



HEALTH



A year after fraternity member suicide, Greek groups at Penn work to prevent future tragedy

They're holding active listening trainings, requiring members to take suicide-prevention workshops, and creating new leadership roles focused on health.



As president of CogWell, a club promoting open dialogue around mental health, Samantha Gold is training fraternity and sorority members in active listening.

HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

by Aneri Pattani, Staff Writer

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On Aug. 31, 2017, Samantha Gold was sitting in her apartment with a group of friends when synchronized dings sounded from their phones. It was an email from the University of Pennsylvania, where they were students.

Nicholas Moya had died, the email announced.

Moya was a 21-year-old math and economics major from Radnor Township. He was also a member and former president of the Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity on campus. Moya died by suicide, [one of more than a dozen Penn students to do so since 2013](#).

Gold didn't know Moya personally, but as a member of a sorority, his death hit home. "It was an awakening to everyone that we needed to start having these conversations in Greek life," she said.

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Although Greek life is often associated with drinking, partying and hazing — actions that can negatively affect mental health — many organizations at Penn are trying to change that. Since Moya's death, Greek life members have worked to teach students how to foster open conversations around mental health, created leadership roles focused on health, and enrolled in workshops on how to identify a student at risk of suicide. Heading into the rush process to recruit members in January, they're applying many of the lessons learned over the last year and a half.

Moya's death prompted Gold to join CogWell, a campus club that promotes students supporting one another through open dialogue. The group holds [training on active listening](#) — how to have engaged, nonjudgmental conversations with friends in need and help them open up.

Now, as president of the club, Gold, a 21-year-old senior, is focusing on training

organizations, training more than 100 members.

“It makes me feel like we’re still remembering Nick, and doing something to actively prevent this from happening again,” Gold said.

Aaron Askowitz still remembers having lunch with Moya the day he died. “He was at the meal with us, laughing, cracking jokes,” said Askowitz, a junior and current president of Sigma Alpha Mu.

Most of the brothers didn’t realize Moya was struggling with depression. Maybe the stereotype that guys don’t share their feelings kept him quiet, said Ethan Volk, a senior who was president of the fraternity when Moya died.

Now, the group holds a session for new members to learn about Moya and to encourage them to open up about their emotions.

“One thing that’s definitely changed in the chapter is the way we treat each other,” Volk said. “In the back of our minds, we’re saying, ‘You never know what this person is going through.’”

The chapter also invited a CogWell representative to do active-listening training in November. About a third of the members participated.

David Isaacs, a sophomore who coordinated the training, said active listening is simple: Put away your phone; make eye contact; don’t interrupt or give unsolicited advice. “But it’s really not done enough,” he said.

In early December, Isaacs said, he was telling a Sigma Alpha Mu brother about feeling overwhelmed. After a few minutes, the brother started checking his phone. “I said, ‘Dude, I actually need help on this,’” Isaacs recalled.

People need constant training and reminders to break habits, he said.

How does Greek life affect mental health?

Though a growing body of research focuses on the mental health of college students, few studies examine Greek life specifically. What little exists paints a conflicting picture.

A handful of studies suggest sorority affiliation can [boost self-esteem](#), while others have found sorority members may be at [increased risk of eating disorders](#).

Mental-health experts say the culture of drinking and drug use — which research has shown [is more prevalent among Greek life members](#) — can cause students to fall behind in school, leading to anxiety and stress.

Vying to be selected for an organization and then pledging as a new member can be especially taxing. It requires a large time commitment from students, and adds a sense of pressure to prove they belong. In the worst cases, [incidents of hazing](#) can lead to physical harm and long-term mental-health consequences.

But once they're accepted into Greek life, students develop strong social bonds and a dedication to community service — qualities experts say promote good mental health.

“I don’t think Nick’s death by suicide is a symptom of Greek life harshness,” said Benoit Dubé, Penn’s chief wellness officer. “It’s a unique, stand-alone tragedy that Greek life members decided to learn from.”

With more than 3,000 members in Penn’s 49 Greek life organizations, they could have a large impact, he added.

New year, new mental-health requirements

Since Mackenzie Lukas joined Alpha Phi her freshman year, it’s been the hub of her life at Penn. She does homework with sisters, goes to sorority parties, and confides in them about the pressures of preparing for post-grad life.

“It felt only natural for mental health and wellness to be a part of that,” said the 21-year-old senior.

In the spring, Lukas [became the first](#) vice president of health and wellness for the Panhellenic Council, which governs sororities at Penn. She’s crafted a number of initiatives to foster a healthier environment.

The first is a requirement that each sorority pick a wellness chair, who will run monthly workshops for the chapter starting in February. Workshops will be drawn from a curriculum Lukas created, including topics such as eating disorders, academic stressors, and mitigating job stress.

The second is a requirement that wellness chairs, as well as one person from each grade in the sorority, undergo [suicide-prevention training](#) offered by the school's counseling center. About 50 Greek members have [already taken it](#) on a voluntary basis.

The Interfraternity Council, which governs fraternities at Penn, has not instituted similar requirements for its organizations, but it [encourages new members to attend](#) workshops on suicide prevention, bystander intervention, and wellness.

Lukas also hopes to improve rush, the weeklong process before classes begin in January when freshmen attend dozens of meet-and-greets in the hope of being selected for sororities.

“You’re being judged based on what conversation topics come to mind or how quickly you can connect with someone,” Lukas said. “It can be really draining.”

To ease the stress, Lukas plans to invite school psychologists to rush events and reserve certain rooms for relaxation.

Since Moya's death, the community is thinking about mental health more closely, Lukas said.

“The way that someone may seem to the outer eye or even to their close friends

want to bridge that gap.”

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