

Self Esteem and Sorority Recruitment

Bailey Ferree | December 2016

I think everyone knows how it feels to be compared to someone. Whether it's 1 person or a few people, thinking that even at your best you still aren't as good as the person standing next to you. It's safe to say that everyone has felt this on some scale, but for sorority women, specifically those who go through traditional formal Panhellenic recruitment, it's much more noticeable. A study by Phired Up, a national organization that helps greek chapters recruit more effectively, found that women's self esteem drops 30 percent during Panhellenic recruitment.

When I went through panhellenic recruitment at the University of Missouri last year, I remember sitting in a room with 2 thousand other individuals and only valuing myself by how I looked. And especially how I looked in comparison to how everyone else. I secretly hoped that the women around me would drop out so I would have a better shot. Why is it that the first thing women do is compare themselves to one another? Why is it so hard to truly be happy for one another?

When women compete for something, like spots in sororities, it can affect their self-esteem because they compare themselves to each other. Dr. Ginny Ramseyer Winter, a professor at the University of Missouri in the School of Social Work, says this about the impact low self-esteem and competition can have on women.

Dr. Ginny Ramseyer Winter: *Anytime you have women competing for something, based at least partially on appearance, it's going to impact them negatively.*

When I went through recruitment, there were 2,300 women and only 1,500 spots. That meant a third of us wouldn't be asked to join a chapter. That's what happened to my friend Emily Smith.

Emily Smith: *It was disbelief, like really? Really they didn't like me? I liked them and stuff so right after that it was immediate. I was really sad, I started crying, I didn't want to cry, but like it made me really sad.*

Emily says recruitment took a toll on her mental health.

Emily Smith: *It's a competition and everyone is trying to get into the house they want, and everyone is trying to look better than someone else, so yeah I think I was tearing myself down because of that.*

The negative effects of recruitment outlast the process.

Emily Smith: *My self-esteem dropped a ton and I kind of went into a depression for a while, that and multiple other things, but recruitment, that whole process, definitely played a big part in it.*

When I went through recruitment it would make me feel awful, during the week every time a chapter cut me all I could think was, why don't that like me? What's wrong with me? It made me think: well maybe if I was just a little bit thinner or a little bit prettier they would have asked me back.

Dr. Ramseyer Winter, said something interesting though when I asked her about the connection between sorority life and a woman's self-esteem,

Dr. Ginny Ramseyer Winter: *In terms of intervention to improve body image, um the interventions to my knowledge at a larger scale level, rather than like one on one therapy sorts of things, the ones with the most evidence actually come out of sororities.*

Dr. Ramseyer Winter says even though many women have their self esteem negatively impacted by sorority recruitment, sororities are one of the best ways to improve body image in comparison to other large group intervention methods, because of the sense of belonging it can invoke. How can that be true though? It's because, while recruitment tears apart your self-esteem, joining a chapter repairs some of that. It validates you. You are in fact good enough.

So we know there is a problem. But now the question is what can we do about it? The thing is, as of right now I don't really know if we know what the solution is.

Dr. Ginny Ramseyer Winter: *"I tend to be a strength based person, and more of an optimist, so I hate to say there isn't anything we can do, I am sure there is, I don't know if we know what that is."*

I honestly have to agree, there has to be a better way to do this. I love my sorority, and I am always going to be a defender of Greek Life, but I know that sorority

recruitment isn't perfect and I know that we still have work that needs to be done. Honestly I just don't think we know what that is yet. With that said though, that's on an institutional level. At the individual level, I have the power to recruit how I would have wanted to be recruited. to try and see girls for who they are, not just what they look like. But for that to work, every single chapter member has to take that approach.