



## **CLINICALLY SPEAKING, WHAT IS THOUGHT REFORM / BRAINWASHING / COERCIVE PERSUASION?**

Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D., Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, acknowledged leading authority in the world on cults says: *Thought reform...is the systematic application of psychological [i.e., through indoctrination and emotional manipulation] and social influence [control of your environment and social circle] in an organized programmatic way...The goal is to produce specific attitudinal and behavioral changes...Contrary to popular misconceptions, a thought reform program does not require physical confinement...[However] thought reform is environment-dependent.*

## **IN SIMPLE TERMS, WHAT IS A CULT?**

**Any group that uses abusive, manipulative methods to attract and retain members.**

## **WHO IS MOST AT RISK AND HOW BAD IS IT?**

- 18-25 year olds going through identity crisis; college students having trouble finding a major or friends
- Recently divorced
- Those with insecure or negative self images
- Those anxious to find instant answers
- Christians who have not had enough Bible study
- In 1997, the US Census reported more than 10 million people belong to about 3,000 destructive cults in the US alone.

## **HOW PEOPLE BECOME INTRIGUED WITH CULT MEMBERS**

- Recruiter is self-confident and sincere; seems knowledgeable and seems to have genuine interest in person. Oftentimes the recruiter is wearing a tie or dressed very professionally—seems nonthreatening.
- Potential convert is invited to a weekend retreat, a dinner or Bible study
- Potential convert is showed with love/attention (love bombing)
- Potential convert becomes impressed with group's devotion and sense of community

## **HOW TO DETERMINE IF A GROUP IS A DESTRUCTIVE CULT OR GROUP**

Ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ Is the leadership considered the supreme authority and claim to have a special mission in life?
- ✓ Does the organization have double standards? Are members encouraged to be honest to the leaders but at the same time encouraged to deceive and manipulate outsiders?
- ✓ Does the organization have two purposes: recruit new members and raise money in some manner, without regard for bettering the lives of their members? Does the group make charitable social contributions?



- ✓ Is the leadership breaking with tradition and offering the only viable system for change that will solve life's problems?
- ✓ Do the leaders expect absolute obedience?
- ✓ Does the organization expect you to jeopardize your family relationships or isolate you from society in some way?

## HOW A CULT OPERATES

- New convert is taught that emotional or social attachments to anyone outside group will hinder or jeopardize your spiritual development. Group becomes convert's new family as convert is taught not to trust others.
- Fund-raising drives are constant. There's a sense you can never give enough. Eighty-year old woman: "I can't attend my granddaughter's dance recital because I have to get more preaching in this week."
- Everything in life is censored: how you dress, your hairstyle, what you watch on TV (Smurfs) or view on the internet (no apostate websites), what you read, who you talk to, what you eat (Heath candy bars/well-cooked meat), what decorations you have in your house (wind chimes/crosses).
- In beginning, group is secretive, deceptive and manipulative. They consider themselves "outsiders" to the rest of the world while trying to blend in. Example: "We're Christians."
- Demand total obedience. Excommunication and shunning.
- They are a-cultural; i.e., ostracized due to their differences, which inevitably tightens the communal bonds between them. Their elite status gives them a sense of purpose and a mission on this planet that no other organization can accomplish.
- New convert only receives positive feedback when he/she doesn't make waves. He soon learns only to accept and not to disagree with cult leaders and is made to feel guilty when he/she does.
- New convert is kept busy; little time to reflect or think independently.
- Conversion is done on emotional level first, then psychological, then theological level

What really happened? The convert has been isolated from the world both physically and psychologically. Deprived of his ordinary frames of reference, he has been conditioned to accept only what the cult leaders teach is true. The individual is no longer in control of his own free will; but what's worse; he doesn't even know he is being controlled. In essence, because the



convert no longer trusts his own thoughts or feelings, he has become codependent on the group. Codependency in adults is dysfunctional.

### **HOW CULT MEMBERS PERCEIVE THEIR RELIGION/THEMSELVES/THE WORLD**

- Their religion is the truth, the way, and having a personal relationship with God isn't possible unless you are one of them.
- Ethically and morally, they are exemplary, above all others in the world. To leave is to fall into darkness. There is no abuse/crime/dishonesty within their fold.
- The world (i.e., all nonbelievers) is evil and must be destroyed by God...soon. To have associations with nonbelievers is to jeopardize your relationship with God.
- They alone are happy, successful, at peace, uniform (not simply united). [In actuality, they are typically depressed, lonely, have low self-esteem, are over dependent and frustrated, confused and have an inability to concentrate.]
- They believe they have no value, except to serve the organization/God. Their guilt about who they are (i.e., inherently unworthy)—perhaps they don't find enough converts or log in enough preaching hours, or they don't keep their property immaculately groomed, or don't give enough money to the cult—all these things keep them in a hamster cage, on a perpetual treadmill, trying to always run faster to gain the leadership's approval.
- Their standing within the cult is the most important thing. God is secondary. Family eventually falls to the wayside.

### **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU REALIZE YOU'VE BEEN DUPED?**

Post traumatic stress; nightmares; depression; split personalities; psychosis.

- "It's like a Twilight one, where everything you thought you knew is suddenly not that way at all. The rug had been pulled out from under me."
- "It's like being spiritually raped."
- "Suddenly I'm seeing this nice spiritual leader as an utterly sinister person."
- "It takes years, or even a lifetime, to heal from a cult experience. I had to learn how to trust my own instincts and to make my own decisions. And I had to learn what real intimacy was about. I had to learn to trust again."
- "Living under the tyranny of the cult may become intolerable, but leaving is wrenching. You're perfectly free to leave; but scared to death to try."



- “Imagine growing up within the confines of Disney World, where all you know is that culture. Now imagine stepping outside the gates after 20 years and into the real world for the first time. That’s what it’s like to leave.”

### **WHAT MAKES IT SO HARD TO LEAVE?**

- Dependence
- Financial instability
- Estrangement from family
- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Trust issues
- Friendships in the group
- All other spiritual paths have been discredited

### **WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO DEAL WITH IF YOU DO LEAVE?**

- Rejection
- Shame/guilt
- Isolation
- Grief
- Loss of identity
- Anger
- Poor self-image
- Futility and feelings of inadequacy
- Regret for lost time
- Fear
- Confusion
- Trust issues

### **WHERE DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY LEAVE A CULT?**

- For some, they become involved in a similar cult that helps them feel like they haven’t left God; they still believe some of the original cult’s tenets and feel it must have been their own spiritual weakness that “stumbled” them.
- For others, they become involved in a more mainstream church; although they often feel confusion and resentment at such phrases as, “Jesus saves” or “be teachable.” They want to become spiritual again, but are afraid of being controlled. Post-traumatic stress is common.
- Still others become agnostic or atheist.
- Many withdraw from the world, feeling detached, angry and confused, afraid to reconnect with the extended family they distanced themselves from.



- Others enter into another dysfunctional/codependent relationship, repeating the same patterns, unaware of what they are doing.
- The fortunate ones take the journey to emotional healing through introspective research, education, surrounding themselves with emotionally healthy people, and counseling with an experienced cult professional who understands that therapy must be intense, personal. Good rehabilitation will seek to avoid unhealthy dependency while providing healthy group support.

*A survey of 350 ex-cultists from 48 different groups found that former members suffered from residual effects that lasted an average duration of 81.5 months (almost 7 yrs).*

- Conway, F., Information Disease: Effects of Covert Induction and Deprogramming, *Update* 10 (2) 11986, 63-65, and *Update*, 10 (3), 45-57

### **REHABILITATION: WHAT WORKS (study on 300 ex-cultists)**

- **Love and support of parents and family - 64%**
- **Insight and support by former cult members – 59%**
- Establishing new friends unrelated to cults – 50%
- Helping others emerge or recover from cults – 39%
- Finding a job and establishing a new career – 36%
- Getting away from the cult – 29%
- Going back to school or college – 25%
- Professional mental health counseling – 14%
- Acting to recover lost money, possessions, etc. – 9%

*It's hard to get out of a cult. Getting the cult out of us is even harder. Our closest relationships, cherished beliefs, our whole way of life goes up in flames. The lush greenhouse-like intensity of life in the cult shrivels to spiritual wasteland. Sensitive rehabilitation and counseling after the intervention enable cult victims to sift the ashes for the gold and find streams in the desert.*

- The Dark Side of Discipleship by Lawrence Pile, Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center, Albany, Ohio

### **CULT-RELATED WEBSITES**

[www.outofthecocoon.net](http://www.outofthecocoon.net) (newsletter available)

[www.factnet.org](http://www.factnet.org)

[www.freedomofmind.com](http://www.freedomofmind.com)

[www.evangelizeamerica.org](http://www.evangelizeamerica.org)

[www.informer.org](http://www.informer.org)

<http://honortheson.com/pages/860192/index.htm>



## BOOKS DEALING WITH CULT RECOVERY

Title	Author
<b>Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman's Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult</b>	<b>Brenda Lee</b>
Combating Cult Mind Control	Steven Hassan
Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change	Flo Conway, Jim Siegelman
Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion	Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D.
Cults in Our Midst	Margaret Thaler Singer, Janja Lalich
The Courage to Create	Rollo May
Releasing The Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves	Steven Hassan
Influence: Science and Practice	Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D.
Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion	Marc Galanter
Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism	Robert Jay Lifton
The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements	Eric Hoffer
Captive Hearts, Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Other Abusive Relationships	Janja Lalich, Madeleine Landau Tobias
Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse	Michael D. Langone
The Manipulated Mind: Brainwashing, Conditioning and Indoctrination	Denise Winn
Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing	William Walters Sargent
Extraordinary Popular Delusions & the Madness of Crowds	Charles MacKay, Andrew Tobias
The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power	Joel Kramer, Diana Alstad
Out of the Cults and into the Church: Understanding & Encouraging Ex-Cultists	Janis Hutchinson
Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation and Guilt to Manipulate You	Susan Forward, Donna Frazier
In Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing With Manipulative People	George K. Simon
12 'Christian' Beliefs That Can Drive You Crazy: Relief from False Assumptions	Henry Cloud, John Townsend
The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church	David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen
Twisted Scriptures: A Path to Freedom from Abusive Churches	Mary Alice Chrnalogar
Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals/Understanding the Fine Line Between Healthy Faith and Spiritual Abuse	Stephen Arterburn, Jack Felton
When God Becomes a Drug : Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction and Abuse	Leo Booth, John Bradshaw
Letting Go of Anger: The 10 Most Common...and What to Do About Them	Ron Potter-Efron, Pat Potter-Efron

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