

# Alcohol & Hazing: Liquid Bonding

While hazing does not necessarily involve alcohol use by either current or new members, alcohol consumption is often either a central or contributing element.

## Consumption as a condition for admission to a group

According to Cornell University's Student Code of Conduct, any consumption of alcohol, other drugs, or another substance that is "an explicit or implicit condition for initiation to, admission into, affiliation with, or continued membership in a group or organization" constitutes hazing. This definition is applied regardless of the level of pressure to drink.

On the continuum of coercion to drink, an implicit condition may be as subtle as inviting new members to sit and drink with members while watching television. Or it can be more explicit, such as lining up fifteen shots and demanding that the new members consume them in fifteen minutes.

## Pressure to participate in drinking rituals

Some fatal cases of hazing have been labeled as episodes of "binge drinking," a term that suggests that the students who died of alcohol poisoning just used poor judgment and did not know when to stop drinking. It is more accurate to refer to such episodes as "ritualized drinking" in which there is systematic pressure applied to vulnerable new members that leads them to consume dangerous amounts of alcohol.

A common argument in defense of groups that pressure new members to drink is that they do not "force anyone to drink." Comments such as "no one poured it down their throat" and "they could have walked out at any time" ignore the reality of coercive power in groups and the fact that psychological force can be as strong as physical force.

## Two roles of alcohol in hazing

### Consumption by current members...

Intoxication of current members is in essence "strategic disinhibition" designed to achieve the following:

- Make it more tolerable to put new members through experiences that current members had to endure.



*When the members of a group that is hazing become intoxicated, they may make disastrous decisions.*

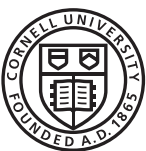
- Reduce anxiety or guilt about subjecting new members to mental and physical distress. Alcohol enables members who feel conflicted about hazing to temporarily suspend their moral standards.
- Provide a sense of "insurance" against culpability by allowing hazers to point to their inebriated state as the explanation for hazing incidents. The "we were drunk and things just got out of hand" defense seeks to obscure that fact that hazing is generally premeditated and systematic. Intoxication, however, is not a valid legal defense.

### Consumption by new members ...

Providing alcohol to new members can serve a variety of functions, including the following:

- As a "social lubricant," alcohol is used to increase new members' comfort with each other and facilitate self-disclosure that can enhance group bonding.
- Alcohol impairs the judgment of new members thus decreasing their resistance to engaging in risky behavior.
- When combined with their lack of knowledge about what they are being subjected to, being intoxicated further lowers new members' power relative to those who are hazing them.
- The withholding of alcohol at times from new members while current members drink serves to underscore the "privilege" of full membership, thus increasing the desirability of both alcohol and membership.

(over)



## Risks of alcohol in hazing

In addition to potential legal and judicial consequences, there are three main health risks that alcohol poses in hazing.

### 1. Acute risk to new members

- Rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol can kill by suppressing brain functions.
- A person can pass out and then choke on their own vomit because of an impaired gag reflex.
- A person can pass out and then suffocate with their face in a pillow.
- A person's breathing or heart beat can stop.
- Heavy drinking can also lead to a wide range of negative consequences such as injuries and memory loss. It can also contribute to being sexually victimized (see [share.cornell.edu](http://share.cornell.edu) for support and resources).

Whenever a person is severely intoxicated, it is imperative that someone call 911 for medical assistance. Every student should be familiar with the signs of alcohol poisoning and Cornell's Good Samaritan Protocol: [GoodSam.cornell.edu](http://GoodSam.cornell.edu).

It is never worth risking someone's life for the sake of the group. When someone does the right thing and calls for help, Cornell administrators consider the act of calling a mitigating circumstance when determining any sanctions that might apply to an organization. Not calling is an aggravating circumstance that will result in more severe sanctions.

### 2. Chronic risks to new members

- One in ten students reports worrying that they might have a problem with alcohol or other drugs. Many of these individuals have either developed or are at risk of developing alcohol dependency.
- New member processes that involve alcohol pose extra risk for students with alcohol problems. The consequences for the individual can be serious and can have a major negative impact on the group as well. By creating conditions where it is difficult for a person with an alcohol problem to decline to drink, the group contributes to the person's problem.

In some cases, members are either unaware of such risks or recklessly disregard them. In one case, a new

member explained to current members that another new member was recovering from a drinking problem. Rather than exempting the new recovering member from drinking rituals, the members targeted this person for drinking activities.

### 3. Risk to hazers and the group

In addition to increasing their own risk of the acute and long-term individual consequences described above, members who haze risk harming others and bringing sanctions upon themselves or their organization.

When the members of a group become intoxicated, they may make disastrous decisions. Impaired judgment can turn a planned group activity into a tragedy.

- **Ithaca College:** In the spring of 1980, a pledge at an Ithaca College fraternity died during a hazing episode. Whether

or not this individual or the brothers in the fraternity had consumed alcohol prior to the incident is not clear. But the poor judgments of these individuals led to both the death of a fellow student and the abolishment of the entire fraternity system at the college.

- **Cornell University:** Two IFC-related deaths have occurred since 2000. The first death (2011) involved a fraternity member whose brothers failed to call for medical help even after he became unconscious. The second (2019) involved a first-year student who, after attending an event at which dangerous amounts of alcohol were consumed, was found deceased at the bottom of Fall Creek Gorge.

# Alcohol Emergencies:

Do you know when to call 911 for help?  
Know the ABCDs.

**A** ( **ALERT** )  
Are they unconscious? Passed out?  
Are they unable to control actions, follow commands, or answer simple questions? Are they unable to stay awake for 2-3 minutes?

( **BREATHING** ) **B**  
Is their breathing slow or irregular? Are they vomiting while passed out, or groggy? Are they having difficulty breathing or having chest pain?

**C** ( **COLOR, CLAMMY** )  
Is their skin color "off"? Are their lips bluish?  
Does their skin feel clammy or cold?

( **DOUBT** ) **D**  
Is there potential involvement of other drugs or medications? Or a potential head injury or trauma?  
Are you unsure for any reason?

**IF YOU SEE ANY OF THESE, CALL 911.**

## GOODSAM.CORNELL.EDU

When you call 911 for help, Good Sam will mitigate judicial and/or legal consequences for underage drinking and use of other drugs.

Cosponsors: CUEMS, Cornell Health, Division of Public Safety, Office of the Dean of Students, and the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards



Cornell's Good Samaritan Protocol (formerly Medical Amnesty) applies on-campus. NY State Good Sam Law applies off-campus.