

How Hazing Can Increase the Likelihood of Mental Health Issues and Can Even Lead to Suicide

Dennis Gillan, International Speaker on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

I will never forget her words. I had just spoken at a national convention for a wonderful Greek organization and as I packed up my bag to leave the hall I noticed a line of people waiting to speak to



me, and it caught me off guard. I'm just a guy talking about mental health, why would someone want to stay after and speak with me? I have since found that this happens all the time and here is why: when you reveal your own vulnerabilities, people get comfortable and want to tell you theirs as well. I now allocate time after my talks to stay and chat until the last audience member is heard. She told me some of the things she was dealing with, and then said this: "My sorority has been a great source of support, but my sorority has also been a great source of stress." Ouch. Her sisters can be a great source of stress, often non-intentional, but she said it, and I will never forget it.

Brain Development & Stress

Stress is not good for us humans----thank you Captain Obvious---and stress is really bad for our brains. Martin Teicher, MD, PhD of Harvard has scientifically proven that while our brains are developing, stress can physically change certain portions of it. I am not a scientist, but I did find this on the Googler:

Researcher Martin Teicher and his team studied young adults, ages 18 to 25. These young men and women had no experience with domestic violence, sexual

abuse or physical abuse by their parents.

The researchers asked the young people to rate their childhood exposure to verbal abuse from both parents and other children. Then the researchers performed imaging tests on the brains of the subjects.

*The images showed that the individuals who reported suffering verbal abuse from their **peers** in middle school had underdeveloped connections between the left and right side of the brain.*

The two sides of the brain are connected by a large bundle of connecting fibers called the corpus callosum. This was the area that was underdeveloped.

Source: <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/health-and-lifestyle-unkind-words-hurt-the-brain/3491496.html>

Hold on there mister, this study was in middle schoolers. That must mean that this does not pertain to high schoolers or college students. WRONG. It is widely debated as to which age the brain is considered "fully mature" or developed. In the past, many experts believed that the brain may have been done developing in the mid to late teens. Then along came some evidence to suggest that development may last until at least age 20. These days, a consensus of neuroscientists agree that brain development likely persists until *at least* the mid-20s – possibly until the 30s. To be safe, let's assume the brain is always developing, so let's all keep our words nice and soft in case we have to eat them.

How Hazing Impacts Mental Health

While doing this research I kept coming back to one aspect of school life that needs to go away and that is hazing. The definition of hazing is this: any action taken or any situation created intentionally that causes embarrassment, harassment or ridicule and risks emotional and/or physical harm to members of a group or team, whether new or not, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. Got it? Good now follow me here, my basic premise is this----hazing causes tremendous amounts of stress---stress is not good for the brain and could lead to depression. Depression is bad and could lead to suicide, and trust me, I know what a suicide can do to a family. I lost

two brothers to suicide. You're going to have to trust me on this one. I KNOW!

The good folks at HazingPrevention.org have a theme they have used to raise awareness about hazing: These Hands Don't Haze. I would like to add one addendum to this phrase: **These hands don't haze, nor do these lips.** You see, I know that the hazing that gets the most attention mostly involves physical abuse, but as a mental health advocate, I worry more about what people say to each other and the impact those words can have. Kate Lattey in her book, *Triple Bar*, summed it all up this way: "Because that saying about sticks and stones is a pack of lies. *Unkind words hurt more than anything else.* You end up carrying them around in your head, wondering if they're true. Bruises fade, but self-doubt follows you forever."

Words Matter

Lisa Ferentz LCSW-C, DAPA, in an article she wrote for Psychology Today states that some of her clients in their 60's and 70's can still recall the exact words and phrases that belittled and hurt them in childhood. (Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/healing-trauma-s-wounds/201708/when-words-can-kill>) You can be considered lucky if you carry unkind words around into your elder years as some folks don't make it that far because unkind words can **kill**. We now live in a world where a young girl convinced a young man to die by suicide through a series of relentless texts. The teenaged boy who ultimately killed himself trusted his girlfriend's words: "You'll be better off," "You just have to do it," "No more pushing it off. No more waiting." This event shines an ugly spotlight on how deadly words can be, and they can slowly kill one's spirit. Part of my healing process from the loss of my two brothers was to work the phones on the suicide prevention hotline (800-272-8255) and I would say about 80% of the calls I received were about relationships. Relationships that had turned sour for some reason or another and the flurry of negative words and emotions lead the target person to pick up the phone and call the hotline. Words mean things.

Many people say they would draw the line at physically being hit in hazing situations, but

what if yelling and verbal abuse were equally damaging?

Thank goodness that we live in a world of balance, and in this world where words can kill they can also heal. Think back to a friend or mentor who said a kind thing about you. Yes, we can carry those words into the later stages of our life as well. In my kitchen I have a jar of kind notes from members of my former tennis club. After a tough stretch in my life I announced that I would be moving to a town around two hours away and before I left they all got together and threw a going away party. One of the best gifts I received was a Memory Jar. This jar contains the kind notes people wrote about me, and whenever I am feeling down I go to the jar for a little pick me up. On dark days that jar is a beacon of light. Compassionate words can heal a fractured psyche. We need more compassionate words.

Back to the article from Psychology Today and Lisa Ferentz. She sums it up this way: Words that are compassionate and non-judgmental have the power to calm, soothe, and re-ground us. They activate our social engagement response, helping us to feel safely connected to other people. This has the effect of reducing fears, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. Words can de-escalate a flight-fight response, enabling us to successfully navigate challenges rather than wildly striking out or fleeing. Loving words of encouragement give us hope, enhance self-esteem, and enable us to take healthy risks in life that allow for ongoing personal and professional growth.

I love the calming nature of words, and if you ever have the chance to see me talk about mental health watch what I do right before I go onstage. I usually find a quiet corner and stand with my palms out and mentally I repeat the word tranquility over and over in my mind in order to calm my brain down and it works! Tranquility, tranquility . . . you see it's even working now.

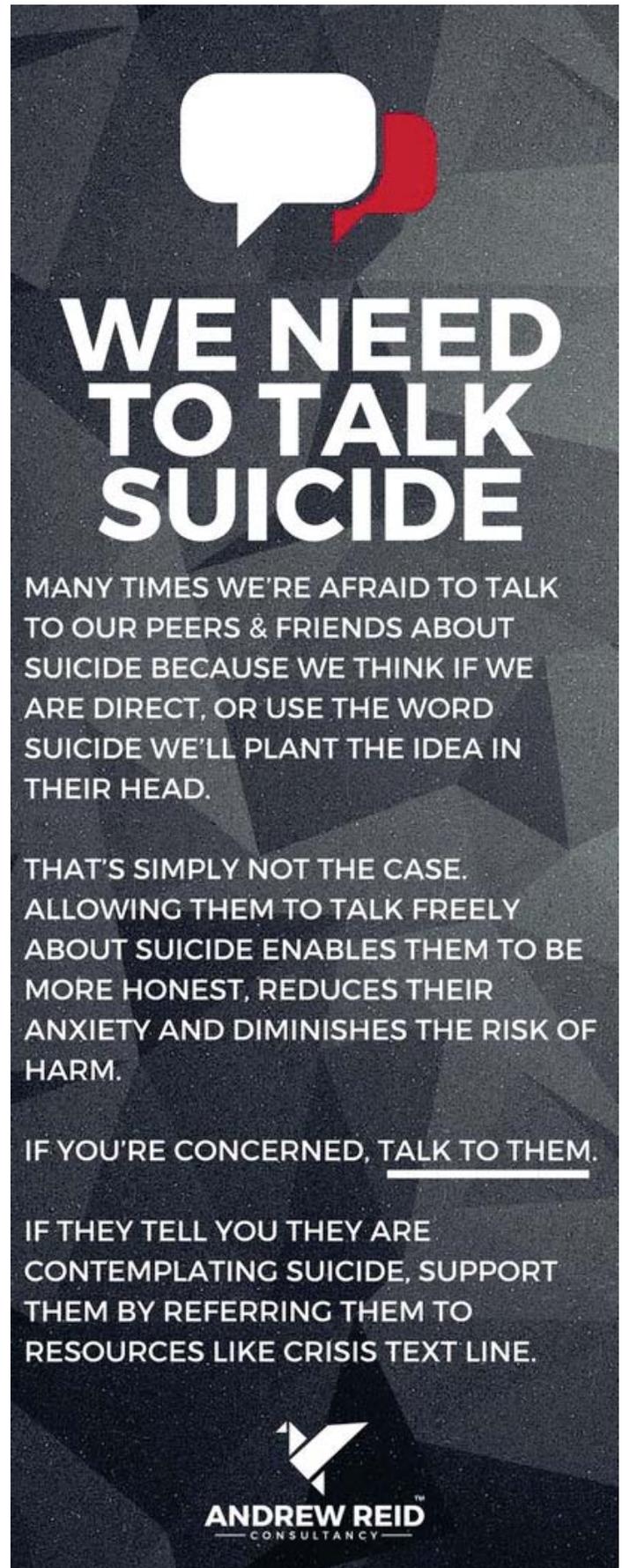
Ok you made it this far let's bring it full circle. The author, Dennis Gillan, lost two brothers to suicide. Dennis now knows that 90% of all the people who die by suicide have some form of treatable mental illness.

Depression is the most common mental illness and hazing can be stressful and lead to depression or even exacerbate depression that is already there. Hazing can be both physical and mental and mean words can be used to inflict mental stress. These hands don't haze, and nor should your lips. Hope this all makes sense and it basically all boils down to the Golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." There is absolutely no room for hazing in the golden rule. Peace out!

***Dennis Gillan** is an international speaker on the subject of mental health and suicide prevention. He has turned the experience of losing two brothers into a positive message about living without the stigma associated with mental illness. He is based out of Greenville, SC and he can be reached at dennis@dennisgillan.com and his website is www.dennisgillan.com*

It is often difficult to prove that hazing and suicide are related, but there are many cases where there are strongly suspected links such as:

- [workplace hazing in the UK](#)
- U.S. [Marine Corps](#)
- the [Russian military where the hazing is particularly brutal](#)
- A fraternity hazing in [Washington State](#)
- An [Australian university](#) (Australia has recently been in the news for shocking and cruel hazing rituals).



The graphic features a dark background with a geometric pattern. At the top, there are two overlapping speech bubbles, one white and one red. Below them, the text "WE NEED TO TALK SUICIDE" is written in large, bold, white capital letters. Underneath, there are three paragraphs of text in smaller white capital letters. At the bottom, there is a logo for Andrew Reid Consultancy, which consists of a stylized white bird or arrow shape above the text "ANDREW REID" and "CONSULTANCY" below it.

WE NEED TO TALK SUICIDE

MANY TIMES WE'RE AFRAID TO TALK TO OUR PEERS & FRIENDS ABOUT SUICIDE BECAUSE WE THINK IF WE ARE DIRECT, OR USE THE WORD SUICIDE WE'LL PLANT THE IDEA IN THEIR HEAD.

THAT'S SIMPLY NOT THE CASE. ALLOWING THEM TO TALK FREELY ABOUT SUICIDE ENABLES THEM TO BE MORE HONEST, REDUCES THEIR ANXIETY AND DIMINISHES THE RISK OF HARM.

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED, TALK TO THEM.

IF THEY TELL YOU THEY ARE CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE, SUPPORT THEM BY REFERRING THEM TO RESOURCES LIKE CRISIS TEXT LINE.

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