For those who are drawn to student affairs as a foundation that guides our work in fraternity/sorority life (FSL), the disruptions occurring as a result of COVID-19 can feel frustrating, confusing, and isolating. Multiple experiences are being disrupted at once — the students, the organizations, the students in the organizations, the students in the organizations at the institutions … and us, the practitioners serving students across multiple functionalities. We come to this work as campus-based advisors, headquarters staff, regional representatives, volunteers, housing personnel, and more. Each functionality maintains a level of responsibility and response.

For some, questions might fuel the feelings of confusion associated with our current existence. For example, how do we support seniors during this time, especially for those on campuses that have gone to online operations for the remainder of the semester/quarter? How do we support staff? Graduate students? What about new member education? Intake? Initiation? How will grade reports be disrupted during this time? What issues will reverberate into the fall semester that were unattended to this spring? Are there programs we can do online, through social media, or remotely with students? And what about dues and housing? Fees? Will money be reimbursed or repurposed? Will we even come back in the fall?

While these questions are valuable and necessary, we want to uplift and acknowledge that, in addition to students, the practitioners themselves may be experiencing their own levels of frustration, confusion, and isolation at this time. Throughout this piece, we evaluate the ways we may be experiencing this phenomenon in the framework of shame, anxiety, and dissonance. We reflect on our identities as humans and practitioners and how that may inform the ways we work with students. We offer insights throughout and conceptualize individual practitioner behavior and human behavior as intertwining to illustrate how we have come to understand our own im/balance. For some, such an imbalance is a feeling of helplessness, one that also exists even outside of the institutional/organizational context. As such, we explore shame, anxiety, and dissonance as three specific feelings that might be occupying brain space and energy.

SHAME
The times we are in may lead us to become frustrated and upset. It becomes easier to be frustrated and upset when individuals are not responding “correctly.” We are devastated that people are dying. We mourn the lives lost. We feel betrayed by friends, students, and family members who know better. We say under our breath, “You should know better!” We are
frustrated with the uncertainty. We are disappointed by cancelled plans. We are upset by time or money lost. We are more introspective than ever before, and new insights are being illuminated. In many ways, our worldview is shifting, and questions of responsibility and positioning are desired more now than ever before.

We have lost family vacations, Spring Breaks, birthdays, bachelorette parties, weddings, conventions, conferences, and graduations. We do not know if summer and fall conferences, conventions, leadership programming, fundraising events, board meetings, and staff training can or will happen. Some folx feel uncertain whether or not they will have a job in six months. We feel disconnected from alumnx, collegians, team members, and campus and community partners. Isolation is real for many.

We are staying home despite this tension. And yet, some are working from home while teaching their children for the first time. Some are expected to manage “normal” household responsibilities, all while spending more time with partners and kids and dogs and cats and things they love but are not fully prepared to be with all day, every day. Some were already working from home but now cannot go out when they need social interaction. Some feel at risk every day by the expectation that they continue to go into work. Some have lost their jobs, and financial stability has been compromised.

The nature of the times we are in leads us (back) to Brené Brown’s work. Her research around shame specifically has always been grounding in that it reminds us of how unproductive, yet tempting, it can be to shame others. The notion that, those not staying home are horrible people, must not get it, are selfish and inconsiderate, and are knowingly putting themselves in harm’s way, is a problematic dichotomy that positions people as either good or bad, right or wrong, or considerate or harmful, without care and concern to life experiences, needs, or individual relationships to context.

Typically, when students break the rules or do something we might deem “dumb,” an initial knee-jerk reaction is often, “Really(?!)” (coupled with a side-eye and exasperated sigh). Most of the time, such a response can be free from shaming the student, and rooted in, “I know you can do better.” COVID-19 reactions, actions, and inaction may not be any different. We are provoked by student desires to still host in-person or in-the-same-room online new member presentations. We are frustrated when students take inspiration from a barstool-inspired mixer theme, “Corona Bros and Vaccine Hoes.” We feel stuck when students share frustration about paying dues or host “social distancing parties” that certainly have more than ten people less than six feet away from one other. It is not hard to shame students for their behavior during this time. The sentiment
that “you should know better” reverberates through newspaper articles and broadcast programming. Such a shaming also appears in how we might respond to friends or family posting on Instagram, or the distant colleague or former classmate documenting their life on Facebook.

But shaming others can come from a place of fear, and we must wonder about each of our own positioning(s) and experiences that can get in the way of empathy and productive response. Posting our dismay to Instagram stories, and reminding folx that grandparents and immunocompromised friends are suffering does not guarantee behavioral change. From what we know and have learned about shame ... it does not work. Brené Brown (2007) reminds us, “You cannot shame or belittle people into changing their behaviors” (p. 2). She writes, “What we don’t need in the midst of struggle is shame for being human” (Brown, 2017).

When decisions are made — good, bad, and really terrible — they are human reactions to uncertainty and fear. And we wonder, how do we fix it? How do we address this and make it better?

Brown asserts that shame is a powerful, master emotion and is rooted in the fear that we are not good enough. Related research shows that reactions to trauma or survival mode can fall under any of the four Fs: flight, fright, freeze, and fawn (Walker, n.d.). After reading about each of these responses, many friends and students may be positioned in flight. While it may seem like a possible excuse for them, this thought comes from a place of understanding. Because, again, shame does not work. Passive aggressive and sometimes explicitly aggressive tweets or Instagram posts are perhaps not making the impact we so desperately want, and frankly, need.

What if this was a calling for grace? What if one-on-one conversations took the place of public shame? What if we said, “I get that you really wanted your senior Spring Break trip to Panama City Beach, and your senior Saint Patrick’s Day on the beach in Wilmington felt like the next best thing, and I get this is a hard decision because you only get a handful of years in college and it feels like something was stolen from you ... yet, it would mean a lot to me if you took selfies staying home.” What if we asked, “How are you feeling about this? How will rescheduling your bachelorette make you feel? Would you enjoy a Zoom call with all your best pals in the meantime?” What if we used this time full of phone calls, (re)connecting, and technology to actually connect, offer grace, and engage with authentic understanding?

Some of this may be piling on because folx are feeling shame for their grief in addition to struggling with internal timelines and expectations. Folx are comparing their loss of a graduation or loss of a wedding to the loss of a parent or grandparent and feeling ashamed for being sad.
about one when the other did not happen to them. Folx are worried that a bachelorette party or family vacation is not significant enough to mourn. What if they did not have to feel that way? It is hard enough right now (and always); we do not need to rank our grief. As Brown (2017) reminds us, “Hurt is hurt, and every time we honor our own struggle and the struggles of others by responding with empathy and compassion, the healing that results affects all of us” (p. 9).

Is it possible to offer grace and be disappointed at the same time? It is no easy task. We are going to have to be vulnerable, it is going to be hard, and at times it is going to hurt. And, people still may disappoint us. Your best friend from high school may still get on a plane to Florida. Your uncle’s spouse may still do a happy hour in person with all their best friends. Your former IFC president may throw a “Quarantina Wine Mixer.”

And, of course, we hope they choose not to do these things. And even so, and if/when they do, we invite you to choose grace over shame. Because coupled with shame, people are also experiencing immense amounts of dissonance and anxiety. It feels like we know exactly what to do, and yet, have no idea what to do all at the same time. This kind of dissonance can feel like an immovable grip, and this grace may be the virtual open-armed hug that gives them an opportunity to reflect and do better next time.

DISSONANCE & ANXIETY
Kindness is essential during times like this, and as one colleague puts it, “dissonance is one hell of a drug.” We are most certainly experiencing quite a bit of dissonance right now. For some of us, the decision to stay home and social distance, to have groceries delivered, or to keep one Costco-sized pack of toilet paper was easy. And even in the circumstance where any of this was an “overreaction,” if it worked, it mattered. But we are all different. We have different needs and life experiences and home situations and personality types. We challenge in different ways and trust different news sources and fear different things. We may even receive mixed messages from different groups of trusted confidants. It is why we are seeing some folks on day 28 of quarantine (shout out to Abby Wambach & Glennon Doyle), some folks on day 1, and others somewhere in between.

And this is why, if we are having dissonance with social distancing and staying home, it should not be surprising our students are as well. What does it mean to meet our students where they are during times like this? Form messages were sent, and many copy and pasted bits from colleagues, borrowing language that felt right after checking in with legal advisors. We shared Center for Disease Control (CDC) links and World Health Organization (WHO) resources and we told students to stay home. And, many deleted or possibly never opened those messages. At
times, we may be no better than Bed Bath & Beyond and that bar you went to in Boston three years ago that sent a list of things they are doing in response to COVID-19.

Are students seeing us the same way we are seeing that Bed Bath & Beyond email?

Whether students read our emails or messages or not has nothing to do with how well written they are or whether or not we followed a “best practice.” Some may not be able to listen to or receive these messages. Some may know what they are doing is concerning, and they may also decide to do it anyway (e.g., the students on the infamous Florida beach video that went viral). This could be because their prefrontal cortex is not completely developed, and their “hell yeah” part of the brain (as Dr. Lori Hart so affectionately puts it), is saying, “Hell yeah let’s do this thing that I know is potentially ethically or morally bad.” Perhaps the part of their brain that says, “No don’t do that,” is not fully developed. Or perhaps they are struggling with anxiety in ways that makes making any decisions difficult or challenging.

Similar to alcohol programming and hazing education, convincing students to stay home is not always about the logic. In the context of Generation Z, we need to help students understand the return on investment. “Stay at home now, so we can have college football in the fall. Stay off the crowded beach for now, so we can have fun later this summer. Celebrate your new member class with photos or individual videos and plan for something to occur as a follow-up in the fall.” When people are scared, overwhelmed, and anxious, sometimes we have to let them be selfish and coach within those bounds. Perhaps the return on investment can be illuminating the things that have otherwise been missing (i.e., If taking something away, what goes in its place?).

An idea we have reflected on from Emily & Amelia Nagoski’s (2019) book, “Burnout,” is The Monitor. The Monitor is the idea that we have an internal hourglass funneling sand from one end to the other telling us when we have to have something done by or by when someone else may have to have something done. We would argue the hourglass concept is exacerbated at this time. The technical term for The Monitor is “a discrepancy-reducing/increasing feedback loop” or “criterion velocity” (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019, p. 31). It is an internal tally that knows “(1) what your goal is; (2) how much effort you’re investing in that goal; and (3) how much progress you’re making” (p. 31). The authors use an example of a trip to the mall taking longer than it normally does and that resulting in a spike in frustration and stress. Similarly, we wonder, if we are “monitoring” our time in quarantine? Our goal is to get out; we are social distancing experts and are living life by the book, and our anxiety is spiked by the fact that we are not making progress or do not feel like we are making progress because we do not know when this will end. This is
escalating our anxiety and making our fuses shorter. Nagoski and Nagoski (2019) share that an awareness of The Monitor, solely naming it, can calm the anxiety it causes.

The unknown is scary. We do not know what is next, when it will come, and who will be here when we get there. That is terrifying. It is anxiety breeding. People are afraid, and rightfully so. For some, social distancing is a call for survival — an unsafe home life, a nonexistent home, troubling family dynamics, or inability to be their full authentic self while at home. This brings us to grace.

GRACE
So, we have named the problem. We have listed all the feelings you may be feeling, we have shared some explanations, we have potentially overwhelmed you with resources and ideas to mull over, and we have given you quite a bit to consider. But, what should you do with this now?

In this time of wanting to do something in response to the pandemic, and this time of wanting to take action and fix it, we are going to disappoint you and we are not going to give you a list of boxes to check or things to do to “make it better.” We’re going to simply recommend grace — for your team, for the students you work with, for your family, and for yourself.

Tactics like acknowledging The Monitor allow us to name our own frustrations. We must also do this for others. If we are navigating our own shame, anxiety, and dissonance, we must acknowledge that others are as well. Kindness and grace are the answer to the questions of not having enough time while simultaneously having too much of it. They are the answer to frustrations with our staff and students, and frustrations with each other. They are the answer to educating and advising in this impossible time.

So, what if we were kinder? What if, while knowing there is so much else we need to do (or not do) to combat this public health crisis, we were just simply kinder? What if we stopped making fun of folks for making banana bread or participating in Instagram challenges and just let them live (inside)? What if there was a way for us to still be angry and sad and mad and yell at the corner of our closet and cry in the shower and confide in our closest circles ... and still, be kinder?

We need to show each other grace, embody grit where we can, and bounce back with resilience we did not know we had. We need to, above all else, be kind.
Jessie Ashton serves as the director of health & wellness for Lambda Chi Alpha Fraternity. She is a current doctoral student at NC State University, studying power-based personal violence and men’s student organizations and teams. She is looking forward to never hearing “weird, unprecedented time” at the beginning of a Zoom call again.

Michael A. Goodman (he/him/his) is the assistant director of advising and programming in the Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life at the University of Maryland, College Park. He recently successfully defended his dissertation for his doctorate in student affairs. Michael earned a Bachelor of Arts in organizational communication from the University of Central Oklahoma, where he joined Pi Kappa Alpha. He has a Master of Science in Education in higher education and student affairs from Indiana University.
References


