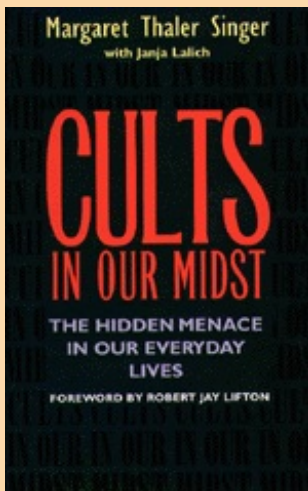


# Cults in our Midst

## Leaving the Cult

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## Practical Issues

Not all former cult members encounter all the problems listed in Table 12.1, nor do most have them in severe and extended form. Some individuals need only a few months to get themselves going again. After encountering some adjustment problems to life outside the cult, they make rather rapid and uneventful reintegrations into everyday life. Generally, however, it takes individuals anywhere from six to twenty-four months to get their lives functioning again at a level commensurate with their histories and talents. Even then, however, that functioning may not reflect what is still going on inside them. Many are still sorting out the conflicts and harms that grew out of their cult experience long after two years have gone by.

Each former member wrestles with a number of the problems. Some need more time than others to resolve all the issues they face, and a few never get their lives going again.

Most of the practical issues faced by former cult members, such as where to live, how to earn a living, and nutritional and medical concerns are nearly universal concerns and need little explanation.

## Money

Unfamiliar with handling personal money, unaware of how to earn money legitimately, or full of resentment at having turned over family fortunes or money earned to their former cult.

Many former cult members, while in their cults, took in more per day fund-raising on the streets than they will ever be able to earn on any job.

After such experiences, it can be difficult to figure out how to recoup resources or make an honest living, not to mention coping with the guilt many former members feel at having taken part in such deceptions. These cult experiences may make it necessary for former members to contact career counseling or mental health services.

## Education and Health Care

The role of professional services, in particular medicine and psychology, is important in postcult adaptation. Some cults put down modern medicine and psychiatry and psychology, along with education in general.

Cult doctrine preaches that if they only follow certain instructions, they will never be ill, never feel blue, and will save the planet, attain nirvana, and become spiritually or politically perfect. Meanwhile cult chores and practices keep them tired, worn down, and often ill. But they have to hide these conditions and keep smiling and working.

When it comes to education, many cults teach that members should "get out of the mind," stop thinking, and get into the heart or the everyday work of the cult. Some leaders preach that we are born with "natural knowing" that has been impaired by school, parents, and society, and that followers should reject "old thinking" and live by the dictates of the leader. Afterward, former cult members of almost any age and background need some sort of education or training to update knowledge and skills and to expand their training.

After years of neglecting their minds and their health, former cult members feel odd and possibly even guilty about their concern with illness, health issues, and their psychological states after leaving the group. They soon realize, however, that their education stopped when they joined the cult, that they have neglected their health, and that they are in emotional turmoil. Yet they have been turned against the very support systems they now need. As they struggle to sort out their personal views about education, medicine, and mental health care, often they may need urging and explanations about what happened in the cult to create their negative feelings and attitudes.

## Explaining time Spent in the Cult

Most people think that cult members are a breed apart and that they must be an odd, dumb, and even crazy bunch. Thus former cult members need to prepare themselves to deal with the most frequent responses relatives, old friends, and new acquaintances make when they learn that the person was in a cult. They are likely to come forth with some version of "But you seem like such a nice person, so bright. How come you were in a cult? Were you really in a cult? You couldn't have been - only weirdos join cults."

Application forms for jobs, higher education, and professional schools will ask for an accounting of one's past education and time.

There have been no specific studies of this issue, but I have been told by many former cult members how embarrassed they are to tell prospective employers they were in a cult. They know how a blame-the-victim attitude colors the way they will be regarded.

People learn to deal creatively with all these issues as they reenter society, network with other former members, and get experience in making friends, applying for jobs, and telling their stories when they feel safe and comfortable doing so.

## **Psychological and Emotional Difficulties**

With their twenty-four-hour regimes of ritual, work, worship, and community, cults provide members with tasks and purpose. When these members leave, a sense of meaningless surfaces. Leaving the cult means losing friends, a mission of life, and direction. Former members also soon realize that they have lost their innocence. They entered the cult full of reverential amazement and with wide-eyed naivete only to discover that they had been deceived and betrayed. As a result, they may be pervaded with a feeling of mourning.

Former members have a variety of other losses to contend with. They often speak of their regret for the lost years during which they wandered off the main paths of everyday life. They regret being out of step and behind their peers in career and life pursuits. They feel the loss of a solid sense of self-esteem and self-confidence as they come to realize that they were used to or that they surrendered their autonomy.

## **Guilt and Shame**

Former cult members experience an overdose of guilt and shame. In the cult, most were obligated to enlist new members and to collect money in less than honest ways. They feel guilty about their treatment of parents, brothers and sisters, and friends' about having lied, having committed acts of violence, or having carried out illegal activities at the bidding of the cult leader. They feel guilty about having tricked others into supporting the cult in some way, and about those they recruited who are still in the cult or who never would have joined otherwise.

Former members may also feel extreme and unwarranted guilt over almost anything they thought or did, fears of all kinds of things, and intense doubt every time they try to make a decision. As they unearth the stark reality of the deception and dishonesty of cult life, many ex-members also feel great remorse over their action and frequently worry about how to right the wrongs they did. They can overcome such guilt only by accepting what they did and forgiving themselves, making amends with others where possible.

## **Panic Attacks**

Many former members experience panic attacks, defined as discrete periods of intense fear or discomfort in which any four of the following symptoms develop abruptly and reach a peak within about ten minutes:

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or a feeling of smothering
- Feeling of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or faint
- Feelings of derealization (surroundings don't seem real)
- Depersonalization experiences (feeling detached, as though looking at oneself as an object)
- Fear of losing control or going crazy; fear of dying
- Numbness, tingling, and hot and cold flashes

Panic attacks and other panic disorders are commonly experienced by people coming out of the emotional arousal cultic groups which tend to focus on stimulating fear and guilt.

## **Fear of Retribution**

Fear of the cult is long lasting, especially if the group has a tendency toward violence. Many cult leaders threaten the lives of potential defectors.

Some former members fear that zealous current members will harm them or their families to show the leader how devoted the current members are.

Some groups have specific derogatory labels for persons who criticize the cult, and they train their members to avoid or harass these stated "enemies." For such reasons, fear and anxiety are high in many former cult members from a variety of groups - and not without justification, although it appears that most cults soon turn their energies to recruiting new members rather than prolonging efforts to harass defectors. Nevertheless, even after the initial fear of retaliation has passed, ex-members worry about how to handle the inevitable chance street meetings with cult members, expecting these members to try to stir up the ex-members' feelings of guilt over leaving and to condemn their present life.

## **Fear of Self**

Yet another kind of fear exists - a more inwardly focused fear that comes from believing that if you leave, you will be doomed to live a life of unenlightenment, will never be psychologically whole, never spiritually fulfilled, never healthy or able to live in peace.

Some cults inculcate their followers with notions that they contain hidden selves or hidden loads of stress that may erupt at any moment and destroy or at least severely damage them. Former members may worry indefinitely about their inner "ticking bomb" or the cult leader's dire predictions of the horrible events that will befall them and their families. Because they have been so well trained, former cult members may continue to see this possible fate as something they may bring on themselves by having left the group, given up on their faith, and betrayed the cause.

Often at the root of the fear is the memory of old humiliations administered for stepping out of line. A woman who had been in a cult for more than five years said: "Some of the older members might still be able to get to me and crush my spirit like they did when I became depressed and couldn't go out and fund raise or recruit. I was unable to eat or sleep. I was weak and ineffectual. They called me and the leader screamed at me: 'You're too rebellious. I am going to break your spirit. You are too strong-willed.' They made me crawl at their feet. I still freak out when I think about how close they drove me to suicide that day; for a long time afterward, all I could do was help with cooking. I can hardly remember the details - it was a nightmare."

It is crucial to analyze and work through such fears objectively. The former member needs to learn that the cult does not hold magical powers over him or her.

## **Conflicts over those Left Behind**

Fear and anxiety may be most acute for former members who have left a spouse or children in the cult. Any effort to make contact risks breaking any remaining link to those left behind. Often painful legal actions ensue over child custody or conservatorships, fought out between the one who leaves and the spouse who remains loyal to the cult.

## **Lack of Understanding in the Outside World**

A problem related to the fear and anxieties that former cult members experience is that often they find it difficult to get others, even helping professionals, to understand what they are going through. Some psychiatrists and psychologists who have ex-members as clients think that they are psychotic, brain damaged, or malingering when they report seeing fog or hearing the voice of Thor, their old leader in another life, or being unable to hold down a job.

When I am consulted on such cases, although I cannot make a diagnosis without seeing the person, I urge the therapists to listen, learn more, and see what happens when they allow a client to go over the details of cult life. As was described in Chapter Six and Seven, many of these phenomena are products of the odd, repetitive training that goes on in cults, and they generally go away with simple listening and helping the patient see how the behavior became conditioned. To diagnose these occurrences as a true hallucination or a sign of major mental disturbance can cause even more damage to the person that he or she has already suffered.

While a few cult members may actually have become psychotic in the cult, more typically, seemingly psychotic behavior is a result of cult conditioning. For example, someone once asked me during a consultation if I saw the Devil sitting across the room where he pointed. I looked over, told him no, and asked if he did. We then talked about the sources of this idea and when it first happened. From that discussion, we learned that the cult leader often used the phrase, "I see the Devil beside you." He would say it to those being chastised or use it to convey that a person was not trustworthy but "of the Devil." When I commented to the man that maybe he wasn't able to fully trust me yet and that it was sensible to go slowly in trusting

anyone, he was relieved. Further discussion revealed that he was not hallucinating (and never had), but he had been conditioned by his cult leader to associate feelings of distrust with ideas of the Devil.

So some odd events may well be leftovers from cult days. All such symptoms need to be checked out carefully, with warmth and compassion.

## **Cognitive Inefficiencies**

Cult practices can cause members' mental skills to falter and become inefficient. Since all cult members learn that reflective thought gets them in trouble, it's no wonder that they emerge with some mental constrictions. Many ex-members experience difficulty concentrating, an inability to focus and maintain attention, and impaired memory, especially short-term memory. It is reassuring for them to know that these aftereffects will pass. General explanations of what they are going through will help them.

Most of us who work with people soon after they emerge from cultic groups note that a lack of humor is almost universal until they have been away from the group for some time. In cults, people do not laugh, joke, and think at the multiple levels that other people ordinarily do and that allow them to grasp the incongruities central to much humor.

Many former members are also unable to comprehend what they read for some time. Many are forgetful, fail to meet deadlines, lose jobs because of inefficiency, and miss appointments. Some become very literal in their thinking. They've been so obedient and nonreflective that, like "Jack" in the following example, they are now highly concrete and literal in the ways they deal with what they hear, see or read.

## **Uncritical Passivity**

Many former members find themselves accepting almost everything they hear, just as they were trained to do. They cannot listen and judge; they listen and obey. As a result, simple remarks by friends, family, dates, and co-workers are taken as commands, even though the person may not feel like doing the task or dislikes whatever it is.

## **Leftover Cult Language**

A prime hurdle for former cult members is to overcome speaking and thinking in the cult's special language. As we have seen, each group has its own jargon, usually based on applying new and idiosyncratic meanings to regular words and phrases. The jargon creates a sense of eliteness, solidarity, and belonging among those in the in-group; at the same time, it cuts people off from easy conversation with outsiders. This is true even in the live-out cults, whose members work at outside jobs but put in most of their free time with the cult; during that time with the cult, they speak the group jargon. In certain groups, the loaded language is more centrally encompassing than in others and thus harder to shed afterward. That is, supplies new terms for practically everything and thereby controls more of the members' thinking.

Communication with others is naturally hindered as long as former members continue to use cult terminology. They don't make sense when they speak to others, and sometimes they can't make sense out of their own internal thoughts.

## **Memory Loss and Altered Memories**

The distorted personal history gradually built up in the cult is not quickly removed. Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in the recent controversy over "recovered" memories of child abuse and other highly painful events. Stories of false memory syndrome, or as researchers in hypnosis have called them decades, pseudo-memories, are frequently in the news.

A pseudo-memory is a fictitious experience induced in a person's memory, either by design or inadvertently, through the use of guided imagery, hypnosis (ranging from light to deep trance states), and direct and indirect suggestions. During the trance state, or even without trance via carefully constructed suggestions, individuals can be led to construct scenes in their minds. They experience these fabricated, or confabulated, images as vividly as, or even more vividly than, real-life memories, even though the events never happened and are products of the interaction between a manipulative operator and a dependent subject.

Cult members may be trained to have specific visualizations and then be praised and rewarded and feel self-fulfilled when they achieve the goal.

Some cults specialize in creating purely fictional identities through emphasizing how bad the member's past was, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Cults that focus on past-lives regression and getting members to think they are communicating with entities from past lives build into their followers rather firm and puzzling revisions of history. In such cults, long-term members lead newer members through processes in which they are encouraged to locate events and imagine experiences and past lives that date back millions of years. In all



these cases, the revised personal history becomes part of the pseudo-identity the cult member adopts during cult life.

Cults have been leading followers to create revised histories for some years now. Members have been made to gradually accuse parents and family and separate from them, then they are repeatedly rewarded for these actions and statements. This practice leaves many former members deeply conflicted.

Many times, former cult members will have written hateful, accusatory letters - the so-called disconnect letters - to parents and relatives at the direction of the cult after they were led to believe that their parents acted in accordance with the fabrications concocted during history revision. Within the cult milieu, these "mystical manipulations" are very believable.

Eventually former cult members realize that their life history was distorted and manipulated by cult practices, and they will want to sort out the truth from fabrication. They will desire to reconnect with what was real and rid themselves of nagging guilt and anxiety and distorted self-image engendered by the cult.

## **Triggers, Flashbacks and Floating**

A number of cult practices tend to produce varying degrees of trance states, disrupt normal reflective thought, and interrupt a person's general reality orientation (GRO). After practicing or participating in certain exercises and activities for years, some of these undesirable habits become ingrained. Both while in the cult and after leaving, a number of persons involuntarily enter dissociative states and have difficulty maintaining reflective thinking and concentration. Time goes by without their being aware of it. During these periods, they have certain kinds of memories and slip into altered states of consciousness, which they sometimes call flashbacks or floating. But these are, in fact, forms of dissociation.

Dissociation is a normal mental response to anxiety. A momentary anxiety arises when internal or external cues (trigger) set off a memory, a related idea, or a state of feeling that has anxiety attached to it. This brief anxiety experience alerts the mind to split off - that is, the mind stops paying attention to the surrounding reality of the moment. The person becomes absorbed and immersed in some other mental picture, idea, or feeling. This dissociation occurs unexpectedly and unintentionally and it is this dissociation that can be experienced as a floating effect.

Most of the time the floating is described by former cult members as "how I felt while in the group." Sometimes the feeling is one of nostalgia for some aspect of the cult. Sometimes it is a feeling of fear that the person should go back to the cult. Most of the time, people describe it as being suspended between the two worlds of present life and the past cult life.

Triggers, flashbacks, and floating are part of the normal repertoire of the human mind, but usually people experience them as brief, infrequent episodes. Because certain cult practices tend to produce hypnotic states and are used extensively for prolonged periods, people emerge with years of practice in how to dissociate. What are transient, brief mental moments for the ordinary person become practiced and reinforced behaviors for cult members. The moments of dissociation become intensified, prolonged, and disruptive experiences; they prevent sustained reflective thinking, concentration, and the ability to plan ahead.

Because these dissociative responses are overlearned, they become distracting, immobilizing habits. They often occur when a person has to shift from one task to the next. It's as though the choice of what to do next sets off the act of spacing out. In the cult, that moment of what to do next was stressful: you had to make a decision knowing that all decisions had to be "right" and that you could get into trouble if your decision was wrong. This experience is perhaps the source of the apparent conditioning that causes decision making to trigger a dissociation.

Consequently, great difficulty in making decisions is common among ex-members. At times they do not know what to do, say, or think. It is as though they suddenly become dependent and childlike, looking for direction. In the cult, they followed a predetermined path of obedience. Now they find themselves fearful, feeling stupid and guilty, and not knowing what to do. The newly found independent decision making process becomes riddled with fears and anxieties - all ripe moments for floating.

Floating episodes occur more frequently when someone is tired or ill, at the end of the day, on long highway drives, or doing highly repetitive tasks - that is, when the person feels weary and unfocused but must also think. A period of dissociation and a puzzled moment of wondering, What just happened to my thoughts and feelings? Will arrive at such times. It helps if former members can learn to recognize those vulnerable moments in their lives for the conditioned responses that they are.

## **Social and Personal Relations**

A majority of former cult members experience varying degrees of anomie, or alienation, for some period of time. This sense of alienation and confusion results from the loss and then the reawakening of previous norms, ideals, and goals. It is exacerbated as the individual tries to integrate three cultures: the culture he or

she lived in before joining the cultic group, the culture of the group itself, and the culture of the general society encountered now that the person is out of the group. The theories learned and held to so strongly in the cult need to be reconciled with the person's precult past as well as the postcult present. In a sense, the former member is asking, Who am I? In the midst of three sets of competing value systems.

For this reason, former cult members often feel like immigrants or refugees entering a foreign culture. In most cases, however, they are actually reentering their own former culture, bringing along a series of cult experiences and beliefs that may conflict with the norms and expectations of society in general. Unlike the immigrant confronting novel situations, the person coming out of a cult is confronting the society she or he once rejected.

## **Building a New Social Network**

Many friends, a fellowship with common interests, and the intimacy of sharing a significant experience are all left behind when members walk away from a cult. A cult is a world of its own. Leaving such an all-encompassing experience means having to look for new friends in what you were taught is an uncomprehending or suspicious world. Moreover, a prominent characteristic of cult members, particularly in those who were in a cult for a long time, is a developmental lag in their social and experiential lives.

Gradually former members need to start making friends, dating, and having a social life, as well as either working for a living or returning to college or both. It's important to give them enough time to make this adjustment and to catch up. It doesn't have to be a great deal of time but enough so that they can pull themselves together in various ways before attempting complicated mental, social, and business enterprises.

## **Loneliness**

Upon leaving the group, a person usually discovers that the group practices shown toward outsiders are now turned on him or her - that is, he or she is scorned and ostracized. Also, there is no hope of retaining cult friendships because cult members have been trained to hate defectors, and because members may try to pull the former member back in. In addition, the former member may not easily resume relationships with former friends and family because of the harsh way these relationships were most likely broken off when he or she joined the cult.

Leaving is a final door slam: the past is behind, and the exiting cult member is heading forward - but alone - toward an uncharted future in which the former member has to start all over at creating a friendship network.

## **Dating and Sexuality**

Some people try to make up for lost time through binges of dating, drinking, and sexual adventures. However, this behavior often produces overwhelming guilt and shame when former members contrast the cult's prohibitions to their new freedom. It also can lead to some uncomfortable, regrettable experiences.

Others simply panic and avoid dating altogether.

Often people were struggling with issues of sexuality, dating and marriage before they joined a cult, and the cult artificially alleviated such struggles by restricting sexual contact and pairing, ostensibly to keep the members targeted on doing the "work of the master." Even marriage and parenthood, if permitted, are subject to cult rules. Sexuality in cults is almost always monitored or controlled in some way. Pairing off with another means you may care more for that person than for the leader or group mission. So cult leaders develop ways to ensure that allegiance goes to the top, not sideways in pair bonding. Another result of this control of sexuality is that cult friendships become sexually neutral and nonthreatening; rules that permit only brotherly and sisterly love can take a heavy burden off a conflicted young adult.

In some instances, highly charged interpersonal manipulations performed in the cult have long-lasting consequences. "Jennifer" said she was often chastised by a prestigious female cult member for "showing lustful thoughts toward the brothers. She would have me lie face down on the floor. She would lie on top of me and message me to drive Satan out. Soon, she began accusing me of being a lesbian!" After leaving the cult, Jennifer felt convinced about her sexual preferences.

Some groups promote a level of membership made up of renunciates, individuals who are akin to monks in the Far East. Some of these men and women do not engage in heterosexual lives when they leave the group, nor are they homosexual. The cult has so affected their outlook that they simply avoid issues of sexuality.

Orgiastic cults enforce sexuality rather than celibacy, and this too affects departing individuals. Describing her cult leader, one woman said, "He uses orgies to break down our inhibitions. If a person didn't feel comfortable in group sex, he said it indicated a psychological hang-up that had to be stripped away because it prevented us from all from melding and unifying." A few cults practice child-to-child and adult-to-adult sexual encounters and forms of prostitution or sexual slavery, sometimes combined with neo-Christian philosophy. There are

also a few aberrant Mormon-based cults that practices polygamy. In some of the guru-based cults, the guru teaches and demands celibacy but has sexual liaisons with male or female members.

Upon leaving groups with unusual sexual practices, ex-members often are hesitant to talk about their experiences lest the listener be critical of them for participating. This is a case where good therapeutic counseling - or the sympathetic ear of a trusted friend - may be beneficial.

## **Marital Issues**

When one partner of a married pair is recruited into a cult, pressure is put on that person to get the partner to join. If the partner doesn't, most of the time the cult, in effect, breaks up the marriage. Leaders give talks about how sinful, how suppressive, how negative the partner is, and the combination of keeping members busy with cult work while denigrating nonmember partners wrecks many marriages.

If both partners have joined the cult, they do not feel able to talk with one another about plans to escape the cult because loyalty to the leader supersedes marital obligations. Therefore one partner might leave without letting the other know, rather than run the risk of being stopped because the other had told the leadership. A number of marriages break up because the ones who leave are crushed when they realize that love and marital loyalty are nothing compared to their partner's fear and duty to the cult and that the partner has chosen loyalty to the cult leader over loyalty to the spouse.

A number of groups arrange member's marriages. The most publicized are the mass weddings in Moon's Unification Church, such as one in which 5,150 members were united in a group ceremony. Smaller groups do the same on a reduced scale. Legal consultation is needed for those who leave a spouse and/or children back in the cult or who simply no longer wish to remain married to a partner they didn't choose.

## **Trust**

Former cult members find themselves feeling phobic in many social situations. They tend to withdraw and to stay away from crowds and gatherings of more than several people. Feeling badly ripped off by the cult experience, they don't trust their own judgment, and they don't trust other people. Additionally, they lack self-esteem and self-confidence; they feel incompetent, clumsy, and undesirable as a consequence of their cult training.

Former members' inability to trust is one of their most frequent and vivid problems. Not only do they realize that they trusted too much, but also they often end up blaming themselves for ever joining the cult and for feeling inadequate about their decision-making abilities and judgment.

## **The "Fishbowl" Effect**

A special problem for cult veterans is the constant watchfulness of family and friends, who are on the alert for any signs that the difficulties of real life may send the former member back to the cult. Mild dissociation, deep preoccupations, mood swings, and positive talk about the cult tend to cause alarm in a former member's family. Both new acquaintances and old friends can also trigger a former member's feeling that people are staring, wondering why he or she joined a cult. Often neither the ex-member nor family and friends know how to open up a discussion of this topic. The best advice I can give for dealing with this is for ex-members to focus on the reality of their surroundings and details of the current conversation until the sense of being under scrutiny gradually fades.

Former members sometimes want to talk to people about positive aspects of the cult experience. Besides acknowledging the seriousness of having made a commitment, the sense of purpose and accomplishment, and the simplicity of life in the old regime, they generally want to discuss a few warm friendships or romances, as well as their unique travels, experiences, or personal insights. Yet they commonly feel that others, especially family, want to hear only the negative.

Former members need to talk about their experiences as they wish, explaining to those around them that this doesn't mean they're running back to the cult. Part of shedding the cult's black-and-white thinking is learning to see all sides of an issue, and that learning will apply the way the cult experience is seen as well.

## **Fear of Commitment**

Many people coming out of cults want to find ways to put their altruism and energy back to work without becoming pawns in another manipulative group. Some fear they have become "groupies" defenseless against entanglements with controlling organization or people. They feel a need for affiliations, yet wonder how to select properly among the myriad contending organizations - social, religious, philanthropic, service, and political - choosing a group in which they can continue to be their own bosses.

For a period of time, most will experience this reluctance to join any type of group or to make a commitment

to another person or an activity or life plan. They will fear going back to their old church, old club, or old college; they will avoid social activities and volunteer organizations.

This may, in fact, be a healthy reaction. Those of us helping ex-cult members advise caution about joining any new group and suggest, instead, purely social, work, or school-related activities, at least for the time being, until the person is more fully distanced from the cult experience and better understands the recruitment phenomenon.

## **Philosophical and Attitudinal Issues**

Most cults claim their members are the elite of the world, even though individual members may be treated subserviently and degraded. While in the cult, members identify with this claim and display moral disdain toward others. They internalize the group's value system and its sense of moral pretentiousness, intellectual superiority, and condescension toward the outside world. In the cult, members get points for showing moral disdain for nonmembers and for members who faltered or left the group.

## **Aversions and Hypercritical Attitudes**

Aversions and loathing are taught by many cults, sometimes in subtle forms. Ex-members of various cults talk about how they must struggle to not fuss at women in pants suits, not rage at relatives who eat meat, and not scoff at mainstream political or social advances. They may find themselves clinging to cult ways, such as wanting to wear dark, dingy clothes to avoid looking like a "harlot," wanting to be on the side of righteousness in their thinking, wanting never to spend money, show closeness, or have fun.

Some are taught prejudice toward certain races, religions, ethnic groups, or social classes, or even something as simple as people who wear clothing of the "wrong" color. While in the group, members are praised for sounding off about these pet hates of the leader. Out of the cult now, the person wants desperately to stop spewing hatred.

Teenagers raised in such groups need considerable training in how to live in a multethnic, multicultural, multiracial world with ecumenical practices. Never instructed in how to live in a democratic world, they learned to exist in a fascist one, where followers echo the leader's values. One teenager and his parents came to me for help because the boy had attended only cult schools. Now out of the cult, he spouted the venom of the cult leader and was being beaten and ostracized by others at school; he was terribly confused. He sobbed as he told me, "I told the class what the leader taught us - that the Pope and the United States Postal Service were part of a Communist conspiracy - and everybody laughed at me and said, 'There goes crazy ["Joey"] again.' After school they beat me up and say they will get me." Through the school principal and teacher, we worked out an educational program for him and eventually he and his parents instructed the class about cults, showed educational films on cults, and discussed how to avoid getting recruited.

To newly emerged ex-cult members, people on the outside do not seem dedicated or hardworking enough. They appear lazy and uncaring about the world. Cults preach perfection and condemn members for not being perfect, and cult members spend years trying to live up to the ideal of perfection, always failing because the standards are beyond human capabilities. Conditioned by their cult's condemnation of the beliefs and conduct of outsiders, former members tend to remain hypercritical of much ordinary human behavior.

While in the cult, members not only learned to be harsh to those under them who were not perfect, but were sometimes punished for the shortcomings of others as well their own. Upon entering the general society, some former members continue to be punitive, critical, confrontational taskmasters. The simple human errors and forgetfulness of others can bring an ex-cult member to look down on them. Cults organized around paramilitary, political, and psychological themes tend to teach some of the harshest and most confrontational practices.

## **No Longer a World Saver**

Nothing on the outside seems as vital and grand as life was supposed to be in the cult. Members were told they were doing "world-class work." Upon emerging, the ex-member looks at the jobs people do, and sees them as hopelessly small and without meaning compared to his or her work for a group that was purportedly saving souls or the world itself.

## **Helpful Tasks for Individuals Leaving Cults**

Knowing that others before you have experienced many of the symptoms you may now be experiencing as a former member is a great source of comfort and relief for many. Rather than thinking that you're hopeless or going crazy, you can educate yourself so that you will see that the experiences you are going through are recognizable consequences of having been in a cult.

Be alert to the possibility of dissociation and try to find activities that will break the rhythm of monotonous work,



so they will not fall into cult habits and periods of floating. These early insights also cued me to start looking more precisely at some of the effects on people of the highly repetitive activities typically found in cults and the power of thought-reform processes.

"Don't worry," I say. "It eventually all goes away." And it does. It's a matter of time, plus learning to label what you are experiencing and hearing some good explanations for what's happening to you, including your physiological reactions and the up-and-down process of recovery.

Recovery is a psycho-educational process - the more you learn about the cult and what to expect afterward, the quicker your healing process and integration into a new life outside the cult.

## Past Lives and Altered Histories

In sorting out past lives from real-life experiences or recapturing your history and family connections, part of the recovery work is to remember and review life experiences before you joined the cult and to compare them with the specific attitudes and contents inculcated by the cult. Working actively to ascertain what was real before, during and after cult life, and thinking over how to reestablish family connections is crucial work for most former members.

## Cognitive Inefficiencies

I often recommend to ex-members with the kinds of cognitive inefficiencies described earlier that they take time out and give themselves a break, and that they not enroll immediately in college or graduate school, because their reading retention, ability to sit, and capacity to recall and reflect will get better in a few months. To attempt high-level functioning in a demanding and competitive situation like graduate school may create undue stress.

Reversing the loss of mental acuity takes time and effort - you may want to try reading again, going back to activities that interested you before you joined the cult, or taking some relatively less demanding evening classes for a start. Making lists and keeping a notebook are two of the most useful and most popular remedies for cognitive difficulties. You can make detailed plans of everything you need to do and everything you want to do, day by day. Then you follow your plan, checking off items as you go along, so you can see your progress.

When passive behavior or troublesome indecisiveness comes up, it can be helpful to dissect the cult's motives and injunctions against questioning doctrines or directives. This will shed light on the effects of your having lived for months or years in a situation that encouraged acquiescence, and also help you think on your own once again and voice opinions. During this process, the cult and its power become demystified as you realize that leadership's orders were meant primarily to reinforce the closed, controlled cult environment and keep tabs on members.

## How to Stop Floating

Behaviorally orientated educational techniques are the best methods of counteracting and dealing with floating episodes. The triggers are just associations and memories, and only that. They are not arcane implants put in your mind by others; they do not reflect uncontrollable suggestions. Floating is simply getting stuck for a few minutes, or sometimes hours, in a familiar, detached, and conflicted state, such as you experienced while in the cult.

Three types of remembrances are experienced by ex-cult members during floating episodes:

- Contents from the cult days; jargon, dogma, practices, songs, rituals, certain clothing.
- Feeling states that were vivid and frequent during the time in the group: gnawing inner doubt, inadequacy, unmitigated fear, unending hidden tension.
- Strange wordless states, sometimes given denigrating labels by the cult (for example, "bliss ninny," "space cadet"): referred to as floating, involuntary meditation, and wavy states by former members.

Often former cult members don't distinguish among remembrances from cult life. But learning to recognize and identify the types just described is helpful in the process of getting rid of them for good. It demystifies your cultic experience and the power you think it holds over you. You will no longer feel you are at the mercy of some strange phenomenon that you cannot control.

Some cults even have their own terms, such as restimulation, which they use to predict the recurrence of these episodes (both while in the cult and later). This, of course, sets members up to expect what does occur once in a while. The cult that uses this particular term also imbues the involuntary state with the implication that "you can't help it because it's in your wiring." This frightens members, who then carry this notion with them when they leave. Myths such as this cause former members to become very anxious when the dissociative episodes occur.

Remember, there are no mysterious, mechanical, out-of-our-control events. No cult and no person has the power or skill to implant such things in the minds of their members or to cause these episodes to happen after members leave. There is no scientific evidence, no valid clinical observation that such a possibility exists.

Individuals newly emerging from a cult can almost expect and need not be alarmed by periods of seeming to lose track of time or where they are. It's normal for them to think often about various experiences from cult days and sometimes feel as they felt back in the cult. During exit counseling, families should be told that floating is likely to occur for a time after the cult member leaves the group. They are advised to ex-member to talk about and deal with these episodes.

Floating does not mean you want to return to the cult. As described earlier, floating is most likely to happen when you are stressed, anxious, uncertain, lonely, distracted, fatigued, or ill. Once you recognize when these episodes may occur, you can prepare for them. Then the event will be less distressing when it happens. Realizing that floating is a dissociative moment will help. Once you understand that you are merely temporarily psychologically disengaging, you won't think that your memory is shot or that you are losing your mind. You can say to yourself, "I'm not damaged for life. This is just a momentary dissociation. I can pick up where I was. It's just a thought, just a memory. I don't have to act on it."

Here are some helpful Antidotes:

- Keep a written log of the happenings so that you can talk about them and come to understand what happens. Write down the simple word, event, voice, sound, smell, motion, expression, or memory; that is, trace back and recall what set you off so that you can begin to comprehend what occurred. Why that thing? Why that moment? What was the state you were in?
- Divert yourself when you are about to fall into a dissociative state. Sometimes a friend or co-worker will notice that you are beginning to space out, and she or he may offer companionship or listening time or divert you into an activity. You can also create your own activities that you set into motion when you recognize a trigger or start to float. Turn to the radio, listen to the news, call someone on the phone, write in your journal, play with the dog.
- Suppress the feeling. You do not have to act on it, you do not have to let the cult-related feeling overwhelm you. Push it away and go on to something else. Later, at a more appropriate moment, you may want to talk with someone about the situation.
- Learn to minimize the frightening leftovers from cult days. You might be flooded with feelings, but say to yourself, "I'm not going crazy. I'm just a little anxious." Focus on the present, on today, on getting your life back together.
- If you do fall into a dissociative state, bring yourself back with a scenery change. Pinch yourself. Rub your hand. Do something that will provide sensory input and break the feeling of being in limbo. Focus your eyes on something directly in front of you.

All these techniques will help break up the floods of emotion and emotional memories that come in at you. Taking a down-to-earth and aggressive stance against triggers and floating will propel you to take great leaps forward in your recovery.

## Combating Aversions

Former cult members remain rigid in their attitudes for some time. This rigidity is a remnant of the cult's moral relativism, which provided reasons to hate and condemn. It takes much constant personal monitoring of your attitudes to change these ingrained reactions. It is necessary to make a conscious effort to understand human frailties. Reactivating a personal sense of values and good standards without being maniacally condemning of everyday human failures and foibles in yourself or others is a needed step in recovery.

## Learning to Trust Again

Regaining your sense of trust will grow partly out of the gradual awakening of your ability to tolerate thinking about and discussing the abuse and betrayal you experienced. Members' massive anger over injustices and abuses is kept hidden in the cult. This anger surfaces in ex-members, along with anger over the dishonesty and deceptions that had to be ignored or the facts that weren't known until the individuals left the group.

Trust is difficult to reestablish. Regaining trust is sometimes easier for those who have the chance to speak with exit-counselors, to spend some time at a rehabilitation center (see Chapter Eleven), or to engage in psychotherapy after leaving the cult.

One of the most poignant aftereffects of cult life is the distrust of the self. Many people start blaming themselves, asking, "Why ever did I join?" Part of exit-counseling and the subsequent psychoeducational work is helping former cult members analyze their involvement. As they recognize the deceptive, step-at-a-time influence program that led them into the group, they will be less hard on themselves. They will be able to forgive themselves and carry on with life.

## Regaining a Sense of Satisfaction

Most of us get a sense of satisfaction from doing life's little tasks well.

Many ex-members describe struggling along, feeling they are wasting time by being nice to fellow employees or watering flowers for a neighbor or visiting a sick aunt. They don't allow themselves to feel any satisfaction, since they are still judging by the cult's standards.

"It is all right to enjoy once more. It is all right to be kind to one person at a time. In fact, it is impossible to do whatever 'save the world' means. Such abstract goals are just that - abstract - and keep you from living and doing good day by day.

\* \* \*

The discussion in this chapter does not cover the conflicts, turmoils and disturbing aftereffects that ex-cult members have struggled with. But it should help the reader begin to understand the breadth of the recovery from cult conditioning and cult experiences that must occur.

Coming out of the cult pseudo-personality is about reeducation and growth. Self-help through reading can be invaluable for those who live far from knowledgeable resources such as exit-counselors, cult information specialists, former member support groups, and mental health professionals.

## There is Life after the Cult

From working with so many former cult members, I have a new picture of the railroad station and the tracks. I think people standing alongside the railroad tracks, hucksters, pied pipers, scam artists, and self-avowed saviors of the world hop off the trains and display their enticing wares, trying to get as many as possible of the people at the stations to hop on board and go with them into the vision of perfection.

Watch out! That can be the last train stop on the way to hell on earth.

I want to applaud all of those who keep on wanting to try to do good, and to be good to their families, friends, and humankind. I applaud them for springing back after the betrayal of a spiritual abuser, a psychological exploiter, or a political fraud and for not allowing a fascistic pseudo-guru to keep on controlling them. I applaud those who speak out and believe that we all need to continue trying to prevent these abusers from taking over more of the world. Truly, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, and the ability to recover from defeats, scams and harassment.

A free mind is a wonderful thing. Free minds have discovered the advances of medicine, science, and technology; have created great works of art, literature, and music; and have devised our rules of ethics and the laws of civilized lands. Tyrants who take over our thinking and enforce political, psychological, or spiritual "correctness" by taking away our freedom, especially the freedom of our minds, are the menace of today, tomorrow, and all eternity.

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