

## Coming Out of the Cults

Psychology Today, January 1979

By Margaret Thaler Singer

Clinical research has identified specific cult-related emotional problems with which ex-members must cope during their reentry into society. Among them: indecisiveness, uncritical passivity -- and fear of the cult itself.

The recent upsurge of cults in the United States began in the late 60s and became a highly visible social phenomenon by the mid-70s. Many thousands of young adults -- some say two to three million -- have had varying contacts with such groups, frequently leaving home, school, job, and spouses and children to follow one or another of the most variegated array of gurus, messiahs, and Pied Pipers to appear in a single generation. By now, a number of adherents have left such groups, for a variety of reasons, and as they try to reestablish their lives in the mainstream of society, they are having a number of special -- and I believe cult-related -- psychological problems that say a good deal about what experience in some of these groups can be like.

The term "cult" is always one of individual judgment. It has been variously applied to groups involved in beliefs and practices just off the beat of traditional religions; to groups making exploratory excursions into non-Western philosophical practices; and to groups involving intense relationships between followers and a powerful idea or leader. The people have studied, however, come from groups in the last, narrow band of the spectrum: groups such as the Children of God, the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Krishna Consciousness movement, the Divine Light Mission, and the Church of Scientology. I have not had occasion to meet with members of the People's Temple founded by the late Reverend Jim Jones, who practiced what he preached about being prepared to commit murder and suicide, if necessary, in defense of the faith.

Over the past two years, about 100 persons have taken part in discussion groups that I have organized with my fellow psychologist, Jesse Miller of the University of California, Berkeley. The young people who have taken part are generally from middle and upper-middle-class families, average 23 years of age, and usually have two or more years of college. Though a few followed some of the smaller evangelical leaders or commune movements, most belonged to a half-dozen of the largest, most highly structured, and best known of the groups.

Our sessions are devoted to discussion and education: we neither engage in the intense badgering reportedly carried on by some much-publicized "deprogrammers," nor do we provide group psychotherapy. We expected to learn from the participants in the groups, and to relieve some of their distress by offering a setting for mutual support. We also hoped to help by explaining something of what we know about the processes the members had been exposed to, and particularly what is known of the mechanisms for behavior change that seem to have affected the capacity of ex-cultists to adjust to life after cultism. My own background includes the study of coercive persuasion, the techniques of so-called "brainwashing"; Dr. Miller is interested in trance-induction methods.

It might be argued that the various cult groups bear resemblances to certain fervent sectors of long-established and respected religious traditions, as well as to utopian communities of the past. Clearly, the groups are far from uniform, and what goes on in one may or may not go on in another. Still, when in the course of research on young adults and their families over the last four years, I interviewed nearly 300 people who were in or who had come out of such cults, I was struck by similarities in their accounts. For example, the groups' recruitment and indoctrination procedures seemed to involve highly sophisticated techniques for inducing behavioral change.

I also came to understand the need of many ex-cult members for help in adjusting to life on the outside.

According to their own reports, many participants joined these religious cults during periods of depression and confusion, when they had a sense that life was meaningless. The cult had promised - and for many had provided - a solution to the distress of the developmental crises that are frequent at this age. Cults supply ready-made friendships and ready-made decisions about careers, dating, sex, and marriage, and they outline a clear "meaning of life." In return, they may demand total obedience to cult commands.

The cults these people belonged to maintain intense allegiance through the arguments of their ideology, and through social and psychological pressures and practices that, intentionally or not, amount to conditioning techniques that constrict attention, limit personal relationships, and devalue reasoning. Adherents and ex-members describe constant exhortation and training to arrive at exalted spiritual states, altered consciousness, and automatic submission to directives; there are long hours of prayer, chanting, or meditation (in one Zen sect, 21 hours on 21 consecutive days several times a year), and lengthy repetitive lectures day and night.

The exclusion of family and other outside contacts, rigid moral judgments of the unconverted outside world, and restriction of sexual behavior are all geared to increasing followers' commitment to the goals of the group and in some cases to its powerful leader. Some former cult members were happy during their membership, gratified to submerge their troubled selves into a selfless whole. Converted to the ideals of the group, they welcomed the indoctrination procedures that bound them closer to it and gradually eliminated any conflicting ties or information.

Gradually, however, some of the members of our groups grew disillusioned with cult life, found themselves incapable of submitting to the cult's demands, or grew bitter about discrepancies they perceived between cult words and practices. Several of these people had left on their own or with the help of family or friends who had gotten word of their restlessness and picked them up at their request from locations outside cult headquarters. Some 75 percent of the people attending our discussion groups, however, had left the cults not entirely on their own volition but through legal conservatorships, a temporary power of supervision that courts in California and several other states grant to the family of an adult. The grounds for granting such power are in flux (see box on page 81), but under such orders, a person can be temporarily removed from a cult. Some cults resist strenuously, sometimes moving members out of state; others acquiesce.

Many members of our groups tell us they were grateful for the intervention and had been hoping for rescue. These people say that they had felt themselves powerless to carry out their desire to leave because of psychological and social pressures from companions and officials inside. They often speak of a combination of guilt over defecting and fear of the cult's retaliation - excommunication - if they tried. In addition, they were uncertain over how they would manage in the outside world that they had for so long held in contempt.

Most of our group members had seen deprogrammers as they left their sects, as part of their families' effort to reorient them. But none in our groups cited experiences of the counter-brainwashing sort that some accounts of deprogramming have described and that the cults had warned them to be ready for. (Several ex-members of one group reported they had been instructed in a method for slashing their wrists safely, to evade pressure by "satanic" deprogrammers -- an instruction that alerted them to the possibility that the cult's declarations of love might have some not-so-loving aspects.)

Instead, our group members said they met young ex-cultists like themselves, who described their own disaffection, provided political and economic information they had been unaware of about cult activities, and described the behavioral effects to be expected from the practices they had undergone. Meanwhile, elective or not, the days away from the cult atmosphere gave the former members a chance to think, rest, and see friends -- and to collect perspective on their feelings. Some persons return to cult life after the period at home, but many more elect to try to remake life on the outside.

Leaving any restricted community can pose problems -- leaving the Army for civilian life is hard, too, of course. In addition, it is often argued that people who join cults are troubled to begin with, and that the problems we see in post cult treatment are only those they postponed by conversion and adherence. In a recent study by psychiatrist Marc Galanter of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and several colleagues, some 39 percent of one cult's members reported that they had had "serious emotional problems" before their conversion (6 percent had been hospitalized for it) and 23 percent cited a serious drug problem in their past. But some residues that some of these cults leave in many ex-members seem special: slippage into dissociated states, severe incapacity to make decisions, and related extreme suggestibility derive, I believe, from the effects of specific behavior-conditioning practices on some especially susceptible persons.

Most ex-cultists we have seen struggle at one time or another with some or all of the following difficulties and problems. Not all the former cultists have all of these problems, nor do most have them in severe and extended form. But almost all my informants report that it takes them anywhere from six to 18 months to get their lives functioning again at a level commensurate with their histories and talents.

**DEPRESSION.** With their 24-hour regime of ritual, work, worship, and community, the cults provide members with tasks and purpose. When members leave, a sense of meaninglessness often reappears. They must also deal with family and personal issues left unresolved at the time of conversion.

But former members have a variety of new losses to contend with. Ex-cultists in our groups often speak of their regret for the lost years during which they wandered off

the main paths of everyday life; they regret being out of step and behind their peers in career and life pursuits. They feel a loss of innocence and self esteem if they come to believe that they were used, or that they wrongly surrendered their autonomy.

**LONELINESS.** Leaving a cult also means leaving many friends, a brotherhood with common interests, and the intimacy of sharing a very significant experience. It means having to look for new friends in an uncomprehending or suspicious world.

Many of our informants had been struggling with issues of sexuality, dating, and marriage before they joined the cult, and most cults reduce such struggles by restricting sexual contacts and pairings, ostensibly to keep the members targeted on doing the "work of the master." Even marriages, if permitted, are subject to cult rules. Having sexuality highly controlled makes friendships especially safe for certain people: rules that permit only brotherly and sisterly love can take a heavy burden off a conflicted young adult.

On leaving the cult, some people respond by trying to make up for lost time in binges of dating, drinking, and sexual adventures. These often produce overwhelming guilt and shame when former members contrast the cult's prohibitions to their new freedom. Said Valerie, a 26-year-old former teacher, "When I first came out, I went with any guy that seemed interested in me - bikers, bums - I was even dating a drug-dealer until I crashed his car on the freeway. I was never like that before."

Others simply panic and avoid dating altogether. One man remarked, "I had been pretty active sexually before I joined. Now it's as if I'd never had those experiences, because I'm more inhibited than I was in junior high. I feel sexually guilty if I even think of asking a girl out. They really impressed me that sex was wrong." In at least one case, the rules restricting sexuality seem to have contributed to highly charged interpersonal manipulations. Ruth said she was often chastised by Mary, a prestigious cult member, for "showing lustful thoughts toward the brothers." Mary would have me lie on my face on the floor. She would lie on top of me and massage me to drive Satan out. Soon, she'd begin accusing ME of being a lesbian." Needless to say, anyone who had been through experiences of the sort described would be likely to have sexual conflicts to work out.

A very few who were in orgiastic cults had undergone enforced sexuality rather than celibacy. Describing the cult leader, one woman said, "He used orgies to break down our inhibitions. If a person didn't feel comfortable in group sex, he said it indicated a psychological hang-up that had to be stripped away because it prevented us all from melding and unifying."

**INDECISIVENESS.** Some groups prescribed virtually every activity: what and when to eat, wear, and do during the day and night, showering, defecating procedures, and sleep positions.

The loss of a way of life in which everything is planned often creates what some of our group members call a "future void" in which they must plan and execute all their tomorrows on their own. Said one, "Freedom is great, but it takes a lot of work." Certain individuals cannot put together any organized plan for taking care of themselves, whether problems involve a job, school, or social life. Some have to be urged to buy alarm clocks and notebooks in order to get up, get going, and plan their

days. One woman, who had been unable to keep a job or even care for her apartment since leaving the cult, said, "I come in and can't decide whether to clean the place, make the bed, cook, sleep, or what. I just can't decide about anything and I sleep instead. I don't even know what to cook. The group used to reward me with candy and sugar when I was good. Now I'm ruining my teeth by just eating candy bars and cake."

Except for some aspects of the difficulty with making decisions, these problems do not seem to stem especially from the techniques of behavior modification that some cults apply to their members. But the next two items are another matter.

**SLIPPING INTO ALTERED STATES.** From the time prospective recruits are invited to the cult's domicile -- "the ashram," "our place in the country," "the retreat," "the family," "the center" -- and after initiation, as well, they are caught up in a round of long, repetitive lectures couched in hypnotic metaphors and exalted ideas, hours of chanting while half-awake, attention-focusing songs and games, and meditating. Several groups send their members to bed wearing headsets that pipe sermons into their ears as they sleep, after hours of listening to tapes of the leader's exhortations while awake. These are all practices that tend to produce states of altered consciousness, exaltation, and suggestibility.

When they leave the cult, many members find that a variety of conditions - stress and conflict, a depressive low, certain significant words or ideas - can trigger a return to the trancelike state they knew in cult days. They report that they fall into the familiar, unshakable lethargy, and seem to hear bits of exhortations from cult speakers. These episodes of "floating" -- like the flashbacks of drug-users - are most frequent immediately after leaving the group, but in certain persons they still occur weeks or months later.

Ira had acquired a master's degree in business administration before he joined his cult; emerging after two years of nightly headsets and daily tapes, he is working in a factory "until I get my head together." He thought he was going crazy: "Weeks after I left, I would suddenly feel spacey and hear the cult leader saying, "You'll always come back. You are one with us. You can never separate." I'd forget where I was, that I'm out now; I'd feel his presence and hear his voice. I got so frightened once that I slapped my face to make it stop."

Jack, a former graduate student in physiology who had been in a cult for several years, reported, "I went back to my university to see my dissertation adviser. As we talked, he wrote ideas on the board. Suddenly he gave me the chalk and said, "Outline some of your ideas." He wanted me briefly to present my plans. I walked over and drew a circle around the professor's words. It was like a child doing it. I heard his words as a literal command: I drew a line around the outside of the ideas written on the board. I was suddenly embarrassed when I saw what I had done. I had spaced out, and I keep doing little things like that."

During our group discussions, unless we keep some focus, we often see members float off; they have difficulty concentrating and expressing practical needs concretely. Prolonged recitals using abstract cult jargon can set off a kind of contagion in this detached, "spacey" condition among certain participants. They say these episodes duplicate the conditions they fell into at meditations or lectures during cult days, and disturb them terribly when they occur now. They worry that

they are going mad, and that they may never be able to control the floating. But it can be controlled by avoiding the vague, cosmic terms encouraged in cult talk and sticking to concrete topics and precise language spoken directly to a listener. In one session, Rosemary was describing a floating incident from the day before. "In the office yesterday, I couldn't keep centered... I couldn't keep a positive belief system going," she said.

"Now, look, Rosemary," I said. "Tell us concretely exactly what it was that happened, and what you were feeling." With effort, she told us she had been using the Xerox machine when the paper jammed; she didn't know how to fix it, felt inadequate, was ashamed to go and ask. Instead, she stood silent and dissociated before the machine. Under pressure now, she found ways to tell the story. In cult days, she had been encouraged to generalize to vague categories of feeling, to be imprecise, to translate personal responses into code.

People affected by floating are immensely relieved to learn that others have experienced these same flash backs, that they can be controlled, and that the condition eventually diminishes. Those who still float for a long time - it can go on for two years - are generally the same ones to have reported severe depression, extreme indecisiveness, and other signs of pathology before entering the cult.

**BLURRING OF MENTAL ACUITY.** Most cult veterans are neither grossly incompetent nor blatantly disturbed. Nevertheless, they report - and their families confirm - subtle cognitive inefficiencies and changes that take some time to pass. Ex-cultists often have trouble putting into words the inefficiencies they want to describe. Jack, the physiology graduate, said, "It's more that after a while outside, something comes back. One day I realized my thinking had gradually expanded. I could see everything in more complex ways. The group had slowly, a step at a time, cut me off from anything but the simplest right-wrong notions. They keep you from thinking and reasoning about all the contingencies by always telling you, 'Don't doubt, don't be negative.' And after a while you hardly think about anything except in yes-no, right-wrong, simpleminded ways." Many ex-cultists, like Ira, the factory worker, or Jack, now working as a hospital orderly, have to take simple jobs until they regain former levels of competence.

**UNCRITICAL PASSIVITY.** Many ex-cultists report they accept almost everything they hear, as if their pre-cult skills for evaluating and criticizing were in relative abeyance. They cannot listen and judge: they listen, believe, and obey. Simple remarks of friends, dates, co-workers, and roommates are taken as commands, even though the person does not feel like doing the bidding, or even abhors it. One woman had gotten up in the middle of the night to respond to the telephoned command of a near stranger: "I borrowed my dad's car to drive about 65 miles out into the country and help this guy I had just met once in a coffeehouse to transport some stolen merchandise, because he spoke in such a strong and authoritative way to me on the phone. I can't believe how much I still obey people."

When this behavior comes up in our group sessions, we discuss the various cults' injunctions against questioning doctrine or directives, and the effects of living for months or years in situations that encourage acquiescence. Ex-members of some of the more authoritarian cults describe constant urging to "surrender your mind ... accept ... melt ... flow with it ... Don't question now, later you will understand."

Reluctance or objections are reprimanded: "Don't be negative, don't be resistant, surrender."

Joan had been the nemesis of many college teachers before she joined a cult. "I was into the radical feminist group at school; I was a political radical; I was trying to overthrow the system. In three months, they recycled me and I was obeying everybody. I still have that tendency to obey anybody who says 'Gimme, fetch me, go for . . .'" Ginny was described by her family as having been "strong-willed. It was impossible to make her do anything she didn't want to do." Now, she complains, "Any guy who asks me anything, I feel compelled to say yes; I feel I should sacrifice for them; that's how I did for four years in the group."

**FEAR OF THE CULT.** Most of the groups work hard to prevent defections: some ex-members cite warnings of heavenly damnation for themselves, their ancestors, and their children. Since many cult veterans retain some residual belief in the cult doctrines, this alone can be a horrifying burden.

When members do leave, efforts to get them back reportedly range from moderate harassment to incidents involving the use of force. Many ex-members and their families secure unlisted phone numbers; some move away from known addresses; some even take assumed names in distant places.

At the root of ex-members' fear is often the memory of old humiliations administered for stepping out of line. Kathy, who had been in a group for over five years, said, "Some of the older members might still be able to get to me and crush my spirit like they did when I became depressed and couldn't go out and fund-raise or recruit. I had been unable to eat or sleep; I was weak and ineffectual. They called me in and the leader screamed at me, "You're too rebellious. I'm going to break your spirit. You are too strong-willed." And they made me crawl at their feet. I still freak out when I think about how close they drove me to suicide that day; for a long time afterward, all I could do was help with cooking. I can hardly remember the details, it was a nightmare."

It appears that most cult groups soon turn their energies to recruiting new members rather than prolonging efforts to reattract defectors. Still, even after the initial fear of retaliation has passed, ex-members worry about how to handle the inevitable chance street meetings with old colleagues, expecting them to try to stir up feelings of guilt over leaving and condemn their present life.

Fear may be most acute for former members who have left a spouse or children behind in the cults that recruited couples and families. Any effort to make contact risks breaking the link completely. Often painful legal actions ensue over child custody or conservatorship between ex and continuing adherents.

Even reporters who have gone into a cult as bogus recruits to get a story, staying only a few days, have felt a terrible compassion for the real recruits who stay behind. One, Dana Gosney, formerly of the Redwood City Tribune, wrote that it took him three and a half hours to extract himself from the group once he announced he wanted to leave. He was denied permission to go, he was pleaded with, he was told the phone did not work so he could not contact a ride. Eventually, he says, "Two steps beyond the gate, I experienced the sensation of falling and reached out to steady myself. My stomach, after churning for several hours, forced its contents from

my mouth. Then I began to weep uncontrollably. I was crying for those I had left behind."

**THE FISHBOWL EFFECT.** A special problem for cult veterans is the constant watchfulness of family and friends, who are on the alert for any signs that the difficulties of real life will send the person back. Mild dissociation, deep preoccupations, temporary altered states of consciousness, and any positive talk about cult days can cause alarm in a former member's family. Often the ex-member senses it, but neither side knows how to open up discussion.

New acquaintances and old friends can also trigger an ex-cultist's feelings that people are staring, wondering why he joined such a group. In our discussion, ex-members share ways they have managed to deal with these situations. The best advice seems to be to try focusing on the current conversation until the sense of living under scrutiny gradually fades.

As I suggested above, returnees often want to talk to people about positive aspects of the cult experience. Yet they commonly feel that others refuse to hear anything but the negative aspects, even in our groups. Apart from the pleasure of commitment and the simplicity of life in the old regime, they generally want to discuss a few warm friendships, or even romances, and the sense that group living taught them to connect more openly and warmly to other people than they could before their cult days. As one man exclaimed, "How can I get across the greatest thing - that I no longer fear rejection the way I used to? While I was in the Church, and selling on the street, I was rejected by thousands of people I approached, and I learned to take it. Before I went in, I was terrified that anyone would reject me in any way!"

Conditioned by the cults' condemnation of the beliefs and conduct of outsiders, ex-members tend to remain hypercritical of much of the ordinary behavior of humans. This makes reentry still harder. When parents, friends, or therapists try to convince them to be less rigid in their attitudes, they tend to see such as evidence of casual moral relativism.

**THE AGONIES OF EXPLAINING.** Why one joined is difficult to tell anyone who is unfamiliar with cults. One has to describe the subtleties and power of the recruitment procedures, and how one was persuaded and indoctrinated. Most difficult of all is to try to explain why a person is unable simply to walk away from a cult, for that entails being able to give a long and sophisticated explanation of social and psychological coercion, influence, and control procedures.

"People just can't understand what the group puts into your mind," one ex-cultist said. "How they play on your guilts and needs. Psychological pressure is much heavier than a locked door. You can bust a locked door down in terror or anger, but chains that are mental are real hard to break. The heaviest thing I've ever done is leaving the group, breaking those real heavy bonds on my mind."

**GUILT.** According to our informants, significant parts of cult activity are based on deception, particularly fund-raising and recruitment. The dishonesty is rationalized as being for the greater good of the cult or the person recruited. One girl said she had censored mail from and to new recruits, kept phone calls from them, lied to their parents saying she didn't know where they were when they phoned or appeared, and



deceived donors on the street when she was fund-raising. "There is something inside me that wants to survive more than anything, that wants to live, wants to give, wants to be honest," she noted. "And I wasn't honest when I was in the group. How could they have gotten me to believe it was right to do that? I never really thought it was right, but they kept saying it was okay because there was so little time left to save the world." As they take up their personal consciences again, many ex-members feel great remorse over the lies they have told, and they frequently worry over how to right the wrongs they did.

**PERPLEXITIES ABOUT ALTRUISM.** Many of these people want to find ways to put their altruism and energy back to work without becoming a pawn in another manipulative group. Some fear they have become "groupies" who are defenseless against getting entangled in a controlling organization. Yet, they also feel a need for affiliations. They wonder how they can properly select among the myriad contending organizations -- social, religious, philanthropic, service-oriented, psychological -- and remain their own boss. The group consensus on this tends to advise caution about joining any new "uplift" group, and to suggest instead purely social, work, or school-related activities.

**MONEY.** An additional issue is the cult members' curious experience with money: many cult members raise more per day fund-raising on the streets than they will ever be able to earn a day on any job. Most cults assign members daily quotas to fill of \$100 to \$150. Especially skillful and dedicated solicitors say they can bring in as much as \$1,500 day after day. In one of our groups one person claimed to have raised \$30,000 in a month selling flowers, and another to have raised \$69,000 in nine months; one testified in court to raising a quarter of a million dollars selling flowers and candy and begging over a three-year period.

**ELITE NO MORE.** "They get you to believing that they alone know how to save the world," recalled one member. "You think you are in the vanguard of history . . . You have been called out of the anonymous masses to assist the messiah . . . As the chosen, you are above the law . . . They have arrived at the humbling and exalting conclusion that they are more valuable to God, to history, and to the future than other people are." Clearly one of the more poignant comedowns of post-group life is the end of feeling a chosen person, a member of an elite.

It appears from our work that if they hope to help, therapists -- and friends and family -- need to have at least some knowledge of the content of a particular cult's program in order to grasp what the ex-member is trying to describe. A capacity to explain certain behavioral reconstruction techniques is also important. One ex-member saw a therapist for two sessions but left because the therapist "reacted as if I were making it up, or crazy, he couldn't tell which. But I was just telling it like it was in The Family."

Many therapists try to bypass the content of the experience in order to focus on long-term personality attributes. But unless he or she knows something of the events of the experience that prey on the former cultist's mind, we believe, the therapist is unable to open up discussion or even understand what is happening. Looking at the experience in general ways, he may think the young person has undergone a spontaneous religious conversion and may fail to be aware of the sophisticated, high-pressure recruitment tactics and intense influence procedures the cults use to attract

and keep members. He may mistakenly see all the ex-cultist's behavior as manifestations of long-standing psychopathology.

Many ex-cult members fear they will never recover their full functioning. Learning from the group that most of those affected eventually come to feel fully competent and independent is most encouraging for them. Their experiences might well be taken into account by people considering allying themselves with such groups in the future.

*Margaret Thaler Singer is a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, and in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. She has testified as expert witness in court on behalf of parents trying to remove their children from cults. She holds a National Institute of Mental Health Research Scientist Award and has received numerous research awards. She has also served as president of the American Psychosomatic Society, as a senior psychologist at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and as an advisory editor for professional journals.*