

Understanding Hazing

In late August 2003, in Preston Township, Pennsylvania, sixty-eight teenage boys, aged thirteen to eighteen, from Mephram High School in Bellmore, New York, participated in a preseason football camp. Five coaches supervised the intense football drills. During breaks, the kids retreated to their cabins, where some of the freshmen, barely weighing more than a hundred pounds, were being tortured by the varsity team members, all weighing in at over two hundred pounds. Three boys were beaten with large plastic garbage bags filled with chunks of ice. The brutality was evidenced by welts and black and blue marks all over the face, chest, arms, and legs of the freshmen. At other times, the boys were sodomized with broomsticks, golf balls, and pine cones covered in mineral ice to increase the pain. These physical and sexual assaults continued day and night, in the bunks and by the lake, for five days. The hazing was not reported until three weeks later, when two boys were bleeding from their rectums and sought medical attention.

This story was too scary to be true. That's how I felt when the news broke in Long Island, New York, in mid-September 2003. As a psychologist specializing in adolescents, I couldn't understand how or why such brutality could occur. I couldn't stop thinking

about the scenes that were being reported on a daily basis. To this day, the stories from that football camp still shock me.

It is surprising to learn that hazing is an everyday occurrence throughout the country and the world. As I realized this, I began to understand the magnitude of the issue, and I believe that there must be reasons why this behavior has existed from biblical days until now. This chapter explores the dimensions of hazing: how it happens, with whom it happens, when it happens, and why it happens.

WHAT IS HAZING?

Hazing is a buzzword that has many meanings, all of which seem to change according to who is using it and in what context. For example, the National Panhellenic Conference, which represents college sororities, does not like to use the words *pledging* or *hazing*; they prefer *new member education*. Athletic coaches usually use the word *tradition*. For those who have participated in some kind of initiation rite, hazing may refer to the exciting or memorable part of that experience. For those who have never participated, it may mean something they have read or heard about.

In 1999, Alfred University in Alfred, New York, conducted a survey on hazing. It is the only substantial published study and is considered the “gold standard” of hazing research.¹ For the purposes of their survey, they used the following definition of hazing:

Any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises.

Another helpful definition comes from Mothers Against School Hazing (MASH).²

They define hazing as follows:

A broad term encompassing any action or activity which does not contribute to the positive development of a person; which inflicts or intends to cause physical or mental harm or anxieties; which may demean, degrade, or disgrace any person, regardless of location, intent or consent of participants, or any action or situation, which intentionally or unintentionally endangers a student for admission into or affiliation with any student organization.

My definition piggybacks on those definitions, but it's more specific in terms of who, what, where, and why. It's important to understand that hazing has characteristics that are very different from other kinds of violence that occur among teens and adults.

I believe that hazing is a process based on a tradition that is used by groups to maintain a hierarchy (a "pecking order") within the group. Regardless of consent, the rituals require individuals to engage in activities that are physically and psychologically stressful. These activities can be exhausting, humiliating, degrading, demeaning, and intimidating. They result in significant physical and emotional discomfort. More specifically, hazing

- Involves a repetition of a tradition
- Is a process
- Maintains a hierarchy within a group
- Intends to create closeness in a group
- Involves psychological and physical stress

Let's take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

Hazing Repeats a Tradition

Tradition is the most distinguishing factor of a hazing as compared with other kinds of group behaviors. These traditions may have significance and relevance to the group, or they may have had a specific meaning that has been lost over time. Traditions are the cornerstone of most hazing, and they've usually been passed down from previous generations of the group.

Traditions may involve physical activities that are symbolic (such as lighting candles at a sorority event) or challenging (such as doing strenuous calisthenics). Likewise traditions may involve psychological elements, such as causing humiliation (having boys wear girls' undergarments in public, for example), which are usually more powerful than the physical ones. Other common hazing traditions involve eating extremely spicy foods, shaving hair, and acting as servants.

Hazing Involves a Process

From my point of view, hazing is a process. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hazing involves planning that often takes weeks or months to prepare and carry out. First, a person is invited or expected to participate in a group activity. Once the person shows interest, the *test* part occurs, and those in charge believe that it's their right and duty to make sure that this person is worthy of being a member of their group. To do this, a sequence of activities is required.

Hazings that occur as part of fraternities and sororities are repetitions of traditions and initiation rites that involve a long process. Weeks before the *pledges* arrive, the members of the fraternity or sorority are planning where and when the pledge activities will occur. The person responsible for organizing this is called the *pledge master*. Frequently, the entire group of active members participates in the actual events, such as requiring pledges to drink large amounts of alcohol in a specific time frame or to memorize huge amounts of trivia about the fraternity or the sorority. In some colleges, the initiation process occurs over the course of four weeks,

whereas in others, it occurs over the course of an entire semester. The kinds of pledge activities change as the process continues and then culminates in a *hell week*, which encompasses the most severe physical and psychological part of the hazing. At the end, there is an initiation ceremony: the pledges are now accepted and become members of the sorority or fraternity.

Hazing Maintains a Hierarchy

Hazing is used by groups to create and maintain a specific social structure and hierarchy. The hierarchy, which has already been established, is a significant part of the group dynamics. The newcomer, sometimes called the *newbie*, “needs” to understand the hierarchy, and it’s up to the senior members of the group to enforce it. In the military, fraternities, and sororities, the concept of *respect* is considered significant. They want the newbies to respect their “elders,” those members who are already part of the established group. In athletics, the concept of hierarchy is similar, where seniors and varsity members hold dominance over freshmen and junior varsity players.

Essentially, hazing necessitates unequal status. Those who are new have less power than those who have been part of the group for a longer time. Whether we want to admit it or not, this drive to maintain the status quo and established hierarchy is seen in almost every example of group behavior. The new kid on the block, the new teacher in the school, or the new cheerleader are all treated with less respect than those who have been established, whose credentials have been verified, and who have already proven themselves “acceptable” to the group. Upon completion of the initiation process, the newcomer is transformed from a newbie, with no rights and privileges, to a member with a higher status.

Hazing Intends to Create Closeness

Members of sports teams, fraternities, clubs, and other organizations that require an initiation rite believe that the group will grow closer by sharing an experience. In truth, those on the same level, such as

pledges in a fraternity or freshmen on a hockey team, may feel close to one another as they will have shared the same initiation. However, these same people won't feel trusting or positive toward those who actually hazed them. Instead the newbies often feel anger and frustration. Such negative feelings could either be conscious or unconscious, and they're usually not discussed with the leaders or senior members of the group. It's probable though that the group of hazers will feel closer once they have hazed, because now they're "partners in crime" and will need to protect themselves should something serious occur.

Groups that haze have no doubt that it is a necessary experience that ensures bonding. To combat this, some hazing experts have suggested substituting positive bonding activities, such as ski trips, rock climbing, or kayaking. What has happened though is that now the groups, such as fraternities and sororities, do the rock climbing or other positive bonding activity suggested by the Nationals (the national office of the fraternity or sorority), *as well as* the usual local traditions—including hazing—that are not sanctioned by the national organization. In fact, a study reported in the *American Journal of Health Behavior* in 2005 found that those involved in hazing were also more likely to be involved in team-building activities. This seems to support my belief that providing positive team-building experiences doesn't replace hazing traditions.

Hazing Involves Stress

Being able to cope with stress seems to be an attribute that's emphasized by all kinds of groups. Those seeking acceptance are often "stressed out" on purpose, in order to measure their ability to cope. For example, in high schools, freshmen athletes are often required to do more conditioning activities than everyone else, and they're treated more harshly if they're late for practice. It's also common for freshmen to carry the heavy equipment before and after practice and games, set up the equipment, and shower after all the senior team members have finished.

An Insider's View of Hazing

I think the most important thing for people to know about hazing is that it doesn't bring people together. What it really does is to slowly break a person down mentally, so they relinquish control to their hazers. Pledging changes a person if they relinquish control. The brothers say you aren't a man or aren't worthy of being a member if you don't eat or drink some disgusting mixture. For example, I had to eat whole onions, unpeeled, drink a gallon of milk as fast as possible, and finish an entire keg of beer between ten pledges. A keg is over two hundred beers, and we did it in forty-three minutes, with a lot of vomiting so we would not get alcohol poisoning. Hell week was worse. Each night, we had to go to the fraternity house, clean it, then go into the cold, dank, smelly basement, blindfold ourselves, and recite passages from a book. All of this was done to strike fear into us and mess with our heads so we followed without hesitation, even though the brothers said it was to make us closer.

As I was being hazed, I was never afraid, I was angry the whole time. I hated my pledge brothers because they were getting brainwashed and wanted to do everything they were told. I hated the people who were hazing me too. I look at them as cowards because of the way they spoke to me, the things they yelled at me, they never would have said if they weren't in that position of authority.

—STEVE, freshman pledge in a National fraternity

In college, Greek life pledges know that they may be dedicating anywhere from a few weeks to an entire semester fulfilling the requirements of the fraternity or sorority. The pledge masters are strict, and fines are given if a pledge doesn't fulfill the required pledge activity. Often pledges are sleep deprived, exposed to the elements (such as being outside during cold winter months without anything other than underwear), and assaulted. (They still get paddled or hit, often with brutal force.) Because they have to maintain a specific academic average, all the while being sleep deprived, being involved in a myriad of questionable activities, and having the pressure to conform, pledges suffer significant psychological stress.

A WORD ON BULLYING

The terms *hazing* and *bullying* are often used interchangeably. Though both are aggressive acts sometimes committed by high school and college students, they are very different. Some educators and professionals are tempted to lump them together and use the same preventive strategies for both. In my opinion, however, because they are different, appropriate interventions are needed for each.

Bullying is an intentional act of aggression that is meant to harm a victim either physically, psychologically, or both. Bullies usually operate alone or in small groups and choose to victimize individuals whom they perceive as vulnerable. Victims attract bullies by their smaller stature, their younger age, or their lower social status. Frequently, there is only one specific victim, who is often a scapegoat. There are no traditions involved in bullying, nor are there authority figures or leaders.

Bullies usually want something—maybe money, maybe a student's lunch, maybe homework answers, or maybe just attention. Bullies may also act simply to demonstrate that they are more powerful, thereby ensuring their status as "tough guys." Often peers of a bully are intimidated and therefore appear to "respect" the bully but are really just in fear of him.

In contrast, hazing involves a large enough group where some participants are hazers, some are watchers, and some are hazed. The hazed members are part of an identified group, such as freshmen on a soccer team. Hazers are acting on the behalf of a group and usually have no intent to harm or to gain individual status or objects from those that are hazed. Those that haze are passing on a tradition and maintaining a hierarchy.

Both bullying and hazing have been increasing in frequency and severity over the past ten years, and both require the attention of parents, teachers, school administrators, and communities. For a further discussion of bullies, read Barbara Coloroso's excellent book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*.

WHAT IS HAZARDOUS HAZING?

Hazing occurs on a continuum from mild to severe. In its mildest forms, hazing involves such things as requiring new group members to address older group members with respectful terms such as *Sir* and *Ma'am* or requiring fraternity or sorority pledges to dress up on certain days. On athletic teams, the freshmen might have to get water for the older members.

Hazardous hazing occurs when traditions or initiation rites skid out of control and cause *significant* and *lasting* physical or psychological damage. When hazardous hazing occurs, everyone in the group, including the perpetrators (those who have planned and carried out the actions), the bystanders (those who have watched and not actively participated), and the victims (those who have received the hazing), may be psychologically traumatized. The families of those involved, the coaches, and the other supervisors may also be traumatized even if they weren't present during the hazardous hazing. Their trauma may be evident immediately, or it may be delayed for months or years or even decades. More specifically, hazardous hazing

- Involves a repetition of dangerous traditions
- Occurs when those in charge have lost control and judgment
- Intends to create closeness in the group but that closeness is undermined
- Involves a plan without an assessment of danger
- Can lead to serious physical or psychological damage

It's important to understand these characteristics in order to comprehend the true nature of hazardous hazing. Let's take a more in-depth look at them.

Hazardous Hazing Repeats Dangerous Traditions

Oftentimes people who have been involved in a hazing don't see the danger in the process. For example, in a high school class that I visited, one junior described how he locked a teammate in a locker. The victim was sitting next to him and laughed about it. Simultaneously, a girl sitting close by turned pale as she imagined being stuck in the locker and having a panic attack, because she is claustrophobic. Even activities that appear benign to some people have the potential of turning into a hazardous hazing.

Hazardous hazing traditions often involve a combination of these, and other, dangerous acts:

- *Physical assault*: including paddling, beating, punching, burning, or branding
- *Unlawful restraint*: including taping someone to a bench, tree, or goalpost
- *Confinement*: including in car trunks, lockers, closets, or basements

- *Ingesting substances*: including excessive amounts of foods or combinations of nonfood substances
- *Alcohol consumption*: such as requiring dangerous amounts of drinking or combinations of alcohol to be consumed, sometimes within a short time frame
- *Sexual activities*: such as simulating sexual acts, performing sodomy, or being involved in forced sexual events or rape
- *Kidnapping*: such as blindfolding and disorienting students before leaving them far from home or campus
- *Exposure*: to extreme temperature and weather conditions, sometimes causing hypothermia or heat exhaustion
- *Humiliation*: involving inappropriate and demeaning acts, such as using a permanent magic marker to circle fat on sorority girls or doing the “elephant walk” (The elephant walk requires students to be nude and walk in a circle, with one thumb in their mouth and the other in the anus of the person in front of them. On command, the leader demands that they switch thumbs.)
- *Physical degradation*: such as being doused or pelted with urine, feces, rotten eggs, and other assorted garbage
- *Psychological degradation*: such as treating the victim like a servant or slave
- *Physical stress and exhaustion*: requiring extreme physical exertion or extreme deprivation of sleep, food, water, showers, or the freedom to speak

- *Dangerous situations*: being exposed to potentially life-threatening situations, such as being drunk and blindfolded while crossing ravines or walking into the ocean

There are other kinds of hazing that are not outlined here but that meet these criteria.

These kinds of hazing leave psychological scars that are even deeper than those that require medical intervention. The victims feel violated and helpless. If they want to remain in the group, they must repress their thoughts about these experiences and deny their hurt and negative feelings. Those who come forth feel betrayed and may face a *second hazing*, in which the group's members harass the individual for reporting the incident. (There's more discussion on the second hazing in Chapter Seven.)

Hazardous Hazing Lacks Control and Judgment

Hazardous hazing occurs when there is no one truly in control and no one who is able to make appropriate judgments about the situation. When hazing skids out of bounds, the group leaders have failed to create safety controls. Those leaders include the immediate authority figure, such as the pledge master or the team captain, as well as all the supervisors and administrators who are above them.

In many cases, the group leaders are probably not even focused on the possible consequences; they are simply caught up in the intensity of the moment or repetition of a tradition. The group leaders may lose control because they are drunk or stoned or their emotional state is inflamed. This often occurs to young adults (ages fourteen to twenty-four), who have the feeling that they are invulnerable and invincible. They are denying reality, falsely believing that they are in control of the situation. The leaders above them—the coaches, fraternity presidents, principals, or superintendents—have not provided safe environments. They have failed to teach the groups how to create safety nets, how to determine dangerous situations, and how to prevent hazardous hazing. They have also failed

to teach the groups why safety nets are necessary for the group's survival and well-being.

How are administrators supposed to control students who are not compliant? Perhaps the analogy to drunk driving is applicable. After many years, and many laws, drunk-driving fatalities have been reduced. High school students actually plan parties and choose a designated driver. Friends often actually take keys away from others who are too intoxicated to drive. As the saying goes, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." The education and public service announcements have worked. And remember that this is the same population, in terms of age and psychological stage, as those who are involved in hazing.

Hazardous Hazing Undermines Groups

The intention of hazing is to develop closeness among a group of people. After hazing skids into the hazardous zone, the group may experience a tightening. This, however, is something like "batten down the hatches and make sure no one tells about what happened." The closeness is out of fear of being discovered, not out of friendship, respect, or true camaraderie. The bonding that occurs under these circumstances is questionable and probably uncomfortable to most members of the group. The participants who have a strong moral compass will experience the most anxiety and discomfort.

Participating in a hazardous hazing may have the opposite effect of the one originally intended by the leaders. Such an experience may teach an individual *not to trust* because they realize how a situation can turn deadly.

Hazardous Hazing Involves Dangerous Plans

Hazardous hazing occurs when those organizing the event don't perceive the inherent dangers in their plan. Usually, the group leaders believe that their plan is no more dangerous than the one that they were subjected to. This may or may not be true. The fact that others

have survived a similar hazing doesn't mean that the original concept was not dangerous to begin with. It means that they were lucky. Therefore the original plan or tradition needs to be assessed for its safety, no matter how many times it has been accomplished without mishaps.

Hazing may be tweaked in order to “outdo” those that were done in the past, or in order to add some originality. This is very common and may be one of the factors that lead hazing into the hazardous zone. Adding just a bit more alcohol, or water, or calisthenics, or freezing conditions, may be just the amount needed to create lethal situations.

In addition, no one truly knows how much his body, or someone else's, can tolerate before organs fail or hypothermia sets in. Perhaps the most dangerous part of these plans is that there is no one on “emergency duty.” There is no one trained and no one alert enough to make the call that the situation is spinning out of control. It is as though the “designated driver” is missing.

Hazardous Hazing Leads to Serious Physical and Psychological Issues

Hazardous hazing often results in a long, complicated array of physical and emotional problems. Alcohol poisoning and drug overdose are common with high school and college students. But the difference in the case of hazardous hazing is that those who are being coerced, either directly or via implied peer pressure, are forced to exceed the amount that they would willingly consume under typical circumstances. Neither the newbie nor the group leader knows how much will be too much for each individual.

The consequences of alcohol and drug overdoses range from an intense hangover to situations that require medical treatments. Some victims need to have their stomachs pumped; some require CPR; and, some die. Other medical conditions resulting from alcohol and drug-related hazardous hazing events include broken bones and fractures caused by car accidents and fights.

Burning of the skin or of internal mucous linings, such as the mouth, esophagus, and stomach may also occur due to contact with fire, or with large amounts of spicy substances. Sometimes jalapenos and other kinds of hot spices are added to alcohol in order to make people vomit, which allows them to continue to consume more drinks. A scary example of this can be seen in the following story.

In a college in Georgia, the fraternity pledge process began with the consumption of an extreme quantity of chopped raw onions. (This is a common theme, to begin the process by eating things that are very spicy, and in fact, sometimes hot sauce, curry, and other kinds of spices are added to increase the intensity of the experience.) For some pledges, the onions burned third-degree holes in the lining of their mouths. The burns were not limited to the mouth and continued to cause inflammation and damage to the pledges' esophagus and digestive tract. Many pledges suffered from significant stomachaches and painful diarrhea, and subsequent hemorrhoids and rectal bleeding. Some pledges were so affected that they were not even able to talk, drink, or eat for several days. They risked becoming dehydrated and missed several days of classes.

Even more disturbing than physical pain are the various sexual activities that may be required either by force or by peer pressure. Sodomy among males is not uncommon and includes putting fingers, objects, or in the worst cases, broomsticks, pine cones, and golf balls covered in Icy Hot into the rectums of the victims. The physical repercussions have ranged from the mild ones to those requiring repetitive rectal surgery. Some sororities have even encouraged pledges to meet the needs of frat brothers, which may include intercourse or oral sex and at its worst becomes date rape.

The psychological aftermath of hazardous hazing can be even more traumatic than the physical. In my interviews of those who have been involved in severe physical hazing events, the victims all state that their wounds heal but not their souls. The psychic damage is probably impossible to measure. It haunts the individual for life.

Victims who come forward and report an incident can be harassed by the group or the group leaders. The isolation, degradation, and humiliation can become so intense that severe psychological problems arise. Many victims are actually physically threatened and intimidated. High school students sometimes switch schools or their family moves away. In every case that I investigated, when college students broke the *code of silence*, they were so harassed and threatened that they felt they had no choice but to transfer to another school.

In the immediate aftermath of a hazardous hazing, such as one that has led to a severe injury or death, all those involved, directly or indirectly, are often in a state of shock. They're not able to concentrate and are often hysterical and extremely anxious. These conditions may fade, only to be replaced by other psychological conditions that continue over time and interfere with general functioning. Emotions can be overwhelming, marked by crying, phobias, paranoia, anxiety, and depression. (There's a complete discussion of the psychological traumas in Chapters Four, Five and Six.)

WHO'S INVOLVED IN HAZING?

At this point, you're probably wondering who would be involved in such absurd, cruel, and dangerous activities. It couldn't possibly be anyone you know. The truth is that anyone and everyone may be involved in hazing! There is no one profile of students who are victimized by hazing or students who are hazers.

Perpetrators

Hazing begins with the people who are leaders and have control of the group. They're the *perpetrators*. They're usually the senior members of the group or those who have significant status due to their size, status, abilities, or personality.

Some perpetrators have been bullies or troublemakers and have a history of out-of-control, aggressive behaviors. However, it's

important to understand that *most* perpetrators don't have such a history. Many are star athletes, honor students, or student council members. Most perpetrators are made, not born. They are made by having once been hazing victims. They have been hazed; they have watched as others have been hazed; and they have waited until it's their turn to haze.

Those who claim that they enjoyed their hazing experience will tell you that they felt stronger and more powerful. They felt connected to generations of others who had experienced similar hazing and, most important, that the hazing made them feel closely bonded with a group. Whether perpetrators think that their original hazing experience was positive or negative, they know, accept, and often anticipate with glee the time that they will be able to gain control, become the leaders, and "do unto others" what was done to them.

What drives the perpetrator to be so cruel? We all have moods in which we are irritable, and sometimes we are not aware of why we are feeling that way. This happens to the perpetrators as well. Sometimes they act out things with planning and intent, and sometimes actions are driven by forces that are outside their conscious awareness. For example, traumatic experiences from the past may have involved physical or sexual abuse, humiliation, or degradation. Repressed feelings may suddenly burst forth during a hazing, and the perpetrator loses control. (Certainly, most parents have had this kind of experience while disciplining a child.) All too often, the perpetrators are intoxicated and their inhibitions are loosened, providing the perfect situation for events to become extreme and uncontrolled.

A perpetrator may be

- Identifying with authority figures or perpetrators he has known from his past, such as an authoritarian coach or father, who has treated him aggressively
- Expressing his own aggressive, sexual, or sadistic feelings, which are part of his personality, and the

developmental needs of an adolescent needing to prove his masculinity

- Simply passing on a tradition that is considered sacred and special, which has been done to him and others and doesn't appear to be as dangerous as it is
- Adding something new to the hazing tradition, which adds a personal touch that may bring it into a hazardous zone
- Having a *failure of empathy*, which means that he's unable to put himself in someone else's shoes and doesn't feel or identify with what the victim is experiencing

Victims

Victims are randomly chosen participants who are recipients of hazing activities. Generally, the victims have low social status within the group, usually because they are new. At other times, the victims are the targets as defined by a particular tradition, such as the *crossing-the-line* ceremony, which has occurred in navies throughout the world since the days of the Vikings. The crossing-the-line ceremony is inflicted on a *pollywog*, a sailor that has never crossed the equator on a naval ship, by the ship's *shellbacks*, sailors who have already crossed the equator. Once the equator is crossed, a daylong strenuous and sometimes dangerous hazing ritual takes place. At the end of the hazing, the pollywog obtains the status of shellback.

Trust is a very important issue because typically individuals have chosen to be part of a group with the belief that the members are trustworthy. Athletes use the phrase "he has my back" to express their trust toward a teammate. Greeks trust their fraternity brothers as though they're part of their biological family. Though students seem to willingly participate in a variety of hazing events, they are assuming that they won't be seriously harmed by the actions of the

➤ DID YOU KNOW ➤

More than 1.5 million high school students in the United States are being subjected to some form of hazing each year. Nearly all of those hazed were humiliated. Most high school students did not perceive even the most dangerous initiation activities as hazing.³

group. As the hazing is occurring, the student may not identify himself as a victim.

In some cases, such as in a fraternity or sorority, students choose to join, and they accept the notion that there will be rituals attached to their pledge commitment. But they assume that these rituals will be benign. Pledges may be told that they can stop at any time, but in some cases, that isn't true. When the initiation rites are unreasonable and dangerous, the pledge may be or may perceive himself as being helpless.

A victim may be

- Identifying with the group in which he wants to gain status
- Pleasing the authority figures (for example, parents or coaches) by joining a group that they had been a member of or that will bring status to themselves or their family
- Gaining instant acceptance into the group, which also brings instant friends
- Needing a role model, which is provided by higher status members (such as a varsity player) or the group's leader (such as the coach)
- Craving structure, which provides clear rules to follow (as with a team or fraternity)

- Denying fears and insecurities, which is a method of coping with stressful situations (In denial the individual may not acknowledge his own feelings, such as fear of being alone or being different from the group. Similarly, he may deny the danger in being hazed.)
- Experiencing a moral dilemma such that the victim knows that his participation is not in sync with his own values
- Trusting the group, which is a projection of the trust that he felt in the past in other group situations, such as at home or in a class

As John Belushi said to a pledge in the film *Animal House*, “Your mistake was in trusting me.”

Bystanders

Bystanders observe but usually don’t actively participate in the actions taken by the perpetrators. For the most part, bystanders are those who are accepted in the group and have already been initiated. They are usually not on the same status level as the perpetrators or the victims. However, in some instances, those who are also new to the group may be bystanders, and some senior members may be bystanders. Bystanders can take many forms and consist of a wide variety of people. However, they usually are the largest portion of the group, outnumbering both the perpetrators and the victims.

In hazing, there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. Bystanders are almost always a necessary ingredient for a hazing, just as an audience is a necessary ingredient for a play. In terms of changing the nature of hazing, it is the bystanders, as a group, who have the most potential to have a substantial impact in curbing the aggression. I believe that all bystanders are affected, psychologically, by what they observe. Regardless of the type of bystander he is, or

whether he willingly or accidentally participated, he is likely to have ongoing psychological effects due to his observation of the events.

There are two basic kinds of bystanders, *active* and *passive*. It's possible that the same person may experience both positions at different times, depending on his status and the internal dynamics of the group.

Active Bystanders

Active bystanders support the actions and intent of the perpetrators. They may be cheering the perpetrators by yelling "more, more" or in some way encouraging the hazing to continue. Their participation in this manner may serve to increase the perpetrators' aggression or lengthen the hazing process. Active bystanders may add to the atmosphere, heightening the emotional state. Think about a crowd at a sporting event. The athletes are spurred on by the tone and enthusiasm of the fans. This is also true during hazing incidences. We've all been active bystanders at some time in our life. We support something, such as rooting for our team or protesting some political event.

Active bystanders may or may not be totally aware of their own motivations and actions. Usually, they're not aware of the power of their presence.

An active bystander may be

- Identifying with the perpetrator, by feeling powerful and superior
- Pleasing the authority figures, by following the rules and not challenging them
- Feeling numb or disconnected emotionally and lacking empathy for the victims
- Expressing his own aggressive feelings, which have been pent up or repressed and are now given a place to be discharged

Passive Bystanders

Passive bystanders would like to blend into the wall and disappear. Usually, they identify with the victim and fear the perpetrators. They may be thinking something like, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Their instinct is to run, hide, or avoid the situation, but they usually read the cues of the situation and believe that they’re powerless. As one young boy in the Mephram hazing later recalled, “I was in the bunk and I laid so flat, hoping they wouldn’t see me—flat and straight, hoping they wouldn’t see me.”⁴

Those who are passive bystanders often suffer great remorse for not intervening (also called *survivor’s guilt*) and are more vulnerable to psychological problems in the future. Passive bystanders may feel uneasy because they are closer in age, size, or status to the victim and fear that they “are next.” Passive bystanders may have a more highly developed sense of morality and conscience, which increases their internal conflict. They’re often paralyzed by the contrast between their inner voice and the outer reality.

The passive bystander feels completely different from the active bystander. Often the passive bystander can’t tolerate his position and is very sensitive to his own precarious situation, as well as the victim’s dilemma. For example, during the Mephram hazing, as the victims were being brutally hazed, one of the bystanders actually started vomiting because it was so upsetting to him.

A passive bystander may be

- Identifying with the victim, feeling vulnerable and stressed
- Afraid of being victimized, because he is very aware of the power of the leaders and is afraid that the direction of the aggression can change momentarily
- Pleasing the authority figures, by accepting the activities

- Caught in a moral dilemma because he knows that the actions of the perpetrators are wrong, yet he's stuck and feels powerless to stop the activity

Supervisors

Supervisors plan, coordinate, organize, evaluate, and run the daily operations of a group activity. These people have been given the responsibility to be in charge by a higher authority, based on their knowledge, aptitude, and experience. The general expectation is that the supervisor is capable of running a program or activity for students that won't endanger their physical or psychological health. Supervisors include coaches, troop leaders, sorority sisters, and youth group coordinators.

It's important to note that most people who are either paid or volunteer to lead a group of students do so from a positive perspective. Whether they have been formally trained or not, supervisors are, in most cases, well-intentioned, good people, who care about a child's well-being.

Often supervisors see themselves as being the good guy, by working long hours and giving a tremendous amount of time and energy to the group. Some supervisors have themselves been hazed or treated disrespectfully, or they have an impulsive, aggressive temperament, all of which may come to bear on the way they supervise.

Problems, such as hazing, often arise because the supervisors aren't adequately trained or the programs are not adequately staffed to provide optimum security and safety. Supervisors may not have been aware of the hazing, or they may have been aware and had no idea of how to control it. Sometimes they send a mixed message, saying that hazing is not allowed but doing nothing to control or stop the group when it gets rowdy. This is probably the most dangerous time, because the kids read the subtext as "It's OK to haze."

Many parents have reported that their adolescents are compliant and willingly conform to strict rules imposed by their supervisor, whereas they are resistant to the limits and advice given by their

own families. For example, in the mind of a developing athlete, the coach is a very important and influential person. The athlete wants to impress the coach, because the coach holds the power to the athlete's future success. It is this position of power that makes the coach or any other supervisor so significant and respected. When I first began my research about the Mephram hazing, I was struck by the way people spoke about the coach. He was a famous personality in the area. He had helped hundreds of kids become football players, including Amos Zeroue, who eventually became an NFL player. (He still is.) The coach seemed to be the most respected figure in the community. No one questioned his authority or his methods.

A supervisor may be

- A role model for the group he is supervising
- The most respected figure in the community, someone who has ultimate power and authority, which is unchecked by administrators or the community
- Pleasing higher authority figures by perpetuating the status quo; for example, allowing a tradition to continue, even though it may be hazing
- Identifying with an authority figure, like his own father, his own coach, or another significant person
- Gaining ego gratification, which means his self-esteem is being strengthened by his role as a supervisor

Perhaps one of the driving forces in being a coach is the satisfaction derived from creating winners, whether it be an athletic team, cheerleaders, or a band.

Administrators

Administrators are the highest authority. They establish the group or program, choose the supervisors, and create policy, guidelines, and training mandates. Administrators are responsible for running the show, for seeing the big picture, for making sure that all the

parts of the organization are working in harmony and that those beneath them, such as supervisors, are capable and will carry out their duties as expected. Administrators include high school superintendents, presidents of national Greek organizations, supervisors of church groups, and leaders of club athletics.

There are over one million people caring for our high school children in terms of athletic, art, drama, and musical activities. This number does not include other kinds of religious groups or supervisors in colleges, such as fraternity or sorority presidents. It is therefore impossible to discuss the various circumstances of supervision and administration that may occur. However, based on the amount of hazardous hazing over the last several years, it seems likely that there is insufficient training and control by authorities over the supervisors and students.

Administrators are often friendly with those who've been in the organization and may not be able to view internal problems without prejudice. For example, if the town loves a winning coach, but the coach has a bad temper, he may be tolerated by the administration, even if that is not in the best interests of the athletes.

An administrator may be

- Protecting his reputation and the reputation of the organization
- Maintaining the status quo, by choosing not to institute changes
- Lacking awareness or ability to change the system

Community

The community is the much larger group, such as a village, parish, town, or city, where the hazing has occurred. The community has a responsibility to demand appropriate controls from the administration. But it also has the responsibility to be part of the system of checks and balances. If the community blindly supports a leader, coach, or supervisor, it may be helping to set the stage for a hazardous

hazing. It is possible that the community as a whole does not understand its power.

A community may be

- Identifying with a winning team, which brings status to the community
- Providing special privileges to parents, teachers, leaders, and coaches of key players, which helps maintain the status quo
- Expecting awards that reflect positively on the town, which may increase property values and town prestige

WHY DOES HAZING OCCUR AND HOW DOES IT BECOME HAZARDOUS?

I initially started my research into hazing with two questions: Why and how?

Why would high school kids hurt one another in the way they did in the Mephram, New York, case, and how does hazing move from teasing and horseplay to acts of extreme violence and sexual abuse?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Kids can and do haze, even if it is against the law or the school policy, even if they know better, even if they didn't like it when it happened to them, and even if they know that it may severely hurt another person. However, there *are* answers. While interviewing parents and students involved in hazing, I began to see patterns emerge that helped explain why and how hazing occurs. We'll first start with the why and then tackle the how.

Why Does Hazing Occur?

Simply put, as human beings, we have an innate need to belong to groups. Groups provide us with a sense of safety, a feeling of belonging to something bigger and stronger than ourselves, or they

may connect us with others of similar interests and tastes. Groups can also bolster our social status and credibility with family, friends, and peers.

Every group has a process in which it accepts or rejects its members. In some groups, the process is a tradition that has been passed down for many years. When this tradition or initiation rite becomes solidified, it may include hazing, proving that the new member is able to withstand physical and emotional stress and proving that the new member is worthy of inclusion in the group. For some groups, this proof of worthiness is the key to being accepted and the only way to become a member.

One of the interesting aspects of hazing is that the senior group members feel that it is their right and duty to pass on the tradition, even if it involves painful and illegal hazing traditions. In fact, many kids actually expect some sort of hazing to happen, although they rarely expect it to be so severe and dangerous as many of the examples used in this chapter. They definitely don't picture themselves as being severely hurt. When the hazing occurs, it feels like it is a case of bait and switch—that they expected one thing and got another. In many cases, what they get is a hazardous hazing.

How Does Hazing Skid into the Hazardous Zone?

To understand how a hazing can turn hazardous, it's helpful to think about the severity of the weather and other natural events. Meteorologists coined the term the *perfect storm* to explain a particularly deadly storm that occurred on the New England coast in 1991. Very specific elements merged in order to create the extreme chaos of the perfect storm. Perhaps the most powerful element was the energy that drove the storm, an energy that we sometimes witness when there is a powerful nor'easter, a hurricane, or a tsunami. It is as though the energy is being stored somewhere in the earth's core and it needs to be released.

Meteorologists try to determine if certain conditions are occurring that are more likely to create significantly threatening weather

conditions and other possible perfect storms. They study the wind currents, the temperature, and the degree of humidity. They study current conditions throughout the country as well as irregular weather patterns or geological events. When two wind currents, one hot and the other cold, are likely to collide, the conditions for a storm become evident. As the specifics are determined, the perfect storm may be created, a storm that often packs the force of a lethal blow.

The same thing can happen with hazing. If the right elements all come together at the same time, a tradition can become hazardous, causing significant physical and psychological damage. I call this theory the *perfect storm of hazardous hazing*.

The elements that make up this perfect storm include the following:

1. Dynamics of the group, where there is a defined and strict hierarchy.
2. An emotional state of the group that is aroused, aggressive, or rowdy.
3. An available time and space. An unsupervised or under-supervised location coupled with enough time to complete the acts.
4. An attitude toward authority. Students are conditioned not to question the authority figure. They are taught to do as they are told and just take it.
5. Individual personalities of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. The specific mix of personalities may encourage aggressive behaviors.
6. Traditions or initiation rites that have become dangerous through time but may not be distinguished as more dangerous than usual.
7. The natural desire for students to want to prove their worthiness to the group, by participating in questionable activities

in order to prove themselves, please leaders and peers, and be accepted.

8. The natural developmental needs of adolescents that urge them to explore their new physical selves, including aggressive emotions and sexual feelings.
9. A no pain–no gain attitude, usually found in team sports and Greek organizations. Students are taught to endure pain and punishment (a take-one-for-the-team mentality) while simultaneously encouraged to unleash aggression on opponents and foes.
10. Unconscious mechanisms that allow adolescents to identify with their leaders. Students may be unconsciously compelled to repeat their traumatic experience (such as a hazing) in order to feel in control. They undo the humiliation that they originally experienced by humiliating others. This psychological process seems to help them feel whole again.

It is possible that a mix of any of these elements can cause hazings to skid out of control. The more we're aware of what causes a hazing to become hazardous, the better we will be able to prevent a future dangerous situation from occurring. For a more detailed and in-depth discussion of the theory *perfect storm of hazardous hazing*, please visit my Web site at www.insidehazing.com.

Just like the perfect storm in nature, where disparate elements came together to form a powerful and devastating storm, a hazardous hazing requires conditions of the physical and social environment, characteristics of the individual and group, and internal processes of the individual to come together in a similarly sinister way. When these elements are set and the emotional energy is available, the likelihood of a hazardous hazing is increased. However, there are ways to prevent these events from happening. We will look at those in the next chapter.

