

Psychological and Physical Hazing: Reclaiming Your Power

by Dr. Jason L. Meriwether



High school students are often convinced that something that is a tradition, or rite of passage, or just a ritual that a club or team “has always done” is not really dangerous, and then quietly go along with the activity.

These activities take two forms, **physical** or

psychological. These can occur in tandem or separately. Hazing is often **physical** in nature, which involves hitting, consumption of hazardous foods or concoctions, sexual battery, extreme exercise, exposure to unsafe conditions, or physical brutality (Jones, 2015; McGlone & Schaefer, 2008; Meriwether, 2016; Nuwer, 2001).

Equally dangerous is **psychological** hazing, which is mental in nature. McGlone and Schaefer (2008) noted that forms of mental and psychological hazing, such as high stress situations or seemingly dangerous or harmful environments, which are frequently overlooked and underestimated. McGlone and Schaefer (2008) discuss several types of psychological hazing may include:

- 1) verbal abuse
- 2) being subjected to highly stressful situations;
- 3) being asked to perform acts that go against personal beliefs such as committing a crime;
- 4) simulating sexual activities;
- 5) and/or being subjected to a perceived physical danger. Another form of psychological hazing includes simulating sexual activities.

Allan & Madden (2008) found that 47% of students come to college having experienced hazing in high school. In 2015, seven high school football players were convicted of hazing and sexually assaulting four teammates at a New Jersey high school in in 2014 as part of a team ritual. In 2017, 13 students at a Texas high school were arrested for violent hazing rituals. Members of the senior class at another New Jersey high school circulated a "Slut List," which targeted 21 freshmen female students who were shoved into lockers and forced to dress in attire selected by the seniors. These cases, and many others have led to serious physical and mental harm that could potentially damage the victims far beyond high school.

The scars of **psychological** and **physical** hazing are very real, extremely dangerous, and woefully underestimated. Here are a few preventative ideas for high school students to consider when faced with the danger of **psychological** or **physical** hazing.

Peer Pressure Is Real

Nuwer (2001) explains, when a request of individuals within a group that a potential victim perceives to be important, solicits that person to do something to gain entrance into a group or organization, this is hazing. Older students often take advantage of peer pressure or the desire of another student to be accepted by a group, club, or team to convince them that what is wrong is actually right. It is important to reach out to club advisors, coaches, teachers, school counselors, or principals to learn the true requirements to enter an organization. Always remember, students cannot set the real rules. Get them from the source.

Please, Trust Your Instincts

Nuwer (2001) explains, “Hazers use mental games, verbal abuse, and peer pressure to make newcomers bend to the will of the group” (p.47). Sometimes to convince others to subject themselves to a hazing activity, an older student or member of a club or team may say, “if I did this, you can take it.” This statement is often used as a tool to elicit participation from an unsure student. However, when faced with a scenario or ritual that your instincts tell you is not safe or healthy, it is ok to believe in your feelings and walk

away. If the only path to membership is to go against your personal values, or your sense of personal safety, then it is ok to question if that organization or team is really for you. Talking with a teacher, family member, or school counselor about your feelings and concerns is a great way to validate your desire to make a good choice.

Power of Your No

Jones (2015) explains that hazing rituals and initiation are used to establish power over potential new members of a club, team, or organization. As a high school student, especially as a freshman, older students may present a hazing ritual to you as if there is no choice but to comply. But in fact, you do have the option to walk away, to say no, or to question any situation that feels or looks unsafe physically or psychologically. While psychological and physical hazing is designed to strip you of power, it is important to remember that you do possess the ability to challenge an unsafe situation, to protect yourself, and to walk away. There are counselors, coaches, teachers, principals, and family members who are there to support you and to remind you that your power can't be taken away by a hazer.

Conclusion

In the moment, it may seem easier to submit to hazing than to trust yourself or your instincts. However, by keeping a system of support in your school and home, it becomes easier to combat the secrecy and pressure of psychological or physical hazing. The first step of hazing is to make you feel alone, without choices, and stripped of power. By recognizing some of the methods that hazers use, you have the first tool to combat hazing, find help, and preserve your power.

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About the Author

Dr. Jason L. Meriwether is the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management & Student Affairs at Indiana University Southeast. In 2014, Jason was selected to Louisville Business First's Top Forty under 40 and as one of Business First's 20 People to Know in Education and Workforce Development. In 2014, Jason received the award of Outstanding Kentuckian and was commissioned to the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels. Jason was also named to the Southern Indiana Business Source 20 under 40 Class of 2016 and is a 2017 American College Personnel Association Foundation Diamond Honoree. Jason is a financially active member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and has overseen numerous Interfraternity Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, & National Panhellenic Conference chapters, as well as service, honors, and music fraternities & sororities. Jason's national presentations on legal issues related to hazing have been the subject of cover stories in the Student Affairs Today Newsletter and in College Athletics and the Law. During his career, Jason has organized community service initiatives that have provided over 15,000 documented hours of volunteering, service, and mentoring completed by Greek Letter Organizations. Jason earned the Ph.D. in Educational Administration at Indiana State University. His dissertation was titled, The Impact of Hazing Rituals on the Intent to Report: Examining the Perceptions and Beliefs of Undergraduate Students in Greek Letter Organizations. To learn more about Jason, please visit www.jasonlmeriwether.com.