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CULTS

HIDDEN

HOW TO DETECT THEM

IN PLAIN

& HOW TO BREAK FREE

SIGHT

A COMPILATION OF RESEARCH & RESOURCES

Author's Note

This booklet is a compilation of my research on cultic groups. Every effort was made to properly attribute all quotes and credit the original authors I drew this research from. If there are any discrepancies or improperly attributed sources, please contact me so the proper adjustments can be made.

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SIGHT

WHEN YOU THINK OF THE TERM *CULT*, your mind may flash to walled compounds, poisoned Kool-Aid, or celebrity studded secret societies. While these types of extreme and highly visible cults do exist, the truth is that other, less obvious high-control groups are far more common. Some may be disguised as self-improvement clubs, edgy political movements, controlling family units, or alluring religious groups.

Cults can drain bank accounts, destroy families, and entrap members. High-control groups coerce members to behave in ways they would not have considered before through manipulative, fear-based tactics.

There are an estimated 5,000 cults in the United States alone.¹ Many of these groups go undetected, attracting members with promises of world-changing purpose and spiritual enlightenment. Once a person dives deeper into the cult, they may begin to see that things are not quite right.

But how do you identify dangerous cults from the outside? Who is susceptible to cult recruitment? And how do you help yourself or others break free? These and many other questions will seek to be answered here.

What is a Cult?

THE TERM *CULT* often evokes a strong, visceral reaction. There is much confusion on how exactly to define a cultic group, and it turns out there are a variety of definitions. For instance, the popular Evangelical website GotQuestions.org defines a cult as:

In a Christian context, the definition of a cult is, specifically, a religious group that denies one or more of the fundamentals of biblical truth.²

This is a common definition I have heard often within Christian circles. There are a number of problems I have with this definition. One issue is that the “fundamentals of biblical truth” have been debated by scholars for centuries, with the various church denominations bearing witness to the discord. This vague and arbitrary vetting process could lead to dangerous behaviors and practices being overlooked so long as “doctrinal conformity” is practiced. This definition could actually be used by dangerous groups making claims that they are the “one true” religious group and that their members should disassociate and separate from anyone who does not belong. Finally, this definition is not broad enough to include non-religious groups, such as politically motivated movements or secular self-improvement programs.

1. Tobias & Lalich, 1994.

2. “What is the definition of a cult?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/cult-definition.html>

While still focusing on the religious nature of some cults, the Oxford Dictionary seems to have a fuller grasp on the definition:

1. A system of religious veneration and devotion directed towards a particular figure or object.
2. A relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or as imposing excessive control over members.
3. A misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular thing.³

Meanwhile, the International Cultic Studies Association defines a cult as:

- ◆ A cult is an ideological organization, held together by charismatic relationships, and demanding high levels of commitment.
- ◆ Cults are at risk of becoming exploitatively manipulative and abusive to members.
- ◆ Many professionals and researchers use the term “cult” to refer to a continuum of manipulation and abusiveness.⁴

Based on these last two definitions and my personal research,
DEFINITION: a cult seems to be a high-control group with a central ideology or leader characterized by manipulation and exploitation of its members. Cults exist on a scale from overt to subtly dangerous, and anywhere in between.

Who is Susceptible to Cults?

THE STEREOTYPE HAS BEEN that it is usually the weak-minded person or easily-manipulated who join or become influenced by cults, yet research demonstrates this is not the case at all. Just as with other forms of abuse and undue influence, anyone can be forced, coerced, or enticed into joining a cult, given the right circumstances.

Dr. Adrian Furnham is a professor of psychology at University College London and the Norwegian Business School and has been devoted to studying what draws people to cults and high-control groups. In an article entitled “Why Do People Join Cults?” Dr. Furnham indicates:

3. “Cult.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cult>

4. “FAQs: What is a Cult?” <http://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/faqs>

Any analysis of the makeup of individuals in cult groups shows surprising large diversity in terms of age, career, education, ideology, and talents. They can attract the postgraduate and the illiterate, the teenager and the “senior citizen”, the solidly middle-class and those on the fringes of society. It is not so much their demography that is important as their psychological needs.⁵



Steven Hassan:
“The truth is...
anyone is vulnerable to
undue influence.”

Furnham goes on to say that those recruited into cults are often at transitional times in their life, bereaved due to a loss of close friend or relative, enduring financial stress, experiencing a career change, or encountering distance from a former religious or social network.

Steven Hassan, a mental health counselor specializing in destructive cults, has stated that “anyone” is vulnerable to what he calls the “undue influence” of cults because “the number one mind-control technique is sleep deprivation,”⁶ which statistics show the average person is currently suffering from.⁷

I would add to this that those who are simply born into high-control groups and are not capable of recognizing the abnormalities due to isolation and lack of information and are at a particular disadvantage.

How People Become Indoctrinated

THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT on indoctrination is from my book *The Courage Coach: A Practical Friendly Guide on How to Heal from Abuse* which is based on my research from International Cultic Studies Association.

“ Stages of Indoctrination

Indoctrination is typically used to maintain power and control over groups of people. It is generally seen in group abuse rather than one-on-one abuse. I see examples of Indoctrination in religious environments, cults, family sects, political movements, and even governments. Indoctrination usually takes place in a group with a centralized ideology or doctrine.

Traditionally, these groups have had a centralized leader, but with the expansion of the Internet and the resulting access to information, I feel it is more accurate to say these groups are bound by similar doctrine and may be enforced by a variety of leaders. These groups may vary in size, ranging from a few people to many thousands.

5. Furnham, Adrian. “Why Do People Join Cults?” *Psychology Today*, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sideways-view/201402/why-do-people-join-cults.
6. Hassan, Steve. “Who Is Vulnerable to Brainwashing and Mind Control?” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huvVmi-fl6Y&feature=youtu.be>
7. “Sleep Statistics - Research & Treatments.” American Sleep Assoc, www.sleepassociation.org/about-sleep/sleep-statistics/.

1. ***The Recruitment Stage***

The Recruitment Stage is meant to entice victims to the controlling group for the purpose of Indoctrination. Some victims are attracted by promises of happiness, hopes for change, a sense of belonging, or higher levels of spiritual enlightenment, personal power, or rewards. Other times, victims will be confronted with threats of disaster or destruction (physically, spiritually, or politically), with the controlling group presenting itself as the only way of escape or salvation.

Recruitment may occur through literature, personal relationships, bait and switch marketing tactics, or mass media marketing. In extreme occasions, victims will be recruited through physical force or capture. Others may simply be born into the controlling group.

2. ***Isolation***

In the Isolation Stage, the controlling group begins Indoctrination by weeding out outside influences, ensuring they can shape the victim's reality. They may start the Isolation Stage by claiming others outside of the group are dangerous or worldly. Some groups will present victims with perceived important tasks such as devoting considerable amounts of time to learning the group's dogma, saving the world, or defending the group against attacks. These tasks quickly take up all of the victim's opportunity for time with people outside of the group. In extreme cases, victims may be placed in solitary confinement, entirely cut off from the world through forced Isolation.

3. ***Breaking the Will***

After victims are successfully isolated, a time of breaking their wills begins. The controlling group seeks to cleanse the victim's mind of independent thought when it breaks the victim's will. They may do this through subtle emotional manipulation, belittling of opposing views, using a reward and withhold system to reinforce ideas and actions they deem appropriate, or punishing those who offend their world view. If the emotional control does not work, the controlling group may enforce other forms of discipline such as substantial mental abuse, deeper Isolation, interrogation, deprivation, physical or sexual abuse, torture, deprivation of sleep or food, forced labor, humiliation, or threats. The goal is to bring the victim into total submission to the controlling group in thought, word, and action. There are examples of this in cult-like environments, but the idea of "breaking the will" of children can also be found in some religious child-rearing manuals.

4. ***Indoctrination***

Once victims are recruited and their will is broken, they are now ready for full-on Indoctrination: a reprogramming of the mind where old or conflicting information is thrown out and replaced with a flood of thoughts, beliefs, ideas, or intentions of the controlling group. Some refer to this as mind control because victims are no longer allowed to question or think for themselves. Their thoughts and actions reflect only the will of the controlling group's ideology. Victims may be forced to read and memorize dogma, sit through lectures and sermons, or have intense interrogation with the purpose of "correcting" and replacing thoughts and ideas that oppose the group.

5. ***Commitment/Submission***

After victims are indoctrinated, the controlling group then seeks their allegiance through total submission. At this point, victims may be given a job to prove their devotion, such as recruiting others, fighting physical or ideological wars, practicing religious rites, defending the group or leaders, and in some cases, even sacrificing their lives for the group or ideology.

6. ***Shunning***

If—at any time—victims begin to second guess, question, or defy the group and accompanying ideology, it will be seen as treason. They will be subject to the Will Breaking and Indoctrinating phases yet again. If victims reject the controlling group and can make an escape, they will be subject to Shunning. Victims will be cut off by other members of the group and they will be shamed, guilty, and demonized to the others who stay behind. In many cases, the group will shame, guilt, harass, stalk, or even "love bomb" (an attempt to entice the victim with gifts and niceties) the victim instead of cutting them off. In this instance, victims will have to choose to cut ties or else be subject to continued emotional abuse.

Other extreme groups will forcibly hold the victims who wish to leave or who reject the Will Breaking phase. They may even end a victim's life for non-compliance. If the victim escapes and can shed the group's control, the group will attempt to control others' perceptions of the victim through character assassination, rumors, and lies. ””

Identifying Red Flags of Dangerous Cults

THOUGH WE HAVE DEFINED what cults are and how they recruit, how can we recognize a cult? As the research demonstrates, it is through analyzing the behaviors of the cult rather than assessing its beliefs that provide the most clarity. We will begin by examining the leadership.

Defining Traits of Cultic Leaders

Whether they are leaders of large organizations, middle sized clubs, or small family units, cultic leaders often have similar actions and personality traits.

Joe Navarro, a former FBI Counterintelligence Agent who studies dangerous groups, in his article “Dangerous Cult Leaders,” describes cult leaders this way:

They all have or had an overabundant belief that they were special, that they and they alone had the answers to problems, and that they had to be revered. They demanded perfect loyalty from followers, they overvalued themselves and devalued those around them, they were intolerant of criticism, and above all they did not like being questioned or challenged.⁸

Later, Navarro goes on to lists no less than fifty typical traits to watch out for:

Tries to control others in what they do, read, view, or think; is superficially charming; a grandiose sense of self; taking sexual advantage of others; is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others; publicly devalues others as being inferior, incapable, or not worthy; makes members confess their sins or faults publicly; anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an “enemy”; believes himself to be a deity or a chosen representative of a deity.

Cultic Practices to Watch Out For

Each high-control group will have some unique characteristics, but overall cults are quite unoriginal in practice. The degree of severity may vary but they usually follow similar patterns.

In the ground-breaking 1961 book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing”* author and researcher Dr. Robert Jay Lifton lays out eight characteristics common in cultic environments. These eight characteristics are excellently summarized here by author and abuse victim advocate, Brad Sargent. I recommend reading his full blog series on cults and dystopian societies⁹ where he delves deeper into these distinctives.

8. Navarro, Joe. “Dangerous Cult Leaders.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/spycatcher/201208/dangerous-cult-leaders>

9. Sargent, Brad. “Lessons from the Hunger Games.” <https://futuristguy.wordpress.com/2012/05/16/the-hunger-games-trilogy-5a/>

1. **Milieu Control:** Restrict what communication modes are allowed.
2. **Mystical Manipulation:** Appeal to some higher purpose, as set by the leader or organization.
3. **The Demand for Purity:** Require purity of thinking, that is, with a black-and-white mentality where every view our group holds is absolutely correct.
4. **The Cult of Confession:** Use a radical level of personal confession to unburden people from their crimes (real or imagined) against the organization and realign them with its principles.
5. **The “Sacred Science”:** Promote our moral vision as ultimate: Our way of life is the only right one.
6. **Loading the Language:** Create code words and insider jargon that reduce complex problems to simplistic solutions and condense categories into judgmental labels.
7. **Doctrine Over Person:** Require people to conform to our perfect system of truth so that individuality is eradicated and sublime conformity is the sacred norm.
8. **The Dispensing of Existence:** Exercise the “right” to decide who has the right to exist in public and who needs to be isolated or excommunicated.

I would also add that one of the tricky things about many cults is that the higher you ascend in the group, the stronger the control becomes. Members at lower levels may not be aware or exposed to the same high levels of control like those on the inner circle. Lower level members may even be able to freely leave without consequence as long as they do not speak out against the group.

Just because some members do not have extreme experiences in a group does not mean that everyone is being treated as kindly or that things could not become worse the as the member becomes more invested.

Signs of Mind Control or Thought Reform

The Freedom of the Mind Resource Center has produced an exceptional website dedicated to identifying and combating mind control, otherwise known as emotional

or mental manipulation. Founder Steven Hassan, a former “Moonie” and now mental health counselor, has developed a resource known as the B.I.T.E. Model. Each letter of the acronym stands for a different type of control cult-like groups use to maintain power over their members.

B Behavior Control: Controlling a person’s physical behaviors.

I Information Control: Controlling a person’s access to outside information.

T Thought Control: Controlling what a person is allowed to think.

E Emotional Control: Controlling what a person is allowed to feel.

If you are unsure if you or a loved one has been affected by mind-control—since thought-reform is often practiced in cults—I recommend evaluating Hassan’s material, particularly his article “Undoing Undue Influence and the BITE Model” which has forty-four types of controlling behaviors.¹⁰

Five Tips for Helping Friends Break Free from a Cult

IF YOU KNOW SOMEONE who may be in a cult here are a few ideas of ways you can help them break free. Please also consult the resources at the end of this booklet, which form a range options for a multitude of situations.

1. Be Aware

Be aware if something does not feel right about a group your friend or family member is a part of. Observing is the first step in helping your loved one. If you have a nagging gut feeling do not reason it away, pay attention and observe more closely.

2. Questions Over Conflict

If you believe someone you love is in a cult or high control group your first reaction may be to tell them all of the reasons the group is wrong. You will rightly have strong emotions but if you come on too passionately or if you speak against the organization to your friend, you are likely to cause them to become defensive and more protective of the group. This could cause them to end their relationship with you and your chance to help them. The cult may then label you as dangerous and persuade other members not to listen to your concerns.

Instead affirm that you hear them when they explain their beliefs or actions even when you disagree. Instead of getting upset ask open ended questions. Your goal will be to

10. Hassan, Steve. “Undoing Undue Influence and the BITE Model.” <https://freedomofmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/BITE-Model-Handout-9-23-16.pdf>



Megan Phelps-Roper:
"The line between
friend and foe became
blurred when we started
seeing each other as
human beings."

ask them questions that provoke them to think for themselves which can lead them to questioning the group as a whole.

I love Megan Phelps-Roper's TEDTalk, who describes how she escaped the infamous Westboro Baptist Church she grew up in and which many experts regard as a cult.¹¹ Phelps-Roper speaks about the way questions and other people's kindness led her on the path to free thought and eventual escape from the cult.

3. Information vs. Condemnation

One stronghold in many cults is the lack of information about the outside world or awareness of any critical information regarding the group. Some cults do not allow internet access; if they do it is closely monitored. Do not assume all cult members are aware of the abuse or dangerous behaviors of the cult leaders. Instead try to provide accurate information about dangerous aspect of the cults. You can do this by giving someone a book, survivor testimonies, news articles, or videos regarding harmful practices. It is important to recognize a cult member may not immediately believe they can trust these sources, but if they or someone close to them begins to experience behaviors similar to what these resources describe, they will remember that they are not alone and that you believe this heinous treatment is unacceptable.

4. Speaking Up

If you have the ability to speak with someone in a cult try using the tips above. You never know how positively it could impact a cult member, now or in the future. When in doubt do not hesitate to reach out to law enforcement or call Child Protective Services if you believe people to be in danger.

5. Offer Supportive Services

Dangerous cults often cut people off from the outside world and brainwash their members into believing that they will have nowhere to go if they leave. If you know someone looking to leave a controlling group, I recommend reaching out to your local abuse prevention center, such as a women's shelter. Inquire about housing, professional counseling, support groups, legal and financial aid, as well as safe exit plans and protective orders. You can find your local abuse prevention centers by visiting [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.DomesticShelters.org).

Sometimes you can do everything in your power to help a loved one trapped in a controlling group and still not free them. Please know this is not your fault, it is the fault of the cultic group.

It is also important to know that your safety is a priority. Enlist the help of others—especially professionals—if you risk being sucked into the cult.

11. Phelps-Roper, Megan. "I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's why I left." https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left

Be aware that if you are too close to the situation you may not be the most effective person for an intervention if the cult has conditioned its members not to trust you. Realize it is not always within our ability to rescue a loved one.

Cults Hidden in Plain Sight

AS WE HAVE SEEN, sadly cults are not uncommon in the United States and around the world. While these high control groups at times may involve mysterious walled compounds or secret societies, cults often show up in subtler, yet no less dangerous, forms.

It is important to remember that, given the right circumstances, anyone could be lured into a cult. We should not shame ourselves or blame others for being manipulated into controlling groups. We also should not think of ourselves immune from the pull of a cult's recruiting attempt. We should always be thoughtful and aware when joining new groups or movements.

Being vigilant while seeking the truth is the best defense as you move into these environments with discernment, awareness, and love.

Resources for Further Study

- ◆ *Freedom of the Mind Resource Center*, curated by Steve Hassan
- ◆ The BITE Model, created by Steve Hassan
- ◆ *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, by Robert Jay Lifton
- ◆ “Lessons from The Hunger Games 5A – Dystopian Dynamics, Totalitarian Tactics, and Lifton’s Criteria for Identifying “Cults”, an article by Brad Sargent
- ◆ *The Courage Coach, A Practical Friendly Guide on How to Heal from Abuse*, by Ashley Easter
- ◆ “I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here’s why I left.” TEDTalk by Megan Phelps-Roper
- ◆ International Cultic Studies Association
- ◆ “Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath” (A&E)
- ◆ “Jesus Camp,” 2006 (Netflix)
- ◆ “Wild, Wild Country,” 2018 (Netflix)

