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How to Help Those Who Are Still Suffering

For the last twelve years I have been studying the cult phenomena intently. I have learned how these insidiously destructive cults take away their members' freedom. For instance, cults destroy families and often demand dramatic personality changes in their new recruits. Furthermore, cults can also be harmful to communities, as exemplified in Tokyo and Waco. Just to name a few issues, those who eventually leave these coercive groups struggle with identity, healthy relationships and how to redefine their religion or spirituality. Understanding how profound and pervasive these effects can be has inspired me to work with cult recovery.

Volunteering with organizations that help those affected by destructive cults is one good way to learn about cults. I started with a national grass roots organization that had a local affiliate to help families, friends and former members. I handled phone lines, gave talks at meetings and even helped to run the local chapter for a few years. One of my favorite events was manning a booth on cult education at the local People's Fair.

As I began developing my credentials in this field, I moved on to a research-oriented educational organization of over 150 professionals, the American Family Foundation (AFF). AFF sponsors yearly conferences on various aspects of destructive cults. I have developed and presented Cults and Psychological Manipulation, a workshop for mental health professionals and Getting Therapy after a Group Involvement for cult survivors. For the last seven years I have helped facilitate yearly cult recovery workshops in Colorado. Occasionally I write articles for their newsletter and function as one of the AFF local contacts in the Denver area.

In the midst of this, I completed a master's in counseling psychology with a specialty in marriage and family therapy. Most of my papers in graduate school were devoted to developing my cult specialty. I was fortunate to find an internship at a residential treatment center where I could work with cult survivors. Here I did individual, group and family work with those clients who had cult issues. All of this hands-on and book learning about the deception, coercion, exploitation and abuse that occurs in destructive

groups has been helpful. It's needed because of the multifaceted role counselors take in helping former members recover.

How Can Counselors Help?

Counselors need to consult with the family and friends of the cult member to help them communicate more effectively with a current member. The family members also provide a valuable resource to help formulate realistic expectations about recovery for those who walk away from cults. When family members contact me, I strongly encourage them to start learning about cults by reading books and doing research on the Internet. Families are more successful when they can build a wide network of support for their loved one and learn to be very patient.

Counselors must address the ethical dimension of psychological abuse. Recognizing that they have been wronged is crucial to the victims' recovery of mind, autonomy, identity and dignity (Langone, M.D).

Moreover, former members just need good, compassionate counseling. This would include screening for depression, anxiety, suicide, possibility of returning to the group and the fear that predictions of harm for leaving the cult will come true. Some of these predictions will sound delusional, yet the member still believes them. It will take time to gently confront the reality without overwhelming the client. Former members have been so exploited by those in authority, it's hard for them to trust again.

Those who leave destructive cults are usually in fragile psychological states for a year or two. They need to tell their story; they need to be believed; they need to be reassured that they are not crazy, that there is an explanation for their experience. Former members need encouragement to trust their own judgment again.

Counselors can also provide ongoing or intermittent support through group work. Counselors could supervise ongoing ex-member support groups or facilitate recovery workshops. Groups help former members feel less alone and isolated. It helps solidify their decision to stay out of the cult and build a new support network.

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EFFECTS OF CULTS

One of the most important things counselors can do for those leaving destructive groups is to educate them about how cults operate. This helps them understand the subtle and gradual process of mind control. Studying models of thought reform is necessary to disengage from the cult mindset. Defining what a cult is and how it becomes destructive is vital.

What is a Cult?

A destructive cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree, displays two or more of the following characteristics:

- exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea or thing
- uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control and socialize members
- systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members
- exploits members to advance the leadership's goals and
- causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community (Langone, M.D.).

What Should Former Cult Members Do?

Former members should read about cults and how they operate, so they can define their experience. The most seminal work to read is Robert J. Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (Chapter 22). Finding information on their group from the Internet or library and talking with former members from their group can also help them reevaluate their cult affiliation.

Understanding the deception involved in the cult recruitment and conversion process is another important aspect of recovery. Cults promise salvation.

- Instead of boredom — noble and sweeping goals
- Instead of existential anxiety — structure and certainty
- Instead of alienation — community
- Instead of impotence — solidarity directed by all-knowing leaders (Hochman, J.)

People who get involved in cults believe their groups represent these positive ideals. Coming to grips with the reality that cults represent negative influences instead of offering healthy lifestyle improvement takes a generous amount of time and an amazing amount of courage. Leaving a cult can mean leaving your culture, your (cult) family, your friends, your way of life and especially your religion and/or your God.

Former members need to know that their anomie is normal. Because of culture shock, anxiety, alienation and disenchantment with both the cult and the larger society, they require a period of time to adjust and reevaluate their goals, values and identity (Singer, M.T. & Ofshe, R.).

Who Are These Former Cult Members?

Finding people who have walked away from cults is not easy. Many former members don't even realize that they have been in a cult. This depends on many factors, like how long they were involved, how close they were to the leadership and how exploitative and abusive the leader or the group was. Many former cultists come to therapy with complaints of depression or relational difficulties, so it takes an astute, informed therapist to figure out cult involvement.

Usually I see clients who believe they may have been in a cult. They find me by calling reliable organizations like the American Family Foundation in Florida (941/514-3081) or the Religious Movement Resource Center in Colorado (970/490-2032). They could have found these resources on the Internet, in a newspaper article or from a book about cults. Others find me by way of an informal network. Most of my cult clients have walked away from a destructive group. However, I do occasionally see people who are still in cults. Most of the time their spouses or families insist that they talk to me. Sometimes they can hear another perspective, but usually not. This could just be their beginning to realize that they have a choice.

I find this type of work especially rewarding. Those who have been in destructive cults are usually productive, caring, spiritual people. Cults operate like authoritarian businesses packaged in spirituality. They don't keep those who cannot consistently produce. The majority of people recruited into cults are relatively normal individuals. The timing of the cult pitch appears to be critical. If you are going through a period of stress or transition in your life, you are more open to what the group has to say. This is the most predictable factor reported in the research (Langone, M.D.).

As a clinician looking at cult survivors, it's hard to believe they could be as normal as they appear. They look very distressed and often sound delusional and/or psychotic, which in most cases is a normal response to a very abnormal environment. Destructive cults are pathological family systems with disturbed leadership.

Cultic groups are formed primarily to meet specific emotional needs of the leaders, many of whom suffer from one or another emotional or character disorder (Tobias & Lalich). The craziness former members feel emanates from the leadership of these dysfunctional systems. The confusion, dissociation and disconnection they experience, comes from the highly controlled cult environment where mind control permeates the atmosphere.

Over and over again, I see how understanding mind control is the key to disengaging from the cult mindset. It's how cult survivors take back their freedom and control of their lives. ▼

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