

Caring for Cult Victims

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Whilst most people would rightly assume that cults represent a major problem in North America, few realise the enormity of the problem in Great Britain and the rest of Europe. In the U.K. there are well over 500 cults in operation which means that on a per capita basis the problem is the same as that of the U.S. In Eastern Europe, since the collapse of the 'iron curtain' cults are also flourishing by exploiting (and removing) the new found freedoms given to the average citizen.

Cults are operating throughout the fabric of contemporary society. They are active in the corporate world and on campus at college and university, where they are affecting both students and staff. They have made inroads into the religious and medical communities and are working in the prison system and even advertise in the media.

Since the average cult recruit becomes a recruiter of others, cults tend to grow at an exponential rate if unchecked. This in turn highlights the tremendous need for trained people to care for cult victims and counsel them. However, without an understanding of the basics, a counsellor may overlook cultism as the source of a client's difficulties and even look for deficiencies in the individual as the root cause of the problems. Other carers, with the best intentions, may recognise that recent cult involvement is at the heart of a client's difficulties, but enter the counselling with many assumptions about cults that are unfounded and erroneous. This lack of understanding impairs progress and can be extremely harmful to the very person one is trying to help.

There are many myths associated with an understanding of the general cult phenomenon today. One popular notion suggests that to become a member of a cult you have to be experiencing a personal problem. This school of thought further postulates that the prospective cult member must be a lost, searching soul with no faith, who may be unstable and suffer from low self-esteem. It continues with the idea that he is likely to be an uneducated teenager, who may have a history of mental illness and/or joined the cult in order to fill a void in his life. The reality is vastly different.

By far the majority of people who are recruited into cults are in fact normal and healthy. They usually come from economically advantaged family backgrounds, have average to above average intelligence and are well educated, idealistic people, with no prior history of mental illness. Their spiritual perspectives vary greatly. Some have a strong faith and some do not.

People of all ages are influenced and many are professionals. It appears that anyone can be recruited. Far rather than joining a cult they are actively recruited. No one wakes up in the morning and says "it's about time I got involved in a cult" and goes out looking for one. Instead they become unwitting victims of deception and subtle techniques of psychological manipulation.

These techniques of mind control used by cults to overpower the unsuspecting are many and varied. They include food and sleep deprivation. Trance induction is common and achieved using hypnosis or prolonged rhythmical chanting. Another popular tool is bombarding members with conditional love. This love is removed whenever there is a deviation from the dictates of the

leader. It is known as 'love bombing'. Guilt and fear are also used to bring about conformity along with isolation from rational reference points, as well as a removal of privacy, so there is no time to think and reflect on the issues and activities experienced thus far. These techniques are employed against the individual in an atmosphere of intense group pressure to conform at all times to the desires of the leader.

A list of 26 cult methods of psychological coercion is as follows:

Hypnosis	Chanting
Peer Pressure	Confession
Love Bombing	Financial Commitment
Rejection of Old Values	Finger Pointing
Confusing Doctrine	Flaunting Hierarchy
Metacommunication	Isolation
Removal of Privacy	Controlled Approval
Time Sense Deprivation	Change of Diet
Disinhibition	Games
Uncompromising Rules	No Questions
Verbal Abuse	Guilt
Sleep Deprivation	Fear
Replacement of Relationships	Change of Dress Codes

The victim is broken down physically and mentally so as to become highly vulnerable to the suggestions and wishes of the group and its leader. This process is likely to take only three or four days with the average person in the average group. The end result is a sudden, drastic personality change in the individual. The cult tries to equate this with 'conversion'. However, Conway and Siegelman describe the change of personality as 'snapping' (Conway & Siegelman, *Snapping*. New York: Delta Books, 1979). The new personality is unable to reason, to choose, to critically evaluate and is dependent on the cult to interpret reality and his reason for living.

Having lost the freedom of choice, cultists will simply do what they are ordered and programmed to do by the leader, which usually revolves around recruiting others and soliciting funds. The intent of such a group is to control and keep its members for life or until the victims cease to be of value to the leader.

Whilst many victims do escape the clutches of the cult after varying lengths of time with the group, it is often thanks to the intervention of that person's family and friends. They have typically spent considerable time, effort and money to try to reactivate the critical thought processes of the cult member. This may have been achieved either with or without the services of an 'exit counsellor' (a person specialising in counselling cult members in a voluntary environment) but knowing that whatever they did there was no guarantee of success.

However, some people are 'walk-aways'. Typically they have left a cult because of something unusual that they have seen, heard or experienced in the group. That particular stimulus was something that provided information directly opposed to what each cult member was programmed to understand about the cult. It was sufficient to provoke the individual to walk away from the organisation, but without a full understanding of what had actually happened to him. Consequently, if a walk-away does not receive appropriate care and counselling, he is likely to suffer from symptoms of cult withdrawal for an indefinite period of time until he is helped to understand the experience. As one person once put it, "Getting a person out of a cult is one thing, but getting the cult out of the person is another!"

Even with the right help the typical ex-cultist still faces more than a year of pain and suffering before he recovers from the damage done by the group. Typical symptoms of withdrawal include confusion, depression, disorientation, insomnia, amnesia, guilt, fear, floating in and out of altered states, suicidal tendencies and violent emotional outbursts. Most were outlined by Conway and Siegelman in their paper "Information Disease," *Science Digest*, January 1982. An ex-member may even bear physical scars that serve as a constant reminder of his experience.

It is obviously a difficult recovery time for former members, but it is made easier if they are made aware of what it is they are experiencing. When ex-cultists experiencing the above symptoms are brought to the realisation that their suffering is quite normal, there is a tremendous sense of relief expressed. This is another area where a counsellor can be particularly helpful. It feels so good to feel normal again, even if only normal at this stage in the fact that they are suffering as they heal, like thousands of others before them.

They can soon be helped by carers to realise they are not alone, that their current situation is understood and has been documented in a growing body of literature published by other pioneers in this field including Dr John G. Clarke Jnr., Dr Margaret Singer, and Dr Jolyon West.

Before beginning counselling the counsellor needs to be sure that it was indeed a cult and not a sect in which the person was enmeshed. A sect may be described as a spin-off from an established religion or quite eclectic, but it does not use techniques of mind control on its membership. However, a cult can be defined as follows:

Definition of a Cult

A cult has all of the following characteristics:

1. It uses psychological coercion to recruit, indoctrinate and retain potential members.
2. It forms an elitist totalitarian society.
3. Its founder leader is self-appointed, dogmatic, messianic, not accountable and has charisma.
4. It believes 'the end justifies the means'.
5. Its wealth does not benefit its members or society.

There are two distinct categories into which most cults can be classified. Whilst most people have heard of 'Religious Cults', few are aware of 'Therapy Cults'. Victims of both groupings require the same counselling skills, but it is useful to understand the differences between the two classifications even if only to help recognise these groups as being cults. The two types of cults are as follows:

Religious Cults	Therapy Cults
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communal living common. 2. Members usually leave or do not join society's workforce. 3. Average age at the point of recruitment is in the low 20's. 4. Registered as religious groups. 5. Appear to offer association with a group interested in making the world a better place via political, spiritual or other means. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communal living rare. 2. Members stay in society's workforce. 3. Average age at the point of recruitment is in the mid 30's. 4. Registered as 'not for profit' groups. 5. Appear to offer association with a group giving courses in some kind of self improvement or self help technique or therapy.

Counselling Walk-Aways

A 'walk-away' is a cult member who has left a cult without having had any form of counselling to provoke the exit from the cult. When counselling this type of ex-cultist, it is important not to assume that he has any real understanding of the of the group he has just left. It is therefore necessary to be able to discuss in some depth the three key issues that apply to all cults, i.e. the psychologically coercive techniques, the philosophy and the corrupt practices.

When talking to the ex-member about the psychological manipulation to which he has been subjected, there is much that can be discussed. Most cults use most of the 26 cult mind control methods listed above. The end result of the use of these techniques in a cult brings about a profound change in a cult member that he has been programmed to understand is associated with 'a breakthrough' or 'achieving oneness with reality' or 'conversion' or some other equivalent term. The objective of the counsellor at this stage is to try to encourage the cult victim to reassess his conversion experience. However, it is important to recognise that whilst this transformation of the individual can be seen to be manufactured, it has still been a very powerful and real experience for the average cult member. Consequently, this topic needs to be discussed with a great deal of tact and compassion.

The aim when looking at the philosophy of the group is to try to bring to the attention of the former member the inconsistencies and contradictions within the particular group's world view. When a person's critical ability has been impaired by cult methods the belief system programmed into the cult member does not have to be as logical as one might first imagine. By analysing the philosophy with the former cultist, the counsellor can try to reactivate the critical faculties of the ex-member so as to help him to re-evaluate the true nature of the group and his former association with it.

When considering the third and last key issue for discussion with him, it is important to have as much information ahead of time on the corrupt nature of the group. This is not the case when preparing to talk about the psychology of the cult's methods and the philosophy of the group, because this information can be given by the cult victim to the counsellor through the relevant questions being asked. However, the average walk-away is not likely to have much more information than being aware of the most common deceitful cult practice of misrepresenting themselves to the general public, when soliciting funds or attracting potential recruits to their first meeting.

Many cults use questionable accounting practices especially when handling cash. Some groups have been found to be involved in drug smuggling and/or weapons offences. Others use money, supposedly designated to third world projects, to pay for yachts, limousines and other items associated with the extravagant lifestyles of the leaders. Some cults sexually use and abuse the adults and/or the children under their control.

The more information there is about the cult in this general regard, the more likely the counsellor is to be able to emphasize the difference between the image of the group that usually suggests it stands for peace, love and brotherhood and the reality of lies, deceit and hatred. Hopefully this will further reinforce the evidence that has already surfaced in the counselling, about the group's world view and its psychological methods and provoke the cult victim to question.

A common statement in the field of counselling cult victims is, "If I can get him to ask that first question, then I am probably on the road to success." The primary objective of any such counselling is therefore to reactivate the critical mind of the cult victim. This in turn gives back to the ex-member his free choice and the ability for self-determination.

Counselling Ex-Members

An ex-member in this context refers to someone who has left a cult after some form of counselling. This guidance is either from friends and family members who have adopted a 'Do It Yourself' approach or an 'Exit Counsellor', who specialises in counselling current cult members to help them to leave.

Again it is wise to not assume anything and be prepared to probe and investigate what the ex-member knows about the three topics discussed above that apply to counselling a walk-away. This should be done to make sure that the issues have been covered already and to determine whether or not there are any remaining areas of confusion in the mind of the former member, so that further counselling on those specific issues can commence.

In view of what has been said earlier, the carer can now see the need to avoid the irrelevant question of "What made you join the cult in the first place?" Former cult members are frequently asked this question. It probably always hurts because the blame should be directed at the cult and not the former member. The 'blame the victim syndrome' seems to be as popular as ever. Whilst it is not just restricted to victims of cults but to victims of rape and other crimes too, it still shows a gross lack of understanding of the problem.

Caring Through Withdrawal

During the recovery period it is important for the ex-member to be able to live with others, preferably in a family environment. It is often wise to have someone available to screen letters and phone calls for several months with the consent of the cult victim, so as to protect him from attempts by the group to influence him again while he is still healing from the damage done.

Similarly, it is usually recommended that someone should accompany him if he goes out for walks, to shop or stray for any other reason from the family home. Cults will often try anything including a direct confrontation on the street to take the person back. Living with a family is also healthy because it means that the ex-member can again become used to experiencing normal people in a normal family environment interacting with each other.

If a former cultist is left to live alone his confusion and fears could grow and become too much for him to handle. This could result in a prolonged withdrawal period, or worse, he may develop irrational desires that he follows to return to the group, or he could adopt suicidal tendencies.

The family can also be helpful in monitoring his recovery. Ex-cult members experience a variety of symptoms of withdrawal including 'floating'. This expression refers to the spontaneous adoption of the cult personality and mentality from time to time. Family members having been aware of this likelihood can recognise this when it occurs and help the individual to 'snap back to reality' by talking to him and gently advising him of what has happened. Quite often this can be triggered by a cult related stimulus. It might be some clothing he sees that he used to wear in the

cult, a bible or other book that he used in the group, a picture of the guru or he might hear some words spoken that were cult jargon. It is therefore recommended that the counsellor advises the ex-member and carers of the importance of removing all potential reminders of life in the cult until the person is fully healed.

During his healing it is a good idea to try to help him or her start again to make basic decisions. This is a difficult task for the average ex-member, particularly in the early stages of recovery, because while in the cult that part of the logical part of the mind responsible for decision making has been unable to function normally. It is therefore helpful to offer multiple choice answers to some questions e.g. the family might suggest going out for a walk and invite him or her to choose which of the three routes they should take.

Throughout this recovery time of a year or more the ex-cultist will not only be battling with the symptoms of withdrawal but he will have various needs that need to be recognised by carers and counsellors. They are as follows:

Needs of Ex-cult Members	
to receive unconditional love and support	to feel normal
to talk to sympathetic and/or empathetic ears	to be understood
to be able to pace his own rehabilitation	to feel worthwhile
to be able to question and be answered	to feel wanted
to be recognised as free thinking again	to feel secure
to be free to talk about the people he met in the cult	to feel trusted
to learn your language while you learn this	to feel accepted
to have a 'safe' place to live at little or no cost	to be free to doubt
to have an opportunity for manual work to give his mind a rest	to be respected

Other former cult members who can 'speak the same language' or families of current or ex-cult members are often very helpful to the ex-member while he is recovering. Various cult awareness organisations around the globe can usually assist with contacts in that regard. However, it is still a long and painful road to complete recovery.

There is a vital need for carers and counsellors to become skilled in helping cult victims if our society is to begin to cope with this vast and growing problem, which is currently out of control. It is also important to recognise that for every person taken into a cult there are usually at least three family members left grieving on the 'side-lines'. They are 'victims' too. They also need your help.

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