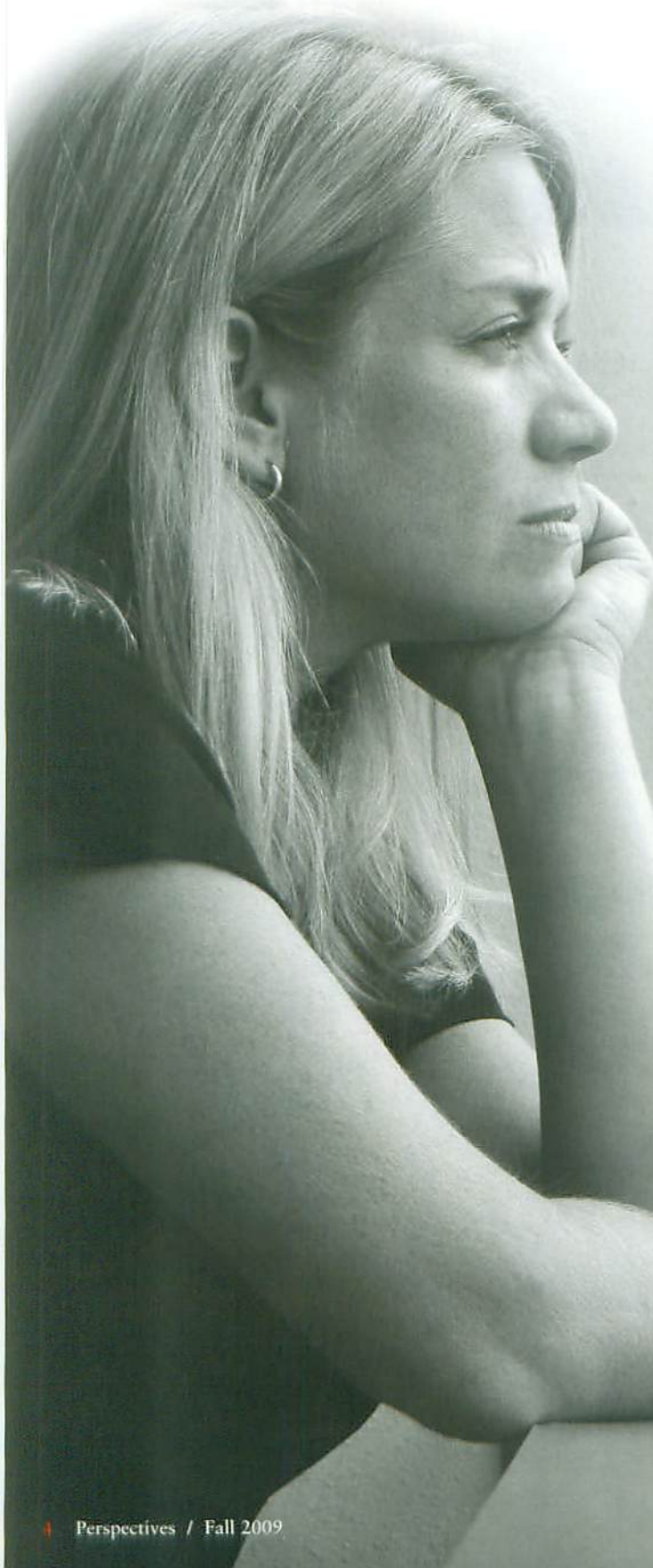


From **BYSTANDER** Behavior to **INTERVENTION**

By Mike Dilbeck



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Two years, four months, and four days after a college man was found dead in his chapter house, officials at a prestigious, private university decided to take action. They realized that it was no longer an “isolated” incident. The use of illegal drugs by members of this national fraternity chapter was not isolated to the student who died. Furthermore, following the death, some members of the chapter did not cooperate thoroughly or were not forthcoming with officials, therefore hampering efforts to investigate this tragedy (Ford, 2009). There *were* opportunities for somebody to say something or do something. There *were* opportunities for others to show leadership.

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Most fraternity/sorority professionals have asked their version of the following questions: “Why aren’t many of the problems I manage actually dealt with before they get to me? Why don’t others show leadership, do the right thing, live out their values, and take action?” These are valid questions and ones that deserve inspection. So much time is spent dealing with problem situations that other students, faculty, alumni, advisors, house directors, etc. may have the skills and ability to handle long before they ever reach the fraternity/sorority professional’s office.

Fraternity/sorority members are of some of the brightest and best students around. They are capable. They are smart. They have solid values. They are committed to making a difference. Why, then, don’t they stand up for what’s “right” and actually intervene in situations involving hazing, drug/alcohol abuse, eating disorders, offensive remarks, discrimination (racism, homophobia, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.), sexual abuse/assault, cheating, and all other unhealthy and inappropriate behaviors? Why aren’t *they* handling these problems on their own? Why do their values seem to disappear when it comes to these problem areas?

According to Dr. Alan Berkowitz, recognized expert on the social norms approach and bystander issues, and author of the new book *RESPONSE ABILITY: A Complete Guide to Bystander Intervention*, one theory is called bystander behavior which is “when someone witnesses a problem behavior and does not do anything about it. A bystander does not respond” (2009, p. 5). You could actually say that every problem in the fraternity/sorority community has bystanders. Something happens – or is happening – and someone sees it, hears about it, or at least knows about it, and does nothing. Very rarely does hazing happen in a chapter and others do not know about it. The same principle applies when a chapter member reaches for those car keys after a “few too many.” Someone sees it yet does nothing, says nothing. We could fill this article with dozens of other examples.

Now here’s something I ask you to consider: *you, too, are a bystander*. This is not to invalidate or minimize those times when you have intervened and made a difference – you do it all the time. However, if you are really honest with yourself, there have been times where you turned away and did nothing, said nothing. There are times you, too, are confronted, just like students, with opportunities to intervene. Now this does not necessarily make you a bad person or a bad fraternity/sorority professional. This conversation is not meant to lay guilt on you, but rather to empower you to see what you may not be seeing now. It also serves as a starting place to help you, and others committed to the fraternity and sorority movement, make the positive change you are out to make.

Allan and Madden’s (2008) findings from the *National Study of Student Hazing* provide evidence that:

There are public components to hazing including: 25% of coaches or organization advisors were aware of the group’s hazing behaviors; 25% of the behaviors occurred on-campus in a public space; in 25% of the hazing experiences, alumni were present; and students talk with peers (48%, 41%) or family (26%) about their hazing experiences (p. 2).

These findings begin to make real that others do know about problem situations and, yet, most of the time, nothing is done to intervene.

As you read the rest of this article, picture one of those moments. Take a minute to visualize one moment in time when you saw something or heard about something happening and did not act according to your own values. This will allow you to personalize the concept of bystander behavior, transitioning it from an abstract concept to a tangible and actionable behavior. The only way to make any difference in beating bystander behavior is to make it real in your life and then take action.

The Phenomenon of Bystander Behavior

According to Berkowitz (2009), research on why individuals do not intervene “has identified four stages in the process of moving from inaction to action. Understanding these stages can help us notice when we are ‘in’ one of them and motivate us to take action to move ourselves into the next stage” (p. 9).

The first step is to notice the event.

There are many events that are obvious (physical hazing, sexual assault, etc.), and there are those that are not so noticeable. For example, if you are not a member of an oppressed or mistreated group, you may not notice when an inappropriate remark is made to/about that group. However, if you are a member of that group, you will most likely notice with no real effort.

Second, you must interpret the event as a problem.

If you do not see the event as a problem, it will not warrant your attention. Anything that allows you to minimize the significance of a problem will foster bystander behavior. This is the world of reasons, excuses, explanations, and rationalizations we use to let ourselves “off the hook” for dealing with a problem.

The next stage is determining whether or not you are responsible for dealing with the problem.

Most of us determine responsibility based on whether or not we play a direct role in a problem/situation. This is a limited relationship. We actually limit how much we are responsible for so that our risks are minimized. I’ve even heard this comment recently, “If I don’t go to the event, then I am not responsible.” In my opinion, this reflects a minimized relationship to leadership as well as a limited view of being responsible. So, I invite you to re-examine and even broaden your own personal definition of “being responsible.”

As Berkowitz (2009) explains, “To be part of the solution, you must first understand how you are part of the problem” (p. 14). This gives you a whole new way of looking at a problem and possible actions you can take. It is critical to understand that any mistreatment hurts not only those affected but also the bystanders. “For example, sexual violence may harm women who [sic] men care about, but it also hurts us as men when it leads women to fear us, view us as only interested in sex, and question our sincerity,” Berkowitz says (p. 15). Therefore, this gives every man the opportunity to see how he is part of the problem and to intervene. So, to be part of the solution requires that we do something about the problem whether or not we believe that we have any responsibility for causing it. Otherwise, we become a part of the problem.

*Now here’s something I ask you to consider:
you, too, are a bystander.*

The final stage of bystander behavior is **determining whether or not you have the skills and resources to act.**

This is where you have an opportunity to train yourself and gather resources, so that you feel empowered to intervene at any given moment. This article will not outline all the different options for intervening; however, the most important thing to know is that there *are* options. Direct confrontation, while one valid option, is not the *only* one for intervening.

Let's say that you have gone through all four stages: you have noticed the event, you have interpreted it as a problem, you have determined that you have a responsibility to deal with it, and you have the necessary skills and resources to intervene. So, why don't you? What's stopping you?

The Barriers To Intervening

In that moment, there are barriers in the way of you doing something or saying something. Bystander behavior theory says that there are five barriers to actually intervening. "While distinct from the stages of bystander behavior, the reasons for not intervening also overlap with them to some extent" (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 18). These five barriers are: social influence, fear of embarrassment, diffusion of responsibility, fear of retaliation, and pluralistic ignorance.

Social Influence: "There seems to be a problem but no one is doing anything so it must not be that big of a deal." Here, you are actually seeing no one do anything, so you don't intervene.

Fear of Embarrassment: This is based on how others will respond to you intervening and is a fear of embarrassing yourself or others. This is based on the reactions you believe you will get from intervening.

Diffusion of Responsibility: You assume someone else will do something. This alleviates the need for you to intervene – someone else will.

Fear of Retaliation: This is fear of physical or emotional harm. This also includes the fear of lack of support from superiors.

Pluralistic Ignorance: Where social influence is based on actual actions of others, this barrier is based on your own perceptions and assumptions that "you are the only one who thinks this way" and that "everyone does it" or feels the same as they do.

THE FIVE BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

FEAR OF EMBARRASSMENT

FEAR OF RETALIATION

DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE

After all, this is ultimately why fraternities and sororities exist – to empower and enable students to become caring, contributing, and responsible citizens of society.

These barriers are reflected in the 2008 study on hazing by Allan and Madden, which notes some of the reasons for students not reporting hazing activities:

I didn't want to get my team or group in trouble (37%); I was afraid of negative consequences to me as an individual from other team or group members (20%); I was afraid other members of the team or group would find out I reported it and I would be an outsider (14%); I might be hurt by team or group members if they learned I had reported it (8%); and others (50%) (p. 29).

According to Berkowitz, "...the reasons for not intervening serve as barriers that prevent an individual from moving through the stages" (p. 18). Now that you know the barriers, how do you have power in a situation and take action? Simply being aware when you are being limited, constrained, and even stopped by one or more of these barriers will give you the opportunity to go beyond that barrier and act anyway. When you are not aware of the barrier, you are trapped by it. In the moment that you distinguish that a barrier is in the way, that barrier no longer grips you, you can move through the stages, and you are free to act.

The Power of Bystander Intervention

The fraternity chapter mentioned at the beginning of this article has been placed on deferred suspension until November 2009 (Ford, 2009). During the suspension, they are required to pay for each of their members to take a "Training for Intervention Procedures" class, among other requirements. This is just one indication that authorities and university officials are beginning to take notice of the power of bystander intervention.

I now invite you to consider that bystander intervention training is a powerful approach for dealing with many of the problems in the fraternity/sorority community. This is our opportunity to empower the 95% of those who are not causing the problems, but who are also not standing up to the other 5% who are. After all, this is ultimately why fraternities and sororities exist – to empower and enable students to become caring, contributing, and responsible citizens of society.

Again, simply knowing what you now know from this article will make no difference. This will be just more information for you to store in your arsenal of knowledge. The real test will come in those

moments of your life when you are confronted with a situation that you know is not right. The next time you see or hear of something happening, you are either going to intervene or you are going to turn your back, shut your ears and your mouth, and do nothing. You choose – it all happens in a moment.

"To Do" List For Intervening:

- Examine, broaden, and re-define your personal relationship to "being responsible" and what you are responsible for.
- Distinguish in any given moment the stage you are in and what barrier is in the way of taking action – then move through the stages and act!
- Share this conversation with others and sponsor a bystander behavior and intervention program on your campus to share with students, alumni, faculty, and staff.



Join the discussion on addressing bystander behavior in fraternity/sorority life by visiting the Association's Online Community and clicking on the "Perspectives Discussion" link.

– Mike Dilbeck is creator and producer of the RESPONSE ABILITY Project, as well as a speaker for CAMPUSPEAK, Inc. For more information on Mike, please visit his website at www.mikedilbeck.com. More information on RESPONSE ABILITY, including the educational DVD and the book, may be found at www.responseabilityproject.com.

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