WHAT IS A Bystander?

Have you ever witnessed someone in need of help yet failed to intervene? Your response to this question may cause you discomfort, guilt, and even shame, yet inaction is more common than one may think. When an individual fails to take action to stop a situation that is potentially harming another, this is known as bystander behavior. Every year, students watch as other students are hazed. Some of those who are hazed will experience emotional and/or physical harm from hazing. When considering hazing, how do we avoid clinging to the comforts of bystander behavior and initiate a new standard of ethical behavior?

Why Don’t We Intervene?

In the 2008 National Study on Student Hazing (Allan & Madden, 2008), over 11,000 students at 95 different colleges and universities in different regions of the U.S. were surveyed about their perceptions and behaviors related to hazing. As well, the study included more than 900 interviews with students, staff and administrators at 18 of these institutions. The students provided a wide variety of responses on the issue of hazing -- from utter disbelief that anyone could possibly find him/herself involved with such degrading activities, to those who believed wholeheartedly in hazing and the perceived “benefits” of hazing. The study revealed that hazing behaviors occur in college athletic teams, honor societies, student organizations, fraternities and sororities, to name a few. More than half (59%) of college students involved in clubs, teams, and organizations have experienced hazing, while 69% of students are aware hazing is occurring on campus. Many authors and researchers have tried to explain why people haze, and why those who witness hazing often choose to ignore it.

Moving from Bystander to Change Agent

The five-step process introduced by Latane and Darley (1970) provides a framework for understanding how to enhance the likelihood that individuals will make the transition from passivity to action. More recently Berkowitz (2003) employs these stages and social norms theory to offer a model of interventions appropriate for reducing the causes of bystander behavior. The stages, outlined below, can be used to understand many situations in which we might be inclined to act as a bystander. Next, we outline these stages and illustrate each with quotes from students interviewed in the National Study of Student Hazing.

"I talked to some people asking about how I can go about stopping this kind of behavior, but ultimately I decided that I rather not have anything happen to any of my brothers now my girlfriend, the people around me...nothing will stop them to ensure that their pledging secrets are kept quiet." (Student V)  

"I told them I was dropping (because of the hazing). They kept pressuring me and continually degrading me, I didn't tell anyone, I kept it inside." (Student N)
1. NOTICE THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING
BEFORE AN INDIVIDUAL IS ABLE TO ACT, HE/SHE MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT HAZING IS, IDENTIFY IT, AND TAKE NOTICE WHEN HAZING IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING.

“Well, I think there are a couple different types of hazing. There is fun hazing and then there is embarrassing hazing.” (Student H)

2. INTERPRET THE EVENT AS AN EMERGENCY
ONCE THE INDIVIDUAL IDENTIFIES THE ACTIVITY/BEHAVIORS AS HAZING, HE/SHE MUST RECOGNIZE THE HARMFUL POTENTIAL OF THE SITUATION.

“We know [hazing] goes on and it is obvious. It is blatantly obvious and you have to be blind not to see it and what do we do about it now? What kind of culture are we creating for our students? I live in this one hall and I am in a majority with how I feel. The people who are doing this are in a very small minority but we are letting a minority culture control our residence halls.” (Student P)

3. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROVIDING HELP
ONCE THE ACTIVITY/BEHAVIOR IS NOTICED AND IS UNDERSTOOD AS A PROBLEM, THE INDIVIDUAL MUST FEEL A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST THE BEHAVIOR/ACTIVITY. THIS STUDENT IS MOVING TOWARD TAKING RESPONSIBILITY.

“...every organization should make it known to their members who their advisor is and who they can contact... A lot of times students won’t want to talk to other students, they want a more adult figure to take their concerns to... I honestly couldn’t tell you where they would turn. I don’t know.” (Student L)

4. KNOW HOW TO HELP
FEELING A RESPONSIBILITY SHOULD LEAD TO ACTION. AN INDIVIDUAL NEEDS TO ACQUIRE THE NECESSARY TOOLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO KNOW HOW TO INTERVENE APPROPRIATELY.

“For me personally when I give a pledge interview this year I am restructuring their resume so a freshman kid can build on it as he progresses through college and he will be able to have something more than the just knowing that he cleaned my house. I can clean my own house I don’t need someone to do it for me.” (Student J)

5. TAKE ACTION TO HELP
IN ORDER FOR THE INDIVIDUAL TO ACT, HE/SHE NEEDS TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO TAKE THE NECESSARY STEPS TO ELIMINATE THE BARRIERS DESCRIBED ABOVE, COMPLETING THE CYCLE.

“...There are those times when those students (who were hazed) come in and think a lot of wrong was done to them... and it (hazing) is wrong and so they start changing the system in a different way.” (Student O)
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

THE FOLLOWING STORIES ARE STUDENT TESTIMONY FROM THE NATIONAL STUDY ON STUDENT HAZING. PUT YOURSELF IN THESE SITUATIONS AND ASK, "WHAT WOULD I DO?":

"I DO SEE PEOPLE WITH LETTERS SHAVED INTO THEIR HEADS AND THEY SHAVE THEIR WHOLE HEAD... I WAS EATING DINNER WITH A FRIEND OF MINE OVER THE WEEKEND AND I SAW SOME PEOPLE PUSHER AND DOING PUSH UPS ON THE CORNER OF THE STREET BECAUSE THEY HAVE (SHAVED) HEADS... I GO OUT THERE WHENEVER THEY ARE (SHAVING HEADS) AND I JUST OBSERVE. I SIT ON MY BALCONY AND I WATCH THEM. JUST YOU KNOW THE ACT OF SHAVING HEADS AND THE HOOVIN' AND HOLLARIN'. IT IS A LITTLE SHOCKING TO ME BUT THEN AGAIN, IT IS THE CULTURE."

"ONE OF THE NIGHTS ON THE THIRD WEEK, (THE PLEDGE EDUCATOR) BUSTED IN AND HE HAD AN AXE HANDLE AND HE STARTED RUNNING DOWN THE LINE PUSHER PEOPLE OVER, KNOCKING PEOPLE DOWN, AND HE STARTED YELLING AT US. WE HAD TO RUN DOWN TO THE BASEMENT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AND GET INTO AN OLD BOILER ROOM WITH BROKEN GLASS, WOOD SCATTERED EVERYWHERE, NAILS, AND WE STAYED THERE IN COMPLETE DARKNESS. THE ENTIRE TIME THE BROTHERS (WOULD) COME DOWNSTAIRS TAKING TURNS AND THEY (WOULD) THROW BEER BOTTLES AT THE DOOR, ATTACKING THE DOOR, TRYING TO MENTALLY SCARE US."

"THEY BROUGHT OUT ONE MATTRESS FOR THE 8 GUYS THAT WERE THERE, AND THAT WAS GOING TO BE OUR ONLY SLEEPING AREA... THE FIRST NIGHT WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO SLEEP, WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO EAT, WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO SHOWER, BATH, BRUSH OUR TEETH. WE WERE BROUGHT UPSTAIRS AND WE HAD TO CLEAN THE HOUSE 24/7."

IN EACH ONE OF THESE SITUATIONS, NO ONE HAD THE COURAGE TO INTERVENE TO HELP SOMEONE IN NEED. ARE THESE INACTIONS EXAMPLES OF BYSTANDER BEHAVIOR? TAKE A MOMENT AND REFLECT ON THE LAST FEW MONTHS, HAVE YOU BEEN BYSTANDER?

NOW, LET'S BE HONEST... BYSTANDER BEHAVIOR IS NOT THE EASIEST THING TO TALK ABOUT IN A GROUP SITUATION, BUT YOU WILL KNOW WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT TO BRING IT UP. YOU MAY WANT TO USE SOME OF THE SITUATIONS ABOVE TO EXPLAIN IT, OR YOU MAY WANT TO USE SOME OF THE FOLLOWING SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

• DISCUSS SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF HAZING YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED, WITNESSED, OR HEARD OF ON YOUR CAMPUS (WITHOUT IDENTIFYING NAMES OF ORGANIZATIONS, TEAMS, CLUBS AND/OR INDIVIDUALS). WHAT DOES HAZING LOOK LIKE?

• DISCUSS IDEAS OF WHAT HAZING IS AND SEE HOW THESE IDEAS COMPARE WITH THE REAL DEFINITION

• DISCUSS AND IDENTIFY REASONS WHY STUDENTS MAY NOT FEEL A RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT AND/OR STOP HAZING ON CAMPUS. WHAT STEPS CAN STUDENT LEADERS, FACULTY, ADVISORS, AND/OR ADMINISTRATORS TAKE TO PROMOTE A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY ON CAMPUS?

• DISCUSS AND IDENTIFY THE APPROPRIATE STEPS TO REPORT AN INCIDENT OF HAZING ON YOUR CAMPUS. ARE THERE MODIFICATIONS TO THE PROCESS THAT YOU WOULD SUGGEST IN ORDER TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR A STUDENT TO REPORT HAZING ON YOUR CAMPUS?

• DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES ONE MIGHT FACE WHEN HAVING TO TAKE ACT AGAINST HAZING. WHAT STRATEGIES CAN YOU EMPLOY AS A STUDENT LEADER TO ASSIST OTHERS IN TAKING ACTION ON YOUR CAMPUS?

• IF TIME AND SPACE PERMIT, BRING THE POINTS OF DISCUSSION TO THE LARGER GROUP FOLLOWING THE SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLARIFICATION, SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, AND TO ADDRESS QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS.

IN KNOWLEDGE THERE IS POWER, AND WITH POWER COMES RESPONSIBILITY. THE NEXT TIME YOU SEE SOMETHING GOING ON AND YOU HAVE THAT "GUT" FEELING THAT SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT, SPEAK UP OR TELL SOMEONE ABOUT IT. DON'T BE PART OF THE PROBLEM BY BECOMING A BYSTANDER... BECOME PART OF THE SOLUTION BY BEING A CHANGE AGENT!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE NATIONAL STUDY ON STUDENT HAZING, VISIT WWW.HAZINGSTUDY.ORG.

