



Could My Loved One be Involved with a Cult? by Brenda Lee

That's a question I often hear.

I wish every middle and high school, every college in the world could teach a class about cults. As Robert Jay Lifton, author of "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism," wrote: "With greater knowledge about [cults], people are less susceptible to deception." None of us like to be swindled, but that's exactly what a cult does. Like a proficient con artist, they prey upon people at the most vulnerable time in their lives and subtly create a destructive metamorphosis in that person's life, hollowing out the potential recruit's identity and perverting his or her family dynamics.

Alan Gomes, author of "Unmasking the Cults," wrote: "A cult of Christianity is a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible."

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of *cult*, one proposed by Rutgers sociologist Benjamin Zablocki seems to highlight in very simplistic terms the key elements of high-influence group situations: "An ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment." *Charisma* refers to a spiritual power or personal quality that gives an individual considerable influence over large numbers of people.

What happens when first meeting a cult member? You have thoughts, feelings, talents and relationships already in existence. The cult member makes you feel special and offers something to you (a free dinner, Bible study, etc.). You feel you need to reciprocate, which is human nature. Pretty soon, the person you were, all of your thoughts, feelings, talents and relationships are replaced by the cult's need for power, glory, sex or money.

Why do people join? Cultural disillusionment, dissatisfaction in their lives, low tolerance for ambiguity (need everything black or white), dependency. Basically, it's the right cult at the wrong time.

Cult survivors know first-hand how cults operate. They "love bomb" you, becoming your new best friend. Then they tell you that Satan is the cause of all doubt and is keeping you from the truth or the way. When you question things that don't make sense, they tell you that it takes time to understand or to "just wait on...." Critical thinking is highly discouraged and it is called being "puffed up with pride," "sinful" or "rebellious." Then they tell you that Satan will cause your lifelong friends and family to say bad things about them and that you should only trust them--your "new family." They tell you that it's good to be persecuted for being in their twisted, dysfunctional clique. (This was what my mother told me when I was being religiously--pun intended--beaten with a paddle by a teacher in elementary school who hated Jehovah's Witnesses.)

Lastly, they teach you that to obey the leadership as their teaching is equal to obeying God. And who wants to disobey and anger God, right? Voila! Hook, line and sinker—they have you—at least until you are able to gather the strength, overcome the oppression and rejection, and free yourself.



Have you ever seen the "Thy Will Be Done" cult documentary? The narrator asks something like, "So what's the danger of a cult, really?" The answer: If the leadership turns corrupt and evil, it can result in something deadly like Jonestown or Heaven's Gate. The video shows Jim Jones, rubbing elbows with Rosalyn Carter and Walter Mondale and being referred to by California State Assemblyman, Willie Brown as, "a symbol of what we all want to be about." Scary indeed!!

What if you are eventually fortunate enough to find the strength to leave a destructive group. Then what?

The coming out experiences one has after leaving a cult include nightmares, anxiety, paranoia/trust/intimacy issues, doubt, and a sense of impending doom. Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, have a fear of getting close to people. They know that their best friend could be disfellowshipped tomorrow (and they'd be forced to shun them) or they could be "turned in" for perceived sins by their "friend." In addition, they are taught that they can't trust *non-cult* members at all. Therefore, cult members learn through both experience and indoctrination that it's dangerous to get close to *anyone*. No wonder trust is a problem for so many when they leave!

Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias, authors of "Take Back Your Life," wrote: "The single-mindedness of cult life is the spoiled milk cult parents offer their children; it nourishes not nearly enough and often leaves a bad taste."

If you have a loved one who is studying with Jehovah's Witnesses or is considering joining another destructive group, please contact Brenda Lee through her website at www.outofthecocoon.net for more information about how cults work.