

Caring for the Family of Cult Victims

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For every person who becomes a victim of a cult, there are usually at least three other victims instantly created. They are the anguished family and friends of the cult member, who are left in shock and confusion watching helplessly on the sidelines.

They know better than most people that something is seriously wrong. Jane is no longer herself. She has changed and changed for the worse. Instead of being warm, friendly, affectionate and good humoured, she has become cold, alienated, distant and defensive. Gone are the times of casual banter, the light hearted witticisms and the sympathetic ear. Jane is now angry, secretive and paranoid. She is convinced that her brother Tim is an agent of the devil, simply because he expressed concern about her new association with the group.

Members of a family often throw up their hands in despair, when confronted by this nightmare and feel there is probably nothing they can do. But, there is!

First the family needs to be made aware of what has happened to Jane from a psychological point of view. They need to familiarise themselves with the techniques of mind control used by cults in general (see Table 1, p. 28, *Counsellor & Carer*, Vol. 7, No. 3). It is then important that they understand the specific techniques employed by the group, that has Jane in its clutches. The more they recognise the psychological methods used by the group, to recruit and indoctrinate the members, the better able they will be to undo some of the damage done by the cult, in the weeks, months or years to come.

Similarly, it is vital that Jane's new cult philosophy be understood as soon as possible. Not only is it crucial to understand the basics of the group's world-view but also the ideology's origins and what the cult jargon means. The cult's own definitions for terms such as God, salvation, ultimate reality, higher consciousness, peace, enlightenment, good, evil, love and truth need to be made available to and understood by the family. By understanding the cult's language, family and friends will be able to have more meaningful conversations with Jane, strained as those discussions may be.

Of course, before there is any attempt to unravel the web in which Jane is caught, the family need to be shown what to do and what not to do in order to keep the lines of communication open, to pave the way for more productive dialogue. Do's and don'ts are shown in Table 1.

To add to the already overwhelming stresses facing the family trying to cope with Jane's situation, the counsellor needs to be aware that there will usually be feelings of guilt shared by the different family members and friends ... If only I had checked out this group ahead of time, when Jane first talked about going to that introductory meeting ... If only I had gone shopping with Jane, the day she was recruited in the shopping mall ... If only I had warned her more often about cult groups ...

Life is, of course, filled with the 'if only's'. However, it is the fault of the cult that Jane was recruited. Her recruitment was not engineered or provoked by anyone else.

Some parents of cult members may ask themselves, “Where did we go wrong for Jane to want to join a cult?” Jane did not join. She was actively recruited. Jane had no idea about the true nature of the group or its methods before going to that first meeting. Some siblings may also try to blame themselves. Jane’s brother Tim might wonder if she would have been recruited if he and Jane had not had that argument on the Tuesday before she met the cult.

Table 1: Do’s and Don’ts for Families and Friends of Cult Members

The Do's

- **DO** try to keep in regular contact via mail or telephone even if there is little response.
- **DO** express sincere love for the cult member at every available opportunity.
- **DO** keep a diary of comments, attitudes and events associated with his/her life in the cult.
- **DO** always welcome the cult member back into the family home no matter what is said.
- **DO** keep copies of all written correspondence from you and the individual.
- **DO** record all the names, addresses and phone numbers of people linked with the cult.
- **DO** try to bite your tongue if the cult member makes unkind comments.
- **DO** read all of the recommended books relating to cults and mind control, as well as reading other information on the cult in question.
- **DO** seek help and information from organisations specialising in counter-cult work. We care about you and your individual situation.

The Don'ts

- **DO NOT** rush into adopting a potential solution before carefully researching the cult problem.
- **DO NOT** say: "You are in a cult; you are brainwashed".
- **DO NOT** give money to the member of the group.
- **DO NOT** feel guilty. This is not a problem caused by families.
- **DO NOT** act in an angry or hostile manner towards the cult member.
- **DO NOT** feel alone. It happens to thousands of families every year.
- **DO NOT** underestimate the control the cult has over a member.
- **DO NOT** antagonise the cult member by ridiculing his/her beliefs.
- **DO NOT** be judgemental or confrontational towards the cult member.
- **DO NOT** antagonise any of the cult's leadership or members.
- **DO NOT** be persuaded by a cult 'specialist' to pay large sums of money without verifying his/her qualifications.
- **DO NOT** give up hope of success in helping your family member to leave the group no matter how long the involvement has already been.
- **DO NOT** neglect yourself or other family members.

It is perhaps important to note that many fathers of cult members seem to have great difficulty in understanding and accepting the concept of psychological coercion. They would often prefer to see the cult involvement as merely a fad or a phase. If and when they do finally appreciate the enormity of the problem, they then often have more difficulty coping than mothers. Some fathers ‘explode’ in frustration and break many of the ‘don’ts’ in Table 1. Other fathers try to appear to be coping, but internalise their problems and ‘implode’ through heart attacks and illness. One father once said, “It was like being on a plane with no pilot”. For him, for once, everything seemed to be totally out of his control.

Many families, living with a loved one in a cult, equate the experience with bereavement. One family once said, “It was like living with a living death. In some respects, it was harder to deal with than death. We know. We had a daughter who died and a son who was in a cult. The pain dragged on and on, until mercifully he escaped from the group.” Accordingly, counsellors may

find their bereavement counselling skills invaluable in caring for the typical family with a loved one in Jane's predicament.

Many parents facing such pain and the accompanying stresses find that their marriages are soon at risk. Counselling of the partners can help to avoid this difficulty from increasing and getting out of control.

Finances usually suffer too. Jane may only contact family and friends by phone and reverse the charges. If she is posted by the group to a location abroad the phone bills alone can soon become considerable. To add to the expense there may be visits to see Jane in that foreign country. So this is another factor that the counsellor needs to take into consideration.

Then there are Jane's children and husband to consider. They may wonder if she really loves them anymore. She seems so engrossed in cult meetings now that her life appears to revolve around those gatherings and no longer her spouse and children. They too may wonder if they were to blame and suffer from similar feelings of guilt and confusion being experienced by Jane's parents. In addition, her husband has probably been under extreme pressure from Jane to go to cult meetings. He is likely to feel that their marriage is disintegrating before his eyes.

The above feelings and questions tend to create additional unhealthy stresses and need to be neutralised by the counsellor through discussion. There are many resources available to assist the average counsellor and family dealing with a cult problem. There are many cult monitoring organisations around the world, that can put one in touch with family support groups, ex-cult members, publications on the topic and other relevant information.

Family tensions are often increased by a general lack of understanding from the police, educators, politicians, general practitioners, mental health professionals and the clergy. This can sometimes be further aggravated by false assumptions made by the family, or misinformation from the cult in question, or cult apologists. Misinformation can lead to the family taking the wrong course of action. It may often mean that the family takes no action at all. Instead, they wait for Jane to leave. When that does not happen, they feel even more guilty and frustrated having wasted so much time.

As well as helping a family cope with the various stresses they now face, it is important to encourage them to be proactive where possible. With this in mind, it is crucial that the majority of the family's energy should be directed towards taking as many positive steps as possible to assist Jane to leave. It is vital for Jane's family and friends to work together as a team to offset the impact of the cult on Jane. They all need to work to the same plan, otherwise the strategy will become fractured and one person's good work could be accidentally undone by the unwise, but well-meaning, efforts of another.

Whilst there is never any guarantee of the family being successful in helping Jane to leave, the odds are in their favour. However the problems do not end there. Jane is likely to experience at least a year, on average, of symptoms of withdrawal. It is important for the counsellor to help the family to be familiar with these symptoms of withdrawal (see p.29, *Counsellor and Carer*, Vol. 7, No 3), so that they are not further confused and so that they can assist Jane in her recovery.

Jane's rehabilitation could be accelerated by a stay at a cult rehabilitation centre. Several have sprung up in the last 15 years to meet the ever increasing demand for such services. One of the oldest and probably the most successful is 'Wellspring' in the United States. There is a vital need for such a centre in the United Kingdom. At such an establishment Jane would receive help, for a week or two, from trained counsellors. They would help her not only re-evaluate her experience in the cult, but also give her coping skills to help her fully recover and again become a productive member of society.

Just as there are 'Do's and Don'ts' for families with a loved one in a cult there are more general 'Do's and Don'ts' for families with a loved one that has just left a cult, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Do's and Don'ts for Families of Recovering Ex-Cult Members

The Do's

- **DO** express love clearly.
- **DO** things together as a family.
- **DO** show that no blame is attached to the ex-member.
- **DO** encourage simple decision making, e.g. asking the ex-member to choose a meal, video etc.
- **DO** realise that full healing usually takes a lot of time, love and understanding.
- **DO** talk about the cult when ex-member wants to do so.
- **DO** screen out phone calls and mail from the cult with the ex-member's approval.
- **DO** accompany the ex-cult member initially, when outside the home.

The Don'ts

- **DO NOT** pressure the ex-member to work or study too soon.
- **DO NOT** be scared of discussing your feelings.
- **DO NOT** be suffocatingly protective.
- **DO NOT** blame the ex-member for being involved in the cult.
- **DO NOT** assume the cult will not try to take the ex-member back.

Jane's family need to know that it is all right for Jane to talk to them about her experiences and the feelings she had while she was in the group.

She may also want to talk about the decent people she met, who were other members of the cult. After all they were victims too. Family members are often fearful of an ex-member talking fondly of some of the people left behind in the cult, because they wrongly assume that Jane's love for individual cult members means she may also be thinking of returning to the group.

Sometimes families are terrified of any discussions about the cult at all, either because they do not want to say the wrong thing, or because they feel it would be unhealthy for Jane if they were to do so. The reverse is usually true.

A common problem, for a counsellor to be aware of, is that some family members may push Jane too hard in trying to encourage her to 'get on with her life'. They may try to force her to think and make too many decisions, before she is ready to do so. Jane's husband or others in Jane's social circle may start to make decisions for her, which also does not help. She needs encouragement and to find her own pace to adjust and return to normal. The recovery rate will vary from one ex-cult member to another.

Some families that share a very strong faith may try to force feed Jane with what they believe is sound theological information. The material may be fine from a theological point of view, but the practice of doing this can be very harmful from a psychological point of view. Again it is better to answer Jane's questions, rather than to try to push her in one direction or another.

During Jane's rehabilitation time her family need to be aware of the typical needs of an ex-cult member (see Table 4, p. 32, *Carer and Counsellor*, Vol. 7, No 3), so that they can work with the counsellor to improve Jane's progress as she heals.

With the right kind of care and attention, there is every reason to expect Jane and her family to make a full recovery. In the course of my 18 years full-time work as a specialist in cultism on both sides of the Atlantic, I have had the pleasure of seeing hundreds of families reunited. Some of the families that are successful often finish up even closer than they were before. In addition, many like Jane have not only recovered but have made a fresh start, going on to lead fulfilling and rewarding lives. However, it will be an experience none of them will ever forget.

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