

## Not-So-Healthy Coping Mechanisms

Breanna Hyde & Darren Pierre, Ph.D. | Loyola University Chicago

Transitioning to university life can be a daunting task: the doors to students' futures open, revealing a wilderness of possibilities. For some students, it can feel like a door to their family, high school, and adolescence has closed. Emerging adulthood requires adjustment due to unforeseen challenges and stressors, especially if students aren't primed for independence and equipped with the tools to succeed (Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle, 2010). In order to reconcile feelings of loss and loneliness, many students get involved in extracurricular commitments, such as fraternities and sororities. Because leisure-based programming offers a productive and healthy route to coping during a time of transition and the strain of academia (Hartman, Evans, & Anderson, 2017), fraternity/sorority membership should be an effective response to adversity ... right? Unfortunately, we know the fraternity/sorority environment is often conducive to unhealthy coping mechanisms, like binge drinking, which often leads to additional stressors and harm (Wuthrich, 2009). As members of the field, it's time for us to stop being complicit in dangerous and harmful coping mechanisms. We should facilitate and encourage effective leisure-based programming that prevents students from avoiding negative feelings and instead teach how to use them in a productive manner.

### Cultivating a Culture of Healthy Coping

"Emerging adulthood, the developmental life phase occurring between adolescence and adulthood, is a period when individuals enjoy increased personal freedom and exploration, and fewer restrictions and less structure" (Hartman, Evans, and Anderson, 2017, p. 303). While the time of young adulthood can be freeing, it can also be the birth of foreign stressors in a time of transition (Schlossberg, 1996). According to the American College of Health Association (2016), 87.5% of undergraduates reported feeling overwhelmed, 59.5% reported feeling lonely, and 58.6% reported high levels of anxiety (as cited in Hartman, Evans, and Anderson, 2017, p. 303). What is also known is that a healthy sense of identity can mitigate the stressors brought on by life (Burt and Paysnick, 2014; Wuthrich, 2009; Schlossberg, 1996; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). So, the question for fraternity/sorority professionals becomes how are we supporting students' understanding of healthy identity?

### Teaching Resilience

Resilience is an invaluable life skill that often isn't taught in liberal studies courses. For survivors of trauma, attending college at all is an act of resilience that requires controlled thought (Banyard & Cantor, 2004, p. 215) and often results in optimism and life satisfaction (Rathore,

2017). However, resilience is for everyone: how do we, as educators, teach resilience to our students? Based on prior research, helping students to self-actualize their identities can result in a stronger internal foundation, thus contributing to confidence in themselves (Burt & Paysnick, 2014). Because fraternities and sororities offer the social and emotional supports that can act as both protective and motivational factors for students' identity development, those who choose membership are better equipped with the tools to become resilient. By facilitating a culture of acceptance, visibility, and positive thinking, professionals can aid in students' identity formation and resilience.

### **Next Steps**

As previously mentioned, loneliness is attributed to young adulthood (Hartman, Evans, and Anderson, 2017). Furthermore, the research indicates those in social fraternities find alcohol as an effective conduit for forming friendships (Wuthrich, 2009). With this known, student affairs educators are invited to think innovatively about how to support students in developing substantive, fulfilling friendships relying less on alcohol to build connection. Student affairs professionals are asked to foster a sense of strong leadership, support positive peer involvement, and have critical conversations with fraternity and sorority members to promote healthy and scholastically enriching lifestyles (Nelson & Engstrom, 2013). As the profession evolves, educators should consider how programming and education can offer students healthy lifestyle choices that allow them to manage their mental health and connect to their own sense of identity (Schlossberg, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

Fraternity and sorority involvement offers an avenue for professionals to cultivate a culture of healthy coping mechanisms while teaching resilience through values-based, intentional program design (Nelson & Engstrom, 2013). This article is a call for advisors and members alike to cushion the often harsh and overwhelming transition to college with friendship and support. Refocusing on preemptive measures instead of reacting to negative events could be the key to positive change, and proactive planning can result in the betterment of fraternity/sorority membership on the individual, institutional, and national level.

---

### **Breanna Hyde**

Breanna Hyde is an M.Ed in Higher Education candidate at Loyola University Chicago and is currently employed by the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. Before beginning her program at LUC, Breanna studied sociology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she

was an active member of Delta Phi Epsilon sorority. Her passion for risk management, leadership development, and student retention drives her to participate in higher education research, and she currently serves as a volunteer research team leader in her free time.

**Dr. Darren Pierre**

Dr. Darren Pierre is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Pierre’s teaching is focused on college student development, student affairs profession, assessment/evaluation, and leadership within higher education. He carries years of experience as a university administrator, a leader within the field of higher education, and a contributor to many entity groups affiliated with student affairs. Dr. Pierre has authored journal articles, and in 2015, authored the book, *The Invitation to Love: Recognizing the Gift Despite Pain, Fear, and Resistance*. He has spoken nationally on the ideals of leadership, integrity, and authenticity.

## References

- Banyard, V., & Cantor, E. N. (2004). Adjustment to College Among Trauma Survivors: An Exploratory Study of Resilience. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(2), 207-221. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0017>
- Burt, K. B., & Paysnick, A. A. (2014). Identity, Stress, and Behavioral and Emotional Problems in Undergraduates: Evidence for Interaction Effects. *Journal of College Student Development, 55*(4), 368-384. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0036>
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers
- Hartman, C. L., Evans, K. E., & Anderson, D. M. (2017). Promoting Adaptive Coping Skills and Subjective Well-Being through Credit-Based Leisure Education Courses. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 54*(3), 303-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2017.1331852>
- Johnson, V. K., Gans, S. E., Kerr, S., & LaValle, W. (2010). Managing the Transition to College: Family Functioning, Emotion Coping, and Adjustment in Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(6), 607-621. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2010.0022>
- Nelson, S. & Engstrom, C. (2013). Fraternity influences on binge drinking and grade point average. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 50*:4, 939-415
- Rathore, S. (2017). Life satisfaction among college students: A study exploring the role of resilience. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(2), 237-239. Retrieved from [http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal\\_detail/19#list](http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal_detail/19#list)
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1996). *Going to Plan B: How You Can Cope, Regroup and Start Your Life on a New Path*. New York, NY: Fireside.
- Wuthrich, C. (2009). Reflections on Personal Responsibility: Sorority Members at Risk for Interpersonal Violence. *NASPA Journal, 46*(2), 228-257. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6040>