

# CULTS

# WHY?

**BRISBANE'S CULT INFORMATION SERVICE**  
**PHONE 07 3878 5212**  
**Intl Phone + 61 7 3878 5212**

[www.cultinfo.org.au](http://www.cultinfo.org.au)

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A “cult” is:

“A group or movement exhibiting great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control, designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families or the community.”  
(Tobias & Lalich 1994)

We define a harmful cultic group as “an authoritarian, pyramid-shaped group which uses unethical persuasion strategies to gain recruits AND where, within its community environment, a member’s Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, and Emotions are systematically manipulated to create dependence, obedience and compliant behaviour to both the leadership and the group’s belief system.”

Such cults or harmful groups can be religious, political, motivational, commercial or community-based. The dynamics of control and manipulation are similar in all cases.

Throughout this booklet, we use the word “cult” to report that some observers have described a particular group as a cult. Distributing this booklet does not mean we consider any particular group or movement to be a “Cult” – this label is for others to attach. Opinions regarding the health or otherwise of a group or movement may vary, and no opinion is implied to be held by the CIS, or supporters, our supporting churches and tertiary campuses.

Information in this booklet is of a general nature only and is no substitute for professional counselling. If you are a member of a potentially harmful group, or a friend or family member of a member, please understand you may have a long and difficult road ahead. This booklet will give you a starting point, but much further research and learning will probably be required before you achieve an aim of an integrated post-group worldview and life.

The Cult Information Service does not provide counselling, but may refer enquirers appropriately.

This booklet has been prepared by volunteers from Brisbane’s Cult Information Service.

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# PREFACE

"It is odd that despite their current widespread use and looming future importance, most of us know very little about our automatic behaviour patterns.... Whatever the reason, it is vital that we clearly recognize one of their properties: They make us terribly vulnerable to anyone who does know how they work."

Robert Cialdini, Ph.D., from his landmark work *Influence: The New Psychology of Modern Persuasion*.

Someone you care about very much - a son, daughter, brother, sister, husband, wife or friend – has become involved in a group that seems to you to be taking this person away from their family and friends; isolating them from their normal social contacts; taking over their life. It is possible that the person is involved in a harmful cultic group.

Perhaps you suspect that you may have been involved in such a group yourself. If so, this booklet may help you to understand your own experiences.

It is our intention and hope to not only provide information helpful for understanding the cultic phenomenon, but also provide some tools that will facilitate recovery and point the way toward a healthy, enriching and satisfying life. Of course, it remains every person's responsibility to make the journey for themselves, and, whether it is via a cultic experience or not, it will necessarily be seasoned with opportunities to overcome stretching experiences.

In Sections 1 and 2, this booklet attempts to explain the nature of harmful cultic groups and what has happened to the person involved with one. Regrettably, it should be acknowledged that much of this material does not make "enjoyable" reading. Cults are not funny. Neither are the difficulties people initially face when they choose to embark on a life beyond the cult. The nature of these difficulties is dealt with in the initial stages of Section 3, but then the booklet starts turning this information to constructive use by providing some positive, useful strategies for recovery. Section 4 outlines the kinds of responses proven effective to cult approaches and recruits' needs.

# INTRODUCTION

It is important that more is understood about what cultic groups are, how they work, what their impact is and how to best respond to that impact. But while we must not forget that a cultic group may appear to be destructive, elitist, isolated, intolerant and abusive – and in some eyes, evil – it is a gathering of ordinary people like ourselves, who have genuine needs, and who believe they have legitimate reasons for belonging. They may need help, but they will not benefit from an adversarial or an overly judgemental approach.

The major factor in a person's cult recruitment is not some deficiency in the person's character, family or background, but the cult recruiter's level of manipulative and deceptive skills. Cults will usually target the most educated, active and capable people they can find, identify and exploit any point of emotional vulnerability and set about increasing that vulnerability for the purpose of gaining compliant behaviour.

The rise of cults has become a growth industry worldwide. In Australia, some estimates put the number as high as 3,000 cults operating here. There are now estimated to be several hundred thousand people in Australia who have been adversely affected by a cult experience. Some of these people are now involved in helping and supporting others as they deal with similarly difficult and painful experiences.

# SECTION 1. WHAT IS A CULT?

## 1.1 DEFINITIONS OF THE TERM "CULT"

Originally, the word cult (based on the Latin *cultis*), simply meant “a particular form of worship, especially in reference to its external rites and ceremonies” (1679), but by 1711, the word had acquired an additional transferred meaning of “devotion to a particular person or thing, especially as by a body of professed adherents”.

Today unfortunately, the term “cult” is often used by the media in rather negative and sensational ways, and could do with being treated with much more rigor. Therefore, while the word continues to be used to describe every kind of group from the strange and bizarre to the followers of television series, the Cult Information Service will continue to clarify which kind of groups cause concern.

The fact that a group may seem strange, irrelevant, offensive, or in direct opposition to your own beliefs, is a poor basis for regarding them as a cult.

In a Christian context, the word cult has also been used to describe groups that deviate from an orthodox biblical Christian belief system, such as a group that denies the deity of Christ, his physical resurrection, his personal and physical return to earth or salvation by faith alone. This definition is inadequate because it is not the belief system per se of a group that harms members or sets them apart from healthy groups, but rather its system of control. A harmful cultic group’s belief system can be completely orthodox, while causing significant harm to its members.

We define a harmful cultic group as “an authoritarian, pyramid-shaped group which uses unethical persuasion strategies to gain recruits AND where, within its community environment, a member’s Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, and Emotions are systematically manipulated to create dependence, obedience and compliant behaviour to both the leadership and the groups belief system.”

Only when it can be shown that a group is systematically manipulating all four areas of a member’s life, do we define it as a harmful cultic group. We draw the line because when there is manipulation in three or less areas, members can still influence their group from within (although usually with considerable pain and distress). When all mechanisms of control are present (refer to the section entitled “Mechanisms of Control”), change from within is no longer possible.

The distinction that the Cult Information Service makes between healthy groups and harmful cultic groups is that healthy groups:

- Respect their members’ privacy, and their right to disagree;
- Encourage the development of an individuals healthy personal boundaries, diversity, as well as healthy relationships with people outside the group;
- Support their members’ goals for personal development (rather than determine the goals for them);
- Allow their members the freedom to move on as the member wishes.

Unhealthy groups may not do all of these things, but harmful cultic groups do not do *any* of these things.

## 1.2 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF HARMFUL CULTIC GROUPS.

We recognise harmful cultic groups not primarily by how they describe themselves, but by what they do and how they behave. Here are some main characteristics of cults and of cult behaviour. If a group, with which you or a friend is connected, show most of these characteristics, you will find this booklet helpful.

- **Authoritarian, pyramid structure of leadership.** Cults typically have a clear hierarchical structure of leadership, which is rigorously protected through an authoritarian use of power. Power is concentrated and exercised from the top down. All teaching and guidance comes from the top down and is also rigorously protected. (Although the “top” may not be visible or known to the recruit)
- **Conformity to the group norm.** Conformity to the group norm is encouraged and rewarded, while diversity and a pursuit of individual interests is actively discouraged and punished. This is done through a powerfully effective system of rewards for compliant behaviour and punishment for non-compliant behaviour. An individual can sustain significant psychological damage when they become convinced of the worthlessness of who they actually are, and that to be a valuable person, they must become like the group’s ideal.
- **Absolute obedience.** One manifestation of how power is exercised in harmful cultic groups is the requirement for obedience in all aspects of members’ lives to those in authority over them. Those in positions

of authority typically require members to seek their advice and determine what is acceptable. Independence (whether of thought or behaviour) may be severely punished.

- **Absolute dependence.** New members also learn from both the leadership and the group as a whole, that belonging to the group is the most important thing that has ever happened to them and that an existence outside the group is to be avoided if at all possible. This occurs through a process called phobia indoctrination (more on that in the section dealing with the B.I.T.E. Model). Members are thereby conditioned to become dependent on the leadership and dependent on their remaining within the group. Most members, if “foolish” enough to be disobedient, will accept severe punishment in order to stay in the group.
- **“Vertical” relationships encouraged while “horizontal” relationships are discouraged.** “Vertical” relationships within the hierarchical structure are encouraged while “horizontal” relationships are discouraged or closely monitored. One’s significant personal relationships within harmful cultic groups tend to be with those to whom one is accountable, and those accountable to one. Genuine close friendships with one’s peers are rare, and intimate relationships (such as marriage) are frequently violated by those to whom the couple are accountable.
- **A preoccupation with gaining new recruits.** Section two deals with this characteristic in more detail. Not all harmful cultic groups are preoccupied with gaining new recruits, however this is the focus of many groups. Those that are preoccupied with gaining new recruits, typically approach the recruitment process in an incredibly organised manner sometimes executed with military precision. Typically, such groups resort to manipulative and deceptive strategies to avoid disclosure of the group’s real controversial nature. They do not reveal the amount of organisation behind seemingly “spontaneous” events and encounters, and they control which issues are raised, which questions are asked and what favourable information is given.
- **Drastic reduction in family and social contacts outside the group’s sphere of influence.** Cults characteristically isolate members from their families, isolate them from normal free social contacts, and often, prevent them from taking part in study or work in any setting outside the cult’s control. Cults aim to control the private lives of members completely.
- **“Demeanour of Utopia”.** Most cult members possess a “demeanour of Utopia”. Outsiders may see people filled with joy and purpose, and see a perfect model of community, demonstrating an impressive dedication to the best cause possible - a “revolutionary vision” to which any intelligent, genuine person could dedicate their lives. However, this is merely the image that each member attempts to reflect because it is the same image that seduced them. It represents the way they need to see themselves, the way they need the group to be. They have, in fact, become needy accomplices to their own deception. This characteristic is exposed when the outsider can observe amongst members, a compliant and determined blindness, or disregard, for aspects of the group that do not conform to the image.
- **“Black and White” Mentality.** Cult groups habitually reduce complex issues pertaining to descriptions of reality to black and white terms. This is an intellectually lazy approach to issues that can have significant life changing implications on how one perceives oneself and the reality one inhabits.
- **“Us verses Them” Mentality.** Cults typically, through the values and concepts inculcated by those in leadership, perceive themselves as something special that is resisted / persecuted / under attack from forces outside the group. There is nothing like perpetual “crisis” to distract people from what is being done to them.
- **Financial Control.** Cults use coercive methods to obtain substantial financial support from members, usually involving either compulsory tithing (giving a preset and obligatory proportion of one’s income to the cult); signing over all property and money to the cult on entry; selling goods, the proceeds of which go to the cult as part of what is described as “ministry”. In services designed specially for outsiders, Cults, which allege that they are based on the Bible, may ridicule Churches that take up free will offerings (e.g. by collection plate) or use other means of pledging to support their church and ministry. They do this to give outsiders the impression that they are altruistically not interested in money. But new members soon learn that they are in fact required to hand over their finances to the control of the group leadership.

All of these characteristics listed above are typical outward manifestations of the dynamics of control present in all harmful cultic groups. The next section describes why these dynamics work so effectively to control ordinary people, and deals with two descriptions of the mechanisms of control.

## **SECTION 2. THE DYNAMICS OF CONTROL**

To understand the dynamics of control, it is necessary to be aware of some common myths about harmful cultic groups and their members, and to be familiar with the nature of the manipulative processes that operate from initial recruitment through to life in such a group. Terms such as “cognitive dissonance”, “mind control”, “thought reform” and “brainwashing” need to be clearly understood, and one needs to be familiar with the mechanisms of control.

### **2.1 COMMON MYTHS**

The journey from an every-day life to a life ensnared in a harmful cultic group is frightening and often frighteningly swift.

Cult members are not more innately susceptible than other people. Everyone has vulnerable periods in their lives; times of rapid change, new situations (e.g. one’s first year at university), perhaps the death of a loved one, or the break-up of an important relationship. The vast majority of cult members have been recruited during such a time of vulnerability. Anyone can be a potential recruit during such periods. No one is immune to cultic deception during such times if they cannot identify for themselves the hallmarks of a Thought Reform Environment.

Cults are full of people who are intelligent, have a genuine concern for life-affecting issues and have a high degree of commitment to doing something about them. These are the kinds of qualities cults exploit to ensnare and keep such people. The higher one’s intelligence, the more effective a cult member one can be.

People are recruited and stay in organisations they believe are not cults. No one joins a “cult”, and no one remains in an organisation that they know is a “cult”.

So how do harmful cultic groups ensure compliance from their followers? The tragedy of September 11 provides us with some terrible illustrations of how the process works. Unlike passengers on the other three hijacked planes, the passengers of flight 93 (hijacked over Cleveland and pointed towards Washington) resisted their attackers. Why? Simply because they were in possession of a different understanding of their fate than the passengers on the other three planes. Through conversations on cell phones, the passengers of flight 93 understood they were going to die at the hands of their hijackers. Consequently, they heroically rushed their attackers, minimizing any additional loss of life. They were behaving logically based on their understanding of their situation. The passengers on the other three flights did not resist. Until this point in history, most hijackings had ended in negotiations with minimal loss of life. Standard procedure was not to resist. These passengers were also behaving logically based on their understanding of the situation.

In similar fashion, the cult member's world-view, not necessarily his capacity for judgment is what is distorted and impaired. He behaves logically according to his world-view. This is why the cult member can seem quite rational and capable of functioning in many levels of society, but the consequences of him following his conscience or world-view can be barbarous and insane. When the cult’s world-view is successfully inculcated in its victim it does not necessarily need to be closely regulated and the desired behaviour will follow. An example is the Nazis’ depiction of the Jews as sub-human. Once this view was accepted by a significant percentage of Germans, the anti-Semitic behaviour of the populace logically followed.

### **2.2 THE CULTIC RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

#### **2.2.1 THE PEOPLE HARMFUL CULTIC GROUPS TARGET**

It helps considerably in dealing with friends and loved ones who may be caught up in Harmful Cultic Groups, if some of the underlying factors are recognised and understood.

When one is in an emotionally vulnerable state, one tends to make decisions that minimise conflict and maximise acceptance. This conflict-minimisation / acceptance-maximisation is a key factor in understanding how the unethical persuasion strategies used in the recruitment process can have such power. When we’re NOT emotionally vulnerable, we have the internal resources to resist manipulative tactics, because we’re confident enough in ourself not to need to be acceptable to others, nor to minimise conflict.

If we’re in an emotionally vulnerable state, we wrestle, consciously or subconsciously, with uncertainty and inner turmoil. Consequently, when a group presents an opportunity to be connected to, and accepted by similarly-minded people, living lives confident in where they are heading, we can find it appealing. Sometimes, the personal baggage that we carry from childhood may also contribute to a susceptibility to the manipulative recruitment processes.

Research<sup>1</sup> has indicated that about one in three have pre-existing family-related issues, only slightly above the general population (about one in four). Usually one's involvement in a harmful cultic group will exacerbate any pre-existing issues and, unless addressed during recovery, these will hinder recovery.

## 2.2.2 RESPECTFUL AND MANIPULATIVE PERSUASION

For a harmful cultic group, the primary purpose behind recruitment is growth. Evidence of growth is used to validate the organisation, so that any means that results in growth is considered valid or good for the organisation.

To implement such a model successfully, an organisation must gain recruits continually. Members of organisations operating with such a bottom line often perpetrate strategies designed to "influence" (over-ride) the recruit's value system.

The recruit is only important to the organisation provided s/he is perceived as useful to contributing to its ongoing success. Regardless of the recruit's position therefore, the perpetrator's agenda is to modify the recruit's position so that it conforms to theirs, thereby making s/he useful to their organisation. The perpetrator will usually attempt this by determining what the recruit's "real" issues should be, defining the options for response, and then "encouraging" the recruit to make a decision quickly. This process is inherently manipulative, essentially disrespectful, and therefore unethical.

**Respectful Persuasion** encourages and requires one to make careful and informed choices free of any emotional, physical, or psychological "influence".

**Manipulative Persuasion** violates the process of making such choices, through using unethical strategies designed to "influence" a person emotionally, physically, and/or psychologically.

## 2.2.3 MANIPULATIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

The recruiters (typically at least two people make the initial contact) usually talk briefly about themselves and the wonderful group they are a part of, and find out a few things about the recruit. Then, they typically invite people to find out more about them by either attending a group meeting, a study group, a retreat held in a pleasant (remote) setting or a fun activity such as a friendly game of volley-ball. Whatever the setting, all have one characteristic in common – these are environments that the group controls. Then by using:

- *Incremental disclosure (controlling the recruits information),*
- *Showering the recruit with praise, attention and affection (love bombing),*
- *Covertly engineering encounters (mystical manipulation based on the information gathered at the initial encounter) which provide instant friendship (both being forms of manipulating the recruits emotions),*
- *Getting new recruits into study situations where the material and the "conclusions" are controlled by the group (controlling the recruits thinking) and,*
- *Subtly pressuring the recruit to become involved with more and more of the group's activities and less and less with activities and people outside the group (manipulating the recruits behaviour and thereby manipulating their information.)*
- *Elicit a commitment to stay.*

## 2.2.4 DECEPTIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Recruiters for harmful cultic groups almost invariably provide evasive responses to questions that touch on issues that reveal the group in a contentious light. They often avoid disclosure of the fact that the group has been publicly identified as a cult. Such groups often set up "Front Groups" with innocuous names designed to avoid disclosure that the group has been publicly identified as a cult. They often avoid disclosure of affiliations of such "front groups" to their group when they are aware that it has been publicly identified as a cult. They employ incremental disclosure of the group's beliefs and behaviours, which is only provided when the recruit complies with the group's agenda, and is never disclosed up front. They employ tactics that amount to "Mystical Manipulation" and "Planned Spontaneity."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Levine, Stringer & Maron "Family Environment as a factor in Vulnerability to Cult Involvement" *Cultic Studies Journal* 5, 1 (1988) pp23-43; John G. Clark M.D. "Cults" *Journal of the American Medical Association* 242.3 pp279-80; Lorna Goldberg and William Goldberg "Group Work with Former Cultists" *Social Work* 27 (March 1982)

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Liftons second criteria for Totalistic Thought Reform in *Section 2.4.2 The Mechanisms of Control*  
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## 2.2.5 HOW HARMFUL CULTIC GROUPS TAKE HOLD.

The process by which these groups take hold is called Thought Reform<sup>3</sup> and is similar to, but goes further than, a process called behaviour modification. At its simplest, behaviour modification is the kind of social conditioning that we use when bringing up dependant children. It is based on a system of rewards and punishments that are intended to equip the child for a life rich in healthy social interaction, where they can make significant contributions to the lives of others and benefit themselves. We reward children for acceptable behaviour (both with praise and actual rewards) and we use sanctions to discourage undesirable behaviour, which may range from the withdrawal of privileges to actual punishment. When used in a healthy manner, the use of praise and sanctions builds a child's self respect, a respect for the boundaries of others, and concepts of fairness and compassion. It therefore equips a child to grow toward maturity, toward a life unreliant on the influence of their parents for the decisions they must make someday for themselves.

When applied in a dysfunctional manner, the intentions behind the process are not achieved. Praise that connects personal worth with what a child has done, can inculcate the child with the notion that they are only acceptable if their behaviour is acceptable, resulting in a deep insecurity that is rooted in poor self-esteem. Likewise, sanctions applied in a similarly dysfunctional manner (specially when it's also done in a manner that is unfairly harsh, inconsistent or intended to shame or blame the child) effectively sabotage a child's ability to live to their full potential. Children can take the resulting dysfunctional behaviours, such as avoidance of responsibility, dependency upon others, and undeveloped concepts of personal boundaries well into adult life.

Harmful Cultic Groups corporately apply and perpetuate a dysfunctional model of rewards and punishments not only to children but even more inappropriately, to adults. Furthermore, they employ such a model to manipulate not only behaviour, but also belief systems.

## 2.3 SOME DEFINITION OF TERMS

### 2.3.1 COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Leon Festinger is a psychologist who studied several cultic groups in the early 1950's that predicted the end of the world. He observed that as the predicted dates approached, members sold their houses and resigned from their jobs, as their leaders directed. Yet, when the predicted dates came and went, instead of an expected widespread disillusionment, the members' belief in their groups consistently became stronger. His investigation revealed that members had to find a way to reconcile their Cultic World View (perception of Reality) with contradictory evidence. Most members of these groups, rather than modify their World View, found ways to both explain the contradiction and protect their World View. Leon Festinger discovered that the members' behaviour leading up to the dates, which amounted to a wholesale commitment to their World View, was the key factor in understanding the unexpected outcomes. After forming a hypothesis that explained his observations, Festinger undertook a series of elaborate experiments to test his hypothesis, and published his *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* in 1957.

The *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* is a general theoretical framework, which explains how people change their opinions or hypotheses about themselves and their environment. The theory accurately predicts that humans experience negative *emotions* when performing *behaviours* that are contrary to their *attitudes* (thoughts). People minimise dissonance by *changing* one or other of the dissonant elements, adding *consonant* cognitions and/or decreasing the *importance* of the dissonant cognitive elements. The *degree* of cognitive dissonance depends on the *perceived* degree of free choice; the greater the free choice one perceives, the greater the dissonance when cognitive elements are brought into conflict.

It provides the theoretical basis for how the manipulation of behaviour can be used to manipulate belief (as Festinger observed with the cultic groups he studied.) Steven Hassan, (M. Psy) used the principles of this theory to develop his descriptive model of the *Mechanisms of Control* called the *B.I.T.E. Model*, described in the next section, *2.4 The Mechanisms of Control*.

### 2.3.2 MIND CONTROL.

There is considerable confusion over what this term means! Mind Control is not about having one's mind taken away, although it often appears so to those on the outside. As was shown earlier, it is the cult member's *world-view*, not necessarily his *capacity for judgment*, that is distorted and impaired. *He behaves logically according to his world-view*. Mind Control is not "Brainwashing". It is not Thought Reform, although Thought Reform is a way of describing *how* a person is convinced to hand power and responsibility to another.

The process of establishing Mind Control was first described and documented by Professor Robert J. Lifton. During the Korean "Police Action" in the 1950's, the United States Military engaged Lifton and his team of psychologists to investigate seemingly incomprehensible changes occurring to U.S. Prisoners of War held by the Chinese. He and his

<sup>3</sup> Refer to *Section 2.3.3 Thought Reform* for a more detailed definition of the term.

team discovered two discrete processes; one process was called *brain washing*, while the other established *mind control*. The distinctions between the two can be summarised as follows:

The process called **Brain Washing**:

- *Is brutal and obvious, using extremely overt coercion.*
- *Perpetrators are clearly perceived as the enemy.*
- *Involves a program of physical imprisonment, torture and sleep deprivation.*
- *Outcome: compliant behaviour, false confessions.*
- *Subjects traumatically aware of the process at work.*

The process of establishing **Mind Control**:

- *Is subtle and sophisticated, using covert coercion.*
- *Perpetrators are perceived as friendly and benign,*
- *Involves voluntary participation and cooperation in the program*
- *Outcome: a new identity and an internalisation of new beliefs.*
- *Subjects do not perceive the process at work.*

Brainwashing is ineffective in setting up the intense cognitive dissonance needed to manipulate belief systems, because the process provides no free choices for the subject. The process that establishes Mind Control on the other hand, is very effective in setting up intense cognitive dissonance, *precisely because* the subjects *perceive* their choices as free.

In its simplest terms therefore, **a person under mind control, makes choices based on options and consequences unethically determined by another.** The process, by which a person is manipulatively convinced to hand such power to another, is called Thought Reform.

### 2.3.3 THOUGHT REFORM.

Thought Reform is a process that uses the same principles as dysfunctional Behaviour Modification; the distinction being that Thought Reform uses the *mechanisms of control* to bring about *Cognitive Dissonance* (refer to the above definition of *Cognitive Dissonance*), thereby manipulating its primary target – a person's *World View*, or *Belief System*.

As we saw in the behaviour of passengers involved in the September 11 tragedy, differing beliefs (about themselves, and about how best to understand reality) can lead to radically different behaviour (passive compliance with the terrorists directions verses the passengers on flight 93 sacrificing their own lives to minimise further loss of life).

Similarly, in the subsequent investigations into the identity and background of the terrorists, one salient point particularly stands out. They were typically intelligent, well educated people with healthy loving families. Mohamed Atta, the suspected leader of the Al Qaeda cell who perpetrated the atrocity, was known by his peers at Cairo University to be a gentle architecture student, who loved life and had little interest in political activism. His family still cannot reconcile the atrocity with the person they knew. The Al Qaeda Network recruited Mohammed while he experienced prolonged culture shock doing postgraduate studies at Hamburg. His postgraduate peers and lecturers all observed a significant shift toward a radical interpretation of fundamental Islamic teaching, after he returned from what turned out to be his "training" in Afghanistan. What had changed? His **world-view** had changed. How? Ex-members of the Al Qaeda Network have all described the training camps in terms that are consistent with Thought Reform Environments, where the process outlined below take place.

*Manipulate* a person's belief therefore, (about themselves, about a group, about a leader or about how best to describe reality) and one has gained immense power and control over that person – a position that, the Cult Information Service believes, no human being or organisation is entitled to take, or accept.

It is important to note however, that Thought Reform is usually not consciously performed by one individual or group upon others. Members usually contribute to the thought reform process while only being aware of their effort to achieve the goals of their group. Instead, Thought Reform tends to be the inevitable behavioural/psychological result of meeting an extreme, specific ideology/goal within a well-defined organisational structure.

This process typically progresses in three recognisable stages, although there can be considerable overlap between each of them.

- **Unfreezing** involves creating disorientation and confusion in the mind and identity of the new recruit. This can be simply done through techniques such as love-bombing, mystical manipulation<sup>4</sup>, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, and psychological manipulation like covert sleep deprivation, deprivation of privacy and

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<sup>4</sup> The term *Mystical Manipulation* is described in the section 2.4.2. It is the second of Lifton's Eight Criteria for Totalist Thought Reform.

leaders presenting logical double binds<sup>5</sup> in the context of the group where everyone else accepts the statement without question. It can involve inducing a mild hypnotic trance called an “Alpha State”<sup>6</sup>. Under the cover of this disorientation, the recruit’s self identity is challenged, measured against some impossible ideal, self-doubt created, and a systematic discrediting begins.

- **Changing** involves the systematic discrediting of the recruits self identity, and the imposition of a new identity and belief system. The Thought Reform process is intensified by using emotional and psychological rewards for compliant responses, and punishment for non-compliant responses. All compliant responses, whether behavioural, emotional or intellectual, result in the new recruit perceiving their previous belief system as invalid, opening the way for the adoption of the group’s belief system; one that ensures dependence, obedience and compliant behaviour to both its leadership and its beliefs. The group effectively begins taking control of the new recruit’s environment. This stage typically occurs within the context of confession, group indoctrination sessions, prolonged exposure to the group’s loaded language and thought stopping techniques, the regular watchful guidance of those in leadership and “guided” study of only the group’s literature. The group usually begins making increasing demands on the recruit’s time, increasing their involvement with other members and commitment to group activities. These processes effectively work to isolate the new recruit from all of their former social networks and alternative perspectives. They also work to deny the new recruit any opportunity to assess what amounts to life changing decisions in a careful and informed way, free of undue “influence”. Accessing information not sanctioned by the leadership (especially information critical of the group) is actively discouraged; typically, the new recruit already understands the consequences for doing so. The transition between this stage and “Refreezing” often includes some kind of initiation or acknowledgement that the member has become one of the group.
- **Refreezing** typically begins with the new member rejecting the old identity, which has been attacked and discredited in the first two stages, and accepting the new identity the group leadership has determined for them. It is important to note that this process does not erase a person’s old identity but rather creates a new dominant identity that represses the old identity and upholds the group’s World View. The New Member is typically required to demonstrate to the leader’s satisfaction, their absolute rejection of their former life. Burning the bridges with their past (often very painful for all concerned) effectively reinforces the new identity and the new belief system. The new member is also usually required to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to group life. This may involve such things as recruiting others, fundraising, handing over financial control to the group, and/or moving in with other members. The new member is often assigned a mentor, whose role is to monitor all aspects of the new member’s life to ensure that they act, think and feel in a way the leadership determines as acceptable.

Unfortunately, leaders of all harmful cultic groups ensure that the “acceptable standard” required of each member is kept *just out of reach*. This is a mechanism that Lifton identifies as The Demand for Purity. Consequently, as members are punished for falling short and threatened with the prospect of more severe consequences or expulsion (with the inevitable “disastrous” phobia indoctrinated consequences), the refreezing stage never really finishes. It serves to control those in the hierarchical structure below the leaders, by threatening them with the loss of position and the privileges so painfully gained. It serves to keep all members relentlessly striving to maintain or improve their position in the group, and continually prove that their commitment to the group and its ideals is genuine. It serves to keep all members too busy to reflect on their life in the group, let alone compare it with what they had before-hand. And years can go by.

Thought Reform is achieved when the mechanisms of control are established and maintained in a group environment. Hence harmful cultic groups can and have been described as Thought Reform Environments.

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<sup>5</sup> A *logical double bind* is the simultaneous holding of two diametrically opposed positions. George Orwell called it “doublespeak”. The following statement is an example of a logical double bind. It is a quote from “Revolution through Restoration” by Kip McKean, the founder and leader of the International Churches of Christ.

*“I have never believed or taught that anyone has to be baptised into the Boston Church of Christ to be saved. However, I do not know of any other church, group or movement that teaches what we teach as Jesus taught in Matthew 28:18-20: one must make the decision to be a disciple, then be baptised for the forgiveness of their sins **to be saved** and receive the Holy Spirit.” (emphasis added)*

Apart from mishandling and misinterpreting the text (he demonstrates that he doesn’t even have a passing acquaintance with the rules of Greek grammar; but then he has had virtually no formally accredited training whatsoever,) he has effectively said that people have to be baptised into the Boston Church of Christ (ICC) to be saved while simultaneously denying it.

<sup>6</sup> The techniques for introducing a low level mass hypnotic state are well known by many mental health professionals and professional hypnotists. A low level hypnotic state can be induced quite effectively in an environment with a *heightened* level of excitement or emotional intensity.

## 2.4 THE MECHANISMS OF CONTROL

Over the last forty years, the mechanisms of control present in all Thought Reform Environments have been described by a number of psychologists investigating cultic phenomena. The Cult Information Service has included two successful approaches below for the purposes of this booklet, however Margaret Singer's Six Criteria For Patterns Of Behaviour In Thought Reform Environments is an equally valuable contribution.

### 2.4.1 THE B.I.T.E. MODEL (HASSAN)

Steven Hassan<sup>7</sup>, a former Moonie and subsequently a psychologist, has adopted an approach that describes the *defining characteristics* of the *mechanisms of control*. He has developed a set of four criteria based on Leon Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: the manipulation of one's Behaviour, Information, Thoughts and Emotions. Steven Hassan contends that the manipulation of Information, while not in itself a cognitive element, is a necessary component for establishing and maintaining the Thought Reform Environment.

#### THE MANIPULATION OF BEHAVIOUR

An individual experiences *cognitive dissonance* when they are manipulated into choosing behaviours contrary to their pre-existing attitudes, values and belief system. After the behaviour has been committed, dissonance is minimised through *Changing* how they think or feel about what they have done, *Rationalisation* (adding consonant cognitions) and/or *Trivialisation* (reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition). All efforts to minimise dissonance result in not only behaviour patterns that conform to the group's standards, but also the individual's belief system shifting toward that of the group.

Behaviour is being manipulated when:

- *People in positions of authority determine whom one can and can't have relationships with,*
- *People in positions of authority require a member to sever filial ties and friendships beyond the influence of the group to demonstrate their commitment to the group.*
- *A member is required to participate in many group activities at the expense of their former interests; especially if that member's prestige goes up in the group because of their "sacrifice". A heavy schedule effectively limits a members contact with the outside world, undermines the members relationships with their former friends and loved ones, and encourages a dependence on ones new circle of friends.*
- *A member is required to maintain daily contact with someone either in a position of authority or other members.*
- *A member is compulsorily required to confess "sins" to a person determined by people in positions of authority.*
- *People in positions of authority determine what one can and cannot do with one's income and financial resources.*

#### THE MANIPULATION OF INFORMATION

Manipulating a person's information amounts to limiting their terms of reference to those favourable to the group, thereby invalidating pre-existing experiences as well as concepts of self and reality, and preventing objective verification.

Information is being manipulated when:

- *People in positions of authority tell members what they can and cannot read, watch, or hear.*
- *People in positions of authority tell members not to expose themselves to information either critical of the group, or contrary to the group's belief system.*
- *People in positions of authority trivialise or minimise the significance of information either critical of the group, or contrary to the group's belief system.*
- *People in positions of authority tell members not to contact ex-members.*
- *Deceptive recruitment techniques are used. Such techniques may involve the use of withholding information, distorting or trivialising critical information, or outright lying.*

#### THE MANIPULATION OF THOUGHTS

An individual experiences cognitive dissonance when they are manipulated into adopting attitudes contrary to their pre-existing behaviours, values and belief system. After the member has been "convinced" about a "right" or "wrong" attitude, dissonance is minimised through *changing* how they will act or feel about what they have thought. Harmful cultic Groups closely monitor members' attitudes and require frequent demonstrations (through compliant behaviour) that their attitudes align with the group. Thus the other forms of dissonance minimisation, namely *Rationalisation* (adding consonant cognitions) and/or *Trivialisation* (reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition) are typically

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<sup>7</sup> This section taken from Hassan, Steven, *Releasing the Bonds – Empowering people to think for themselves*, Freedom of Mind Press, 2000. ISBN 0-9670688-0-0. This is an excellent book and we recommend you buy it.  
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not permitted. All efforts to minimise dissonance result in not only *attitudes* that conform to the group's standards, but also the individual's *belief system* shifting toward that of the group.

Thoughts are being manipulated when:

- *People in positions of authority establish "study" situations where the material and the "conclusions" are controlled by the group,*
- *People in positions of authority "help" members make decisions by determining (limiting) their options and "recommending" the solution. This kind of manipulation is clearly exposed when the member is punished whenever the advice is not followed.*
- *People in positions of authority control the way critical information is interpreted. This is often done in a ridiculing or trivialising manner.*
- *People in positions of authority define complex issues in black and white terms.*
- *The group environment induces members to adopt easily expressed, highly reductive "thought stopping clichés". Members' constant use of these phrases on themselves and each other serves to set up reflex thoughts that compartmentalise perceptions, and steer them away from any logical or intuitive thinking that conflicts with group dogma.*

### THE MANIPULATION OF EMOTION

Emotional manipulation is where one attempts to serve one's own interests, by inducing an intended emotional response in another. Emotional manipulation is commonplace; one experiences it with one's siblings and family relationships, in the schoolyard, in the work place and as peer group pressure. How well one responds to it depends on how clear one's personal boundaries are and how emotionally vulnerable one is at the time. In the cultic context, emotional manipulation is not only used to reward and punish in order to gain compliant behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, but may also be used to establish dissonance. It can take many forms, such as flattery, charm, intimidation and bullying, showing contempt, ridicule, sarcasm, and through inducing guilt or fear. If cult members should, for instance, find themselves torn between wanting to show their affection for their family and wanting approval and acceptance from the group, the resulting cognitive dissonance is largely emotional in nature.

An individual experiences emotional cognitive dissonance when they are manipulated into *conflicting emotional responses*. After the member has experienced the emotional conflict, dissonance is minimised in three ways. They can *change* how they will act or think about what they have felt (e.g. "*this group is my real family now*") *Rationalise* (adding consonant cognitions e.g. "*they will come to understand later*") and/or *Trivialise* (reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition e.g. "*they probably won't even remember it later*"). All efforts to minimise dissonance result in not only *emotional responses* that conform to the group's agenda, but also the individual's *belief system* shifting toward that of the group.

Emotions are being manipulated when:

- *Friendships and intense relationships are established almost instantly. This is called love bombing.*
- *There is a system of emotional rewards for compliant behaviour and punishments for non-compliant behaviour. Examples of emotional rewards include effusive praise, accolades or promotion; examples of emotional punishment includes the use of humiliation, shaming strategies, harsh rebuke and ostracism.*
- *Love and acceptance is conditional. The member feels loved and accepted unless they fail to be compliant or become critical of their group.*
- *Contact with members who leave is severed.*
- *People in positions of leadership tell members that their leaving will invoke dire consequences upon themselves, or put the lives of others in jeopardy, or that they will have no value outside the group.*

## 2.4.2 LIFTON'S EIGHT CRITERIA FOR TOTALIST THOUGHT REFORM

While Hassan adopted an approach that describes the *defining characteristics* of the *mechanisms of control*, Lifton has approached the same problem of description by identifying the *defining mechanisms* that characterise a *thought reform environment* and how each of them *work*.

He contends that *thought reform* is not consciously performed by one individual or group upon others. It tends instead to be the inevitable behavioural/psychological result of meeting an extreme, specific ideology/goal within a well defined organisational structure. Any ideology – that is, any set of emotionally-charged convictions about man and his relationship to the natural or supernatural world – may be carried by its adherents in a Totalist direction. But this is most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most sweeping in their content and most ambitious or messianic in their claim, regardless of whether the ideology/goal is religious, political, financial, educational or psycho-therapeutic in nature.

As mentioned earlier, Lifton developed the following eight defining mechanisms from his investigation of seemingly incomprehensible changes occurring to U.S. prisoners of war held by the Chinese, during the Korean “Police Action” in the 1950’s. Lifton’s eight *defining mechanisms* that characterise a *thought reform environment* are:

- Milieu Control
- Mystical Manipulation (planned spontaneity)
- The Demand for Purity
- Cult Confession
- Sacred Science
- Loading the Language
- Doctrine over Person
- Dispensing of Existence

As each of Lifton’s eight *defining mechanisms* build upon each other, the thought reform process acquires a self-perpetuating energy that increases its severity over time.

## ONE. MILIEU CONTROL

The mechanism of *Milieu Control* is the establishment, maintenance and protection of the group’s social, physical and ideological environment, through the regulation of ones terms of reference and ones perception of reality. The means by which this is done is through regulating what one sees, hears, reads or experiences, and what one does, writes or expresses. Members soon learn to regulate not only all of their perceptions and responses to their own environment, but also to everything and everyone outside. Milieu Control of oneself and one another provides the basis for the operation of the other seven mechanisms in their entirety. With all mechanisms operating within a controlled milieu, a person will inevitably adopt the group identity and worldview.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of *Milieu Control* include:

- ***The leadership requiring or “encouraging” members to live communally, or in houses overseen by group leaders.*** This enables leadership to monitor all aspects of a member’s life and provides a “convenient” environment to ensure compliance.
- *Holding seminars, teaching sessions or retreats in locations controlled by the group, where leaving is inconvenient or considered rude. Control can take the form of:*
  - *Holding such seminars in remote locations (which makes leaving inconvenient)*
  - *Providing parking that is some distance from the location (also makes leaving inconvenient)*
  - *Eliciting commitments to stay for the entire period without disclosing the true nature of planned events. Controlling transport to and from the locations (e.g. transporting all participants by bus chartered or owned by the group, transporting all participants in members vehicles, or collecting car keys for the duration)*
  - *Controlling personal belongings (e.g. collecting wallets, passports or watches for the duration)*
  - *Planning intensive training sessions with little or no free time, or “free time” taken up by “informal” group activities.*
- *Establishing socialisation patterns that require members to:*
  - ***Participate in many group activities at the expense of their former interests;*** *A heavy demand on a member’s time effectively limits a members contact with the outside world, undermines the members relationships with their former friends and loved ones, and encourages a **dependence** on ones new circle of friends. It also results in limiting exposure to “dangerous” ideas and opinions, and limiting opportunities to stand back and gain perspective.*
  - ***Maintain regular (e.g. daily) contact with someone in a position of authority.*** *Maintaining regular contact enables people in positions of authority to “explain” how the group interprets reality, and “help” members make decisions by determining (limiting) their options and “recommending” the solution. This pattern also provides an “ideal” environment for “Cult Confession.”*
- *Controlling access to information and controlling how it is interpreted. Such control can take the form of:*
  - *People in positions of authority telling members what they can and cannot read, watch or hear.*
  - *Members being told of the “dangers” of exposing themselves to information either critical of the group, or contrary to the group’s belief system.*
  - *Members being told of the dangers of contacting or associating with ex-members.*
  - *People in positions of authority establishing “study” situations where the material and the “conclusions” are controlled by the group,*
  - *Presenting critical information to a closely monitored assembly, where the leadership ridicules or trivialises the material, thereby demonstrating how such information is to be perceived.*

## TWO MYSTICAL MANIPULATION (PLANNED SPONTANEITY)

The mechanism of *Mystical Manipulation*, or *Planned spontaneity* can take two forms. One is where events or encounters are planned and executed in a way that both avoids the target’s detection, and manipulates the target’s perceptions and conclusions to serve the interests of the group. The other is where accidental or coincidental events are given special significance to manipulate the target’s perceptions and conclusions, also to serve the interests of the

group. It is a mechanism of control frequently employed to target recruits during the recruitment process, but can also be used to target group members, instilling a fear of leaving the group (phobia indoctrination.)

Examples demonstrating the implementation of *Mystical Manipulation* include:

- **Recruits are invited to some group activity and, there they “incredibly” and “suddenly” meet many new friends.** To bring about this pattern of encounters, the leadership may draw on the intelligence gathered at the initial encounter, select which members have similar interests and are most likely to be able to establish a rapport, and instruct them to be the recruit’s “best friend”. They may even coach members on how to behave and what to say. Through such “love-bombing”, the target is typically led to believe that it is their **destiny** or “**God’s Will**” to embrace the group and its cause.
- **Undoing the wheel nuts or sabotaging the brake-lines of a vocal critic’s, or ex-member’s car.** The resulting “accident” is represented by the leadership to their members as an example of the kind of fate that awaits people who leave or criticise the group.
- **A vocal critic or ex-member dies, or is struck down by a serious illness.** The incident is similarly represented to members as an example of the kind of fate that awaits people who leave or criticise the group.
- **A wavering member, having confessed their issues with their assigned mentor is suddenly showered with praise, loving concern, given gifts and promises of change.** The course of events is orchestrated by the leadership with the intention to persuade the member to stay. If the member decides to stay, all is well and the attention soon dies down; the promised changes are typically not forthcoming. If the member decides to leave, they are typically vehemently rebuked, denounced, marked and cut off, with members forbidden to contact them and commanded to treat them as though they had died.
- **A valued wavering member, or ex-member who returns, rapidly finds themselves loved and in love with another member.** The feared isolation of a life outside the group is sometimes overwhelmingly real. Leadership can easily exercise their power through the mentors of members to orchestrate and manipulate intimate relationships to the advantage of the group. Such machinations are not done for the sake of the members concerned but are rather a ploy designed to make it harder to leave. Should one of the couple decide to leave, intense pressure is typically brought to bear to break up the relationship so that control can be maintained over the remaining individual.

### THREE THE DEMAND FOR PURITY

The mechanism of the *Demand for Purity* operates in conjunction with *Cult Confession*. It is both a set up for failure and the means by which a Harmful Cultic Group sets itself apart from The World. It involves defining the groups standards as higher than all other worldviews, thereby establishing an unattainable, black and white standard of behaviour, attitudes and values that is used to instil guilt and shame in members. Even neutral thoughts with no bearing on the group ideal, may be considered to be “day dreaming”, and thus impure. The philosophical assumption is that absolute purity is attainable and that anything done in the name of this purity is moral. Therefore, a member who falls short of the standard (everyone) is convinced of this assumption and consequently accepts humiliation, ostracism and punishment; not only because they believe they deserve it, but also because they believe it helps them to attain the standard. The Demand for Purity serves to:

- Give the **leadership immense power**, which is nowhere more evident than in their capacity to forgive.
- **Control** those in all but the highest levels of a group’s hierarchical structure, by threatening them with the loss of position and the privileges so painfully gained.
- **Keep all members relentlessly striving** to maintain or improve their position in the group, and continually prove that their commitment to the group and its ideals are genuine.
- **Keep all members too busy** to reflect on their life in the group, let alone compare it with what they had before-hand.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Demand for Purity include:

- **Members severing ties with the outside world.** Since all impurities are seen to originate from “outside” (the world), one of the best ways for a member to be relieved of the burden of guilt and demonstrate their wholehearted commitment to the group, is to denounce these with great hostility. The more guilty they feel, the more committed they must be, therefore the greater their loathing and the more hostile their denouncement. The resulting damage to family relationships and former support networks is painfully difficult to repair.
- **Members with doubts, questions and concerns are regarded as “impure” or exhibiting some personal “inadequacy.”** Members who have difficulty reconciling the leadership’s responses to their concerns are typically labelled as divisive. Such members, rather than have their issues adequately addressed, find themselves on the receiving end of correction. (Refer also to Doctrine over Person)
- **Members constantly demonstrating a “radical” commitment to the group’s standards.** Such behaviour can take the form of conforming to dress standards, dating standards, and undertaking financial commitments over and above the group’s minimum requirements.
- **Members constantly demonstrating a “radical” allegiance to the group.** Such behaviour can take the form of burning their bridges with their former life, over-riding obedience and submission to the whims of leadership, zealously proselytising for new recruits and a willingness to go anywhere, and pay any price for the group.

#### FOUR CULT CONFESSION

The mechanism of *Cult Confession* serves to provide the necessary feedback for *policing* the group's *Demand for Purity*. It is the means by which cultic leadership monitors members' adoption of the group's worldview. Any divergence from "correct" attitudes, behaviour or emotional responses is "corrected" using the group's system of rewards and punishments. Group members are required to regularly confess "sins" usually to a mentor assigned to them, who is directly above them on the leadership pyramid. Members use this behaviour to purge themselves of all thoughts and feelings that the group considers impure. These thoughts and feelings may not be bad or evil in and of themselves, but simply aspects of one's personality not consistent with the group ideal. Such thoughts may, if not confessed, give rise to such "rebellious" actions as visiting a museum instead of soliciting potential recruits – an action that carries potential for much guilt and punishment as a consequence.

Cult Confession is a grotesque parody of how confession is used in healthy religious and therapeutic contexts. In healthy contexts, one confesses because one seeks to do so. It is quite a different thing, to have it required of one by another. One must be allowed to choose to whom to confess, and when to confess it. For another not to respect this, is to violate one's personal boundaries, and require a degree of intimacy that is inappropriate. If one confesses anything to another, there may be intensely personal issues involved. One should not therefore confess anything to someone until that person has demonstrated their trustworthiness, their discretion, and an understanding that what they hear, needs to be and will be held in the strictest confidence.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Cult Confession include:

- ***Socialisation patterns*** requiring members to disclose with a mentor what they have done, thought about and felt during the day, what they have learnt from the process, and any questions, confusion, uncertainty about issues that may have arisen. Matters that arise are often discussed at leadership meetings. The leadership can use such information to determine whether any corrective measures need to be taken, which tasks are to be given to them, or the future of their position within the hierarchical structure. Depending on the group's nature, the leadership can also use such information to determine such matters as suitability of partners, whom they can date, when they should have sex, where they should live, how much they should give, whether they can visit their worldly family etc.
- ***The requirement to divulge in group assemblies before ones peers, the issues with which one is struggling.*** Leaders can humiliate and shame entire group assemblies, and reward the desired compliant behaviour to "motivate" members to strive harder to meet the Demands for Purity. (Fulfilled by whatever behaviour the leadership wants, whether it be greater submission, more recruiting or an increase in financial commitment.) Such patterns of behaviour constitute a violation of personal boundaries and serve to further discredit members' former self-identities and reinforce their cult-identities.
- ***Socialisation patterns that require members to disclose in small group sessions at the instigation of the group leader.*** This pattern serves a similar purpose to the one above. Such sessions are typically accompanied by patterns of criticism and self-criticism, with an active and dynamic thrust toward personal change reinforcing their cult-identity.
- ***Written lists of "sins" or misdemeanours which are handed on to leadership.*** As well as serving a similar purpose to the ones above, this practice also provides the leadership with a weapon with which to enforce compliance or justify expulsion. Ironically, such lists usually frequently contain imaginary misdemeanours. When one writes down all one can think of and is then contemptuously told that one is holding back, the only way to stop the intense personal attack, is to give them what they want.

#### FIVE SACRED SCIENCE

The mechanism *Sacred Science* is the **placing** of the group's worldview in an unassailable position. The following mechanisms, *Loading the Language and Doctrine Over Person*, serve to **protect** the worldview's unassailability. *Sacred Science* operates through the group member deifying/holding as sacred, the narrow, specific worldview the group has taught them. They suppose it to be ultimately moral, true, and valid for all people, of any culture, at any time. Once arrived at through a series of seemingly logical scientific steps, the sacred aura of this worldview enforces itself within each individual through sweeping, intuitive "insights" (e.g. "The leaders are such awesome people! Their teaching is so clear and makes so much sense now; why didn't I see it before?"). Those who do not accept this worldview after having been exposed to it are considered not only morally impoverished, but also inadequate in character.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Sacred Science include:

- ***A hostile intolerance to any challenge to the validity of the group's interpretation of their foundational texts.*** Should one disagree with their interpretation, one is told that one is disagreeing with whatever text is held to contain "The Truth."
- ***The rigid adherence to a set series of steps in the recruitment process.*** When the Study material is rigidly adhered to, and the only conclusions allowed are those consistent with the group's teaching. Progression through each step depends on acceptance of the "teaching."
- ***"Correction"*** meted out to members who fail to show "proper" respect for the group's "truth".

## SIX                   LOADING THE LANGUAGE

The mechanism *Loading the Language* is the overlaying of reductionist meanings defined by the group onto words. Group members' thoughts and emotions are over time compartmentalised and confined within these easily expressed, highly reductive "thought stopping" clichés; effectively creating "blind spots" in relation to ideas and concepts that conflict with the worldview. *Loading the Language* serves to protect the worldview's unassailability through members' constantly using these phrases on themselves and each other, steering them away from any logical or intuitive thinking that conflicts with group dogma.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Loading the Language include:

- **"Trusting one's Feelings"** *may be understood by an outsider to be synonymous with trusting one's instincts, whereas the group uses the term to make no distinction between one's instincts and one's emotions, effectively invalidating one's instincts (and one's emotional distress!)*
- **"Leaving God"** *An outsider may understand the term to refer to someone who loses their faith in God, whereas the group uses the term to describe everyone who leaves the group, making "the group" synonymous with God! In fact, it is quite possible to leave a Harmful Cultic Group and retain one's faith in God, provided one can make the distinction between the group and God.*
- **"Sentimental"** *An outsider may understand the term to describe someone who tends to indulge their emotions excessively, yet in a cultic context, that meaning is ascribed to a members legitimate love, compassion and grief in relation to their "worldly" family or spouse, thereby invalidating the significance of these profound relationships.*
- **"The Body of Christ"** *In a Christian context, the term can be understood to refer to all followers of Jesus, yet in a cultic group context, the term is synonymous with the group, carrying with it the connotation that only members of the group are the "true" body of Christ.*

## SEVEN               DOCTRINE OVER PERSON

The mechanism of *Doctrine Over Person* disables the member's testing of reality, thereby serving to **protect** the worldview's unassailability. A member adopts the group's underlying assumption that its totalist dogma is ultimately more true, real, and valid than any aspects of human character or experience. Consequently, when a member's experience conflicts with what they have been taught as real (cognitive dissonance) the groups worldview insists that the member's interpretation of their experience is wrong. The individual will thus gradually alter, or completely remould their perception of historical events, past personal experiences, thoughts, and even emotions, to fit securely within the group's view of history and reality.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Doctrine Over Person include:

- *Members with doubts, questions and concerns rather than have their issues adequately addressed, find themselves on the receiving end of "correction". Harmful Cultic Groups can never allow their worldview to be wrong. Consequently, any discrepancies must originate in some "inadequacy" of the member who notices them. The Demand for Purity allows for only one course of action – "correction".*
- **There is no reason considered legitimate for leaving the group.** *If one leaves, Harmful Cultic Groups will insist that one has either misunderstood the nature of the group, or was never serious about ones commitment in the first place; the worldview cannot be wrong.*

## EIGHT               DISPENSING OF EXISTENCE

The mechanism *Dispensing of Existence* determines a persons right to exist according to their position in relation to the group s worldview. Harmful Cultic Groups act as though people have a right to exist if they can accept the worldview; they forgo that right if they reject it. Members come to believe that those inside the group somehow possess more knowledge, talent, integrity, moral fibre, or even common sense than do outsiders, especially those who reject the group's worldview after having been exposed to it. Outsiders by definition are either lacking in vital information about, or are unwilling to understand/acknowledge the truth/reality/God than are those inside. Consequently, this "we/they" mentality may arise not from a lack of compassion within a member, but instead from a fear of the feelings of compassion/empathy with an outsider that would dampen one's wholehearted commitment to the group.

Examples demonstrating the implementation of Dispensing of Existence include:

- **Regarding and behaving toward ex-members as though they were dead.** *People who leave harmful cultic groups can lose best friends and loved ones overnight. It hurts when people with whom they have seen great highs and desperate lows, suddenly turn off all emotions and treat them as someone of no consequence and their shared history as utterly unimportant.*
- **The practice of expelling and denouncing members who challenge, question or doubt the leadership.** *Members who challenge, question or doubt the leadership either leave or are expelled. Leadership typically indulge in malicious wishful thinking when denouncing members who leave their control, often embellishing information gathered through the mechanism of Cult Confession.*
- **Phobia Indoctrination.** *This is the inculcation of a fear of living outside the group. Some of the ways of doing this have been mentioned in Mystical Manipulation. Yet, Phobia Indoctrination is also the inevitable result of witnessing the above phenomena in the day to day living of a "submitted" life. Consequently, as members are relentlessly required to handover responsibility for day to day decisions to those in authority,*

*and all social interaction is planned for them, the possibility of a life on their own, with no support and nowhere to go (especially when they have burnt their bridges with their former life) can be a terrifying prospect.*

Being informed about the *Dynamics of Control*, namely the processes of *Cultic Recruitment* and *Thought reform*, and the *Mechanisms of Control*, help one to understand what members in Harmful Cultic Groups experience. The next section shows why these groups are harmful and describes common problems people face once they are free of the Dynamics of Control.

## **SECTION 3. THE ROAD TO RECOVERY**

### **3.1 ESCAPING A HARMFUL GROUP**

Since the processes of *Recruitment* and *Thought Reform*, and the *Mechanisms of Control* do *not* erase a person's old identity or their spirit, it is always possible for people to escape to freedom. It is never easy for members to leave; but people *do* leave and move on to healthier satisfying lives.

The decision to leave a harmful cultic group cannot occur without at least a partial collapse of an individual's worldview. After investing so much of themselves to a cult, people are naturally very reluctant to face the prospect that what they believed about their group has been false. Such times can be truly wretched. People are often very fragile as they face the bridges they've burnt, the opportunities they've lost, the relationships they could have had, and the consequences of their wishful thinking, denial, and rationalisation; the costs they (and those who love them) have paid, while they sought to prove the reality and ultimate value of their aspirations.

Such collapses can be extremely distressing and are typically accompanied by a profound sense of disorientation, personal failure, grief, confusion, depression, and sometimes despair. People in this position lack confidence in what they have believed to be true, and consequently, lack confidence in their judgement, their ability to make sound decisions and solve problems.

To simply question their group's worldview can trigger extreme cognitive dissonance, and tremendous feelings of shame and grief – and when they think of what they've said and done because they believed that the end justified the means – sometimes guilt. Some are less inclined to face these issues until they have exhausted every other possibility; preferring to believe the “promises of change” and the love bombing they receive; allowing themselves to be persuaded to “give it another shot”. Until the next time . . .

The leaving process almost invariably adds to any trauma already suffered and usually involves finding a lot of courage and integrity. Indeed many in these groups are putting off the decision to leave because they have come to believe that they have nowhere else to go. Better the devil they know . . .

Another reason people find it difficult to leave is fear; the web of induced phobias they carry regarding the consequences of their leaving. The prospect of a life outside of their group can be like contemplating suicide. Some fear being alone, losing all of those in the group they've cared about and who've cared about them. Some fear rejection or “divine retribution” for “rejecting the truth,” others fear scorn, ridicule and contempt from their family or their former friends and peers.

These matters are not easy to address for those already suffering from a collapsing worldview, personality fragmentation, identity confusion, dismantled personal boundaries, dissociation and devastated self-esteem. Those who seek help usually fare much better along the road to recovery, than those who struggle on their own.

### **3.2 HOW PEOPLE ESCAPE**

There are basically three distinct ways people escape from Harmful Cultic groups. There are those who are *helped out*, those who *find their own way out* and those who are *expelled*.

Those who are helped out and avail themselves to exit counselling are in a better position to regain their personal identity. Exit counselling provides help and understanding for members and their families to effectively identify and resolve problems. It provides strategies for healing and recovery.

Those who find their own way out are typically disillusioned and/or burnt out. The experience of those disillusioned, perhaps with internal politics, witnessing unfair treatment, power struggles etc., can be likened to a divorce. They often continue to believe that the group's worldview is right and typically continue to be attracted to groups or personal relationships in which the *mechanisms of control* are practised. The largest numbers of former members are in this category.

Those burnt out, not only continue to uphold the group's worldview, but also believe that they are simply incapable of achieving the standard set by that worldview and give up, convinced that they are doomed. Leaving for these people, is

often seen as a form of suicide. These people may have been so abused spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally and financially, that they are barely able to function on a normal basis. Some “burn-outs” exhibit Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, commonly experienced by war survivors. They are usually very confused, perhaps even physically ill, afraid and unable to trust anyone, most of all themselves. These people, as well as those expelled, are the most serious casualties.

Those who are expelled have usually either been steadfastly non-compliant, or have become so severely burnt out that they have developed serious psychological or physical problems, making them a liability to the group. Expulsion, for these people is often seen as a kind of death sentence. This is because the group has denied them a life in the group after inculcating a belief that there can be no life outside it.<sup>8</sup> After expulsion, many consider suicide and some actually commit it. Some are incorrectly diagnosed as schizophrenic, and need more accurate and informed diagnosis in order to receive effective treatment.

Leaving a spiritually abusive environment is akin to a ‘rape of the soul’. It parallels a broken relationship with all the typical emotions of anger, grief, shock and denial. However, it may go much further. For those who have been burned at the lower end of the continuum, anger, mild depression and disillusionment may be the outcome. For others the consequences may be more far reaching. For these individuals, it is a collapse of a worldview, a cosmology. It is a collapse of all the answers you *thought* you had about why we exist and our place in the cosmos, only to find out it was a sham. Below are some of the more common difficulties experienced upon leaving a toxic group.

### 3.3 SOME COMMON PROBLEMS UPON LEAVING

#### The sense of Self is wounded

Ofshe & Singer<sup>9</sup> have differentiated ‘central’ elements of self as opposed to ‘peripheral’ elements of self in discussing spiritual woundedness. They posit that because cultic or spiritually abusive systems deal in the very ‘core’ issues of human existence, once the experience disintegrates, a psycho-spiritual fragmentation occurs. Likewise, related literature suggests that victims of prolonged emotional and psychological strain, brought about by such forces, undergo a personality transformation to cope with the self-fragmentation. Other terms such as ‘identification with the aggressor’ and ‘Stockholm syndrome’ have been coined to represent that radical transformation of personality in the face of overwhelming trauma, as one individual describes:

*Now I couldn't sleep at night because my mind wouldn't shut off. I heard multiple voices chattering, arguing, whispering, sometimes for days and nights. I felt I had fragmented into hundreds of “me's”, each having its own perspective and arguing with one or more other “me's”<sup>10</sup>.*

#### A deep sense of grief and loss

As previously mentioned, spiritual abuse can be likened in some ways to a broken relationship though it encompasses much more. The loss may include issues such as the loss of family if the family of origin has disowned the person, the loss of being a member of the ‘elite’ or ‘God’s chosen ones’ and the loss of easy black and white answers to life’s questions. For others it may be the loss of spirituality/cosmology or the sense of loss of special customs/rituals particular to the group. The writer below gives some sense of this experience:

*The loss of the best years of my life, the loss of the opportunity to have children of my own, and the loss of building a career are bitter pills to swallow. I can see now that in giving myself completely and unconditionally to the cult leader and his beliefs and practices, I gave myself up (ibid).*

#### More extensive psychological damage

For some individuals where the spiritual abuse extends to physical or sexual abuse, the trauma can be more acute. Formal diagnoses are not uncommon such as post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders and psychoses. In one study by Lalich<sup>11</sup>, 40% of a female sample of ex-members experienced sexual abuse.

*“Pam” joined an apocalyptic ‘doomsday’ group that had its headquarters in an American desert while on a holiday from her native New Zealand. After 3 years in the group, she informed the leadership that her workload was too strenuous and needed time away. She was told that those who cross a five mile radius of the groups’ home would be attacked by invisible forces deep from outer space and go insane. Six months later she was asked to leave when her psychological condition deteriorated. She was put on a plane back to New Zealand whereupon shortly after arrival she experienced a psychotic episode and jumped from a two-story building (Personal communication).*

<sup>7</sup> Lifton’s 8th criteria – Dispensing of Existence - refer to Section 2.4.2, in 2.4 The Mechanisms of Control.

<sup>9</sup> Ofshe, R., & Singer, M.1986, Attacks on Peripheral versus Central Elements of Self and the Impact of Thought Reforming Techniques, *Cultic Studies Journal*, vol.3, no.1, pp. 3-24.

<sup>10</sup> Whitfield, H. E. 1994, Recovering from a cult, in Tobias, M.L. & Lalich, J. (eds), *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, pp.230-233.

<sup>11</sup> Lalich, J. 1997, Dominance and Submission: The Psychosexual Exploitation of Women in Cults, *Cultic Studies Journal*, vol.14, no.1, pp.4-21.

### Triggering emotional states

In our experience, we have found that an individual can experience unpleasant feeling states ranging from the mild to the terrifying. They can include a general sense of unease to a full panic attack upon exposure to stimuli that reminds the individual of the group. Below are some of these thoughts expressed by an ex-member:

*“Andrew” left an eastern religious sect with his parents and one of his sisters after growing up in the group. An older sister however stayed for some months after the rest of the family left. At that stage, they were both finishing High School and attending at the same campus. The very sight of his sister would precipitate a panic attack which were so common they eventually compelled him to move to a new school (Personal communication).*

Similar to other forms of abuse or trauma, an individual may find that certain stimuli may trigger unpleasant memories, feeling states and behaviours that were previously internalised by cult processes. Family members of the ex-member may observe these and may come to the conclusion that the individual is still connected to the group or is wishing to go back (a possibility). The type of trigger largely depends on the type of group the individual left behind. For those who have come out of a religious group, crosses, Bibles, the very notion of ‘God’ or ‘spirit’ may induce a variety of responses ranging from mild annoyance to full panic attacks. Ex-members who utilised a lot of meditation may find themselves slipping into trance-like states. Triggers can indeed be any number of things that have been associated with the cult. In particular cult language continues to be the predominate trigger for most ex-members. Language in destructive groups is used in a very specific and orchestrated way. It solidifies group cohesiveness, reinforces the ‘us versus them’ mentality and defines the person’s experience according to the group’s dogma. It is generally a wise move at the beginning of any counselling to discuss with the counsellor what facets you find particularly troublesome now you have left the group. Once the therapist discovers the triggers, there can be an educative focus on typical conditioning processes and how to deal with them.

Some individuals who have little experience with destructive groups sometimes find it difficult to understand the dynamics of cult abuse and may ask “why didn’t they just leave?”, or “mind-control is a lot of rubbish”. For some ex-members, they might have little insight into just how abused and manipulate they really were. Below is a brief list of some of the parallels between domestic violence and cult abuse. This may help you understand where these people are coming from and why they have difficulty leaving sometimes. If you are an ex-member, take note of how you may have been abused!

Domestic Violence	Cultic Abuse
<b>Environmental Control</b> Perpetrators control who the woman sees, talks to, what she reads and where she goes; limits outside involvement	<b>Environmental Control</b> Cults control whom the individual is allowed to see and associate with. Cults control reading matter, living arrangements, and lifestyle.
<b>Economic Abuse</b> Perpetrators can prevent the woman from getting a job, make her ask for money, take her money, forbid access to family income.	<b>Economic Abuse</b> Cults often expect a large proportion of an individual’s income, including signing over assets, getting money from family, moneymaking activities.
<b>Using Children</b> Perpetrators can use the children to make the woman feel guilty, threaten harm to children, alienate children from Mother.	<b>Using Children</b> Cults can emotionally, spiritually and physically abuse children. They can threaten to harm children to control the parents.
<b>Coercion &amp; Threats</b> Perpetrators threaten to hurt and can use guilt, fear, and other emotional manipulations to control the woman.	<b>Coercion &amp; Threats</b> Cults regularly use fear, guilt, and other emotional manipulations to control members.
<b>Minimizing/Blaming</b> Perpetrators refuse to take responsibility for abusive behaviour; they say it is the woman’s fault or ignore or make light of abuse.	<b>Minimizing/Blaming</b> Cults make sure if something is wrong, it is the individual’s fault; no critical thinking about the group is allowed.
<b>Powerlessness/Helplessness</b> Perpetrators ensure that the woman is dependent on the male; a learned helplessness is established.	<b>Powerlessness/Helplessness</b> Cults systematically create a sense of powerlessness through a system of rewards and punishments.
<b>Attack on Self</b> The result of Domestic Violence can be a shattered self; a “hollow shell”: “I no longer feel like a person.”	<b>Attack on Self</b> Cults destabilize the sense of self, reinterpret reality according to the group, and create a cult identity.
<b>Performance Orientated</b> “As long as you do what you’re told, it’ll be ok”. “I’ll try not to upset him tonight.”	<b>Performance Orientated</b> "Happiness" and commitment are measured through performance; measure up or suffer the consequences.
<b>Residual Effects</b> Many battered women exhibit symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).	<b>Residual Effects</b> One of the most common psychiatric disorders experienced by ex-cult members is PTSD.

Taken from: Ward, D. 2000. *Domestic Violence as a Cultic System*, *Cultic Studies Journal*, (Vol.17, pp.42-55).

### 3.4 SOME COMMON AREAS OF NEED

(Taken from: *Recovery from Cults*, M.Langone (ed) WW Norton)

#### **Psychological: separating the wheat from the chaff**

- Sorting through beliefs and values, before, during and after the cult
- Identifying and disarming cult mind-control techniques
- Unloading the language/discontinuing the use of the cult's terminology
- 'Floating', various levels of dissociation
- Indecisiveness, black and white thinking, obsessional thoughts

#### **Emotional: dealing with feelings**

- Grief work
- Depression and feelings of failure
- Shame and guilt
- Fear, including nightmares and panic attacks
- Anger and rage

#### **Physical: helping the neglected body**

- Health issues and medical care
- Exercise and diet

#### **Vocational: focusing on the future**

- What to do with their life now
- How to explain the years in the cult
- Reevaluation of career goals and skills
- Going back to school

#### **Relationships: dealing with trust issues**

- Trusting self and others
- Loneliness, including 'cult-hopping'
- Reconciling with family and former friends, making new friends
- Dating and sex

#### **Spiritual/Philosophical: what to believe in now**

- Where's God after the Guru?
- Reclaiming spirituality or other beliefs previous to the cult

The road to recovery involves escaping the groups' environment and escaping the group's distorted worldview. Obviously, individuals involved in thought reform environments are invariably harmed and, once free of them, face a number of issues pertaining to recovery. However, the degree of harm sustained varies significantly from individual to individual, depending on factors such as length of involvement, prior personality characteristics and pre-existing issues. When someone leaves a Harmful Cultic Group and returns to broader society, they typically experience culture shock and anxiety. Ex-members typically feel like immigrants or refugees entering a new culture. However, they are re-entering their former culture, bringing along a series of experiences and beliefs from the group that conflict with societal norms and expectations. Unlike the immigrant confronting merely novel situations, the "returnee" is confronting a rejected society.

Once free, most people, almost regardless of the length of time spent with the group, experience a sense of confusion and alienation resulting from their fragmented identity and the partial collapse of their worldview. This is a result of a conflict between who they were and who they have become, and a conflict between their partially collapsed worldview and the need to reconcile situational demands, values, and memories in three eras – their past (prior to the group) the time in the group, and the present situation.

Thus, most people leaving Harmful Cultic Groups require a period in which they need to both integrate their fragmented identity and reconstruct an effective worldview. However, their ability to effectively address these issues is often compromised by two things; their passage through the transitional stages listed below, and psychological and emotional problems resulting from the harm brought about by their involvement.

Since the process of escaping from these groups constitutes a significant life change, it typically involves passing through the following stages of accommodation to the change:

- **Disbelief/denial:** *"A Cult!? Rubbish! It wasn't that bad . . . surely."*

- **Anger / hostility:** “It was all a colossal lie! They deceived me! How could I have fallen for it?!”
- **Self-pity / depression:** “Why me? I’m so useless. What’s the point in trying? I can’t make sense of anything.”
- **Fear / bargaining:** “What if I AM going to hell? Can I avoid that by associating with them on a limited basis?”
- **Reassessment:** “OK, IF there is a problem with this group, I need to get to the bottom of it.”
- **Accommodation / acceptance:** “I can move beyond this experience and choose new directions for my life” or...
- **Re-involvement:** “I’m so confused. I miss them. Life was less complicated back there. I want to go back.”

Passing through these stages is seldom a smooth progression. It is fairly typical to bounce back and forth between different stages. Not everyone achieves the stage of accommodation / acceptance. Some return to their group.

### 3.5 SOME POST-CULT TASKS

There are many an individual whom, despite leaving a toxic group years ago, continues to experience difficulties. It appears that like other phenomena where grief and loss are involved, and when the person concerned attempts to ‘put it behind them’ without understanding and appreciating the healing process, the traumatic residue can remain. Subsequently, there needs to be a proactive approach taken in addressing post-cult issues. For this purpose, Worden’s work<sup>12</sup> on grief and loss helpful. Below we have taken and modified his four basic tasks of mourning and adapted them to the cult experience:

#### **Task 1: To Accept the Reality of Non-Cult Life**

Even when it is obvious that group involvement is no more, there can still be a sense that it hasn’t happened; it seems so ‘unreal’. Part of the acceptance is to come to the belief that going back is impossible. Sometimes the pain is so great that the individual shows denying behaviour. Denial in the initial stages is a self-defence mechanism that helps protect the person. Only when it continues for any length of time does it become unhelpful or dangerous. Sometimes people deny the *facts* of the exiting process, ie. they inform people that they are still involved. Others might deny the *meaning*, ie. “I don’t miss the group”; “I didn’t want to stay anyway”.

#### **Task 2: To Work Through the Pain of the Exiting Process**

Not every individual who has exited a cult will experience the pain the same way. All however, will feel emotional pain to varying degrees. To deny this task is to *not feel*. People do this in a number of ways. Some deny that they are in pain, some hinder the process by avoiding any painful thoughts. Others self-soothe through alcohol or drugs. Some people try a ‘geographical cure’ by moving away to a new town or State. Sooner or later however, it will catch up with the individual, sometimes in the form of anger or depression.

#### **Task 3: To Adjust to a Non-Cult Environment**

This also means different things to different people. Going home to an empty house, waking up alone, raising children by oneself and diminished finances are all hard-hitting in adjusting to a life apart from the group. As pointed out previously, for most, their identity was wrapped up in the group. They can now feel quite ‘incomplete’. Feelings of inadequacy, helplessness and awkwardness can propel the individual to behaviours that others may perceive as bizarre. Attempts to fill the missing person’s role (joining another cult; using the therapist) may fail and aggravate these emotions.

#### **Task 4: To Emotionally Relocate the Cult Experience and Move On With Life**

A counsellor’s task is not to help the person ‘give up’ the group *per se*, but to find an appropriate space for the cult experience in their emotional lives. The experience will always be a part of the individual, consciously or unconsciously. The task here is to essentially evolve a new relationship with the thoughts and memories that they associate with the cult experience. A consequence of not ‘completing’ this final stage would be not trusting. In other words, by tenaciously holding on to the past attachment (out of the group but vehemently defends it) or believing that it’s safer to ‘trust no-one’, the task of forming new relationships is hindered. Perhaps it could be best summed up when the individual can say, “There are other people to be loved and trusted”.

Paralleling other forms of traumatic grief, a warm supportive family can be crucial in dealing with these tasks. Remarks to the tune of, “Shouldn’t you be over this now?” and “Just put it behind you!” are not the most conducive in restoring the family. This is particularly important when we remember that some loved ones, having left the group and participating in therapy, then return to the cult. This can be devastating for the family. This highlights the need to explore options with the family concerned about how the ‘vacuum’ left by the cult will be addressed. The ‘cult-shaped hole’ in the person’s life calls for a sensitive and supportive focus that encourages the ex-member and family; good intentioned but misguided manipulation will certainly delay the family unit experiencing healing.

<sup>12</sup> William Worden, *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy*.  
Phone 07 3878 5212

## 3.6 SOME POSITIVES?

- **What did you learn in the cult?**

Sometimes an ex-cult member will have some fond memories about the group, despite the pain they experienced. For example, hard work, team work and organisational skills could be viewed to be a unforeseen advantage of the cult experience (in a twisted kind of way!) This might help the sense of ‘wasted years’ that many an ex-member experiences.

- **You got recruited into a cult ? Congratulations!**

It is also important to note that most people who are recruited into cults did not suffer from any significant psychological handicaps, and did not come from dysfunctional family situations. Although it is important to explore the individual’s vulnerabilities in terms of the recruitment process, it can also be helpful for former cult members to recognise that cult recruiters regularly play on a myriad of personal characteristics that are actually desirable in the general population – characteristics such as loyalty, honesty and idealism.

Maybe the last word on recovery should be on spirituality. We have found one of the greatest challenges for an ex-member is deciding what things to ‘keep’ and what to ‘throw away’ about the group. If you have been a victim of spiritual abuse, we would encourage you *not to throw out the baby with the bathwater*. It would be natural if an individual was bitten by a dog, then the next dog seen would bring up fearful thoughts. However, it would be wrong to assume that all dogs are the same. Likewise, don’t let your experience of spiritual abuse poison your attempts at a spiritual life. While you are taking an active role in your healing of spiritual abuse, don’t be afraid to consider that spirituality can heal what spirituality has burned.

## SECTION 4. EFFECTIVE RESPONSES.

**Responses of recruit's friends and family to the Recruitment Process.**

**Responses of friends and family to the needs of Cultic Group Members.**

### 4.1 WHAT YOU NEED TO DO.

By now, you should have a pretty good idea what's going on. If your friend or family member is in a harmful cultic group, you'll have almost certainly seen a number of the behaviours and changes described above. This information is scary, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed and unable to do anything productive to cope. A few things to remember:

- What a harmful cultic group *believes* is not the issue, but what it *does*. A harmful cultic group routinely lies to its members, defrauds them, and manipulates them psychologically without their knowledge or consent – things that are wrong regardless of who is doing it or why.
- People don't join cults – they are recruited by cults. A harmful cultic group is extremely effective at recruiting members, and uses some powerful psychological tools to do so. Most people do not know what they are getting into when they get involved. Please try not blame yourself, or the victim, for what happened.

There are three steps you will need to go through to understand what has happened, and what you can do about it. This applies to current cult members who are thinking of leaving, to former members who don't know what hit them, and to others who want to help someone in a harmful cultic group.

**Educate:** Research a harmful cultic group. Order books, videos, audio tapes, and other materials from such organizations as Freedom House Ministries, the American Family Foundation (AFF), Wellspring, and other sources of information about a harmful cultic group and cults. Read books; watch videos; listen to tapes; dig your way through internet searches, newspaper and magazine clippings. It is vital that you understand a harmful cultic group, either to regain your own freedom, or help your loved one regain theirs.

Often people involved with a harmful cultic group will find it helpful to learn about a different cult, perhaps the Unification Church (Moonies) or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, Hare Krishnas). Many people, cult members and others, find this helpful in spotting the psychological behaviours common to all cults.

**Communicate:** Talk with others who have experienced what you are going through. If you are a member thinking of leaving, talk with former members. The reasons many former members have been “marked” are not the reasons you have been given by your leaders; your leaders use “marking” and terms such as “spiritual pornography” to keep you from hearing things they don't want you to know. Especially when you have questions, do not let them get away with this. Talk to everyone you can. If you are a family member or friend of a member, talk with other parents with children in a harmful cultic group, and other brothers and sisters with siblings in the cult. If you are a friend of a member, talk with others who have had friends join this group.

This type of communication can be very helpful, not only in giving you support and encouragement, but in helping you decide how to proceed.

**Debate:** Consider your options. You basically have three –

1. do nothing;
2. plan a private “family” intervention, where only those close to the cult member are involved; or
3. hire an exit counsellor to do a more formal intervention.

Debating your options can be done with help from other parents who have “walked a mile in your shoes”, former members who have left a harmful cultic group and know what that is like, or an exit counsellor.

You will need to determine just how much of an emergency the situation is. If you are a member of a harmful cultic group and are still reading this, you are probably at least considering the possibility that something is very wrong with your church/group. And we probably don't need to warn you about what will happen if you tell your leader/discipler that you've been reading this. Please take your situation seriously – call someone – a friend or family member outside the group, or contact the CIS.

If a friend or family member is in the process of being recruited, but has not committed to the group yet, you may want to intervene quickly before they are fully drawn in. If a member is showing signs of acute physical or emotional illness, is contemplating a marriage in the group, or is considering some other major life change, that might also justify treating the situation as an emergency.

Most situations are not emergencies, though. A person who is a member and has been for a few months, or a few years, is probably not going anywhere. Unless they show signs of acute psychological problems, such as suicide threats, a few more weeks or months in the group will probably not hurt them further. Since thorough preparation is the key to a successful intervention, you do not want to rush unless you have to.

## 4.2 WHAT NOT TO DO

While you are figuring out what to do, here are some things to avoid so that whatever you eventually decide to do will have a better chance of working.

Don't say, "You're in a cult. You're brainwashed." Think of how you would react to hearing this out of the blue, or from someone whose judgment and objectivity you already have doubts about. You'd probably still get angry and quit listening. So will a harmful cultic group member. Be quiet about your reservations about the group until you know more about it and can discuss it, or think about it, calmly.

Don't say, "You can't think for yourself, reason, or make decisions." This will just make the member angry, and it isn't true – a harmful cultic group may have temporarily interfered with the member's ability to reason about it, but the member CAN STILL THINK. The whole purpose of exit counselling is to get the member to think for themselves and start reasoning about their group.

Don't argue with a harmful cultic group member about the cult's beliefs, or criticize the cult or its leaders in front of the member or in public. Maintain a friendly, neutral position towards the group and any of its members you come into contact with. Rank-and-file cult members, during and especially right after their conversion, are warned that, "Satan will use those closest to you to pull you out of the Kingdom." This is deeply ingrained in most members, and criticism of the cult from a family member will simply reinforce this.

Don't be confrontational, aggressive, or antagonistic to a harmful cultic group member you are concerned about, or any other cult members. Family members or friends who have ongoing problems with the member should not attempt to resolve those at this time. Family members who cannot be around the member without quarrelling should stay away until the member's cult involvement has been addressed and dealt with. This is not the time for bringing up lesser issues.

Don't give a harmful cultic group member large sums of money, or relinquish trusts, bank accounts, titles or property deeds to a member. It will disappear into the cult's "World Missions" fund or just to keep up with the group's "sacrificial giving" standards. At this point, you may be the only thing standing between the member and their blowing resources they will need to get on with their lives after they get out.

Finally, a word of warning. Exit counselling is NOT deprogramming. Deprogramming is the process of breaking a person away from a cult using force or coercion. Deprogramming makes use of tactics such as kidnapping the recruit, or preventing them from leaving while visiting the family, and then force-feeding them information. Even in a relatively benign deprogramming, the deprogrammer employs many of the same techniques the cult did. Even a successful deprogramming often leaves its subjects feeling victimized, violated, and wondering what the difference is between a harmful cultic group and their family or friends. An unsuccessful deprogramming merely reinforces what the cult leadership says about outsiders.

However desperate you are, please don't make the mistake of hiring a deprogrammer.

## 4.3 PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE.

While you are learning about a harmful cultic group and evaluating your options, there are several things you can do to keep the lines of communication open with the recruit, and prepare yourself for whatever course of action you decide to take. The belief that most cult members come from very dysfunctional families is an urban legend – cult members come from all backgrounds. There are few families whose communication skills are so good they can't be improved, though – even good families have problems.

Remain interested and involved in their activities, especially any activities which predate their involvement in a harmful cultic group. If they like to play a sport, join them. If they do art or play a musical instrument, encourage them and ask to see (or hear) their latest work. If they enjoy reading, talk about a good book. If they like hiking, arrange to go on a day hike with them.

Encourage their positive actions and good intentions, but do not approve of the group. Support their desire to help people, but do not donate to any group-sponsored activity. Instead, invite them to come with you to volunteer at a local soup kitchen, or another non-controversial charitable activity. Encourage any independent study of the Bible or other spiritual reading, and don't be afraid to suggest a good book you've read (as long as it is not about cults), or to leave it lying around for them to see. Anything that promotes thinking outside a harmful cultic group's rigid mindset is good.

Go with them to group social activities, or perhaps to a Sunday service, but do not attend long seminars, retreats, or anything that will require you to stay overnight or longer. It may be worthwhile to negotiate with them – agree to visit with them in return for their visiting with you later.

If there are ongoing conflicts or problems with other members of a harmful cultic group member's family, work on resolving those. Especially if communications problems are severe, consider family therapy. This can result in a much better chance of reaching the cult member if you decide to try.

If there is or has been a drug or alcohol problem in the family, go to Alcoholics Anonymous or Alanon. This will be useful for two reasons.

1. It will help deal with a problem which probably has affected the cult member's trust in their family and willingness to listen to their family's concerns.
2. Alanon addresses “denial” – the psychological state of refusing to see or acknowledge an upsetting reality – extremely well.

Above all, don't rush. Take time to educate yourself and other family members and friends thoroughly before deciding what to do. Talk with former cult members, and with parents, family and friends of other current and former members. Become thoroughly familiar with the issues and people involved.

Remember that a harmful cultic group will, as a matter of principle, do its best to minimize the member's involvement with their family and non-cult friends. They won't leave the member much time to spend with you. If the member lives at home, they will usually encourage them to move in with other members. They may be encouraged to visit home only with their leader/disciple or another member, especially if the local leadership suspects their family might be suspicious about the group or considering taking action.

A harmful cultic group will probably also discourage the member from pursuing activities and interests that predate his/her membership in the group, unless the activity can be made advantageous to the group. This is both to free up time and money for the group, and to discourage anything that might cause the member to think favourably about people or a period of time outside of the group. It is your job not to go along with this program.

Fortunately, you have some tools on your side. Since the member will probably be tired and stressed much of the time because of the schedule he/she is keeping in the group, you have the opportunity to become their haven from the stress in the rest of their life. By keeping your home quiet, peaceful, and welcoming, allowing the member to get some extra sleep when the opportunity arises, feeding them some nourishing meals, and not exposing them to quarrelling or disputes, you will make your home a refuge from the struggle and stress of the rest of their life.

You also have something else on your side – the relationships a harmful cultic group member built up over the years before they joined the group. The group is exciting, especially at first. A new member will probably have more friends than ever before, and an enormous amount of “instant intimacy” with a number of them. But instant intimacy isn't the real thing. When the first excitement wears off, a new member often finds that they are being rebuked constantly for minor things, expected to meet a discipler's often unrealistic expectations, and expected to go on without the same level of emotional support that is given to a new member at first.

When this happens, the instant friends start looking like fakes. Those who have been in a discipling movement know that some of these friendships will be real, but most are not. If a tired, stressed out, frustrated, depressed member sees that their family and old friends have stood by them even though they neglected them or tried to drive them away, the contrast between the fake and the real thing becomes a powerful witness to the possibility that a harmful cultic group isn't all it claims to be.

Probably the biggest factor in successfully extricating a member from the cult is giving him/her people worth returning to. Regardless of what action you choose to take, do your best to see to it that a member has someone and something to turn to when they are ready to leave.

