

Running From Myself

Opening Activity

Freewrite on Bad Things That Happen

Ask students to freewrite for 90 seconds on the following prompt:

“Think of a time something bad happened to you, or you were treated unfairly. What happened? Who was to blame? What did you learn from it? How did the experience help you grow or change?”

When they are done, briefly allow a few students to share if they would like.

Note: Avoid being judgmental.

This writer feels uncomfortable in her own skin. She’s painfully shy, overweight, and lonely. She decides to break out of her shell by taking drugs, drinking, etc.

There is a “downside” to her actions (the risks of drugs, especially). But there is a big “upside” too: she emerges from her shell and learns how to have fun. It’s a breakthrough.

Adults sometimes wonder why teens do “stupid” things like take drugs, or run away. This story shows how the powerful need to find oneself can cause some teens to take reckless action. When discussing the story, it’s important to acknowledge the bravery of the writer, and to refrain from being too judgmental about her drug taking. Encourage students to focus on her process of finding herself—a theme they can all identify with.

Story & Workshop Summary

Materials: paper, pencil

Core Issues/Emotions: strength; coping with pain

Theme: Emotional pain can lead to risky behavior and to positive change, if the risks are kept under control.

Plot: The writer, a shy and obedient girl, goes through a wild phase of drinking, smoking, and cutting. She goes through a period of depression but comes out of it a more social, self-confident, and self-aware person.

Youth Development Goals:

- Validate the fact that growing up can be a painful struggle for young people.
- Affirm that young people can work through painful situations in healthy ways.

Read the Story and Talk About It

Take turns reading the story. Pause from time to time when there is a passage that you think is ripe for discussion. Consider pausing at the designated points.

Running From Myself

By Jennifer R.

1. The summer after 7th grade, I went to stay with my father. I was so excited because I hadn't seen him for years.

I arrived there a shy and obedient child, but over the summer I changed into a social and wild adolescent. At first I loved it because, for the first time in my life, I felt included and free. Then things changed.

My parents separated when I was 1 year old, and I grew up as an only child. I spent most of the day with my grandmother, playing games like cooking show and dolls. When Mom picked me up from Grandma's house, I went home and watched TV until bedtime. That's what Mom did too; she was tired after work.

Life with Mom was boring. I had no one to play with. Sometimes I'd catch her on a good day, usually on weekends, and we'd bug out together. We'd play music and dance around the house as if we were on Broadway. But other times I made believe I was two people and played games alone.

2. **Too Shy to Make Friends**

I didn't have friends in school. I wasn't used to being social. I was too shy to talk to anyone I didn't know. And no one asked me to be their friend. I was the fat, shy, smart girl in class that no one noticed.

I didn't start out fat, but by the time I was 11 I weighed 180 pounds. I loved Grandma's cooking and could eat plates of it. I ate candy and drank soda, and I didn't play outside. But I hated

(All names have been changed.)

Q. Why do you think Jennifer went from shy and obedient to wild and free?

Q. After her initial feelings of freedom, why do you think things changed for Jennifer? What might have happened?

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being fat and shy.

I dreamed of being cool. I imagined how my life would be different if I were in the “in” crowd. I’d know the good gossip and I’d say “hi” to everyone when I walked down hallways. I envied the attention they got.

3. **Daddy Treated Me Like a Princess**

I saw my father on occasional weekends, and he paid attention to me. When I was little, he’d swing me around and carry me on his shoulders. We played kiddie games and laughed at silly jokes. He treated me like a princess.

I hated not seeing him every day. I often asked him to get back with Mom, but every time he told me no. By the time I was 5, he was living with his girlfriend Rosa, her two kids, Sandra and Luis, plus the two little kids they had together. I didn’t know them well, but I didn’t want to because I felt they took my father from me.

Then my father and I lost contact when Mom and I moved to Staten Island with her fiancé, Stan. At first, I felt like I was missing a part of me.

I didn’t ask why Dad wasn’t around anymore because I was afraid the answer might be he didn’t want to see me, or my mother didn’t want me to see him. I told myself that maybe Mom didn’t tell him that we moved, or he didn’t have the time to see me.

After four years, my mom broke up with Stan, and we moved to Brooklyn. Then my father called that New Year’s Eve. I was stunned. Mom told me that she’d been looking for him for the past year.

“When are you going to come see me? I miss you,” Daddy said to me. After he talked to Mom, she asked me if I’d like to go to his house for the summer.

No one asked me to be their friend. I was the fat, shy, smart girl in class that no one noticed.

Q. Why do you think her dad didn't maintain contact? (Encourage teens to speculate. There are lots of possible good and bad reasons.)

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I wasn't sure. I worried that maybe I wouldn't be accepted by his family. And now they lived in Pennsylvania, too far to come home if I didn't like it. But he really wanted to see me and I missed him and wanted to make him happy. I finally said, "Yeah, I wanna go."

4. **I Partied and Had Fun**

The summer after 7th grade, I went to Easton, Pennsylvania, where he lived. But I only saw him at night and on weekends because he worked long hours.

To my surprise, I had a lot of fun. I hung out with people. I went to parties with Sandra and Luis, who were a little older than me, and my two cousins, Cara, who was 16, and Adam, 17. They became my buddies.

Being social was a new experience for me. And so was trying drugs like alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes, which I'd never even thought of doing before. I was curious and excited to be experimenting.

My new buddies took me to my first club on my 12th birthday. I had a blast. I hung out, met guys, and afterwards we got wasted on beer and hard liquor.

5. **Finally, I Was Cool—I Thought**

I thought I was cool. I felt like I belonged. Even though I was still heavy, it didn't seem to matter to my buddies. I felt like an adult. No one told me I couldn't do something because I was too young.

Daddy wasn't aware of what we did. He worked all day and came home too late to worry. And when he was suspicious of us smoking, we lied about it. But I think if he'd found out, he'd have been furious.

At the end of the summer, I didn't want to leave. When I got home, I rebelled against Mom for not letting me be free.

Q. Now that Jennifer has turned to alcohol and drugs, what do you think is going to happen to her? Do you think this will be her pattern for life or is it a temporary phase? Why?

Q. What does Jennifer mean when she says she "thought" she was cool? Isn't she cool?

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6. **Back Home, I Rebelled**

Thinking about it now, I think I rebelled against myself. I was looking for some way not to be the person that I'd left at home. Rebelling wasn't me—and so it was exactly what I wanted. It helped me keep the feeling of being free.

I wanted to be like my father's other kids, loose and wild. My father and Rosa gave them too much freedom. They let them stay out as long as they wanted and they didn't even have to go to school if they didn't want to.

So, when I went to school the first day of 8th grade I decided it would be my last. That was my first step toward being like them. Each day I waited for my mom to go to work. Then, after walking halfway to school, I'd go home and watch TV. Sometimes I cursed a lot at home for no reason, like they would. Sometimes I stole cigarettes from Mom and smoked them in the bathroom like they would.

I wanted to be bad; I felt I needed to be a completely different person from the shy good girl who lived alone with her mom. I felt liberated by not going by the rules. I wanted to see how far my freedom would go and how much I could get away with.

7. **Mom Confronted Me**

But Mom was too smart for me. After two weeks cutting, she confronted me. "Jenny, we need to discuss what's been going on with you lately," she said. "Why have you been acting so strangely?"

"I don't know," I replied. I didn't want to tell her about anything that was going on. I wanted to keep my distance and independence.

She started crying. "Please tell me what you want. Let me know what you're going through. I want to help you get through this." She was heartbroken that I was changing.

But I just stood there quietly; her distress didn't faze me.

"Do you want to go with your father? Will that make you

Q. Is it stupid of Jennifer to rebel against her mom? Is it brave? Is it necessary? (Why or why not?)

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happy?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, without thought, not caring how hurt my mother was. I just wanted the fun summer experience back.

8. **Back to Dad’s—But the Fun Ended**

So I went back to my father’s. He accepted me with open arms, but everyone else was wondering why I came back. “You were lonely over there, weren’t you?” Cara asked. I had to admit it.

I was so excited to be back. I hung out like I wanted. I smoked, drank and had my fun. But after six months, my buddies from the summer started to treat me differently. They made fun of my squeaky voice, my non-hip-hop style, my weight, my glasses and my frizzy hair.

I felt liberated by not going by the rules.

I felt like I was thrown into a desert and vultures were surrounding me, waiting for me to let my guard down. I felt alone in a house full of people. It was like I wasn’t even part of their family. I was an outcast. To make matters worse, my dad thought we were moving back to Manhattan, and took everyone out of school. But the apartment fell through. We were out of school for nothing, and I was stuck in the house every day with these people.

9. **I Got High to Forget**

I started to take drinking and smoking pot and cigarettes seriously—and began to depend on them. I kept telling myself that being high would take away the madness. I smoked every day so that I didn’t have to recognize when I was being teased.

I called Mom many times to ask her to take me back, but every time she gave me an excuse. She told me that she’d made my

Q. When Jennifer returns to her father’s, why is she mistreated by her step-siblings and others? What changed? (Did she change? Did they?)

Q. What’s the difference between how Jennifer used drugs in the beginning and being “dependent” on them?

Q. Why do you think Jennifer's mom won't take her back? Is her mom being selfish? Does she realize that Jennifer is not really ready to come home?

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room a storage space. I felt like she wanted me gone. I assumed she didn't love me. I felt hurt and unwanted. I felt so alone and depressed.

10. **Conversations With Myself**

As I sat there alone, I had conversations with myself about what I wished for, what I didn't have, what I didn't do, why I wasn't accepted. I spoke to myself, then cried to myself. I wished I could find love, true friends, a life.

I needed to break out of my insecure shell. If I didn't try to change, nothing would get better.

I told myself that my former buddies were jerks and didn't like anyone but themselves. I told myself to speak up, to defend myself. But then I thought that it was my destiny to be miserable. I thought I was

just going to have to live with it.

After about a year, we finally moved to Manhattan. I was in 8th grade again and started thinking to myself that I needed to make an effort to change. I didn't want to be depressed anymore. I didn't want to be alone anymore. I needed to break out of my insecure shell. If I didn't try to change, nothing would get better.

11. **More Social, But Still Me**

Then, on the day I started school, I heard some boys rating how cute I was. Some girls introduced themselves to me. "Have I already changed?" I wondered.

I began to feel more social. I became more open by saying more of what was on my mind and not holding back, and people wanted to be my friend. I was surprised by the attention, and happy to have anyone as a friend.

I even started dating. Boys were actually coming up to me to ask me out. Having other people accept me made me feel I could love myself more. But I was still self-conscious about my looks,

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even though I'd lost a lot of weight. (I guess I'd lost interest in eating when I was feeling down and alone.)

12. I Had to Help Myself

I no longer cared about the parties and the drugs because I didn't need them anymore. And I started to get into my studies again. Knowing that other people liked me for who I was helped me ignore the situation with my cousins and step-siblings at home. It wasn't easy to forget about what they thought of me, but I tried.

I realized that I needed to depend on myself. I got my own job at a clothing store, which I really enjoyed because I was able to be more independent.

At the end of 10th grade, I had a serious talk with my mother. For two years I'd only talked to her on the phone and visited her job. I asked her if I could spend the weekend at her house.

13. A Big Talk With Mom

Once there, I showed her how well I was doing in school. "I'm so proud of you," she said with a big smile on her face. I spoke to her about what I did and why I rebelled. "I needed to have fun," I told her. "I felt like moving was the only way I could get it."

She understood. I also told her how miserable I was living with my father because of the people around him. She listened to every word. I realized how lucky I was with her. I didn't need to rebel. I was just too young in the mind. I didn't know what I was getting myself into.

But after that summer with my mom, going back to my father's was the right move because I would've become so caught up in the fact that my mom wasn't lenient like my dad. I would've lived my days hating Mom for no reason.

14. I Learned My Lesson The Hard Way

Now Mom and I have worked things out. We spend weekends together. I've decided that I want to move back to Brooklyn with

Q. Why do you think Jennifer is changing? Is it because she lost weight (an external change) or has she changed inside? (Or some combination?)

Q. What do you think about Jennifer's transition from using drugs and partying to getting a job? Does this make her "boring"?

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her.

I haven't told Daddy yet because I think it's best to take it slow with him. My father's said he wants to be with me more than ever. He's a sweet and caring man, and the last thing I want to do is break his heart. But now that I have the maturity to make better decisions, I need to do what's best for me.

Q. Should Jennifer move back in with her mom? What's different now?

Explore the Ideas

Advice Column

Ask the group, “Can growing up be hard?” Ask a few people to explain why they think so. Point out that one of the best resources teens have is their peers. Young people can provide advice and support for each other when dealing with hard situations or personal problems.

Break the students into four groups. Explain that they have all been hired to write an advice column in the school newspaper. The letter will be addressed to the “Peer Helpers.” Assign each group one letter from a “student” at their school (see next page). They will have 10 minutes to work together to write a response. Walk around as the groups are working to make sure everyone is on track and to help if anyone is stuck. When time is up, ask the groups to read their responses aloud.

Closing Activity

Ask the groups if they agree with the advice. Is there anything they would add?

Ask each teen to pick one of these prompts and respond to it:

“I admire Jennifer because...”

“I don’t admire Jennifer because...”

Do Something About It

Write a letter to Jennifer telling her what stood out for you in her story. (If you have students do this, collect the letters. They provide fascinating insight into your students’ circumstances.) You can send the letters to Youth Communication if you like and we will try to forward them to Jennifer. If you like, have students block out the letter in traditional fashion. (Jennifer, Writer, Youth Communication, 224 W. 29th St., 2nd fl, NYC 10001).

Prompts for starting the letter:

I really liked when you wrote about...

I’ve felt the same way when...

I agree with...

I don’t understand why you...

If I was in your situation I would...