



DEAR AGONY AUNT ...

Activity Guide

This guide provides background information and prompts for further discussion around the *Bodies, Hearts, and Minds* toolkit activity ‘Dear Agony Aunt’. It may be useful when running the activity with groups.

You can also find associated ‘Learning Objectives and Curriculum Links’ that can be used to support teaching on topics related to personal, social, health, and wellbeing education in England (2.1), Wales (2.2), Scotland (2.3), and Northern Ireland (2.4) on the [Body, Self, and Family website](#).

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A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF AGONY AUNTS

Look up ‘agony aunt’ in the dictionary, and you will find that it is ‘a person usually a woman, who gives advice to people with personal problems, especially in a regular magazine or newspaper article’. In fact, when agony columns first appeared in the 1690s, men wrote them – though it was not long before women took over. Advice columns have persisted from the eighteenth century right until now. The format of a wise figure answering readers’ questions has not changed much, but almost everything else about agony aunts has transformed.

In the mid-twentieth century, the problem page was often the most popular feature in women’s magazines. These magazines, read by millions, pictured agony aunts as older women. In reality, many were young journalists writing under assumed names. They were depicted as older because it was believed that with age came wisdom and authority. Agony aunts were not there to comfort readers, but to give moral guidance – to help readers do ‘the right thing’. Often, they were quite stern with readers in distress. There were many rules about what agony aunts could and could not say on the page. Magazines censored certain words (like ‘bottom’), and some topics could not be discussed at all.

This all changed in the 1970s. Traditional moral codes appeared less certain. Sex and relationships could be discussed more openly. Magazines for adult women tried to reflect these changes. Agony aunts now wrote under their real names. Many were younger, and shared their own unconventional lives with readers. Some agony aunts became celebrities in their own right. Agony aunts like Marje Proops and Claire Rayner

campaigned on issues like contraception, gay rights, and sex education. They not only comforted individuals in their columns, but helped to change attitudes in wider society.

In 1970s teen magazines like *Jackie*, agony aunts were more like friends or older sisters – they could guide readers because they were also young and understood teenage problems at first-hand. Teen magazines still did not discuss sex openly at this time. This did not change until the 1980s, when magazines like *Just Seventeen* strongly pushed messages around safe sex, consent, and LGBTQ+ rights. Before the internet existed, magazine problem pages were an important way for teenagers to get accurate information on topics that parents and teachers might not discuss with them.



ACTIVITY: COULD YOU BE AN AGONY AUNT?

Task 1

The activity asks participants to undertake a simple exercise matching questions and answers from teen magazine *Jackie*. The letters deal with issues that many young people still face now.

This familiarises participants with the agony aunt format. It encourages them to think about changing attitudes to body image, same-sex attraction, and friendship. This sets the scene for the more complex activities that follow.

Group leaders: Be sensitive to the fact that these are 'live' problems for some participants. Allow participants time to reflect on the problems.

Task 2

The activity asks participants to consider what advice they would give friends experiencing similar problems.

This encourages participants to step outside their own lives, to empathise with the experiences of others, and to consider what makes good advice and how to communicate that advice.

Group leaders: Ask questions like, 'Do you think the 1970s agony aunt provided helpful advice? Why?', 'How do you think that advice would make someone feel?', 'How would you like to be treated in a similar

situation?', and 'Are there any practical steps this person could take to help them?'

You might encourage participants to consider how and where the advice reflects common attitudes in the 1970s, and how that advice might differ today.

For example, does providing diet advice help the letter-writer to have more confidence in their own opinions, rather than worrying about what their friends might think? Or could the agony aunt help teenagers exploring their sexual identity to work out how to respond to homophobic attitudes?

This approach can help participants to think about friendship, peer pressure, and bullying in more depth.

Task 3

The activity is a series of questions reflecting on differences between teenage life in the 1970s and now, what makes good advice, and where adolescents seek information now.

This encourages awareness of similarities and differences over time, including how feelings about body image, sexuality, and friendships remain powerful. By considering changes over time, participants gain new perspectives on current attitudes. Thinking about sources of available information prompts them to consider where to seek help if it is needed.

Group leaders: Ensure that participants are aware of good sources of information and guidance. The toolkit provides a list of resources – you can point participants towards this information.

'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ Open discussion of sensitive issues depends on social standards at the time
- ✚ Changes in openness about particular issues did not change at the same time for all age groups
- ✚ Sources of advice have changed a lot, especially with the advent of the Internet

