

# Myths of Hazing

*Hazing is such a hot-button topic that there are frequently myths and half-truths about it. Here, we address some of the common misconceptions surrounding the issue of hazing.*

**Myth:** The definition is so vague that anything can be considered hazing - it's such a gray area.

**Reality:** Read the definition and then ask yourself the following questions:

- *Does the activity involve mental distress such as humiliation or intimidation?*
- *Does it involve physical abuse (e.g., sleep deprivation)?*
- *Is there a significant risk of injury or a question of safety?*
- *Would you have any reservations describing the activity to your parents or a university official?*
- *Is alcohol involved?*
- *Would you be worried if the activity was shown on the evening news?*

If the answer to any of the above questions is "Yes," the activity is probably hazing.

**Myth:** Hazing only exists in fraternities and sororities.

**Reality:** Hazing incidents have occurred across the country in athletic teams, military units, performing arts groups, religious groups, and other types of clubs and organizations. Hazing occurs in high schools as well as on college campuses.

**Myth:** New members want to be hazed.

**Reality:** Occasionally there are new members who say they want to be hazed. But generally most do not want to be humiliated, intimidated, or physically abused. "Wanting" to be hazed usually means desiring an intense, challenging experience. It is not necessary to haze new members in order to challenge them.

**Myth:** Hazing only "a little bit" is not really that bad.

**Reality:** While there are more and less severe forms of hazing, even low level hazing crosses the line. Even a "little" hazing can have an unintended negative impact on new members. And if the action meets the definition of hazing, the group will get in trouble if caught.

**Myth:** Hazing builds unity among new members.

**Reality:** Hazing may create unity among new members, but often there are costs as well (see Arguments For and Against Hazing). The effect of hazing on a group can be like the effect of a hurricane on a community: residents feel closer to each other afterward but some may be suffering. Would anyone suggest that it is good for a community to be hit by a hurricane?

**Myth:** Hazing is the only method for holding new members accountable.

**Reality:** While holding new members accountable may be important, there are effective ways to do so without hazing. Effective parents, teachers, and bosses all know ways to hold others accountable without humiliating, degrading or physically hurting them. These skills can be learned.

**Myth:** "If it doesn't kill you, it only makes you stronger."

**Reality:** If this statement was true, then child abuse and torture would be prescriptions for personal growth. So while it's true that difficult situations can help individuals grow and prepare for life's challenges, many experiences that don't "kill" nevertheless do damage because of their psychological or physical impact.

**Myth:** Hazing is okay as long as it is not physically dangerous.

**Reality:** Mental hazing can be brutal and leave lasting psychological scars. Some hazing victims report that the mental hazing they endured was worse than being physically abused.

**Myth:** Hazing is a way to improve the attitude and character of a new member.

**Reality:** Hazing often generates anger and resentment. Plus it teaches that "values" such as deception, coercion, and intimidation are acceptable means for achieving your goals.

**Myth:** As long as there's no malicious intent, a little hazing should be okay.

**Reality:** Even if there's no malicious "intent," safety may still be a factor in traditional hazing activities that are considered to be "all in good fun." For example, serious accidents have occurred during scavenger hunts. And when members are drunk, they sometimes subject the new members to more than they originally intended.

**Myth:** Hazing continues because everyone in the group supports it.

**Reality:** Many group members may not approve of hazing but go along with the activity because they mistakenly believe everyone else agrees with it. This "reign of error" helps to perpetuate hazing. The strongest supporters of hazing are often the most vocal and dominant members.

**Myth:** If someone agrees to participate in an activity, it can't be considered hazing.

**Reality:** In states that have laws against hazing, consent of the victim can't be used as a defense. This is because even if someone agrees to participate in a potentially hazardous action, it may not be true consent because of peer pressure, intentional or unintentional threats, and the withholding of information about what will occur.

**Myth:** Since alumni and current members were hazed it is only fair that the new members go through it too.

**Reality:** "Tradition" does not justify subjecting new members to abuse. Traditions are created by groups, and groups hold the power to change or eliminate them. It only takes one year to break a hazing tradition. Remember that the founding members of organizations were not hazed.

**Myth:** Eliminating hazing makes an organization just like any other social club. It will be too easy to become a member.

**Reality:** Hazing is not necessary for an initiation experience to be challenging and unique. A well-organized, creative program will build group cohesion and foster character development. Any group can haze new members - that's the easy way out. It takes vision and commitment to run a good, non-hazing program.

**Myth:** Enduring hazing is a sign of strength.

**Reality:** While it does take a certain strength to make it through hazing, many people submit to it because they desire acceptance by others, are afraid to resist, or feel a need to prove to themselves or others that they are worthy or tough enough (e.g., "a real man"). These motives reflect conformity, fear and insecurity, which are not qualities typically associated with strength. In contrast, standing up to a group of abusive peers or breaking free from hazing takes courage. That's real strength.

**Myth:** Hazing is no more than pranks that sometimes go awry.

**Reality:** Accidents happen during hazing, but hazing is not accidental. It is premeditated abuse that can be emotionally traumatic, physically dangerous, or even life-threatening.

**Myth:** Hazing practices preserve the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the group.

**Reality:** Since hazing practices are secret, group members often don't realize that their "unique" practices are typically variations on common themes: extensive memorization with verbal abuse for incorrect answers, sleep deprivation, servitude, kidnappings, drinking rituals, calisthenics, lineups, cleaning up messes, isolation of members, theft, impossible games, sexual embarrassment, inappropriate clothing, absurd scavenger hunts, unpalatable food, and physical violence.

**Myth:** Other groups on campus will not respect an organization that does not haze.

**Reality:** A positive, educational program will result in a better all-around organization and the ability to attract the best new members. Being able to recruit the best students will earn the respect of other groups.

**Myth:** Hazing must be okay if the military does it.

**Reality:** The U.S. military does not, in fact, condone hazing practices. The military does engage in a unique type of training for dangerous military operations. This training is conducted by professionals to prepare military personnel for putting their lives on the line for their country. According to the Dept. of the Army's TRADOC Regulation 350-6: "Hazing is strictly prohibited" and is "an offense punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice."