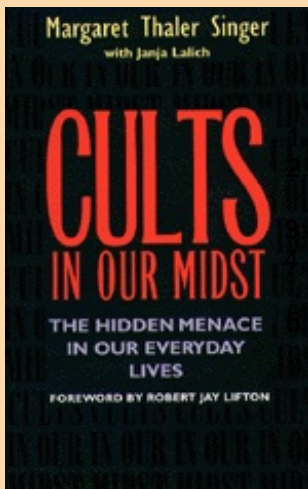


Cults in our Midst

Leaving the Cult

Jossey-Bass Publishers San Francisco

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Chapter 11: Leaving the Cult / Recovery

Why it's hard to leave.

Deception in the recruitment process and throughout membership
Debilitation, because of the hours, the degree of commitment, the psychological pressures, and the inner constriction and strife.
Dependency, as a result of being cut off from the outside world in many ways
Dread, because of beliefs instilled by the cult that a person who leaves will find no real life on the outside
Desensitization, so that things that once have troubled them no longer do (for example, learning that money collected from fund-raising is supporting the leader's lavish lifestyle rather than the cause for which it was given, or seeing children badly abused or even killed.)

Psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric social workers dealing with cult members suggested behavioral changes they labeled the *cult indoctrination syndrome*. These changes included:

- *Sudden, drastic alteration of the individual's value hierarchy*, including *abandonment of previous academic and career goals*. These changes are sudden and catastrophic, rather than the gradual ones that result from maturation or education.
- *Reduction of cognitive flexibility and adaptability*. The cult member substitutes stereotyped cult responses for her or his own.
- *Narrowing and blunting of affect*. Love feelings are repressed. The cult member appears emotionally flatter and less vital than before.
- *Regression of behavior to childlike levels*. The follower becomes dependent on the cult leader and accepts the leader's decisions uncritically.
- *Physical changes*. These changes often include weight loss and deterioration in physical appearance and expression.
- *Possible pathological symptoms*. Such symptoms can include altered states of consciousness.

Deprogramming - that is, providing members with information about the cult and showing them how their own decision-making power had been taken away from them.

Exit counseling identifies the educational process that takes place in efforts to get cult members to reevaluate their membership. In fact "deprogramming" is in many ways a more accurate description of the process, but since that word is now tinged with memories of the early snatchings and restraint, most people are reluctant to use it.

Mental Health Professionals and Clergy as Counselors.

Families who call upon these clergy or mental health professionals are almost always told some variant of "It's just a passing stage; he will outgrow it," or "There is nothing to be done; she is forty years old (or seventy)." Because in most cases these professionals don't recognize how intense influence, social pressure, and cult interactions affect cult members, they simply turn away or misdirect the family.

Exit Counseling Versus Therapy

From my interviews with many former cult members - some who have received exit counseling that participation in an exit counseling session is far better than ordinary psychiatric or psychological treatment, both for assisting people who are in cults to evaluate whether they want to stay in, and for helping those who have already left but are having trouble understanding and handling what went on during their cult days and the types of problems they are experiencing in the aftermath of their cult involvement.

* * *

From the very early days of my work with ex-cult members, I have noticed that those who have been deprogrammed or counseled out make the easiest, best, and quickest returns to normal life. Other professionals have found the same thing, which suggests that the education and information provided by exit

counseling may be extremely valuable, helping those leaving cults to understand their own situation and feelings and to adapt to life in the regular world.

Chapter 12: Recovery; Coming out of the Pseudopersonality

Just as cults vary greatly, so do their members, their after-effects, and the duration of those effects. Yet those who help former cult members have seen certain patterns in the types of trauma, damage, and emotional and cognitive difficulties. This has been true for former members of a variety of cults and groups that use thought-reform processes.

Not everyone who is exposed to thought-reform processes is successfully manipulated, however; nor does everyone respond with major reactive symptoms. An evaluation of what a person may experience after belonging to a cult requires study of the group's particular practices, social and psychological pressures, and conditions. Nevertheless, groups using thought-reform processes can be usefully classed into two main categories: those that primarily use dissociative techniques and those that primarily use emotional arousal techniques. Each category produces characteristic negative psychological effects.

Former members of groups relying mainly on the use of *dissociative techniques* - meditation, trance states, guided imagery, past-lives regression, and hyperventilation - have tended to exhibit these aftereffects:

- Relaxation-induced anxiety and tics
- Panic attacks
- Cognitive inefficiencies
- Dissociative states
- Recurring bizarre content (such as orange fog)
- Worry over the reality of "past lives"

Eastern based cults and New Age groups doing past-lives work and channeling fall into this first category.

Former members of groups using primarily intense *aversive emotional arousal techniques* - guilt and fear induction, strict discipline and punishments, excessive criticism and blame - have tended to experience these aftereffects:

- Guilt
- Shame
- Self-blaming attitudes
- Fears and paranoia
- Excessive doubts
- Panic attacks

Bible-based, political, racial, occult, and psychotherapy cults typically fit into this category.

However, although cults tend to focus on one category or the other, they often use a multitude of techniques and do not restrict them selves to one or the other of these major groupings. For example, the large group awareness training programs and some psychotherapy cults use both kinds of techniques. Moreover, a group relying heavily on meditation, trance, and dissociative techniques is also likely to include elements of intense emotional arousal devices, and the reverse is also true. Some of the most intense emotional arousal responses can be produced by guided imagery, speaking in tongues, and other trance-inducing procedures. Thus it is important not to regard this heuristic division too rigidly, since the techniques readily overlap and can produce a range of responses.

Some aftereffects may be experienced by former members regardless of the kind of cult they were in. These general aftereffects are:

- Depression and a sense of alienation
- Loneliness
- Low self-esteem and low self-confidence
- Phobic like constriction of social contacts
- Fear of joining groups or making a commitment
- Distrust of professional services
- Distrust of self in making good choices
- Problems in reactivating a value system to live by

Recovering from Cult Aftereffects

Once out of a cult, former cult members, although now free, face the challenge of reentering the society they once rejected. The array of necessary adjustments can be summed up as coming out of the pseudopersonality, or as others have termed it, dropping the synthetic identity or reuniting with the split-off old self. An additional helpful way to view the many problems faced by former cult members is to cluster them into five major areas of adjustment: practical, psychological-emotional, cognitive, social-personal, and

philosophical-attitudinal. Former cult members must:

- Address *practical* issues related to daily living
- Face *Psychological* and *emotional* stirrings that can cause intense agonies for a while
- Deal with *cognitive inefficiencies*
- Develop a new *social* network and repair old *personal* relationships, if possible
- Examine the *philosophical* and *attitudinal* adopted during cult days

It is through dealing with all these areas that the former cult member gains insight into his or her experience and, over time, sheds the cult pseudopersonality.

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