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Freedom of Mind

IDENTITY

Understanding Cults: The Basics

To help others, it is important to understand mind control and undue influence.

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KEY POINTS

- **No one joins a cult; they are recruited by systematic social influence processes.**
- **Destructive individuals and cults use deception and undue influence to make people dependent and obedient.**
- **Not all influence is bad. There is a difference between due and undue influence.**
- **Cult leaders are typically malignant narcissists and want people who will be obedient to them.**

Ever had an experience with a cult or controlling relationship?
Have a friend or family member caught up in a black-and-

To help them or yourself, you need to learn how the mind works and how people can be programmed into a destructive authoritarian cult. Not all are destructive, some are benign. There are specific strategies, patterns, and behaviors used by cultic groups to recruit new members and manipulate and control them.

The first step in keeping you and your loved ones safe is learning more about what a cult is, how they work, and the lasting serious after-effects of being involved with one.

Vulnerability and Recruitment

No one joins a cult voluntarily; they are recruited into it. There is lack of informed consent. Everyone has vulnerabilities. Possible situational vulnerabilities include illness, the death of a loved one, breakup of an important relationship, loss of a job, or moving to another city, state or country.

Individual vulnerabilities may include high hypnotizability, strong ability for concentration and vivid imagination, learning disorders, or autism spectrum disorders. Excessive use of hypnosis, meditation, and other activities can induce an altered state of consciousness. These, in turn, increase susceptibility to being recruited by a cult unless there are strong critical thinking, media literacy and good supportive network, which can help a person stay grounded.

Other risks consist of:

- Learning and communication disorders
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Trauma
- Unresolved sexual issues
- Phobias (fear of heights, drowning, sharks, aliens, terrorists, crime, etc.)

There are even recent 21st century contributors:

- COVID-19/pandemic
- Severe economic disruption
- Isolation, lack of touch, social distancing
- Social/political polarization
- Increased time online
- Internet addiction
- Recruitment into extreme conspiracy theories and cults/scams

may meet someone at work, through a friend or from a community. Or you may find yourself recruited online from social media posts, websites, YouTube videos, discussion forums, dating apps, movies or video games.

Examining Cults

What exactly is a cult? Destructive individuals and cults use deception and undue influence to make people dependent and obedient. A group should not be considered a cult merely because of its unorthodox beliefs. It is typically authoritarian, headed by a person or group of people with near complete control of followers. Cult influence is designed to disrupt a person's authentic identity and replace it with a new identity.

There are many types of cults: political, religious, self-help, large group awareness trainings, mini-cults (family or one-on-one), multi-level-marketing (MLM), conspiracy theory, commercial, and labor/sex trafficking.

Influence and Control

Influence is everywhere:

- Parenting
- Relationships: friends, family, community
- Media: advertising, films, social media
- Education
- Politics

- Psychotherapy

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

But influence can be enormously positive and helpful as well as detrimental. It is important to recognize the difference between due and undue influence. Due influence involves informed consent, your choice, right to question, listening to your inner voice, freedom to interact with anyone, free will, and the freedom to leave. However, undue influence is deceptive and manipulative. You are not allowed to question and your inner voice is suppressed. It includes isolation and control, fear and coercion, and enslavement.

Undue influence can present as subtle; for example, you are given the illusion of informed choice and control. More and more, I am seeing clients who have been abused by use of hypnosis and NLP (neurolinguistic programming)—especially by unqualified "life coaches." Undue influence can, alternatively, be extreme and overt, such as in kidnapping or torture. But all undue influence is destructive. It is also known as mind control or thought reform.



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Cult Psychology

Cult leaders want people who will be obedient to them and their rules. They look for ways to “break” people; they want people who will work hard and long hours for little or no pay. They want “willing” slaves. Authoritarian religious cults often use members for labor trafficking. When the mind is controlled, a victim may appear happy and willing to suffer for the profit or benefit of the leader/group.

For members, happiness comes from "good" performance within the group, along with elitist thinking—believing they have the "truth" or the the best way of life. But strict obedience is required. They are manipulated by fear and guilt and may be stuck, with no way out!

Identity Change

Undue Influence does NOT erase the person’s old identity but rather creates a new identity to suppress the old one. After different types of manipulation, the creation of a new identity is done step-by-step by formal indoctrination sessions and informally by members, videos, games, movies, publications, and social/digital media. Behavior modification techniques are employed, such as rewards/punishments, thought-stopping, and control of environment (isolation or restriction of access to others). And then the new identify is reinforced and the old identify suppressed.

Lasting Effects

Prolonged and intense coercive persuasion can cause identity disturbance. Commonly, there are many additional after-effects:

- Extreme identity confusion
- Panic and anxiety attacks
- Depression
- Psychosomatic symptoms (headaches, backaches, asthma, skin problems)
- Anger, guilt and shame
- Decision-making dependency
- Fear and phobias
- Sleep disorders/nightmares
- Eating disorders
- Fear of intimacy and commitment
- Distrust of self and others
- Grieving loss of friends and family

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

In an era when cult mind control is ever present and growing, it is essential to better understand the basics of cults, in order to combat their influence. The first goal in educating yourself is prevention, for yourself and others. But, if you have been affected, recovery is possible. And if your friends or family are involved in a destructive group, you can help rescue them from harm.

Continue to learn about cults and how they work. Where possible, reach out to former members. Plus, there are many reputable resources available including websites, books, [online courses](#), and cult experts, that can help.

References

Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'brain-washing' in China by Dr. Robert Jay Lifton

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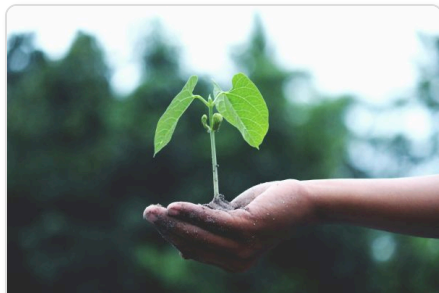
About the Author



Steven Hassan, Ph.D., is a mental health professional, cult and undue influence expert who has been working in the field of relationship, group, and political cults for over 40 years.

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