

Cult Concerns: An Overview of Cults and their Harmful Methods in the UK

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When the word cult is mentioned, some people may think not only of the tragedy in Waco, Texas but also of 'Jonestown' and the murder/suicides there on 18 November 1978, when 913 died following the order of Rev. Jim Jones to drink cyanide laced 'Kool-Aid'.

Both of these cases instantly became the focus of the world's attention. Since the two groups were U.S. based, there is a danger that many people in the U.K. may consider the cult issue to be a North American problem and one that does not affect people here in Britain. They do so at their peril.

Figures quoted for the UK usually indicate 500+ cults in operation here. On a per capita basis the U.K. has a similar problem with the number of cults to that of the U.S.

Most cults register with the government as religious organisations or simply charities of one form or another. So what is the problem? It is that people are being deceived and then psychologically coerced into association with the cults through the use of methods sometimes called mind control techniques. On the latter point alone, the cult problem becomes a human rights issue.

People coerced into cult involvement usually find it is to the exclusion of all else that they have stood for before, whether it be their studies, beliefs, careers, families or friends. As the above may suggest, the impact not only on the cult victim, but on his or her family too, can be devastating. Some families have described it as being harder to deal with than death. "It's a living bereavement" said a woman recently.

When looking at the kind of person most likely to fall victim to the cults, many people are surprised by the findings. The following are characteristics of the most likely cult recruit and suggest that the person:

1. Is from an economically sound family background.
2. Has average to above average intelligence.
3. Has a good education.
4. Is idealistic.

Most cults can recruit and control a person in a matter of three or four days. However, leaving the group is not as easy. Some never do leave. For those that do it is often thanks to a lot of hard work on the part of their family and/or friends over a prolonged period of time. Some families elect to adopt a DIY approach to helping the loved one to try to critically evaluate once more, whilst others prefer to hire the services of an 'exit-counsellor' to do the job for them. Whatever route is adopted there is never a guarantee of success.

For those who are fortunate enough to leave a cult there then begins a difficult rehabilitation period. This typically takes a year or more. During this time the ex-member experiences a variety of symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms as shown in "Information Disease," *Science Digest*, January 1982, include:

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| Hallucinations | Fear of the group |
| Delusions | Emotional outbursts |
| Insomnia | Menstrual dysfunction |
| Amnesia | Sexual dysfunction |
| Guilt | |

Without adequate assistance and information the ex-member's rehabilitation is likely to be prolonged for an indefinite period.

In order to continue to discuss the issue, it is important to offer a definition for the term 'cult'. The Cult Information Centre (CIC) defines a cult as a group having **all** of the following five characteristics:

1. It uses psychological coercion to recruit and indoctrinate 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' in order to solicit funds or recruit people.
5. Its wealth does not benefit its members or society.

It is also important to consider the categories of cults. There are two main headings under which CIC chooses to categorise all cults:

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.

If someone becomes an unwitting member of a cult then clearly the suggestion is that the person becomes a victim of psychological coercion. The techniques of mind control are many and varied and comprise a list of 26 as follows:

Hypnosis
Peer Pressure
Love Bombing
Rejection of Old Values
Confusing Doctrine
Metacommunication
Removal of Privacy
Time Sense Deprivation
Disinhibition
Uncompromising Rules
Verbal Abuse
Sleep Deprivation
Replacement of Relationships

Chanting
Confession
Financial Commitment
Finger Pointing
Flaunting Hierarchy
Isolation
Controlled Approval
Change of Diet
Games
No Questions
Guilt
Fear
Dress Codes

The average cult uses a combination of the majority of the above described techniques, which result in a potential recruit being broken down physically and mentally and made highly vulnerable to suggestion. This pressure usually continues to a breaking point referred to as 'snapping' by Conway and Siegelman (Conway & Siegelman, *Snapping*. New York: Delta Books, 1979). After snapping, the subject is left in a state of hyper suggestibility where the critical ability is severely impaired. Simultaneously there is usually a sudden personality change, a change for the worse.

It is this change of personality and the relative inability of the subject to critically evaluate, that provokes family and friends of the average victim to react. Unless they are given some guidance in how to cope, the cult member will rapidly become more and more alienated from them. With cults representing such a threat to the individual, the family and society, how can we cope? There are many things that can be done as follows:

1. Society needs to become aware of how everyone is vulnerable to manipulation.
2. People need to be educated about mind control techniques, so they can recognise and leave an environment where psychological coercion exists, before becoming a victim.
3. Society needs to become aware that there is a lot of good material on cults to be found in the media. It is useful for updating one's information.
4. People need to learn to question, be discerning and feel it is OK to say NO!
5. More mental health professionals need to be trained to help cult victims.

Hopefully some of the popular misconceptions have been overcome in this article. They are as follows:

Exploding The Myths

1. People don't join cults. They are recruited.
2. People are recruited by a method not a message.
3. People do not stay in cults because they have nothing better to do with their lives, but because psychological coercion holds them there.

4. Cults intend to retain a hold on people for life, or for as long as they are valuable to the cult. It is not a fad or a phase.
5. Normal people from normal families are recruited into cults.
6. Cult leaders should be blamed for the problems caused, not the individual members, ex-members or their families. (Blame the victim syndrome). It can happen to anyone.
7. Cult members are sincere. (Sincere victims, but sincere.)
8. Cult members are victims and need to be treated with love. They are people who need help, not hostility.
9. Cults recruit people of all ages, not just young people.
10. Cult recruiters are rarely visually identifiable. They usually look like quite normal people who appear to be very friendly.
11. Anyone can become a victim of cult techniques of psychological coercion. The safest people seem to be the seriously mentally ill, or those that know how to recognise a cult.
12. Accurate information on cults is not best obtained by trying to infiltrate a cult. This is far too dangerous.

Ian Haworth,
General Secretary, Cult Information Centre
<http://www.cultinformation.org.uk>