

The myths and facts of hazing...

Hazing. The term is often used on college campuses in association with Greek-letter organizations. It often conjures up images of drinking, paddling, kidnapping and servitude in the process of pledging one's commitment to the brother/sisterhood. Some say that hazing is simply harmless pranks and a tradition that is "all in good fun." Others admit that hazing can be humiliating and even dangerous, but contend that it is the best way to build loyalty to the group. However, many are surprised to learn that hazing can be deadly.

Studies have shown that hazing is prevalent in student organizations at the high school and collegiate level and that hazing has been responsible for the death of at least one student every year since 1970.

There are many ideas about what constitutes hazing, its purpose, rightful place (if any), and effects—clearly there are many misconceptions. Clear-cut answers to many of these questions are difficult to find. Many victims and perpetrators of hazing say they made poor judgments in part because they were not well informed about hazing. Knowledge is a form of power; the more knowledge people have about hazing, the more empowered they will be to make good choices.

The following are common myths and facts about hazing.

Myth 1: Hazing primarily occurs in fraternities and sororities.

Fact: Hazing is endemic to our society. Hazing incidents have been reported in middle schools, high schools, athletic teams, bands, professional sports teams, the military, religious cults and other clubs and organizations. In fact, a survey conducted by Alfred University and

the NCAA reports that 80 percent of college athletes have experienced hazing. Many students have already been inculcated into a culture of hazing long before joining any of these groups. Hazing has become so pervasive that it is often ignored or accepted. Many hazing "traditions" have occurred for years in organizations, often with the tacit approval of coaches, teachers and advisors. Since hazing activities are often misperceived as normal behavior, it makes it all the more difficult for initiates to refuse to participate in potentially dangerous and humiliating activities.

Myth 2: It is difficult to determine what is considered hazing.

Fact: Hazing can be defined as *the act of creating the potential for undue physical and/or emotional harm to an individual for the purpose of initiation or continued membership in an organization.* While there are many actions that can be considered hazing, hazing can be both overt and covert. Covert or subtle hazing often involves activities that are designed to ridicule, humiliate or demean the prospective member. This includes requiring prospective or new members to perform duties not required of the other members such as carrying equipment, shining shoes, cleaning duties and forced periods of silence. These subtle forms of hazing, while sometimes not particularly harmful or hazardous to the prospective/new members, often set the stage for more dangerous activities. More obvious forms of hazing include activities that cause extreme mental anguish or physical discomfort to the prospective members. Examples include verbal abuse, forced sleep deprivation, ingesting alcohol or noxious substances, and kidnapping and locking initiates in enclosed spaces.

Myth 3: Hazing is just foolish pranks that are rarely dangerous.

Fact: Hazing is not about foolish pranks. At its core, hazing is about power and control over others. It is premeditated victimization. Even if there is no malicious intent, the imbalance of power between members and non-members creates the potential for abuse to occur. Many deaths have been caused by events that many members initially considered "harmless" initiations.

Myth 4: Hazing is a tradition.

Fact: No fraternities, sororities, athletic teams or other student organizations were founded on a tradition of hazing. If the founding members didn't haze then why should current members? These so-called hazing traditions need to be exposed and the founding ideals of the organization reclaimed.

Getting tough on hazing

Minnesota was the first state in the nation to address the role of hazing prior to a death or permanent injury. As a result, Minnesota now mandates that anti-hazing policies be in place in all levels of K-12 and

Myth 5: Members must haze new members to teach them respect for the organization.

Fact: Respect can only be earned, not taught. Victims of hazing rarely report feeling respect for those who hazed them. In fact, hazing often has the reverse

post-secondary education. The anti-hazing legislation, which has been in effect since 1998, does the following:

- Prohibits any hazing on or off school property
- Prohibits any hazing during or after school hours
- Mandates all schools adopt a written anti-hazing policy
- Requires disciplinary actions that are severe to deter violations regarding hazing, and
- Allows any party the right to civil litigation for damages due to hazing.

Source: Adapted from *Stop the Secret Code of Silence*, Coznik Company Anti-Hazing Education, Roseville, MN 651-490-0912.

effect. Taking a stand against hazing in the organization will eventually earn a person more respect than going along with the crowd.

Myth 6: Prospective members can always say no to hazing.

Fact: The intense peer pressure involved in hazing, coupled with the prospective members' desire to belong to the group, make it very difficult to say no to hazing. In fact, many state laws recognize this dynamic and specifically provide that consent of the victim can not be used as

a defense against a hazing charge. In other words, even if a prospective member appears to willingly submit to hazing, the perpetrators can still be charged with a crime.

It's up to you!

The first step toward eradicating hazing is to educate others about the realities of hazing. Until more students recognize the harmful effects of hazing, many students' lives will remain at risk. We hope that this article is a small step in this endeavor, and we urge each of you to continue this effort by talking with others about hazing and taking a stand when you witness or have knowledge of hazing activities. ■

Adapted and reprinted with permission from the October 1999 issue of *The Peer Educator*. Authors: Brian Rahill and Elizabeth Allan, content supplied by the www.StopHazing.org Web site, which includes state-specific legislation and other resources on this topic.