups will take place throughout the year-long broadcast. Audience feedback will be used to fine-tune the chat and drama in later episodes.

UNICEF will broaden life-skills communication from radio to TV, through a drama series called “Catmandu”, co-produced with Nepal Television, targeting urban teenagers. Lessons on life skills will be reinforced through a nation-wide network of listeners’ clubs where teenagers are encouraged to discuss their problems with the help of a facilitator. The network of youth listeners’ clubs, covering both rural and urban, in-school and out-of-school teenagers, will reach out to the most marginalised and poorest communities. The aim is not only to promote healthy behaviour, but form an enhanced understanding of generic skills such as empathy, increase teenagers’ acceptance of people with HIV/AIDS, and participation in care and support. A group of facilitators will be trained to conduct weekly discussions, based on the Life Skills Facilitators’ Guide developed for the radio programme.

The Guide focuses on cultivating young people’s positive attitude towards life, and towards problems they face while growing up. Assessing and analysing problems in addition to problem solving will be emphasised throughout. Sexual health, HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse are woven subtly into the lessons, told through drama and chat. Reducing young people’s vulnerability to HIV risk is, after all, not just about safe sex, but more about micro and macro environments that often become the push factors driving them into high-risk behaviour.

The central message is for teenagers to stand above the social-economic environment in which they grew up (which is not of their choice), and develop the ability to deal effectively and positively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. The ability to think positively and creatively will form the core of all chat topics and mini-drama in the facilitator’s guide. It will be illustrated based on the multitude of examples collected in the KAPS survey.

Life skills, as a public education strategy, are best illustrated in one of Aesop’s fables. “Once a saint wanted to help a poor man.
He pointed at a stone, which immediately turned into gold and offered it to the poor man. Instead of taking it, the poor man shook his head. To the saint’s surprise, the man said: “No sir, I do not want the piece of gold, I would like the finger that creates the gold.”

For whom is the guide written?

The guide aims to help facilitators, NGO trainers, government officials, social workers, teachers, parents and young people themselves, gain a holistic understanding of the 10 generic life skills that foster positive self-development.

The Guide was formulated in the 5-month period of training that UNICEF conducted for the 10 young Nepalese radio producers. The coaching was used as a designing phase for the year-long radio series on life skills: “Chatting with My Best Friend” (“Sathi Sanga Manka Kura”). It has proven effective in helping the young producers understand the concept and apply it in their weekly scriptwriting session.

Every skill is independently illustrated, yet its effective application is usually linked to other skills. To help our readers understand life skills in stages, we focus on elaborating on two or three skills in each chapter. The chapters in this Guide are arranged in the following sequence: managing oneself, relationships with others, making responsible decisions and taking actions.

Most life skills training, centres on communication skills, specifically, how better to negotiate with others and resolve conflicts. Other essential skills – or competencies – such as self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and creative thinking, are either left out or given less attention even though they are essential parts of a holistic package.

We feel that the sole emphasis on communication skills is much like building a high-rise building without laying the corner stones. One can at best be aggressive when communication serves merely to convey one’s wishes without empathising the needs and desire of others. Critical thinking helps us analyse what is at stake. It draws us towards the wishes and motives of ourselves and others and why we react the way we do. Creative thinking leads us out of the box, to find the best alternatives by looking at a situation from multiple perspectives.

In this Guide, we emphasise the individual’s complete understanding of themselves. Self-awareness is of prime importance, as every action or behaviour begins with our own thoughts. Self-assessment and self-reflection are processes that build understanding of both ourselves and others, harnessing constructive relationships and enabling us to make effective decisions.

The Guide begins with self-awareness and teenagers’ dreams. Those dreams are entry points that lead young people into a process of self-discovery. In thinking hard about their aspirations, or paying attention to their goals, listeners are engaged in productive pursuits that put them on a higher ground. Whether big or small, those goals will guide them toward making responsible decisions in their own lives.

In later chapters, we lay out the precarious conditions that impede the progress towards those goals or dreams. We explore issues often arising in interpersonal relationships that create emotional turmoil, sometimes leading to violence. Chapter III talks about managing emotions and stress, important for the prevention of high-risk behaviour. Chapter IV and V focus on decision-making and problem-solving, which
require the application of several other competencies such as self-awareness, communication, creative thinking and critical thinking.

Life skills put teenagers in a better position to translate their dreams and values into constructive actions. It provides the inner power to evaluate and resist peer or social pressure, especially when it comes to making decisions that affect their well-being, including health, and their future.

Life skills are important not just for adolescents and young people but for everyone. These skills are applicable to parents, couples, in their socially-defined role as husband or wife, to enhance the quality of their relationship and the ability to meet daily challenges. This Guide can be adapted into training manuals for other target groups, using relevant cases to support the lessons.

Teenagers who eventually join in the radio listeners’ clubs – whether in cities or villages - can use the Guide as a supplementary reading. For those unable to access radio or gather every Saturday to listen to Radio Nepal’s broadcast, every episode is duplicated on cassette tapes for facilitators to play back at other times. Cases illustrated in the Guide and stories used in the radio series can also be adapted for role-play exercises, stage and street drama.
• The Quest — Setting goals for yourself
The Quest — Setting goals for yourself

“Who am I?” It’s a question that haunts us, the moment we are aware of our existence. A question for which the answers are constantly changing.

Many problems confronting teenagers centre around the search for the self, an identity, which stems from the confusion of “me verses society”. The gap between ideals and reality, between parents’ expectations and your own aspirations, culminate in frustrations that become an “adolescence syndrome”.

“Adolescence”, a period in which children are on the way to becoming adults, embodies both opportunity and risk. Teen rebellion, the eagerness to assert independence, increased association with peers, curiosity about the opposite sex are a “growing up syndrome” which, if demystified, is no more than a quest for self-identity. Biological changes – in physique, including a hoarser voice for boys and menstruation for girls – are visible signs that propel the search for one’s identity. Adolescence is also a time of change and experiments that come with new responsibilities such as planning for a career and marriage, as in the case of Nepal. Along with it comes the motivation to find ways of improving appearance, such as make-up, new clothing, and for some, new behaviours such as drinking and smoking.

Though adolescence marks the entry into adulthood, it is by no means adulthood, not yet.

It is commonly acknowledged that Nepalese do not go through adolescence. Children leap directly from childhood into adulthood. Does the perception still hold today? The Year 2000 Knowledge, Attitude, Practices and Skills Survey of 1,400 teenagers confirms this view. Perception, however, does not alter that fact that young people in Nepal are facing universal issues
characterised by the growing pains of adolescence, however different in milieu.

1. Getting to know yourself:

Self-awareness is about getting to know ourselves, as well as our feelings, desires and needs. It is about accepting ourselves, whether it is our strengths or our weaknesses. It’s about examining ourselves in front of the mirror and say: “I like myself, even though I am imperfect”.

Do you know who you are? Very often we rely on the feedback of others - from our parents to our siblings, relatives, and friends - to “discover” who we are. Other people’s views mirror our own image, through which we see ourselves. This image, however, is by no means our actual selves. The image projected from the minds of others has been shaped, or even distorted in one way or another, by a host of factors that influence their perception.

Finding out who we really are requires self-awareness. Self-awareness goes hand in hand with critical thinking. For example, not letting others “judge” and mold us into something we do not want to be. Critical thinking is the ability to analyse our own surroundings and experiences objectively, and question why things are the way they are. In other words, not accepting the current situation, or what is been handed down to us, as the only answer. You seek the answer by assessing the motive, biases, views and values of those who judge you as being right or wrong, good or bad, useful or not useful, intelligent or stupid.

The progressive increase in self-awareness is a path usually strewn with emotive disapprovals, resistance and criticisms. It is not a path to be feared though. Without developing the ability to think critically (“Am I really that bad? Am I really stupid?”), you will never reach the wonderland of self-discovery, which helps you develop another important competence: self-confidence.

Twelve-year old Laxmi is used to her mother’s admonition whenever she breaks something. “Why are you so stupid? Why can’t you be as smart as your brother?” Unconsciously, Laxmi has taken her mother’s opinion as true, that is, she is stupid and not as smart as her brother. This is the image she sees of herself through her mother’s eyes, which gradually erodes her confidence.

What will help Laxmi find her own strength and regain her confidence? The first step is to ask herself: am I really stupid? Is my brother really smarter?“ As Laxmi raises these questions in her heart, she realises that her mother actually believes boys are always smarter than girls. Her brother is brighter simply because he is a boy. Moreover, her brother is never asked to do any housework, he will never have a chance to break anything! This discovery excites Laxmi, and she further questions: “If I am stupid, why am I doing better at school than my brother?” Laxmi is second in her class, while her brother ranks seventh in his class. Laxmi also questions: “If I am stupid, why did Uncle Krishna praises me for the dahi (yogurt) I made the other day? He said I make the best dahi he has ever eaten!”

When Laxmi answers her own questions, it becomes clear that her image in her mother’s eye is not a full reflection of what she really is. Her mother is biased towards her brother. Now that she is able to see her strengths, her confidence returns. Once she starts to feel better about herself, she is able
to concentrate and work hard, she does better and better at school.

Laxmi’s thought process is self-awareness, allowing her to see herself clearer, not tarnished by the biases of others. The ability also helps her see other people and understand their motives better. Self-awareness is a unique human capacity.

Parents are authorities in our lives. We assume they are always right. We have forgotten though, that they are human beings, who have biases and who make mistakes. While we love and respect them, we have to ask ourselves what the factors and social influences are, that affect our parents’ objectivity. Gender and caste are among the social and cultural factors that directly affect Nepalese teenagers’ assessment of themselves.

In the KAPS survey, more than 70% of girls interviewed were aware of gender discrimination at home, in school and in their communities. However, few of them are aware of how discrimination erodes their self-esteem. Many of them feel they have to accept their fate as a girl and their inferior position to men whether at home or in society.

This perception suppresses the self-awareness of girls and obscures the true picture of themselves. It leads to a low self opinion, a feeling of inferiority or low self-esteem, preventing them from expressing their needs, desires and making smart and responsible decisions that affect their lives.

Making a critical assessment of your surroundings and culture – in the case of Nepal, a patriarchal tradition – is important for re-establishing your confidence, especially for girls, in the discovery of your charm and a host of other positive attributes.

No less than gender biases, caste discrimination also poses enormous barriers to the healthy self-development of Nepalese teenagers. In many societies outside Nepal, there is no artificial social segregation of human beings as caste. Caste is irrelevant to human development. Children and young people enjoy equal rights. They can pursue basic and higher education, and build up their own career through hard work and good performance. Young people can also choose their own partners without having to worry about marrying into the “upper caste” or “lower caste”.

Nepalese teenagers, especially those in the “low castes”, are unable to develop their full potential due to the pre-determined, artificial social divisions that condemns them to a life without much hope. In the belief that they are fated to lead an inferior life like their parents do, many teenagers do not believe they can strike out, and make little or no effort to live differently. This psychology partly accounts for the vicious cycle of deprivations and the lack of opportunity.

To break the vicious cycle, we have to inject hope, especially young people in the lower or lowest castes, by identifying role models and encouraging them to analyse what can lead to a change in their own lives. Hope is the first step towards change. You cannot give up by telling yourself: “Huh, it is hopeless!” This attitude breeds cynicism, it retards your mental growth and does not help to improve anything.

2. Accepting yourself:

Shankar is a 6th grader. His classmates often poke fun at him and call him “pighead.” He has trouble understanding what the teacher is talking about in class. He wishes the teacher could speak a bit more slowly, especially when it comes to mathematics.
He sometimes wants to ask the girl who sits next to him for help, but he is unable to muster the courage to do so.

The daily jests showered on him make Shankar feel that he is useless. Sometimes he is sad to the point that he would rather die than live. One day, to his surprise, the girl sitting next to him invites him to her house. She says, “Next Saturday is my birthday, I have invited several classmates who I think are special.”

“Am I special?” Shankar asks in absolute surprise.

“Yes, I think you are one of the nicest people in our class!”

“Hm…. can you tell me what is nice about me?” Shanker blushes, and asks meekly.

“Oh, you don’t bully girls and you volunteer to clean the blackboard after class,” the girl replies. “Most boys don’t bother to do it,” she adds with a grin.

For the first time in his life, Shankar realises that he has special qualities that others appreciate.

Shankar accidentally discovers the bright side of himself through the eyes of the girl next to him. From then on, he is able to see himself more clearly. Perhaps he learns more slowly than his classmates and he does not comprehend mathematics, but he brings values to others in his own way. Shankar begins to feel more hopeful about himself.

However, when you are not as lucky as Shankar in receiving positive feedback from others, can you make the effort on your own?

Many teenagers often tell themselves: I know myself, I am not good-looking, I am ugly, I am not smart, nobody likes me, I don’t like myself at all...

When you feel that nobody likes you, the problem is not with others, but with you. It’s your own thoughts that influence people’s attitude towards you. Everyone has special qualities, like Shankar that make him or her lovable and likable. In order for others to like you, you have to like yourself first. It often means discovering your own positive attributes or qualities and not allowing the negative comments of others to break you apart. When you are able to smile to yourself, you will, miraculously, gain a smile from others too. People can pick up the cheerfulness and confidence you exude, and they will reciprocate accordingly. To cite an opposite example, anger. When someone is angry or in a bad mood, you can usually sense it quite quickly, and will try to avoid that person. In the same vein, if you feel negative about yourself, people will react negatively towards you.

But the good news is: when you sense that you dislike yourself, it is the start of self-discovery. You are entering a meaningful process of confronting, rather than running away from what you are afraid of, that is, the feeling that nobody likes you. If you probe deeper, you may realise that your negative feelings about yourself stem from self-denial, the unwillingness to admit that we are flawed human beings.

Look at it this way: consider yourself a coin with an ugly side and a beautiful side. When you see the ugly side, don’t you think you have to be aware of the beautiful side too? You are certain to feel lousy and useless if you stick to the ugly side. You will not be able to turn the situation around until you turn the coin over. It all boils down to adopting a new perspective rather than sticking to one, which does not tell you the whole story about yourself.
Both the ugly and beautiful are two sides of the same coin; they are a part of us. Neither side can exist without the other. When we hate ourselves for the ugly side, we are denying ourselves of a wholesome perception of ourselves. We lose the whole coin, including the beautiful side. The interesting thing is you have to first accept the ugly side of yourself so that you will not get stuck with the negative view forever. Only then will you gain the mental agility - or the courage - to turn the coin around and discover the other side.

When you feel you are so ordinary that there is nothing special in you, it is because you have not thought hard enough. You have not opened your eyes to look at yourself from both sides of the coin.

The effort you make to discover both sides of yourself is the process of self-assessment. Self-assessment is about looking objectively at our character, strengths and weaknesses, our desires, aspirations and our talents, no matter what other people say! It is the first step towards building confidence in ourselves when we know who we are, what we can do, and what are our special attributes are that help us stand out and excel.

3. Setting a goal for yourself

We all have a dream, lurking somewhere. Whether we are conscious of it or not, it is the secret compass that guides our vessel into the unknown.

As a human being, we are valuable in our own right. And as humans, we are motivated to prove that life is worth living. Our goals, whether big or small, provide us the direction. The attainment of these goals is the proof of our personal success, from which we derive meaning.

Among the 1,400 teenagers interviewed in the KAPS Survey 2000, 22% wanted to be a doctor, nurse, or a veterinarian. 12% said they wanted to be a professor, teacher, principal and a further 15% wanted to be a politician, social worker, or government employee. 9% wanted to be a businessman or tourist guide and 7% aimed to be a tailor, mason, carpenter or mechanic while 3% were interested in farming, horticulture, or raising livestock.

The overwhelming majority of teenagers (only 8% say they had not thought about it) have a clear goal for their future. These goals, and dreams, are delicate seeds. Without constant nurturing, they will die out in precarious conditions.

4. Working towards your goal:

self-awareness

+ critical thinking

creative thinking

For teenagers who are unsure of how to go about pursuing their dreams, they need guidance to keep their dreams alive and discover ways to remove obstacles along the way. The following questions can be asked to help them:

a. What are the steps you need to take in order to fulfill your goals?
b. What are the barriers? 
c. What kind of help do you need to get rid of the barriers? 
d. Who could help you? 

Sangit, 15, is not very good at his studies. At grade 8, he knows he will not score high in the SLC exam and is not hopeful of entering high school or college at all. Sangit however has his own dream. He wants to become an electrician. He has helped his father wire his house. This is something enjoyable for him and he can earn a decent income as an electrician. So what are the steps Sangit should take?

Sangit feels he has to go through training. There is one technical institute that provides the kind of vocational training he needs. After learning how to be a good electrician, he will get a certificate, and find a job either in a company or set up his own house wiring business.

However, Sangit faces two obstacles: First, it will be difficult to persuade his father who wants him to go to college. Secondly, how is he going to get money for the training? If his father is against his decision, it will be all the more difficult for him. Unless his father agrees to his choice of career, Sangit will not be able to finance his own training. The money has to come from his father.

After analysing the situation, Sangit decides his father is the major target he has to work on. If he can get past his father, he will remove both the obstacles at the same time. His father however is not an easy person to talk to. He is quick-tempered, and quite stubborn.

How does Sangit go about changing his father’s mind? Nobody at home listens to teenagers or children. Being young, he is not in a position to speak for himself. Even if he does sometimes, his father will tell him off and dismiss his views as “silly” or “immature”. Sangit realises it will not be effective if he walks up to his father to have a straight talk. Then it dawns upon him that he can go to someone whose opinions mean a lot to his father, someone he will listen to and be more likely to agree.

Who can help Sangit persuade his father? Sangit thinks about it: not his mother, she never dares oppose his father’s views. Not Uncle Rajesh, his father’s kid brother, who is always drunk. Going through the mental list, he suddenly has an idea! “Why haven’t I thought of Dinish?” his elder brother, who is a practicing lawyer in Kathmandu. Dinish is the most respected member of his family and the only person in a position to talk to his father. Sangit is confident that Dinish will understand him and take his side. Sangit decides to wait till Dashain when his brother comes home to broach the topic with his father.

Examining one’s goal, then slicing up the big goal into smaller goals at each stage, will help one see clearly the steps to take. In the case of Sangit, he first analyses what he wants and the barrier. Then he plans how to remove the barrier and who and what can help him do so. The most important lesson is that Sangit must be committed to each step. By making and keeping commitments, we are able to develop our inner strength and confidence in handling pressures on all fronts. Gradually, we can undertake larger responsibilities for ourselves and others. The journey towards achieving our goals is also a character building process. It builds up our courage, competence and harnesses our integrity as a person who does what he or she believes, and not abandon it out of fear.

If you do not have a goal yet, ask yourself: “What am I good at? What do I want to do in my life?” Once you are certain there is something you want to do, go for it. Make a plan for fulfilling your goal. Ask yourself,
what is the very first step you should take to reach your goal?

When you make the first step toward your goal, you will find that, however small a step it is, the effort you make – your positive action - gives you the confidence and courage to take the second step. With each little step, you develop your skills further in meeting new challenges that get in your way. Along with each step, you cultivate the sense of worth in your own existence, and find happiness and meaning in moving nearer to your goal.

**Guideline for discussions**

Some of these questions can be raised to help teenagers enhance self-awareness and critical thinking:

1. What do you like about yourself?
2. What do you dislike about yourself?
3. How do you overcome criticism from others?
4. Have you thought of a new way of looking at criticism?
5. Have you evaluated your critics' motive and values?
6. What do you feel most inferior about yourself?
7. What makes you feel that way?
8. If you are given a glass half filled with water, do you look at the empty half or the full half?
9. Have you thought of adopting a positive way of looking at yourself?
10. What's your wildest dream?
11. What are you good at doing?
12. What's your biggest worry?
13. Do you have a goal?
14. If not, how can you set a goal for yourself?
15. If yes, do you have a plan to fulfill your goal?
16. What are the barriers towards fulfilling your goal?
17. Do you have any alternatives?
18. Who do you think can help you?
19. What's the very first step you can take to realise your goal?
20. Do you believe that you can take all those steps? What are the further barriers along the way you have to assess and overcome?

**Suggested topics for discussion among teenagers**

**My fears**

We all have fears. Dark thoughts often loom large in our minds due to ignorance, hearsay, inaccurate information and superstitious beliefs.

Encourage teenagers to share their fears and worries in their daily life. Your audience will be relieved when they know that they are not alone, that their peers, or even older people, feel the same, suffer similar distress and share similar anxieties. It is through sharing, that teenagers are able to learn from each other, learn how to prevail over difficulties and overcome their inner turbulence.

(\textit{The lessons are delineated in Chatting with My Best Friend’s or “Sathi Sanga Manka Kura” radio episodes on “SLC failure” & “Shamanism”})

**My body – Taking care of myself**

Teenagers experience bodily changes during puberty. Boys' muscles develop rapidly and girls' menstruation starts..... Growth hormone produces a rapid growth spurt, bringing the body close to its adult height.
and weight within about two years. The growth spurt occurs earlier among females than males, indicating that females mature sexually earlier than males.

The main hormones governing these changes are androgen in males and estrogen in females, substances also associated with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics: facial, body and pubic hair and a deepening voice among boys; pubic and body hair, enlarged breasts, and broader hips among girls.

The physical changes that occur at puberty are responsible for the emergence of sex drive. Fulfillment of sex drive is still complicated by many social taboos, as well as by a lack of accurate knowledge about sexuality. Along with physical growth are mental and emotional changes: feeling attracted to the opposite sex, becoming conscious of one’s looks, etc. How do we deal with those changes, and with young, tender feelings of adolescents?

(Chatting with My Best Friend: episodes on “Menstruation” & “Boys in puberty”)

My gender role - Femininity and masculinity

Societies impress upon girls and boys, expectations that are gender-specific, which somewhat predetermine their life, including how they are treated. In Nepal, men have to be masculine, dominant, inexpressive, and exercise authority over women and children. Girls are not considered a “person” until they are married, and even then, they are expected to be subservient, and refer every decision to men.

As it is written in Sanskrit: A woman has to be taken care of by her father before marriage, by her husband after marriage, and then by her son in old age.

Along with those expectations are unequal opportunities for girls and boys. Teenagers are taught that men and women have different opportunities due to different gender roles. As a result, many girls are deprived of education. Even if they do attend school, girls are often sent to public school, and boys, to private academies. Girls are also expected to get married and give birth, most preferably to a son, at an early age.

Are girls truly inferior to boys? Is femininity an inferior quality? Do boys necessarily have to demonstrate masculinity in order to prove their manhood? The latter is traditionally associated with physical strength and courage, qualities useful in an agricultural based society. Although men are able to undertake heavy physical labour, it is ironic that in Nepalese society, more women end up with heavier workloads than men. Women, apart from doing work of a feminine nature, also have to take on hard physical labour. As well as cooking, looking after their children, husband and in-laws, they walk miles to collect wood, animal fodder and fetch water.

It’s a beautiful world for girls too. Girls make up the other half of the world. The gender role imposed by society: drawing a clear line between femininity and masculinity, is most often superficial. As a girl, you can become an engineer. You can achieve big goals. But you have to dare to dream, and you will find you are able to accomplish a lot that others say you cannot.

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “The girl who aspires to be a health worker”)

My caste

Teenagers from lower castes often feel they are fated to lead a lesser life like their parents. Growing up in a socio-economic environment hostile to low castes, many have
developed deep inferiority complexes and a cynical outlook. How do young people in Nepal feel about their caste? How do you inject hope in their young minds so that they can start making changes for their future?

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: "Inter-caste marriage")
chapter ii

• Interpersonal relationships
Interpersonal relationships

Life is about relationships. The relationship between you and your parents, siblings, your friends, classmates, and future partners, determines the quality of your life. Family, peer and love form the tripod of relationships that dominate the world of an adolescent.

1. Relationship with your family

The family provides a physical and emotional shelter for us to grow up in. Attention invested in each other - among family members - creates an environment of love and mutual support, which is the nutrient that keeps a family together, harmoniously and happily. The family is a small subsystem in society where we spend most of our time, learning and growing until adolescence, or even adulthood.

Our reliance on parents weakens, albeit gradually, as we leave childhood to enter adolescence. During this time, we struggle to become an individual and prepare ourselves for the establishment of a family of our own. Conflict arises, when parents are not ready to let go of the control over their children, who increasingly demand more freedom in making decisions relevant to their own surroundings (such as school, workplace or children’s clubs), aspirations and dreams.

When children are small, they admire their parents, who are without question authority figures. Later, as children are increasingly exposed to a rapidly changing world, they absorb new information and begin to form their own views. A certain amount of independent thinking and judgment is developed. However, parents are often unwill-
ing to admit that their children are capable, intelligent, or mature enough to make their own decisions. Tension arises when parents continue to adopt an “I know best” attitude, and impose wishes and advice that serve to undermine, rather than enhance, their children’s independence.

Frustrations mount up and sometimes, escalate into antisocial and reckless behaviour, when parents are unable to strike a compromise with their children. Major decisions involving future career and marriage plans are usually delicate matters that puts our relationship with our parents on trial. Parental authority and personal freedom do not often come together in a neat package. Frequently, they are at different poles, and taken to extreme, lead to a deteriorating relationship with our parents.

**Findings of the 2000 KAPS Survey:**

It is interesting to note that 53% of the teenagers interviewed said they have to obey their parents’ wish on who to marry; whereas 42% said they were able to make their own choices. More girls (63%) than boys (42%) felt that parents had the final say on their future partner. This shows that girls have less freedom in making decisions about their own lives.

More than two-thirds of young people (73.8%) said they do not feel strong pressure to live up to their parent’s expectations. However, 26.2% admit having felt strong pressure from their parents to perform and achieve parents’ satisfaction. Interestingly, more boys (29%) than girls (23%) feel such pressure from their parents. Further more rural teenagers (33%) than urban teenagers (20%) said they are facing strong pressure to meet parents’ expectations.

Over half of the teenagers interviewed said that the person they trust most is their mother. Reasons: “she gives me love and attention,” “she understands how I feel,” “she trusts me more, not revealing my problems to others,” or “mum’s and my problems are the same.”

When it comes to disagreement with parents, many of them said: “I get upset, but say nothing,” or “I get angry and refuse to talk to them”. However, only about 20% try to persuade their parents to change their mind.

**2. Relationship with peers**

As the family’s degree of influence dwindles in an adolescent’s life, friends move into the forefront. Friends are peers, that is, people of the same age, with a similar background and interest. They may be taught by the same teachers, listen to the same radio programmes, or idolise the same movie star. They have so much to share that they enjoy talking with each other or simply hanging out together.

Adolescence is a time characterised by both rebelliousness and conformity. When teenagers’ fragile sense of identity is threatened or suppressed by their parents or any kind of authority at home, they feel frustrated, or upset. So, they seek a way out by turning to their peer group. Friends can share your problems, explore alternatives, cheer you up, and give you joy.

When adolescents get together, they may take to drinking, smoking, or even drugs. These are things considered “cool” and that make them feel that they have achieved adult status.

Many teenagers, however, have a strong sense of what’s right or wrong in their
consequences. The problem is that they are often unable to face the prospect of being ridiculed, or abandoned by their gang. Their daily lives are dominated by peer values, they conform to group behaviour, even though they are keenly aware of its consequence, and may regret it afterwards.

For teenagers, friends are usually the source of new information, providing positive feedback and giving them a sense of personal freedom. Very often, it’s friends who know them better than family members, or are willing to listen to their problems and stand by them when faced with tension at home.

However, friends can also become the source of social pressure, making a teenager yield to the same standard of behaviour. Although friends can provide emotional comfort, they can also seduce a teenager into drinking, smoking and drug-use.

Findings of the 2000 KAPS Survey:

Among Nepalese teenagers who have taken drugs, 77% said that their friends got them into the habit. Another 7% said that relatives introduced them to drugs and roughly 16% said they took to drugs due to a broken love relationship or other mental stress.

3. Love relationship

Have you noticed how ill at ease a teenage boy feels in front of a girl? Or how bashful a girl is in the presence of a boy? Their awkward reaction toward the opposite sex comes at a time when adolescents are going through physiological and psychological changes. Those changes make them self-conscious, which is a process of adjustment - to a new appearance, new emotional needs and new interests - intensifying the search for self-identity.

A teenager's life is further complicated when he or she starts to enter a relationship with the opposite sex. The first experience of strong emotion or attraction to the other person is exhilarating, making you happy and alive. At the same time, the relationship is fragile. It has to withstand many tests, pressures and barriers to grow stronger and stronger. A rift can lead to a permanent break-off if the young lovers do not make efforts to communicate, and empathise with the other party's plight. A break-off can cause immense emotional turmoil to the extent that it can drive a teenager into extreme behaviour.

Some teenagers in the KAPS Survey admitted that they turned to drugs and alcohol after breaking up with their lover. The reason? To numb their pain because they are deeply hurt.

“Falling in love” is an ecstasy so great that you feel you are in heaven. But the opposite of ecstasy is sadness or misery. When a relationship falls apart, when the girl says: “I can’t be with you anymore,” or “I do not love you, please leave me alone,” the disbelief, followed by dejection, sends you from seventh heaven to hell.

In truth, a healthy way of handling a relationship is not just about falling in love. Neither is it all about living happily ever after. It is also about ending a relationship constructively.

When Anita tells Surendra that she doesn’t love him anymore, her response undoubtedly deals a heavy blow to his pride, and his ego. Can he take it? If Surendra is unable to sit out the pain, he will continue to pursue the relationship, pester her, or
perhaps resort to violence simply to prove he can triumph over her. It often leads to tragedies, in some cases, acid attacks that completely destroy the girl's physiognomy and her life.

However, if Surendra is able to adopt a different perspective, and think positively, the outcome will be totally different. He will muster the courage to face reality, seeing how meaningless it is to hold on to a girl who no longer feels for him. “Why do I want to pursue a relationship that will bring both of us greater pain? If she is not happy, I will not be happy either!” Though Surendra is indescribably sad, and suffers a wounded pride, he is able to tell himself that ending a relationship is not the end of the world. With courage, he decides to put the relationship aside and devote his energy to studying so that he can enter a good college. Once Surendra channels his mind on another goal, he surprises himself after a while, how he is able to rediscover the joy of living. Anita’s image may resurface from time to time, but the pain subsides and she is no longer the dominant figure in his mind.

Family, peer and love relationships all matter to a teenager. Self-awareness, empathy and effective communication are the cornerstones of a healthy and responsible relationship.

4. Treat others the way you want to be treated

Self-awareness and empathy are the foundation of our relationship with others. In the first chapter, we learned about self-awareness - the ability to know and accept ourselves. The ability to understand ourselves engenders the capacity for sensing other people's needs and feelings and accept their perspectives. Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. It is the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another person to understand what he or she is going through. Empathy means you care how others feel and you are willing to offer emotional support. When your friend tells you, “I feel lousy, because my teacher ridicules me in front of the class for my low grades.” If you are able to respond by saying: “Well, Rajendra, I had the same experience last time when I misspelled a word, the teacher made me look like a fool!” Your reply will immediately induce a sense of togetherness in Rajendra, who no longer feels he is the only stupid student, you will help him feel better about himself.

Empathy allows us to find the common ground between ourselves and others. On this ground, we are able to make decisions that benefit ourselves without hurting others.

17-year-old Shekhar has just completed high school and is surprised to know that his parents have arranged his marriage back in the village. He is upset because he wants to continue his studies and does not feel he is ready to start a family. He is also angry with the way his parents have gone ahead and found a girl without even consulting
him. He does not want to talk to them, they're too obstinate...

But Shekhar is stuck. How can he get out of this tight spot?

One day, after having a fight with his parents, Shekhar is roaming around the field. With a pang of guilt, he begins to reflect: my parents are getting old and I am their only son. While I am in college, they are coping with housework and farming by themselves. They need somebody to help out at home, that's why they want me to get married so soon........ Or perhaps, they are worried that if they fall sick someday, they will want to see that I settle down...

Struck by this thought, Shekhar’s anger evaporates. Now that he is able to see the reasons behind his parents’ decision, his mind is in action again. He quickly directs his thoughts toward finding a way to help his parents understand why he cannot get married now. He also toys with ideas on how to relieve his parents’ worries...

Having mentally prepared his strategy, Shekhar talks to his parents that evening. Now, there is a major difference after reflecting on the situation: he no longer speaks only in terms of his needs. He has factored in his parents’ concerns.

Shekhar starts the conversation with the subject utmost in his parents’ mind: their concerns for old age, in particular, who will look after them. It works wonders! His parents listen attentively for the first time. Then, Shekhar moves on to explain his career goal of becoming a computer software programmer in Kathmandu and that he plans to move his parents over to live with him when he settles down...

Empathy enables Shekhar to reach a common ground with his parents. Empathy also allows his parents to see the potential harm that early marriage can bring to their son’s career and to the relationship with him. Shekhar’s parents are finally convinced that their son is making sense, they do not insist on the arranged marriage any more. The conflict is resolved, and all it took was a bit of empathy!

Empathy is most effective when both parties are willing to apply it. Someone however, has to take the lead. If we simply wait for others to empathise with us, it may never happen. If you are a parent, you can make efforts to understand your child first; if you are the child, you will want to see the viewpoints of your parents first; if you are a husband, you may try help out when your wife is busy with domestic tasks and farming, and if you are a wife, you may want to understand why your husband turns to drinking. Perhaps it is not due to the bad neighbour’s influence, perhaps he is frustrated and does not know what to do...

Empathy works wonders when we apply it to our relationships - with our loved ones, classmates, parents, friends, cousins and colleagues. It helps us move closer to solutions, to resolve conflicts, and enhance our quality of life.

5. You need to tell

Communication is the key to a harmonious relationship. If we hide everything inside us and do not communicate, we are likely to live in darkness. Firstly, others will not get to know what we are thinking and secondly, we will not make ourselves understood by others. Do you not feel terribly alone this way? For some people, it is the problem of not knowing how to communicate. For others, it may be that they are too afraid to talk about their problems, share their views, and let others know what is going on in their
mind. In fact, without communication, our relationships with others are likely to be dominated by suspicion, guesses, misunderstanding and false assumptions.

Coming back to empathy. Empathy creates wonderful results only when we are willing to let others know how we feel, albeit skillfully sometimes. Lack of communication breeds problems in our relationships. We tend to assume others know what we want or how we feel. Then when they do not react as we think they should, we get upset. We are annoyed when others may not even know why! We expect people to understand us. The truth is they do not understand us, if we choose to believe that ideas can get across at the unspoken level!

All too often, the communication between us, and our loved ones, is merely functional – out of necessity. We waste many opportunities to enhance our understanding of each other and improve our relationships. For instance, if you are used to your mother cooking everyday, and assume it is her role to cook so there is no need to feel special about it, she may increasingly find cooking a chore. Do you know each time your mother goes into the kitchen, she actually injects her affection into the food by choosing the type of vegetables or ingredients you like? Do you know that each time she dishes out the food, she silently hopes you will enjoy it and tell her how good it was? She may be able to tell from the way you gobble up the dal bhat, but nothing is more powerful than language at that moment if you can simply say: “Mum, it’s delicious, I love it!” You will make her day! You can do it everyday to make her feel appreciated, even though it is not in your culture, or habit.

There are many such moments for us to express affection, especially to our family members. If you simply let those moments slip by, you will realise that the fountain will dry up one day. Relationships, like a reservoir, require constant nourishment. Imagine what would happen to the reservoir if we kept drawing water from it but there was no rainfall to top it up. In the same vein, we cannot draw affection without investing affection. By continuing to take relationships for granted, we will come to a crisis one day – when the reservoir has dried up. That is how things begin to fall apart.

It is quite common to find Nepalese couples communicating with each other in an unspoken way. In other words, they do not relate to each other in conversation. A man may even regard it as shameful for him to talk too much to his wife. Does a silent relationship work well? We often find the wife harbouring grudges against the husband for being unhelpful, and the husband de-riding the wife for not showing sufficient understanding. Silence is like a time bomb, which may explode one day at the slightest provocation. We all have a part to play in triggering its explosion. If you can reduce your part, you are helping to deaden the bomb.

The 2000 KAPS survey reveals that over 30% of teenagers do not talk to their parents during disagreements. Nearly half keep quiet when they encounter bullies, simply to avoid conflicts. Among girls who have experienced gender discrimination at home, school or in their communities, half of them feel angry about the way they are treated. However they feel there is nothing they can do about it.

Silence does not help to resolve problems. On the contrary, it breeds bitterness. When our heart is bitter, we cannot be happy and loving, even though we can suppress the bitterness to pretend we are fine. If you do not begin to make a change though, the silent relationship pattern will go on from generation to generation. It will stay the same with your parents, with your future wife or husband, and children of your own...
We all have fears, worries, and concerns; talking with somebody we trust is an effective way to relieve ourselves of mental stress. If you can share your inner world with others, you may find out you are not alone - others have the same problems. That makes us feel instantly better.

6. How do you tell?

Being positive and appreciative

It’s important to express our needs, desires, fears and opinions, when we wish to obtain support or help. Our emotional needs can only be satisfied by feedback from people in our lives, in particular, our loved ones. What nurtures relationships is being positive and appreciative.

Being positive doesn’t only mean saying good things, rather, it means looking at people or issues in a positive way even though there are problems to resolve. For instance, when your girl friend asks you, “how do you like my new sari?” You feel it doesn’t look as nice as the old blue sari, but you know she will be very upset if you tell her so directly. A positive way will be, “it’s nice, but you also look good in the old blue sari you wore yesterday.”

Being appreciative means being able to feel grateful for what others are doing for you, no matter how small a favour it is. It makes people feel good for helping you, or being with you. That is the engine that keeps a relationship going.

Effective communication is built on empathy - the ability to sense the need and feeling in another person. However, when there is a conflict of needs between ourselves and others, and we want to persuade others to accept our views or make a compromise, we need to analyse what is the priority and what are the factors to be taken out (i.e. critical thinking). Then we can find the most convincing way (creative thinking) to express ourselves.

7. How to resolve conflicts?

One major source of teenager’s frustration is their inability to cope with the conflicts they face in their daily lives. What prevents young people from behaving assertively might be the fear of negative consequences, such as ridicule, dismissal, a fight, or strained relation. That fear may compel them to keep quiet or say “yes” to everything simply to avoid conflict or “wrongdoings”.

Nearly half of the teenagers interviewed in the 2000 KAPS Survey said they have quarrelled with their classmates or friends while
engaging in social activities, such as con-
versations, games, smoking, flirting with
girls or while taking drugs.

One third of them said the bullies they have
encountered include their friends,
neighbours, community members, land-
lords, local leaders, drunkards, bosses, and
relatives, in particular, their stepmothers.
When asked how they dealt with bullies, al-
most half of them said they simply keep
quiet, or try to avoid direct confrontation be-
cause they do not know how to handle the
situation.

Avoiding conflict is not the way to resolve it.
It’s only a short-term solution with a long-
term negative impact on our mental well-
being. When we are taken advantage of,
we feel angry or frustrated with ourselves,
feel hurt, and possibly indulge in self-pity.
These feelings are directed inwards at our-
selves, and lead to increased turmoil within
which, if not let out, may intensify psycho-
somatic problems, such as headaches and
backache.

In many cases, it is our lack of courage to
speak up that allows others to take advan-
tage of us or impose their demands on us.
Being silent erodes our self-esteem and
confidence, and jeopardises our chances of
fulfilling our dreams, achieving success, and
leading a better life.

Conflict resolution today is more about sat-
isfying the needs and wants of both par-
ties, that is, finding a win/win solution,
rather than beating the other party down. It
is based on the belief that your needs are
as important as the other person’s, and you
do not necessarily have to lose if others win.

When there is a conflict of interest or needs,
it helps to go through the following three
steps in negotiation to reach an acceptable
outcome for both parties:

1. Clarify the needs of both sides. When
people put forward their suggestions to
you, they may not make it clear what
their needs are. You can ask, “What’s
the problem?” or “Why is it so?” When
you understand the other person’s
needs, you can also state what you
need and explain why it is important to
you.

2. Accept needs. It’s important that you
show the other person you accept their
needs as valid by saying, “I understand
it’s important for you to...” or “I recognise
your need to...” By doing so, you soften
up the other person, who will become
more willing to accept your needs in
return. This makes it possible for you to
focus on the issue of how to meet the
needs on both sides.

3. Find a solution of mutual gain by ex-
ploring the next best alternatives. Most
situations have win/win outcomes only
if the people involved are prepared to
give some time to identify them. To
achieve it, both you and the other party
will have to accept the validity of each
other’s needs and claims. Many con-
licts arise because none of the parties
are willing to listen to the other and
recognise the other person’s needs as
being important as their own.

8. Win/win strategy — the
secret weapon of
negotiation

The world is not a fixed pie. The assump-
tion – I lose, you gain or I gain, you lose – is
rarely true. Rather than vie for a bigger share
of the pie, to gain more than you, why can’t
we expand the pie? That way, everyone will
be better off!
9. Principles of persuasion

Negotiation is a skill. It is an intelligent way of getting what you want without getting into conflict with others. Negotiation is inseparable from good communication skills, not only expressing an idea clearly and appropriately, but expressing it well. That means you also keep the other party’s interest in mind when presenting your viewpoint. There are principles, which we call “the principles of persuasion”, that can help improve your chances of getting others to agree. That is, getting others to say “Yes!” to you. You may have already applied many of those principles in your daily lives unknowingly. These principles are also widely used by advertising and marketing professionals to persuade consumers to buy their products and services!

a. Authority

There is, within us all, a deep sense of duty to authority. We are trained from birth that obedience to proper authority is right, and disobedience is wrong. The essential message fills the parental lessons and school stories, and songs of our childhood, and is carried forward in schools, in our community as we grow into adulthood. Our automatic response to authority is most apparent in daily interaction with others. We tend to react to another person’s title, clothes, or those with a luxurious car or a big house. (Source: Dr. Robert Cialdini – see Reference)

Salina wants to join the children’s club. However, her mother does not like the idea of her mingling with other children, especially boys. No matter how much Salina argues with her mum, her mother does not budge. Seeing all of her classmates happily staying back to participate in games and singing session every Friday, makes Salina sad. Salina broods over her problem under the banyan tree, wondering how to change her mother’s opinion. As a child, Salina knows she has no authority over her parents. Even though she has explained in different ways the advantages of participating in the club’s activities, her mother usually regards her reasoning as arguments. “Children shouldn’t argue, we know what is best for you!” her mum usually rebuts.

But Salina is not willing to give up. She then thinks about who her mother would be most likely to listen to. She knows her mother respects the school principal very much. So one day, after class, Salina walks up to her principal and explains her interest in the children’s club. The principal decides to visit her mother.

Salina is applying the principle of authority for persuasion.

b. Social proof

We determine what is correct usually because other people think it is correct. The principle applies especially to the way we decide what constitutes correct behaviour. What it means is we tend to follow collective action, and yield to the pressure of the majority.

In the example above, the school principal persuaded Salina’s mother by telling her, “…all the other girls in the village are taking part in the children’s club’s activities. You will be the only one not allowing your daughter to go…”

Salina’s mother finally agrees that the children’s club activities do more good than harm for her daughter. The principles of authority and social proof are intelligently applied to get her to say “Yes!”
c. Commitment & consistency

We have a strong desire to stand by a position or viewpoint after we have taken action. Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we tend to encounter personal and interpersonal pressure to behave consistently with that commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision.

For instance, Salina’s mother is most likely to let her daughter continue after agreeing with the school principal that the children’s club is useful. Even though she is worried that Salina may mix with boys (which is not a bad thing to do), she is not likely to criticise the children’s club as a “bad place” because she has agreed to let Salina participate in the club’s activities.

d. Liking

As a rule, we prefer to say “Yes” to the request of someone we know and like. Astonishingly, total strangers use this simple rule, in hundreds of different ways to get us to comply with their requests. In the case of Salina, her mother likes and respects the school principal. Because she likes her, she is more likely to agree to the principal’s request.

e. Reciprocation

We generally, try to repay, in kind, what other people have given us. For example, if we receive a birthday gift from a friend, we tend to want to send a gift to that friend on his or her birthday. This rule explains why it’s such a gratifying experience when we do something for others in return for their kindness.

All in all, your ability to read the feelings of others and to communicate with others is critical to maintaining a successful interpersonal relationship.

Guideline for discussions

It is recommended that each session focuses on one topic to give teenagers time to open up. The following questions will help participants reflect on relationship problems, and help them improve communication skills by practice. Empathy can be induced by getting participants to evaluate their attitude towards their mother, sister, drug users, people living with HIV/AIDS, etc.

Family relationships

1. Who do you like most in your family, why?
2. Who do you dislike most in your family, why?
3. Do you want to improve your relationship with a particular family member? If so, do you think it’s possible? How can you go about it?
4. When you disagree with your parents, what do you usually do? Do you try to understand why they think that way, and try to help them understand your position? (Emphasise the importance of empathy in communication)
5. How do you help your parents better understand your position?
6. How do you say “thank you” and express affection to your loved ones. For instance, what can you do on your mother’s birthday?
**Peer relationships**

1. Do you have friends? What do you think is most important in friendship? (Focus on constructive friendships that help us grow and make progress.)

2. What is peer pressure?

3. Have you experienced peer pressure?

4. What’s the harm of peer pressure?

5. How do you deal with peer pressure? (Episode: Peer pressure on drugs)

6. Have you ever forced others to do things that are harmful to their health? Why did you do that?

7. How do you say “No” without offending others on the following occasions:
   a. When you are offered a cigarette
   b. When you are offered drugs such as marijuana or tidigesic
   c. When you are asked to go to a brothel

**Dealing with bullies**

1. Have you ever encountered bullies?

2. If yes, who are they? Do you do you deal with them?

3. What are the usual types of bullies in our lives? How should we deal with them?

(Address the adolescents’ anxiety over what might happen if they speak up and act assertively. Help them understand that when they make their own voices heard, nothing terrible will happen as they fear. On the contrary, they will be able to walk out of the situation feeling good about themselves, with enhanced self-confidence, even if they fail to convince others. Further, they will realise that most bullies appear strong, but are rather gutless and weak inside. Once challenged, they tend to run away! But you must assess the situation with intelligence. If the bullies are armed, that is, if they come with clubs and in a gang, you are better off staying quiet and compromising your way out. They can harm you! You prevail as a hero when you emerge safe and sound!)

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Your own identity”)

**Love relationships**

1. What’s the difference between friendship and love?

2. If you have a special feeling toward a boy or a girl, what do you do?

3. When you are interested in someone, but that person doesn’t have the same feeling towards you, what do you do? (Emphasise respecting another person’s feelings and will)

4. When your girlfriend/boyfriend decides to break up with you, how exactly do you feel? Can you accept it? (Emphasise the ability to end a relationship constructively)

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Love and friendship” & “A girl in love”)

**Learn to overcome shyness: ask for help**

1. What would you do if you discovered you had contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STD)? Who could you talk to? Do you know what the best thing to do is, that is go and see a doctor? Did you know it is a serious matter and that there is no need to feel shy about it?
2. What would you do when you find yourself addicted to drugs? If you are determined to kick the habit, who can you turn to for help?

3. If an addict turns to you for help, would you be willing to do so?

Empathy — understand and help those who are in need

1. (Ask boys) Are you willing to help your mother/sister with housework? If yes, why? If not, why?

2. If by sharing housework you will free up your sisters time to attend school, are you willing to do it? (Explore the psychological factors behind male’s indifference toward female’s suffering and pain)

3. When you see your father beat your mother, how do you feel? Do you think you can help change his behaviour?

4. How do you feel towards drug users? Do you think they are worth your help?

5. How do you feel towards people living with HIV/AIDS? Do you know how HIV is transmitted? Do you know how to protect yourself from being infected?

6. Now that you know touching people living with HIV/AIDS will not infect you, do you still avoid them? Do you think discrimination is wrong? How can you help reduce social stigma? Can you think of a way in which you can contribute your effort? (Think from the bottom of your heart, and think of way you can be truly called upon to help.)

(Cha[ting with My Best Friend episode: “Migration and HIV”)

Learn to express yourself — cultivate your ability to communicate through daily interactions with others

Ask the participants whether they have regrets that they should have expressed on a particular occasion, but didn’t? What were the consequences of their failure to communicate? If a similar situation arises now, how will they tackle it differently?

Resolve conflicts — apply a win-win strategy in your daily life

Ask each participant to describe one case of conflict they have experienced or are facing now. Encourage them to come up with a win-win solution, or use the six principles of persuasion to resolve conflicts.
• Managing emotions and stress
Somedays we are in a good mood, somedays, in a bad mood. We are human beings after all and emotions are part of us. Positive emotions, such as joy, happiness and excitement, bring glints of light to our lives. Negative emotions, such as sadness, anger and hatred, bring gloom and darkness. Have you experienced times when you were gripped by anger, guilt, sorrow, or jealousy? When you were bothered about something, you could not think, work, eat, or sleep? Weighed down by negative emotions, our mind is unable to function rationally. Our thoughts are stuck with the incidents or events that jolt us into despair.

We also develop negative feelings towards others and ourselves when the demands from people around us, especially our family, become too much to bear. We are put under emotional stress. Unhappiness ferments into bitterness and prolonged frustration can turn into depression, if not, cynicism.

Family, peer and school exert the strongest influence on a teenager’s life. The family, however, plays the most important role because teenagers depend on their parents for financial and emotional support. They also learn about the world and themselves through the eyes of their parents.

Interestingly, adolescence is also marked by frequent conflicts with parents. Most people attribute the conflict to the “generation gap”. At different periods, parents and teenagers are each exposed to widely varying social changes and conditions. You may have learnt about computers and the Internet today, whereas such technological advancements were virtually absent in your parents’ time. Each generation is exposed to different trends and type of societal changes that shape their view of the world. Further, young people usually learn new things at a faster pace and are invariably, more idealistic than
their parents. Adults, who realise that their dreams or desires are more often rejected than fulfilled, tend to have a more jaded, “realistic” outlook of the world.

Both parents and teenagers are right, the gap between them merely represent the different outlook of their time. For instance, Nepalese girls are expected to wear saris, but an increasing number of teenagers, especially those in the cities, are now wearing jeans. Many are even riding motorbikes, a phenomenon that was unthinkable when their mothers were teenagers.

Adolescents, in the journey of growing up, are often caught in the conflict of values, that is, between what parents tell them as right, and what their peers are doing. They tend to be confused, and lost, and begin to rebel. Some of them turn to drinking, smoking, or drugs in order to find a way out, and some opt to end their lives because they cannot resolve the emotional impasse and stress.

Prolonged negative emotions and stress can harm our mental and physical health, threaten our relationships with others and affect our lives profoundly.

1. Managing emotions

We cannot avoid conflicts and problems, and therefore, negative emotions. What we can do is shorten the amount of time we experience negative emotions and reduce their harmful effects on us.

a. Recognise the emotions in you

Self-awareness

Self-awareness lays a foundation for one’s ability to manage emotions. To be aware of our emotions is the first step towards managing them, rather than allowing emotions to control us.

When you are gripped by a strong emotion, you know it. If it is negative, our instinct often tells us to ignore it, deny it, or play it down, and pretend nothing is happening. When you turn your eyes away and choose to overlook its nagging call for attention, it is as though you see flames rising from your house and wish the fire would die down by itself. However, the flame of emotion will not die down by itself. When you ignore it or deny its existence, it will grow bigger and bigger, and may even burn down your entire house!

Sometimes, you feel you have successfully smothered the flame in you by covering it up. But you will find out later that it has not gone away, it has always been there, tormenting you in silence. You may not be aware of it until something - an event or a comment from others - triggers the flame. The strong emotion can be anger, hatred, or love that burns in your chest. Once you trace back to the root, you will find the seed, the incident or the person that roused the strong reaction in you.

The only way to overcome the burning emotion in you - just so you can function and think normally - is to admit such a flame, look at it and find out its cause. For instance, was it the comment from the teacher today about your homework that made you feel lousy? Was it the conflict with your parents that put you in despair?

b. Analyse how it affects your behaviour

Critical thinking

Sometimes, simply by recognising the source of your anger, sadness, happiness,
which are all emotions of different types, you will have the “A ha!” experience. “A ha!” because you gain clarity about what is causing you to feel this way. Once you are able to move out of its grip, and “see” yourself in the particular situation clearly, you are mostly likely to realise that the problem is not as bad as you think. Negative emotions have the power to trap us in a cage and exaggerate the impact of a problem, a criticism or a conflict. Critical thinking helps us gain control over negative emotions and bring us out of the cage.

The direct confrontation of the negative emotion enables us to “see” what it is that’s bothering us inside. Attending to this emotion will give us the knowledge and “power” to overcome it. You can let it out of your system by talking with a good friend or someone you trust. Whatever you do, try to recognise the distressing feeling inside you. Do not ignore it or resist the emotion because if you do, you will be trapped for a long time. You will also have missed the chance of building up self-awareness, and making yourself happier! The awareness of your emotion can help you prevail over a situation, and take positive actions that are good for yourself and people who matter to you.

Sometimes, the “seeing” can be done easily. Other times, the emotion stays there even though you are already clear about its root. When this happens, you will need to think further by analysing the consequences of your emotion, and how to get out of it.

For instance, the teacher in your class has made a nasty comment about your homework, saying you are a “bad boy.” You know you are angry with the teacher but you cannot help feeling upset. Everyday, the flame consumes you. You cannot concentrate on that subject or the subjects taught in other classes. What are you going to do? If you go on like this, you will fail the final exam in a few weeks’ time.

Now ask yourself what this anger has done to you. Your emotion has taken control and put you in a cage. You cannot focus on your studies or do your homework. You have learnt nothing in the past few days. By allowing your anger to burn inside you, you will reinforce what the teacher is saying about you. You are proving the teacher right, that you are not capable of studying and doing your homework! Isn’t that the case?

If you are able to pause and take a look at the harmful effects, you will learn to take positive actions. Prove the teacher wrong, you are not a bad boy. The moment you turn the situation around, you have won over the negative emotion, and done something really good for yourself.

Emotions are, however, not always negative. Love is a strong emotion too. For instance, Raju is in love with a girl in his village. He gets up the guts to walk up to her one day, and suggests, haltingly, that they meet under the banyan tree on Saturday afternoon. When Meethu, the girl, worried about what other people may think, says: “No!” Raju’s world is crushed. He feels completely dejected, and is burned with pain inside him. He cannot get his mind off Meethu, she is really beautiful and charming... The more he thinks of her, the more pain he feels.

Meethu’s rejection is the source of his pain, which becomes a negative emotion. The pain is a mixture of shame and not getting what he wants. Some boys take to drinking to drown out the pain. Is it a permanent solution? Drinking will not help you turn Meethu’s heart towards you.

Now if you were Raju – ask yourself – what could you do? The “A ha!” experience will come from your recognition that you are upset because you are not getting the girl, not getting what you want. Knowing the source of your pain is not enough. Love is
no simple matter. If you care about Meethu, why not find out from her friend why she is rejecting you? Perhaps it is not because she does not like you, but because she is too shy to sit with you under the banyan tree and invite teasing from other villagers. Raju is faced with choices. He can walk up to her again and suggest that they meet in a more secluded place, or he can turn his thoughts toward himself: what he can do to impress her further.

However, there is also a chance that Meethu does not like Raju at all, and does not want to lead him on. If this is the case, Raju will have to ask himself: “Do I care about her? If I care, and I claim to love her, I will respect her decision.” Empathy, rather than anger, is an effective way to get Raju out of the cage. Even though shame is a difficult emotion to overcome, Raju is better off confronting his own feelings, finding out his positive attributes, to balance up the deep sense of rejection that erodes his self-confidence. Raju will then realise that it is only one incident in his life, however painful. She will always have a chance to encounter another girl who likes him equally later on. Hope keeps Raju alive! And hope usually comes through!

c. Take actions to respond to your emotions

Creative thinking

There are many ways to respond to your emotions and you should apply them according to the situation. One way to go about it is to share with a friend or a family member you trust most. Sharing itself is a process of clarifying how you feel, and understanding your emotions. The advice and counseling from your friends usually has a positive effect on you.

Some teenagers choose to make a resolution: I should not continue this way, I have to make a change, I have to do what I should about my studies, my future... . This is easier said than done. You tend to forget your promise and let negative emotions take control of you again. However, if you feel more comfortable disciplining yourself this way, you can put gentle pressure on keeping your promise by making your vow known to a trusted person. Your friend will be able to remind you whenever you are bogged down by negative emotions.

Whatever way you choose, it is very important to solicit help in this process. We are all social animals. Love, comfort and support do wonders for us. By isolating yourself, and wrestling with emotions all alone, you are wasting the most precious asset all human beings: sharing. Many people hesitate to share because they are ashamed of revealing what they feel inside. Some believe that it is immoral to reveal their true feelings because their feelings are immoral... . All this boils down to fear: fear of how other people may judge you, and fear of offending god by thinking in a certain way. Fear cripples us.

The truth is, you lose nothing from sharing. You do not lose your pride, your ethics or create bad karma by your effort to understand how exactly you feel inside, whether positive or negative. On the contrary, you gain insight and strength by sharing, especially with those who love and care about you.

Sharing often brings you a new perspective, and helps you look at your problem from a different angle. The ability to discover another way of looking at the situation is creative thinking. Being creative is not just about being artistic or innovative, that is, creating an image on canvas or creating a kite. Creative thinking is a state of mind, and it can be applied to every situation and incident you encounter as you grow up. Let’s
say your mother is taking clothes to the pond to wash. She usually follows the footpath that everybody uses to get to the pond. One day, you accidentally discover another footpath leading to the pond. Nobody knows the new route, which is probably shorter and nicer, with flowers along the way. Creative thinking works something like this. It means finding another route to tackle your problem or the situation, which can lead you to a solution.

Another way of looking at creative thinking is simple. Stand in front of your house, walk round it once, including the back of your house, and return to the same position. You will see different aspects of your house – the windows of the living room, the wall facing the kitchen, and external roof that makes up the ceiling inside your house. Now compare the difference between looking at the house from the inside such as your living room, and from the outside, where you will see only the windows. You are looking at the same house, except that the perspective is different, depending on where you are standing.

We can always adopt a similar way of looking at our problems and our own situation. You can choose to think positively or negatively. If you believe that there is no way out, try looking at the positive side of your problem. If you cannot find a solution by standing in your living room, go out of the house, and look at your living room from the windows. A solution may be there, it all depends on whether you are willing to think differently.

Rupa is upset that her parents treat her brother, Minto, better because he is a boy. Minto gets more food, goes to a private school, is given a bicycle on his birthday and always has nice clothes. Rupa does not receive any of her parents’ attention. On the contrary, she always ends up doing housework, washing dishes after meals for her brother and the whole family. Rupa knows she is discriminated against because her culture favours sons, not daughters.

One day, Rupa’s mother asks her to wash Minto’s dirty trousers. Rupa bursts into tears. She cannot take it anymore. Amidst her mother’s scolding, Rupa runs to her friend Manju.

“Oh dear, are you having a fight with your parents again?” asked Manju.

“Yes,” Rupa said, sobbing. “They are unfair, why do I always have to do things for Minto? He has never done anything for me,” she continues.

“Ke garne, Rupa, that’s life, even though it is unfair,” said Manju.

“But can’t we do anything to change it?”

“How do you think we can change the situation?” asked Manju, pointing to the mountains overlooking the trees where they are chatting.

A good friend, Manju often keeps an open mind about Rupa’s ideas, and they dream together.

“Maybe I won’t wash Minto’s trousers to protest,” said Rupa.

“If you refuse to do it, do you think your mother will understand?”

“I’ll get more scolding,” Rupa weeps.

“Well Rupa, I face the same situation at home, as you know. We cannot change the fact that we are girls and housework is our responsibility,” Manju replies.

“But don’t you always enjoy going to the pond?” in a flash, Manju has an idea. “Since we aren’t allowed to go roaming, we can
use the opportunity of clothes washing to have a little picnic by the pond!” Manju says, excitedly.

The idea of having a picnic by the pond with her best friend elates Rupa too! All of a sudden, her resentment disappears. It is replaced by the happy thought of spending an afternoon munching sweets, and chatting with Manju... Now, she looks forward to taking Minto’s clothes to wash!

Often, a solution involves merely changing perspective. It does not alter facts. Rupa and Manju cannot alter the fact that they are girls, unfairly treated by parents who favour sons over daughters. However, Rupa and Manju have found a positive motivation for something that is forced upon them. Creative thinking is about finding a motivation, a positive impetus that gives meaning to your action. Without motivation, you will be bitter, resentful, and angry all the time.

2. Managing stress

A life without pressure and challenge is not a productive life. We can unleash the hidden energy in us and achieve superb performance only when we are stimulated. Such stimulation is called stress. There are positive and negative stresses.

Pressure is a good thing when it serves to challenge our limits, increase our capacity to undertake responsibility and meet demands imposed upon us everyday. A person who idles away his or her energy may feel sluggish, languid, and lousy stemming from the lack of purpose, and hope. However, when pressure or responsibility goes beyond reasonable level, we will be put under tremendous stress, mentally and physically. When we are stressed out, we are unable to achieve high-quality performance, and our health deteriorates.

Suntali is a 12 year-old girl living in Kailali district. She has one elder and one younger brother. All three of them go to school. Suntali has to cook and clean when her parents are working on the farm, leaving Suntali no time to do her homework. Suntali is afraid of complaining because schooling is a luxury to her. Her parents have strongly objected to her education because they feel it is a waste of investment. “You will be married off sooner or later, what is the use of studying?” her father once said. Suntali pleaded with them and promised that schoolwork would not affect her domestic responsibilities. Her parents finally agreed, on condition that she would continue doing housework each day.

With the homework getting heavier, Suntali finds it increasingly hard to cope with the workload at home. She is a diligent student and wants to do well in her SLC (School-leaving Certificate) exams to become a teacher in her village. Now she is worried if she can ever make it. Everyday, she trudges to school with a heavy heart. She feels she is running out of energy, and losing hope. Clearly, Suntali is living with great stress, having to cope with both demands at school and at home. She is unaware, however, of what is producing fatigue and despair in her. She does not even know it is stress.

What can be done to help Suntali?

a. Recognise the source of your stress

Firstly, help her understand what is the source of her stress. At about the same age or even older, her brothers do not have to
do any housework. They go to school and play all the time. Suntali's burden is at least twice that of her brothers.

b. Analyse how it affects your life

As she moves to a higher grade, Suntali needs more time to study. If she has to continue with the present amount of housework, her performance at school will deteriorate. She will not be able to top her class, and reduce the chance of actualising her dream – of becoming a teacher.

c. Take actions to reduce the sources of stress

Creative thinking

Suntali has to do something about her situation, to reduce stress. Who can help her? Her mother is already burdened with domestic and farming duties. Being a thoughtful daughter, Suntali does not want to saddle her mother with problems of her own. Her two brothers, one at 15, the other at 11, are actually the freest people in the family. She wishes: “If only they could help...”

Is it possible to persuade her brothers to take over some of the housework? Well, they are not selfish boys. They are good brothers and often protect her from bullies in the village. However, her brothers have been conditioned by the traditional belief that boys are not responsible for domestic duties. By helping their sister at home, they are likely to become the object of mockery because cooking, cleaning and washing are considered unmanly...

How can Suntali change her brothers’ attitude and convince them that domestic work has nothing to do with a male sense of masculinity? Suntali can educate her brothers about the equality of boys and girls. But more effectively, Suntali can appeal to their conscience: Are they willing to see their sister drop out of school? Will they not be proud of themselves when their sister becomes a teacher? What’s more important: their sister’s future, or the risk of being teased by other boys?

After talking to her brothers on several occasions, Suntali successfully wins her brothers’ empathy and support. They agree to help her wash dishes and sweep the floor to free up some time for her to prepare exams.

By working out a strategy to reduce her stress, Suntali makes it possible for herself to pursue her dream. If she had not taken action in time, Suntali might have been like many other girls, forced to drop out of school, feeling regretful and resentful...

Life is full of demands and responsibilities. While we want to do our best, we also need to know our limits. We have to learn to love ourselves, and heed the call of our anxieties. That is, being alert to the time we have reached our limit, getting frustrated, resentful, and feeling down. We should not hesitate to tell others and ask for help bravely. It takes courage to say: “I cannot do it, can you help?” Help will usually come, only if you ask, and ask intelligently!

Guideline for discussions

Coping with emotions

1. What are the happiest and saddest moments that you have experienced?

2. What are emotions? What are positive emotions, and what are negative emotions?
3. How can negative emotions affect our lives (health, work, relationship, etc.)?

4. Have you experienced any emotions such as anger and guilt that linger for a long time? How do those emotions affect you and others? What will you do if you encounter the same situation again?

Coping with stress

1. What are the symptoms of stress?

Facilitators can help participants identify physical signs and symptoms of stress, including but not limited to: increased heart rate; pounding heart; sweaty palms; tightness of the chest, neck, jaw and back muscles; headache; diarrhea; constipation; urinary hesitancy; trembling, twitching; stuttering and other speech difficulties; nausea; vomiting; sleep disturbances; fatigue; shallow breathing; dryness of the mouth or throat; susceptibility to minor illness, cold hands, itching; being easily startled; chronic pain and dyspnea.

Emotional signs and symptoms of stress include, but are not limited to: irritability, angry outbursts, hostility, depression, jealousy, restlessness, withdrawal, anxiety, diminished initiative, feelings of unreality or over alertness, reduction of personal involvement with others, lack of interest, tendency to cry, being critical of others, self-deprecation, nightmares, impatience, decreased perception of positive experience opportunities, narrowed focus, obsessive rumination, reduced self-esteem, insomnia, changes in eating habits and weakened positive emotional response reflexes.

Cognitive/perceptual signs and symptoms of stress include: forgetfulness, preoccupation, blocking, blurred vision, errors in judging distance, diminished or exaggerated fantasy life, reduced creativity, lack of concentration, diminished productivity, lack of attention to detail, orientation to the past, decreased psychomotor reactivity and coordination, attention deficit, disorganisation of thought, negative self-esteem, diminished sense of meaning in life, lack of control/need for too much control, negative self-statements and negative evaluation of experiences.

Behavioral signs and symptoms of stress include: increased smoking, aggressive behaviors (such as driving), increased alcohol or drug use, carelessness, under-eating, over-eating, withdrawal, listlessness, hostility, accident-proneness, nervous laughter, compulsive behavior and impatience.

Stress vs. mental and/or physical illness: when serious physical or mental illness develop from those symptoms, clinical treatment will be necessary.

(Source: Dr. Wesley S. Sime, Professor, Department of Health and Human Performance, University of Nebraska, Lincoln)

2. What can cause stress?

3. What can we do to reduce stress?

4. Do you think you are under stress now? If so, what are the causes of stress? Do you think you can take action to reduce it? Who can help?
Dealing with school work

1. Do you have problems at school?

2. Are you worried about your exam results?

3. Do your classmates feel similar ways about school? Do you share your thoughts with them?

4. What can you do to improve school performance?

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Dealing with failure in SLC exams”)

Teen suicide

There is a relatively high rate of teenagers’ suicide in Nepal. Ask participants:

1. What prompts young people into the decision to end their lives?

2. Why can’t they ask for help when they are in trouble?

3. If you were in the same situation, what would you do?
chapter iv

• Making responsible decisions
Making responsible decisions

We make decisions all the time: small decisions such as what to wear, what to cook, and perhaps, which Hindi films to see. We also make big decisions such as which college to go to, who to marry or what career to pursue. Some decisions are made after careful deliberation, some are made more hastily; some made through our own will, some, under the pressure of others.

If we have bought the ticket for the wrong movie, it does not affect our lives apart from wasting two hours at the cinema. But if we marry the wrong person, or choose a career that does not interest us, the decision will affect us profoundly.

We always make decisions based on the information we have. The information is perhaps incomplete, and sometimes incorrect. Often, we do not have the luxury to wait and decide what to do.

Decision-making is an art, governed by the law of probability. We all have experiences of making good and bad decisions. We are not saints; we cannot control the outcome. All we can do is to try our best in moving towards our goal. If things go wrong due to some unforeseeable circumstances, we must not blame ourselves for making the wrong decision. We have made the right decision given what we know at that moment.

Even given the right information, we are often unable to make the right decision. The biggest barrier perhaps comes from ourselves – the critic in our minds, our fear and our perception of other peoples’ reactions. Those worries prevent us from making the right and the best decision. Under social pressure or parental expectations, we are unable to make decisions in our best interest despite having the information, such as wanting to study computer science, as opposed to your parents’ wish for you to become a doctor.
In the survey of Nepalese teenagers, nearly half of the 1,400 respondents said they have to absolutely obey their parents when it comes to deciding whom to marry. The reasons they cited are: “I am afraid of upsetting my parents”; “I do not want them to lose face”; “My parents’ decisions are better than mine, and they know who are the good families”; “If anything goes wrong with my marriage, it will be my parents who should be blamed, not me, and I can return to my parents.”

Relying on parents’ choice is a demonstration of respect, and some may even call it filial. But letting parents decide for you or giving up your own will is also a demonstration of irresponsibility. You may be lazy, or simply gutless, or fear growing up and making independent decisions or taking responsibilities for your own action and choices. By not participating in the decision making process, you are shunning responsibility in an important matter that concerns your happiness and well-being.

Perhaps it is comforting to put the blame on others when things go wrong. We give up our independence because we feel more comfortable shunning blame, which manifests in our ability to make decisions. Why have we not thought of making good decisions that can prevent things from going wrong in the first place? Our lives are shaped by the cumulative impact of our decisions, big or small. We cannot simply let those moments of deciding what is in our best interest and in others pass carelessly. By giving up the will or the chance to take decisions, however risky (that it may go wrong), we are allowing others to rule or run our lives. As we grow, we have to learn to be responsible for what is best for ourselves, for our self-development. Decision-making is one such ability that will benefit us throughout our life.

1. What’s the best option for me?

Often, we are caught between conflicting interests: between our own needs or desires and the expectations of others. That is when we have to choose, and decide what to give up and what to keep. You cannot have the best of both worlds.

Self-awareness enhances our ability to see our own interest and how we feel. Critical thinking helps us evaluate different options, and analyse what is in our best interest.

We are sometimes unsure of ourselves. The monster that often jumps out as we try to make major life decisions is fear. In particular, fear of others’ opinions, fear of failure as well as the lack of faith in ourselves.

When we are unsure of ourselves, we tend to go by what others like and do. It is safer to follow the majority. There are millions of times you wish you could do something you like, and need not worry about the reaction of your parents, your siblings, your friends and relatives, or other kinds of authorities. But it remains a wish.

You waver between your own needs and the expectation of others. It is a tug of war on the decision-making scale, especially when nobody nods at your idea, or worse still, they disagree with you. In a situation like this, do you still have the courage to
stand on your own? Or do you feel you would be better giving up and following the majority?

At that moment, ask yourself: what is the worst that could happen if you followed your own heart? If you have a bottom line, that is, accept the worst outcome, you will find your fear and anxiety gone and evaporate. You will be able to pursue your goal with maximum energy. As it is a decision of your own, you will try very hard to prove to others you are right about yourself. Even when you fail, you will try again and again, until you succeed.

If you leave it to your parents to decide, they will decide for you out of love and what they think is best for you. But what they think is best for you may not always be right. When this happens, you are not likely to be motivated to make much effort, and you take it without passion. When you fail, you can simply blame them for making the wrong decision for you. But the price is high: you may live in regret, guilt or resentment, forever.

2. Making decisions under pressure

a. Pressure from parents

As teenagers face major decisions about their future, parents are the dominant factors that influence their choices. Parents often have high expectations for their children. Children are their hopes and carry their unfulfilled dreams. Parents also want to protect their children, worried that they may be too inexperienced to make decisions for themselves.

When children are small, they admire their parents who are definitely an authority in their lives. Then when children grow up, they are increasingly exposed to rapid changes in society, they form their own views about the world. Many develop independent thinking from the new information they receive, and are likely to look at the world quite differently from their parents.

Teenagers are capable of analysing their own strength and weakness, what is best for them, as they pursue their career and marriage. A healthy adolescence provides teenagers the chance to express their needs, wishes and desires in the family, allowing them to be understood, in particular, by their parents. It is important to give them a say in decisions about their future, rather than take over the decision. It robs them of the ability to make effective decisions later on, stifles their sense of independence, and slows down their path towards maturity. Parents may not know their children as well as they think and may not follow changes in the society rapidly enough. They are not to blame though. It is us teenagers who should take the initiative to share our views if parents are unaware of our needs as an individual, not just as a son or a daughter. This is not to say that we should deliberately defy our parents’ wishes. With their experiences and wisdom, parents can serve as a great source of knowledge for us – for consultation.

Independent thinking can be fostered in each step that teenagers take in their quest for future.

Rajan is in love with Arti, a girl from a lower caste. His mother vehemently goes against their relationship, and their marriage. Then one day Rajan’s mother falls sick and has to go to the hospital. Arti is a nurse, she offers to look after his mother by giving her advice on nutrition, serving her medication and even cooking for her. Rajan’s mother is touched. However, it’s difficult for her to accept Arti as someone of a lower caste, a tradition she has learned and followed since
the day she was born. Rajan doesn’t yield to his mother, and tries to convince her that adhering to caste does not guarantee his happiness. He tells his mother that he will adamantly remain single if he is not allowed to marry Arti.

Rajan’s decision is based on careful deliberation. He is deeply in love with Arti, and he knows Arti is the best girl for him. If he gives up Arti to please his mother, he will regret it for the rest of his life. He will be angry with his mother. Rajan knows that if he insists on marrying Arti, his mother may not be happy for a while. In the long run, she will accept it when she sees that her son is happy, and that Arti is a wonderful wife and daughter-in-law. Unless Rajan’s mother is hopelessly narrow-minded, she will gradually recognise her son’s choice, and change her attitude toward people of lower castes.

Comparing the consequences of the two options, it is not difficult for Rajan to make the right decision about his own life. Rajan’s determination comes from his self-awareness – he knows what he wants and what is best for him. He also utilises critical thinking by analysing the options between pleasing his mother and defending his own happiness. Doing what is best for you is not selfishness, for in the long run, Rajan is happier with Arti than a girl his mother chooses simply because she belongs to the right caste. Rajan knows it is love, not caste, which matters to him. This awareness helps him take a responsible decision.

**b. Power relations between boys**

Teenagers often face peer pressure to start habits such as smoking, drinking, and in some cases, drugs, and casual sex. They have to choose between the risk of being ridiculed by their peers, which affects their status in the group and their sense of pride, and the risk of getting into bad habits, financial difficulties, and poor health.

Sexual conquests are often shared with pride within male peer groups, because sexual experience is seen as a rite of passage into manhood. In order to achieve certain status among his peers, a boy is often pressured into doing things that he may not want or know as risky. The risks include impregnating a girl or having unprotected sex with a commercial sex worker.

For a teenager eager to assert his identity, mockery about his “manliness” is often a direct affront to his pride. The fear of “losing face” cripples their ability to say “no”, or gives little time for them to think. What is at stake is their status among peers, and the sad thing is, risky behaviours often take place on impulse. There is no room for rethinking or evaluating their action.

**Critical thinking** is the key to lifting boys out of the “dilemma” they face often in adolescence. Young boys have to learn to question: “What is more important to me? Status among my friends, or my own well-being?” “Does it really matter if I am teased by my friends for being timid or ‘sissy’?” These questions will help boys stand their ground when faced with peer pressure. Some take to smoking, drinking and injecting drugs under pressure to conform to group behaviour. Unfortunately, the “majority” is not always right. Blind conformity to those behaviours can lead you down the lethal path of HIV/AIDS, which is primarily transmitted through unprotected sex and needle-sharing among injecting drug users.

**c. Power relations between boys and girls**

For an adolescent girl, the love relationship with a boy is the first step toward woman-
hood. The wooing of a boy means a lot to her identity and self-esteem. Many a times, she is also caught in a dilemma of whether to compromise or not compromise on the boy’s sexual demands. On the one hand, she wants to please him, and on the other hand, she is concerned with the consequence, that is, losing her virginity, and getting pregnant.

Boys sometimes use tricks to dismiss a girl’s worry of pregnancy. There are instances when a boy tells his girl friend: “Oh, you won’t get pregnant if we have sex in the daytime.” Some say: “Having sex just once won’t get you pregnant…” Some boys resort to threatening the break-up of the relationship if the girl does not agree to have sex.

The boy-girl power relationship is complex, involving desires, misconceptions and pride. It is important to empower a girl to make responsible decisions for herself at such moments.

Sabita’s parents are concerned that they have not received any marriage proposals for their eldest daughter, Sabita. The anxiety grows as girls in their neighbourhood are all getting married. What they do not know is that Sabita is in love with Neeraj, who has been seeing her for several months.

One day, Neeraj comes to Sabita and subtly suggests having sex. Sabita is furious as she never expected Neeraj to think about such things. She does not feel it is proper to have sex before marriage. What if she gets pregnant…? Why doesn’t he care about the risk? The reasoning gives Sabita the courage to reject his request. Offended, Neeraj, leaves her angrily.

Sabita is nervous and terrified. Will she lose Neeraj? She somehow regrets having turned down Neeraj that way. Even yesterday, she was still thinking what she should wear at their wedding ceremony… Should she change her mind and bring Neeraj back?

### 3. Stick to your decision

As you make a decision that affects others, you usually want them to support your decision. Communication is the key at this stage. When your decision is resented or resisted by others, you will be better off maintaining your composure - managing the emotional reaction and stress - to resolve the conflict that arises as a result of your decision.

When Rajan makes up his mind that he will not marry anybody else but Arti, he is going against his mother’s will. But Rajan does not force his decision upon his mother. He talks with her, and uses any opportunity that comes his way to win her acceptance. Eventually, his mother is convinced that her son’s happiness is more important than what others might say about their inter-caste marriage…

This post-decision stage is crucial to success in implementing our decision, and turning it into reality. Communication
among different parties involved in decision-making will effectively reduce the stress resulting from conflicts.

After Sabita turns down her boyfriend, she suffers two agonising nights, reflecting on their fight. Why was Neeraj so angry she said “no” to him? Did he feel she does not love him enough? Sabita is torn, but empathises with his needs. Maybe she can convince him that she loves him deeply, but she cannot compromise on her principle. If she explains to him, he may understand why she is reacting this way. Sabita decides to overcome her shyness; she goes to see Neeraj. She tells him that love is mutual, and love is about responsibility for your loved ones. If Neeraj loves her, should he not care about the harmful result of satisfying his desire?

In the conversation, Neeraj admits that he wants sex because he wants to prove he can conquer a girl to his friends. He was angry because she did not submit to his wish. He felt “powerless” and unable to boast about his experience. He proposes to Sabita at the end of their conversation, not to have sex this time, but to marry him. Sabita replies with a smile, “I will think about it…”

**Guideline for discussions**

1. Ask participants to list the important decisions they have made or they are going to make. Ask them to analyse how these decisions may affect their lives.

2. Create the following scenarios through role-play or by playing back selected episodes of “Chatting with my Best Friend” (“Sathi Sanga Manka Kura”). Ask the participants to analyse, and come up with their own conclusions.

   a. How do you make a responsible decision about your career?

      (Episode: “A boy who dreams of becoming a fashion designer”)

   b. How do you make a responsible decision about your marriage?

      (Episode: “Dowry” & “Arranged/Early marriage”)

   c. What do you do when your boyfriend asks you to have sex?

      (Episode: “Peer pressure on sex”)

   d. What is a responsible relationship?

      (Episode: “Condom use” & “When she doesn’t love him any more”*)

* This episode is about a girl facing the difficult decision of breaking up with her boyfriend when she realises that she does not love him. Should she simply marry him because everybody thinks they are a good match? Ask participants what is a responsible decision for her and his happiness?

   e. What do you do when you discover you have a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD)?
chapter v

• Smiling to your problems
Smiling to your problems

When we encounter a problem, our instinctive reaction is to run away from it. We usually react negatively: Gosh! I hate it! I am so unfortunate, I am stuck.....

Denial of our problem is also a denial of the negative feelings associated with the problem. No matter what we feel, the problems do not go away by themselves. They continue to linger in our minds and make us feel miserable.

We tend to look at problems by referring to the backlog of our past experiences. Those experiences, usually the unhappy ones, give rise to fear and worries. We tend to think: “What if I cannot solve it?” Before we make an effort to obtain more information about the situation, we tend to give ourselves the answer: “No, I cannot overcome it. It’s impossible.” We have given up before we even try.

If you have a drunkard father, do you tell yourself: “My father is drunk everyday, he is the source of problems of my entire family, we cannot do anything about it.”

If you feel you are forced to drop out of school to get married, do you say to yourself: “Since I am a girl, I have to resign to my fate. There is nothing I do about it.”

When you are faced with problems, do you wait for the problem to go away by itself, or will you take the initiative to solve it? When you are in trouble, do you simply blame others or blame it on fate, or will you take action to change your own circumstances?
1. Do I have a problem or not?

Ask yourself, “Do I have a problem?” This is the very first step toward solving your problem. Many teenagers have difficulty admitting to or recognizing their problems. When you are convinced that you are indeed facing a problem, describe your problem. Draw or write it down on a piece of paper, list out the important factors and people, including your own needs, which are contributing to the problem. As you draw a picture or describe your problem in words, you will see a clearer landscape of your problem, and find potential solutions. Defining your problem is a process of helping yourself discover the core issue, so that you will not be distracted by insignificant details or peripheries. When you are able to see what your problem really is and what are the causes, you are coming very close to the solution. Now, what is most important is to continue your analysis by writing down all the possible ways of tackling the causes. This requires creative thinking, that is, thinking out of the box or beyond the usual frame of reference. Specifically, it means finding solutions beyond our usual, or traditional way of reacting to a problem. We are often limited by our past experiences, and we dare not think differently. To go beyond the traditional boundaries of doing things, you need to empower yourself with more information through newspapers, radio, TV, classmates, teachers, relatives, friends, or even strangers. Research is the key to help you formulate ideas toward finding a creative solution. For instance, 17-year-old Rakesh lives in Achham and wishes to become a veterinarian. He knows that by enrolling at the district health institute for a two-year training course, he will be qualified to diagnose diseases for animals, including livestock. The problem is, he does not have money to pay for his tuition. His family, who rely on subsistence farming, can barely make ends meet. Rakesh is frustrated, but thinks hard about how to obtain support. One day, as he tunes into the radio, he learns about a government scholarship. Each year, the government allocates a certain amount of money for each village to promote local development, such as road construction and school maintenance. It also provides scholarships to local people for training. This piece of information is crucial to Rakesh, who sees a glimmer of hope in his search for a solution. He decides to talk to the VDC chairman, and convince him that the village needs a well-trained veterinarian. If the VDC leader supports the idea, he will be able to receive a training grant to study at the Health Institute. In Rakesh’s case, he has found the best solution because he has made an effort. We often face different options, have to seek information and look at different alternatives. We have to envisage the potential consequence of each option, and decide on what we really want to do and what is best for ourselves. Decision-making, based on as much information as you can gather, is always an essential part of problem solving. It is part and parcel of making good and responsible decisions, as discussed in the previous chapter. No solution is final. Implementing your solution is only part of the process, that is, testing whether your idea actually works. If your solution leads to failure, do not panic. This experience of failure is essential to coming up with new, and better ideas for a better solution. You have to keep trying. You cannot achieve a breakthrough without failure. Failure is the evidence that you are pushing the boundaries of your experience.
Take Rakesh’s case again, he has talked with the VDC chairman who is quite interested in his idea. However, the chairman also asks him to present his idea to the entire VDC committee who will take a final vote on the training grant. Some committee members are quite suspicious of his proposal, for they doubt whether he will return to serve the village after his training. Others think it is more urgent to build a road linking the village to the main highway, than on training a veterinarian.

However, Rakesh is not discouraged by this initial setback. He decides to talk to the members who are concerned whether he will return to the village after training. He proposes to them that they talk to the Health Institute to withhold his certificate if he does not return after graduation. This helps convince them of his sincerity. Now that Rakesh has won the majority vote of the committee, he is confident he will get the scholarship.

If Rakesh had stopped making efforts when he heard a big “No!” from the committee, he would not have fulfilled his dream. There is no secret in Rakesh’s success: keep trying until you reach your goal.

2. What if another problem arises when one problem is solved?

Sometimes, we are caught in a situation where the very solution to the current problem leads to a new problem. Does it mean we should not solve the current problem in order to avoid another problem?

Life is made up of problems. Living is an unending journey of solving problems. When you solve one problem, and find yourself soon caught in another problem, you are not back at the starting point. While dealing with each and every problem, you are developing your capacity and gaining confidence in tackling life’s varying situations. In the journey of growth, our environment also changes accordingly, and new problems arise. The way we handle new problems mirrors the higher level of knowledge and competence we gain from tackling earlier problems.

If we have never taken actions to solve our problem, our ability remains at the same level, and we will never be able to evolve. Problem-solving provides human beings with opportunities to evolve, and develop his or her full potential.

Let us take a look at Padam, a teenager who bravely stands up to his problems, and solves them.

Padam’s father works in the city, far away from home. Whenever he comes home, he beats up his wife and daughter. Watching the violence unfolding at home, Padam seethes with anger. He does not know what to do. All he knows is that his father will not listen even if he were to confront him. But it hurts him each time he witnesses the beating.

Padam often reasons with himself: since many men beat up their wives, it is maybe alright for his father to do the same. However, this reasoning doesn’t calm him down. He sinks into deeper despair amid the regular thumping and yelling of his father, and cries of his mother and sister.

One day, a friend tells Padam that his father is having an affair with a woman in the city. Padam begins to have an inkling about the way his father treats his mother. He feels he cannot take it any longer. He evaluates two options. One option is to say and do nothing, just let it be. That means, his father will continue to abuse his mother. His
mother will continue to suffer and their life will not change. The second option is to confront his father, but Padam is uncertain of the outcome. Will his father get very angry and whack Padam too? Or will he feel ashamed and change his behaviour? Even though the option is risky, Padam feels it is the only way to make a breakthrough in the family's ordeal.

That evening, his father bashes his mother again. Padam stands up to stop him and exposes his wrongdoing. He gathers the strength to challenge him: “Dad, you treat mum so badly because you have another woman in the city, I know all about it!” His father is shocked. To Padam’s surprise, his father does not deny his extra-marital affair, nor does he beat up Padam. He drops his fist, stays silent for a while, and walks out of the house.

Padam’s father has not returned home since. Padam’s mother is now spared the daily physical abuse and suffering and able to find some peace. Now, Padam and his mother begin to face a new problem – financial difficulty. His mother does not have a job. Now that his father is gone, the family has lost its bread earner.

It looks like Padam has solved his previous problem, but is running into a bigger problem. Should he regret it? Should he have kept silent so that he would not have offended his father, and therefore, not lost the family’s source of financial support?

These thoughts bother Padam. However, after thinking it through, he continues to believe he has done the right thing. The first priority or the most important concern is the physical well-being of his mother and sister. The daily bashing can lead to severe injuries. As he weighs the cost of physical harm with the money his father brings home, he feels the money is too little compared to they price they pay: the pain he inflicts upon the family. To relieve her mother of worries about financial security, Padam takes up a part-time job.

Padam becomes a delivery boy for a local factory, and becomes the family’s bread earner. Soon, it proves too difficult for him to manage both his studies and the job. Padam decides to quit school and work full-time. After work, he usually spends time drinking and bantering with his friends. After a while, however, Padam gets bored and questions whether he wants to continue living this way forever. He realises that he will not achieve much in life if he does not continue with his education. “If I study part-time to pass the SLC, and learn a special skill, I will be able to find a higher-paid job and have a brighter future,” Padam reasons to himself, dreaming about owning a motorbike one day. Now the hurdle is: where does he find the money to support his family as well as his studies?

Determined to complete his education, Padam soon comes up with a solution. He decides to take up a student loan from the bank to cover his tuition and his mother’s living expenses. He is confident that he will be able to repay it within two years of his graduation.

Padam has gone through at least three stages in solving his problems: 1) confronting his father; 2) supporting his family; and 3) pursuing his study. With every step, he has developed his capacity to think, analyse, make decisions and take action. In the process, he has built up his confidence and gained greater maturity and intelligence.

If Padam had done nothing, simply to avoid trouble, he would have continued living in fear and anger. His mother and sister would have sustained physical injuries, as well as enormous mental inflictions. Padam would not have grown up, become a confident
Smiling to your problems

person, and gained strength in dealing with the demands and challenges of life.

Problems are often opportunities in disguise. When you escape from problems, you give up the opportunity to develop your skills and potentials. Once you resolve your problems, you will find yourself happier, more fulfilled, and more ready to confront new issues.

Tackling problems involves the use of our mind. The process enhances our capacity to solve greater problems.

3. Learn to live with your problems — if there is no solution now

Sometimes, we cannot resolve the problem at hand because they are associated with powerful external factors over which we have no control. We may be worried or frustrated, but there is no way to solve them given the circumstances. A typical example is war. For instance, thousands of Jews were sent to death camps by the German Nazis during the Second World War. There was no chance of escape at all. It was difficult to survive the daily ordeal, including hard labour, disease and starvation in the death camps, where the aim was to torture, and eventually extinguish all the Jewish people. Many of those arrested and detained in the camp could only live with the hope that their lives would be saved when the Nazis lost the war.

Caught in such a situation, the best we can do is to put the problem aside for the moment and move on to other things we can do. We are not escaping from the problem, but waiting for an opportune moment to arise that will bring a solution. We have to learn to live with such problems without stressing ourselves out, or sinking into depression. The ability to do it requires great courage and patience.

Chameli was trafficked to Bombay and forced to become a sex worker at the age of 13. With tight security at the brothel, she has little opportunity to escape. Although Chameli has to live with her problem, it does not mean she ignores it. On the contrary, she is waiting for an opportune moment to save herself. She senses that one of her clients is a kind and sympathetic man. She decides to try her luck by asking him to help her get out. Fortunately, this client agrees to help. He informs the police who later come to raid the brothel. Chameli is finally free.

Chameli is able to change her own destiny by her sheer will. Girls who are forced to sell their body often feel they can never enjoy a good life again. The shadow of the past looms at the back of their minds, haunting them with a trembling voice that says: “Your life is over because you are no longer ‘clean’.” Whether you are ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’, however, depends entirely on how you define it, or perceive it. You need courage to go against social definition, such as what relatives, neighbours and friends may say about your past or ‘background’. Nobody can look down at you unless you allow them to do so! With courage, you will find strength to change your own destiny. Relatives, neighbours and friends do not decide your destiny; it is in your own hands.

Likewise, drug addicts often feel they are never able to kick their habits. They also find their life “tarnished” and over because of the social stigma attached to drug users. Pessimism deprives them of the chance to make a change. Taking the wrong step by no means signals the end of anything. Rather, it is the start of a positive and healthy life if you take action to mend your ways. It all depends on how we look at it, how we
perceive and act on it, to reverse the circumstance.

It is important for teenagers that live under difficult circumstances to keep their hope alive. Encourage them to think positively - live with their problems without giving up hope. Creative thinking will enable them to find solutions when it looks as if there is no way out.

Guideline for discussions

Ask participants to share their problems:

1. What’s the biggest problem confronting you now?
2. Are you doing anything to solve it?
3. If not, do you think it is possible to solve your problem in the future?
4. If you do not solve the problem now, what will happen?

Suggested topics for discussion among teenagers - Encourage them to find creative solutions to the following issues:

1. Sexual harassment
   (Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Sexual harassment”)
2. Coping with domestic violence
   (Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “A boy’s story”)
3. Kicking drugs habit
   a. Why do some teenagers turn to drugs?
   b. If you know somebody is addicted to drugs, what can you do to help him?
4. Can you mobilise your friends/peers to help drug addicts kick the habit? (Encourage young people to think beyond their own problems)
   (Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Sibling rivalry and drug use”)
5. Do you know anybody who is a sex worker? Do you think sex workers are in danger of being infected with HIV? What can they do to protect themselves?
   (Chatting with My Best Friend episodes: “Sex workers in Kathmandu” and “Girls’ trafficking”)

Remind participants: Be aware of providing a false solution to your problem! When we are faced with problems, we can sometimes take an easy way out by lying or cheating. That is a false solution.

Case:
Sane owes his friend 20 rupees for the football they bought together. He hesitates to ask his father for the money for fear of being scolded. Sane dare not face his problem and goes to talk to his father. Under pressure from his friend, he steals some grain from home and sells it for 20 rupees. Sane finds an easy way out, which unfortunately leads him to a bigger problem. Whenever he is short of money, he takes stuff from home and sells it in the market. Eventually, he steals more and more. He even ventures into neighbor’s house, and he steals from shops. Sane becomes a thief, and his easy solution puts him on the path to crime.

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “I wish I dare to talk to my father”)

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• Taking control of your own life
Taking control of your own life

The 10 generic skills we have learned in this guide will ultimately enhance our self-esteem and self-confidence. It will improve our psychosocial competence in managing ourselves, and relating to others. With these skills, we are able to build a sense of leadership in ourselves and adopt a proactive attitude toward life.

1. Do you believe in yourself?

Self-esteem is all about how you evaluate and perceive yourself, and whether you like yourself. If your self-esteem is low, you might think: “I am not as important as others”, “my opinions do not count”, “I will invite disapproval if I reveal my true opinions”, “it’s safer to concede in times of conflict”, and so on...

With low self-esteem, you tend to compare yourself unfavourably to others. You do not believe you can convince others of your ideas, and therefore, remain silent about your needs, wants, feelings and beliefs, and refrain from standing up for your own rights when you are treated unfairly. Even if you do express yourself, you do it in a diffident and self-effacing way that allows others to brush you off or ignore your view.

Self-worth helps you put things in perspective. You life is not to be dictated by others. You are in control of your own destiny, and are aware of your actions. You do not give away your rights to anybody under any kind of pressures. You have the confidence to convince people what you think is the best for yourself, and others. Confidence, unlike arrogance, is a belief in your own ability and worth. You have to like yourself to be confident, just so that you will not be trampled over by the powerful, the rich, the bullies, or simply, the majority.

Many teenagers, especially girls suffer from
low self-esteem. This is primarily due to the wrong belief that have been inculcated on their minds. In a patriarchial society like Nepal, a girl is traditionally given the least importance among her family members, after her father and brothers. She is made to believe that she is not worth the investment in education, care and self-development - because she will be married away. Once married, her value to the husband’s family lie in whether she can give birth to a son. Such belief - imposed by society and a strong tradition - erodes a girl’s self-esteem. She remains forever timid, servile and humble, for she has never learned that she was born equal to others, and enjoys equal human rights.

Even boys are not necessarily more confident than girls. The entrenched caste system and fatalistic belief offer little in the way of helping boys develop self-confidence. Boys from lower castes may feel superior to their sisters, but their confidence tend to evaporate when they mingle with Brahmin or Chhetri boys.

In a society that believes deeply in fatalism, many Nepali boys and girls are brought up to accept their fate. If they belong to the lower caste, they are made to believe they were born inferior to others, and there is no way for them to change their destiny. This kind of social conditioning provides little ground for teenagers to believe in themselves, which is an important starting point for self-confidence, and believe that they are born with fundamental human rights.

Nepal became a democratic country more than 10 years ago. But the values of equality and human rights are still are new concept to most of its citizens. Nepal is a signatory of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discriminations Against Women. These conventions are derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, which says: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” It embodies basic rights that are deemed necessary for human beings to live a decent life, such as “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the rights of all children, including teenagers, up to the age of 18.

But do Nepalese adolescents believe they have the right to express their own opinions, views, and ideas? Do they believe they have needs and wants that may be different from other age groups? Do they believe they can turn down a request without feeling guilty or afraid of being looked upon as selfish? Do they believe it is all right to make mistakes, since to err is human?

If teenagers do not believe in their basic rights and intrinsic values as a human being, they will not be able to develop the confidence and courage to speak up for themselves, and defend what is in their best interests.

Life skills can empower teenagers to think critically about these values, and think creatively, to find the best ways to develop their potentials.

2. Be a leader of your own life!

It is your choice – to choose to get stuck in a situation by following the opinion of others, or take charge of your own life by changing
your perspectives. From here, you will realise, things start to change towards the better.

When you have a worsening relationship with your father, you tend to focus on the weakness of your father by telling yourself: my father is bad-tempered, he often gets drunk, he is difficult to talk with, he will never understand me....

But if you are able to think positively, you can shift the focus from your father to yourself, by thinking proactively: I will listen to him, empathise with him, appreciate what he has done for me, talk to him, and try to make him understand my needs. Communication is very important.

Leadership comes from within. We have to become a master of ourselves before we are able to influence others. We will only be able to influence others by working on ourselves, putting the focus back on ourselves, including making ourselves a diligent student, a good listener, and a great friend. People in our lives will feel the positive energy from us and respond in the same way.

Can you be a happy teacher or health worker? Many may say “no”, because teachers and health workers are poorly paid, not as well-respected as doctors or lawyers. That is why you see so many grouchy teachers and unfriendly health workers, for they do not enjoy their work, for they feel they have no future. But, is it really so?

Well, you have a choice. You can choose to get stuck, feel lousy, dispirited and low for the rest of your life or you can choose to think differently. As a teacher, you can enjoy your work and develop love and care for your students. If you enjoy teaching and helping your students, you will be able to produce better students. By your efforts, your class may become the best in the school. Seeing your good performance, other teachers will be influenced by you. They will begin to find your attitude effective and worth learning, and start doing the same. The change will make your school popular among students and people living in your community. Wherever you go, you will see respect and admiration in people’s eyes.

By changing your attitude towards work, you have added immense values to your work, and to teaching as a discipline. Whatever career you pursue, you can always choose to be a mediocre or the best in your field. It all depends on whether you choose to adopt a positive outlook, and find joy in what you do.

Sometimes we blame others or the system that cause all the problems. But can you take leadership from where you are, stop complaining and do your best, and change yourself? Each of us can be a leader of our own life. Instead of blaming society, you can make a start by changing from within. After all, society is made up of you, me and everyone. If everyone can do the same, the society will become a better place for all of us.

3. Act now

To take control of your own life, you need to have faith in yourself. When you experience the conflict between “me verses society”, you have to have the guts to say, “I believe in myself!” Can you follow your own heart throughout?

It is your belief that matters. With faith in yourself, you will be able to take the first step to make a change, and overcome barriers along the way. With each step you make, you gain greater confidence in your
own abilities, which in turn strengthens your self-efficacy, that is, your effectiveness. Concentrate on what you are doing, rather than worry about what can go wrong. You can always bounce back from your failures, and learn from your experiences, which will eventually lead to success.

But what is success? How can it be measured? The answer lies in your intrinsic value of life. Life is a journey, not a destination. It is not about how much money we can make or what position we can achieve. It is how you feel about yourself, whether you value yourself above money or position. It is your attitude towards life that determines whether you are happy or unhappy. It is the process of learning about yourself, enjoying what you do, that gives you fulfillment as a person with special talents and interests.

You may know the life of your grandfather, or your mother, and how their life turned out. But being young, with a long way ahead, you do not yet know what your life is going to be like. The answer lies in your own leadership, in how you want to shape it. Life is an experiment, and you have to dare to give yourself a chance to try, and do things differently.

Take action now, and begin with yourself!

**Guideline for discussions**

The following questions can be asked to encourage teenagers to think critically, and help build confidence.

1. What are the things you like about yourself? And the things you do not like about yourself?

2. Do you find yourself thinking differently from others sometimes? If yes, can you provide one or two examples?

3. What do you want to do most in your life?

4. What sort of failure are you afraid of? Why?

5. Are you afraid of criticism? If so, why do you value others’ opinion more than your own? (After all, you are supposed to know yourself best!)

6. Do you know you are enslaving yourself by allowing others to dominate you, and your views?

7. What dark thoughts do you have? Can you get rid of those dark thoughts?

8. What fears do you have? Can you cite an example where you have overcome your fears?

9. Do you dare to stand up for what you think is right, even though others do not agree with you?

10. Have you ever stood against disagreement based on what you believe is right? Can you cite an example?

11. If you dare not stand up for what you think is right, what are you afraid of?

12. Do you think your fear will come through by doing that? What is the worst that can happen?

(Chatting with My Best Friend episode: “Badi girls — When her father asks her to sell sex”, “Be a teacher”, and “Success story of a Nepalese entrepreneur”)
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