

What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us Most: The Hidden Harm of Hazing **by Travis Apgar and Ross Szabo**

As Travis placed the empty pistol to his head, he stated, "I will die for this fraternity," and pulled the trigger. What he and his fraternity brothers didn't know at the time was that this hazing activity triggered a lifetime of pain and anger for Travis that went much deeper than his freshman year of college. When Travis was eight years old his father took his own life with a gun. The flashback to that event was too much for him. This event was a trigger point for him, and later that night Travis lost control. He went on a rage, destroying anything he could, and eventually ended this night in the hospital.

This is an example of the hidden harm in hazing that is rarely discussed. Today's fraternity and sorority members need to know that Travis isn't alone. He is only one of many members who come to us broken, entrusting you to make the right decision and not haze in your fraternity.

The Hidden Attributes of Members

Mental health problems are hard to miss on college campuses these days. Each year, one of four college students suffers from some diagnosable mental disorder (NIHM, 2007). About half of all students report feeling so depressed that they could barely function (ACHA, 2004). Suicide is the second leading cause of death on college campuses (Haas, 2004). Over 44% of college students report binge-drinking (Kadison & Digeronimo, 2004) and two-thirds of young people with a substance use disorder also have a mental health issue (Surgeon General, 1999). Ninety percent of counseling centers have reported a rise in students with severe psychological distress (Gallagher & Graham, 2005). Psychological diagnoses that were rarely discussed a decade ago now seem to be worn as badges, as students come to campus life openly admitting to suffering from all types of mental disorders.

The most common mental disorders in young people are anxiety disorders, depression (including bipolar disorder), eating disorders, ADD/ADHD, and schizophrenia (NIHM, 2007). The most prescribed medication for college students is anti-depressants (Birch, 2005). Eighteen to twenty-five year olds have one of the highest rates of severe psychological distress out of any age group, and also have the lowest rate of seeking help (SAMHSA, 2006). Mental disorders can develop due to a biological predisposition much like cancer or heart problems or can be triggered by a traumatic event (with no prior history of mental disorders in the family). Some of the largest triggers for mental disorders are stress, lack of sleep and change. The acceptance of the stereotypical college life, which includes these three components, often masks these mental/psychological disorders. Unfortunately, lack of sleep, stress and change can also trigger a relapse with a previously diagnosed mental disorder or bring out a mental health issue that a person was previously unaware of.

Furthermore, we must consider the societal and environmental experiences that students have lived through before they ever even reach a college campus. Girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen make up thirty-eight percent of females who have

been victims of acquaintances rape (Hazelden, 2000), and somewhere between three and ten million children are exposed to domestic violence each year (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2007). Today's students have experienced the attacks of September 11, and many serve as military reservists. A large number of these reservists have had to take leaves from college to go to war, returning to campus having seen war first hand and carry with them the trauma from that experience. A study on high school hazing demonstrated that 48% of students who belong to student groups reported being subjected to some form of hazing activities (Hoover & Pollard, 2000), many of those students later going on to college. The examples listed above should serve to remind us that we do not know what life experiences people come to college with and what affect they may have had on the individual. These same students who have had these significant life changing mental illnesses and experiences may be the ones who are coming to our organizations. Hazing them may hurt them in more ways than a paddle or verbal abuse ever could.

Hazing and Mental Illness: Travis' Experience

Today's college students are exposed to vast amounts of knowledge, as we live in an information rich society. This creates an opportunity for us to address hazing in a different way. Many students are aware of the physical risks of hazing, or the legal ramifications, but a large majority are completely clueless when it comes to the mental harm hazing can cause. Most hazing activities include events or experiences that can trigger mental health problems in a short time span, leading to a relapse of a mental disorder for some people, or causing a breakdown so massive that it could take years to recover from just one hazing incident, if ever. The last scenario describes Travis's experience; the events that night continued to haunt him during his college career.

After the incident with the gun, Travis left school. At first, he didn't know what to do with his life and looking back Travis is confident that he would have been diagnosed with depression had he gone to see a medical or mental health professional. He eventually did get his life on track while attending a local community college, and decided that he would give a four-year college education another shot. He also hoped to have another chance at pursuing one of his life dreams, playing college football. Travis did well academically at the community college and soon found himself accepted to a larger university and was also invited to summer football training camp. After a few short days Travis had proven his abilities and his commitment to the team. Until the third night of camp, things could not have been going better for him.

That night, a teammate came to his door and asked him to come downstairs where the "rookies" on the team were getting their heads shaved. Travis declined and went to bed. At practice the next morning everyone's attitude toward Travis had changed. He was no longer being treated like a teammate, but rather an opponent. Rude comments and cheap shots were taken at him, and he was called names. After the morning session the captains kept the team on the field and asked the new players, or "rookies" as they were called, to introduce themselves to the returning players. They were asked to say their names and bark like a dog, which was the university mascot. Travis did not go along. In fact, he left camp, left football, and gave up his second chance to live a dream. Travis was not going to be hazed again, ever. The pain he endured after his father killed himself

and after the fraternity he pledged brought back those memories would never plague him again.

The guys on the team had no idea the hazing Travis had once endured, and he certainly was not going to introduce himself at football pre-season camp by saying ‘Hi, I am Travis and I am the victim of hazing,’ especially after what he had experienced that day. So again, because a group of peers did not stop to think about the negative effects hazing could have on a person’s mental well-being, Travis suffered. We cannot tell what someone has experienced in life, what “baggage” they bring with them to campus, and what may trigger a negative reaction, therefore everyone must be educated on these traumatic and negative effects of hazing. Travis is not alone. There are many more that have suffered as a result of hazing.

Consider the Risks of Mental Illness

If fraternities (and sororities) are supposed to be the honorable organizations we all so proudly claim to be then why would we put our new members in these scenarios? We must think beyond the threat of death, the legal ramifications, and judicial action. We must consider the hidden harm hazing causes our new members, these young men and women who desire to be members of our groups. We must remember that we are dealing with individuals who are trying to figure out who they are and what their place is in the world and that these antiquated and juvenile traditions of hazing are little more than hostile attempts to rob a person of their integrity and self-worth.

Remember the possibility that the person you haze, such as Travis, may have been broken and mentally fragile. Remember that the experience you promise and the pain you deliver may push him to the end. Consider the hidden harms that come from hazing the next time you plan new member activities. For someone like Travis, it may be the difference between finding a sense of belonging and reaching the breaking point.

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