

Let's Talk About Johnny

Jordan Griffen, Babson College

Vulnerability is a topic frequently forgotten when educating our young men and women. If it is not forgotten, then it is often ignored to avoid the discomfort coming with the topic. Many do not know where to start the conversation because it seems like you need to be vulnerable in order to have a discussion about vulnerability. Fear of repercussions, such as being attacked or ridiculed, often prevents dialogue on vulnerability from materializing—especially in fraternity.

Having graduated recently, I can tell you first-hand many undergraduate members do not feel comfortable being vulnerable and forthcoming when disclosing the truth about what they are experiencing. They would rather tell you that everything is fine, that they have open discussions all the time and know everything about their brothers. Although in smaller chapters word gets around fast, and members may know each other better than in large chapters, there is often little emphasis placed on providing space and time for necessary dialogue.

Take Johnny, for example, a fictitious brother of Theta Zeta Pi, who is struggling with addiction. Johnny is not engaging during weekly chapter meetings, won't admit he needs help, and isn't even telling his big brother he has a problem. His big brother may sense something is wrong, but since Johnny isn't bringing it up, his big brother hasn't spoken to him about it. At only twenty years old himself, how can he help Johnny with addiction when he doesn't have it all figured out?

The only "conversations" taking place are whispers behind Johnny's back. It's Billy telling Dan that Johnny hasn't been going to class. It's Mike telling Austin that Johnny has been drinking alone in his room lately. It's the secretary taking attendance at chapter and wondering aloud where Johnny is, only to be met by a group of men shifting uneasily in their seats while looking down at the floor. It's everyone knowing there's a problem, but no one knowing how to broach the subject.

Johnny won't talk about it because he fears letting down the chapter. His big brother is ill equipped to address the addiction, so he won't say anything. Billy and Dan are worried if they say something to Johnny he'll call them out on one of their own issues. Mike and Austin don't think it's their place to intervene. The executive council is apprehensive to act, concerned that disciplinary action might just push Johnny away even more.

Everyone is frozen and the problem persists until the worst happens. Maybe Johnny ends up hospitalized, dropping out of college, or worse, dead. There are many ways this situation may unfold that could be avoided or prevented if just *one* person was brave enough to have a vulnerable conversation with Johnny.

You can be that person. As an advisor, you're a role model. Your job does not end at keeping the charter on the wall. Fraternity and sorority life is about the people; it's about shepherding

young men and women in their journey to adulthood and establishing lifelong community. By taking the first step and being vulnerable with your students, you give them permission to do the same. You can serve as a catalyst for creating an environment where students embrace vulnerability. The true hallmark of brotherhood and sisterhood is the compassion, trust, and togetherness that manifest from an environment supporting vulnerability. If our students lack opportunities or willingness to be vulnerable, we must show them the way; we must own our truths and demonstrate the value of being vulnerable.