

How Cults Work

by [Julia Layton](#)



Learn what a cult really is and separate the truth from the propaganda.

When most of us hear the word "cult," we see a bunch of brainwashed zombies feeding their children cyanide-laced fruit drink, mass murders, a burning compound in Waco, Texas -- it's not a pretty picture. But is it a true picture? What exactly is a "cult," and how is it different from a "religion"? Are all cults dangerous? Are people who join destructive cults mentally disturbed, or are all of us equally susceptible?

In this article, we'll separate fact from propaganda and learn what a cult actually is, what practices characterize a destructive cult and look at some of the more notable cult incidents in recent history.

The cults that make the news and drive fear through the hearts of parents sending their kids to college are the exception, not the rule. At its most basic, a cult is simply a small, unestablished, non-mainstream religious group that typically revolves around a single leader. The American Heritage Dictionary defines "cult" this way:

1. A religion or religious sect generally considered to be extremist or false, with its followers often living in an unconventional manner under the guidance of an authoritarian, charismatic leader.
2. A system or community of religious worship and ritual.

The first definition is closer to the common usage of the term today, but you'll notice there's no mention of brainwashing, murder or mass suicide. There is no meaningful difference between a cult and a religion in terms of faith, morality or spirituality. The primary differences are that a "cult" operates outside of mainstream society, often calls on its followers to make an absolute commitment to the group and typically has a single leader, whereas a "religion" usually operates within mainstream culture, requires varying levels of commitment from its members and typically has a leadership hierarchy that, in practice, can serve as a series of checks and balances.

But **destructive cults** are a different story. There is a big difference between a destructive cult and a non-destructive religion (or a non-destructive cult). A destructive (or **totalist**) cult exploits its members'

vulnerability in order to gain complete control over them, often using unethical psychological techniques to bring about **thought reform**. It can be said that a non-destructive religion or cult attempts to alleviate its members' vulnerability through spiritual guidance in an effort to help them exercise control over their own lives.

Doomsday Cults

While most small, non-mainstream religions are harmless, certain circumstances do make them an easy breeding ground for destructive practices. The People's Temple began as a charitable organization in the United States that ran a free medical clinic and drug rehabilitation program. But you probably know it as the **doomsday cult** whose Kool-Aid mass suicide/murders took more than 900 lives in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. How can something that began with so much hope go so very wrong? There's a lot of speculation about what happened to the members of The People's Temple, but for the most part, what went wrong is what goes wrong with most destructive cults: the leadership.

It's really a two-part problem. First, many of these religions are founded by a single person who retains a position of exclusive power within the organization, and power tends to corrupt even the most ethical among us. In the case of The People's Temple, there is evidence that its leader, Reverend James Warren Jones, was abusing prescription drugs and becoming increasingly paranoid through the 1970s. Next, because these groups operate outside the mainstream, there is usually no one checking up on their operating procedures, so a corrupt or mentally unstable leader is free to exploit his followers to his heart's content. In addition to this **authoritarian leadership structure**, some primary characteristics of a destructive cult include:

- Charismatic leadership
- Deception in recruiting
- Use of thought-reform methods
- Isolation (physical and/or psychological)
- Demand for absolute, unquestioning devotion and loyalty
- Sharp, unsurpassable distinction between "us" (good, saved) and "them" (bad, going to Hell)
- "Inside language" that only members fully understand
- Strict control over members' daily routines

For the remainder of this article, when we refer to techniques employed by "cults," we're talking about destructive cults, not the small religious groups that keep to themselves and don't hurt anybody. In the following sections, we'll examine destructive cults more closely and find out how they function. Let's start with the leadership structure.

IT TAKES ALL KINDS

Not all destructive cults are religious in nature. They can be driven by political or financial goals as well. In the end, it's all about subjugating members' individuality to achieve the desires of the leader(s), whether that means reinforcing a self-proclaimed messianic status, participating in destructive activities in the name of political revolution or simply filling the leader's pockets with their

hard-earned money. There are radical political groups, commercial pyramid schemes and self-help seminars that employ similar recruiting and indoctrinating techniques as destructive religious cults, targeting people with certain vulnerabilities and then playing on those vulnerabilities to keep them "in the fold." The end result is a "convert" who will blow himself up in the name of destroying capitalism, try to get all of his loved ones to buy into the same business deal that he is losing his life savings on, or keep signing up for an unending series of lectures, seminars and retreats that promise psychological and spiritual healing but really only drain his bank account.

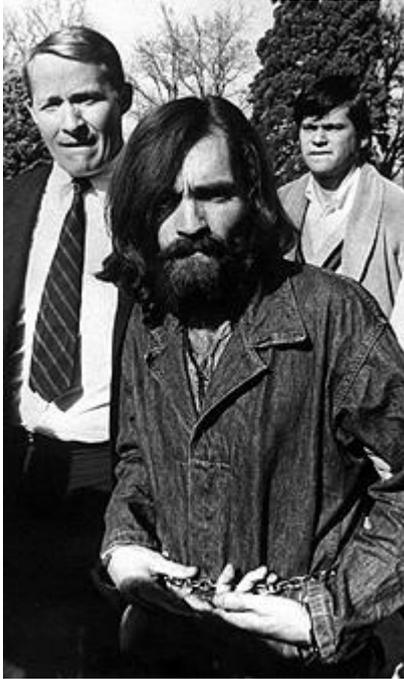
Cult Leadership Structure

There is no cult without a powerful, charismatic leader. A **charismatic leader** has the uncanny ability to get people to follow him unquestioningly. The phrase "cult of personality" refers to this type of group dynamic. Cult members are devoted to the leader, not to the leader's ideas. The leader has complete control over his followers -- there is no questioning of his decisions, and he is accountable to no one within the group.

It's possible for a cult to have more than one leader, but that's atypical. Most destructive religious cults demand absolute devotion to a single person who is considered to be God or connected to God, the Messiah, a prophet or possessing some other holy status. This is a critical component in maintaining absolute devotion: To the members of a cult, only this single person can lead them to salvation. Without this single person, they will spend eternity in Hell.

How does a person fall into a role like this? One common scenario is the preacher or church member who gets "banished" from a mainstream church for preaching extreme or unconventional ideas or showing signs of corruption or instability. When he leaves, his followers go with him, or else he joins an already existing cult and eventually vies for control. **David Koresh**, leader of the Branch Davidian cult that was destroyed during a U.S. government siege in 1993, was active in a mainstream Christian church before he was thrown out for "negatively influencing" some of the church's younger members. **Reverend James (Jim) Warren Jones**, who ordered hundreds of members of The People's Temple to drink poisoned punch in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, was ordained a mainstream Christian pastor.

But not everybody starts out in mainstream religion. Some cult leaders are simply anti-social, destructive individuals who find out they have a knack for manipulation. **Charles Manson** fits this description.



Manson being led from a courthouse in 1969

Manson was the charismatic leader of a **doomsday cult** (which the media would eventually dub "The Family") with more than 100 members near Los Angeles, Calif. He spent most of his youth on the streets and in and out of prison. At one institution, Manson was described as "a very emotionally upset youth who is definitely in need of some psychiatric orientation." He was also described as violent and manipulative. After the age of 18, his crimes grew from robbery and car theft to pimping, rape and fraud. In 1967, Manson was paroled from one of his prison stints and landed in San Francisco, where he slipped into the hippie scene and developed a following -- mostly young women who were generally troubled and disillusioned with America. "Charlie" became their guru. He preached that the world would end in a racial war. Blacks would destroy wealthy whites and win a position of dominance, but the black power structure would quickly collapse due to inexperience. And then, the Manson Family would come out of hiding in the desert and rule the world.

Manson referred to himself as the reincarnation of Jesus. His followers called him "God" and "Satan" seemingly interchangeably. Manson and the members of his cult brutally slaughtered people, committing what is probably the most famous cult mass murder -- the shooting and stabbing of seven people over two days, including actress Sharon Tate (wife of director Roman Polanski), who was eight months pregnant when she was killed. Most reports conclude that Manson ordered his followers to brutally kill their victims, but he never killed any of them himself. His power over his cult family was absolute. While Manson was on trial for murder, one of his followers, Lynette Fromme, protested the trial by carving an "X" into her forehead on the courthouse steps. Fromme would later attempt to assassinate President Gerald Ford in order to bring attention back to Manson's cause. As of March 2006, Charles Manson is still in prison, receiving tens of thousands of letters every year from people hoping to become members of The Manson Family.

While Manson found his followers in the drugged, anti-establishment haze of 1960s San Francisco, not all cult leaders have such a ready-made base of potential recruits. Cult recruiting is a controversial topic, in that some believe active recruiting has died down since its heyday in the '70s, and others

think it has only gotten quieter. Whatever the degree of the problem, there are people out there looking for potential cult members. In the next section, we'll learn about cult recruiting techniques.

Cult Recruitment

You may have an idea of a "cult recruit" as an obviously troubled young person, maybe "mentally ill," easily exploited by unethical cultists. But studies show that people who join cults have only a slightly higher incidence of psychiatric disorders than the general population.

Cult members come from all walks of life, all age groups and all personality types. However, one common thread among most cult recruits is **heightened stress**: Research indicates that a majority of people who end up joining a cult were recruited during a particularly stressful period. This could be the stress associated with adolescence, leaving home for the first time, a bad breakup, losing a job or the death of a loved one. People undergoing significant stress can be more susceptible when a person or group claims to have the answer to all of their problems. Michael Langone, Ph.D., a psychologist who specializes in cults, also identifies some psychological traits that can make a person more likely to be successfully recruited, including:

- dependency - an intense desire to belong, stemming from a lack of self-confidence
- unassertiveness - a reluctance to say no or question authority
- gullibility - a tendency to believe what someone says without really thinking about it
- low tolerance for uncertainty - a need to have any question answered immediately in black-and-white terms
- disillusionment with the status quo - a feeling of marginalization within one's own culture and a desire to see that culture change
- naive idealism - a blind belief that everyone is good
- desire for spiritual meaning - a need to believe that life has a "higher purpose"

Cult recruiters hang out in places where you might find people in a period of extreme stress or possessing the above personality traits -- which is anywhere. Some particularly fruitful recruiting locations might include college campuses, religious gatherings, self-help and support groups, seminars related to spirituality or social change and the unemployment office. In a 1990 article in the San Francisco Examiner, an unnamed ex-cult member commented on how easy it is to get sucked in: "People don't realize how susceptible we all are. Those smiling faces lead you to buy it when you're naive and accepting." She was recruited on the UC San Diego campus when she was 19. Her parents arranged for her to be "deprogrammed" eight years later (more on deprogramming in the "Getting Out" section).

The main methods of cult recruitment revolve around **deception** and **manipulation**. Potential recruits are not told the true nature or intentions of the group. Instead, recruiters portray it as something mainstream, low-pressure and benign. They may tell people at a church gathering that their group meets once a week to brainstorm ways to raise money for a new homeless shelter. They might invite a high school student to a talk about how public service can enhance a college application. Recruiters identify the specific needs or desires of their targets and play to them. They learn to pick up on a person's fears and vulnerabilities and portray the cult accordingly. For instance, if a young woman just went through a bad breakup, and she's feeling depressed and alone, a cult member might tell her that

his group helps people to overcome interpersonal problems and rebuild their confidence for a fresh start. If a man just lost his wife in a car accident, and he can't bear that he didn't get to say goodbye to her, a recruiter might claim that his group helps people reach peace in the wake of sudden death.

It might seem strange that someone would accept these types of invitations, but there are a couple of factors that make it seem more palatable. First, the recruiter might be someone these people know. He could be in that young woman's college dorm or that man's survivors' support group. And someone who is sad, lonely or desperate might be more inclined to trust someone who claims to know the path back to happiness. Also, cults typically **isolate** recruits so they can't get a "reality check." They may hold meetings or services at times that would normally be spent with family and friends; they may hold "retreats" that submerge the recruit in the group's message for days at a time; and they may ask recruits not to discuss the group with others until they know more about it, so they don't mislead people or give them only part of the story. This kind of isolation narrows a person's feedback structure drastically for a period of time, to the point that the only people they're really communicating with are the members of the cult they're being invited to join. Their doubts about the group, therefore, are never reinforced, and they end up turning into self-doubt, instead. Looking around them at all of the smiling, friendly people who have obviously found peace and happiness by following this path, it appears that it must be the right way.

Once a person attends one meeting or service or lecture, he's invited to another, and another and another. He's welcomed into the cult family and invited to commit himself to the group. From day one, it's a process of manipulation and deception. And for those who stay on, the recruiting process culminates in the submission of their own personalities to the "will of the group." In the next section, we'll see what cult indoctrination entails.

Cult Indoctrination

SOUNDS LIKE BOOT CAMP

*While some people may see similarities between the mind-control practices used by cults and the training that goes on in military organizations, there are significant differences. For one thing, military recruits know from day one that being in the military means giving up some of their autonomy -- that's how the military hierarchy works. A person who joins the military makes an **informed decision** to relinquish that autonomy, whereas a cult recruit does not know that total submission is a requirement of membership. Also, a person who joins the military does so for a **definite period of time** -- he is a party to a legal contract that states how long he will be a soldier and what he will get in return. A person who joins a cult thinks he can leave whenever he wants, but in reality, his commitment to the group is supposed to be indefinite. Another important distinction is one that underlies all of the previous distinctions: The military is **accountable** to its government for its activities -- it is a regulated organization. A cult answers to no one.*

A destructive cult uses countless techniques to get its members to stay, commit themselves and take part in what may be harmful activities. The sum of these techniques constitutes what some people call "mind control." It's also known as "thought reform," "brainwashing" and "coercive persuasion," and it involves the systematic **breakdown of a person's sense of self**.

Patty Hearst, heiress to the Hearst publishing fortune, became famous in the 1970s after she was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (the SLA, which some deem a "political cult") and allegedly brainwashed into joining the group. There are reports that Hearst was locked in a dark closet for several days after her kidnapping and was kept hungry, tired, brutalized and afraid for her life while SLA members bombarded her with their anti-capitalist political ideology. Within two months

of her kidnapping, Patty had changed her name, issued a statement in which she referred to her family as the "pig-Hearsts" and appeared on a security tape robbing a [bank](#) with her kidnappers.

Thought reform is an umbrella term for any number of manipulative techniques used to get people to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. The concept of thought reform itself is a controversial one -- some say it's mere propaganda designed to scare people away from new religions and political movements. But most psychologists believe that cult brainwashing techniques, which are similar to techniques used in prisoner interrogation, do change a person's thought processes. In cult recruiting and indoctrination, these techniques include:

Deception - Cults trick new recruits into joining the group and committing themselves to a cause or lifestyle they don't fully understand.

- Cults mislead new recruits/members as to the true expectations and activities of the group.
- Cults may hide any signs of illegal, immoral or hyper-controlling practices until the recruit has fully immersed himself in the group.
- A cult leader may use members' altered consciousness, induced by activities like meditation, chanting or drug use, to increase vulnerability to suggestion.

Isolation - Cults cut off members from the outside world (and even each other) to produce intense introspection, confusion, loss of perspective and a distorted sense of reality. The members of the cult become the person's only social contact and feedback mechanism.

- Cults may keep new recruits from talking to other new recruits. They may only be allowed to speak with long-committed members for a period of time.
- Cults may not allow unsupervised contact with the "outside world." In this way, there is no chance for a "reality check" or validation of a new member's concerns regarding the group.
- Cults typically instill the belief that "outsiders" (non-cult members) are dangerous and wrong.

Induced Dependency - Cults demand absolute, unquestioning devotion, loyalty and submission. A cult member's sense of self is systematically destroyed. Ultimately, feelings of worthlessness and "evil" become associated with independence and critical thinking, and feelings of warmth and love become associated with unquestioning submission.

- The leader typically controls every minute of a member's waking time. There is no free time to think or analyze.
- Members are told what to eat, what to wear, how to feed their children, when to sleep ... the member is removed from all decision-making.
- Any special talents the member has are immediately devalued and criticized in order to confuse the member's sense of self-worth.
- Any doubts, assertiveness or remaining ties to the outside world are punished by the group through criticism, guilt and alienation. Questions and doubts are systematically "turned around" so that the doubter feels wrong, worthless, "evil" for questioning. The member is loved again when he renounces those doubts and submits to the will of the leader.
- The member may be deprived of adequate sustenance and/or sleep so the mind becomes muddled.

- The leader may randomly alternate praise and love with scorn and punishment to keep the member off-balance and confused and instill immense self-doubt. The leader may offer occasional gifts and special privileges to encourage continued submission.
- The member may be pressured to publicly confess sins, after which he is viciously ridiculed by the group for being evil and unworthy. He is loved again when he acknowledges that his devotion to the cult is the only thing that will bring him salvation.

Dread - Once complete dependence is established, the member must retain the leader's good favor or else his life falls apart.

- The leader may punish doubt or insubordination with physical or emotional trauma.
- Once all ties to the outside world have been cut, the member feels like his only family is the group, and he has nowhere else to go.
- Access to necessities depends on the leader's favor. The member must "behave" or he may not get food, water, social interaction or protection from the outside world.
- The member may believe that only group members are "saved," so if he leaves, he will face eternal damnation.

Indoctrination, or thought reform, is a long process that never really ends. Members are continually subjected to these techniques -- it's part of daily life in a cult. Some adjust well to it after a period of time, embracing their new role as "group member" and casting aside their old sense of independence. For others, it's a perpetually stressful existence. In the next section, we'll take a look at what it's like to live within the confines of a destructive cult.

Cult Life (and Death)

There is no single description that fits the lifestyle of every destructive cult out there. But there are some common themes. Many ex-cult members depict a type of insulated, moment-to-moment existence in which repressing fear and anxiety is job one. Chanting and meditation become prime coping mechanisms in this regard. Cut off from family, old friends and the outside world, their old life becomes like a dream. In their new life, psychological growth just stops -- cult members are caught in a static life that depends on not thinking, not questioning, not wondering, not remembering. Children raised in a destructive cult are stunted early. They do not usually attend school, and the cult may or may not provide its children with an education.

Cults need food, shelter and clothing like everyone else, and unless they have a wealthy benefactor or they're truly isolated, living in a jungle and growing their own food, that means they need **money**. Some cults make money to sustain themselves by legitimate means. The Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego, Calif., had been running a successful Web design business before they committed mass suicide in 1997. Some cults commit crimes like fraud and tax evasion to help support themselves. They may use deceptive fundraising techniques or require that new recruits make significant financial contributions to support the rest of the cult.

Above all else, life in a totalist cult is typically characterized by **tight control**. There is very little freedom in daily life: The leader prescribes what a member can and cannot do for every minute of the day. This includes what food he can eat, what books he can read, whom he can talk to, what he can

wear, where he can go and how long he can sleep. The leader makes decisions, and the followers do as they're told.

For some people, living this way is a relief -- life is simple. There are no unanswered questions, no uncertainty, no worrying about the future or managing conflicting desires. Some people's lives on the outside were so bad that the cult is in reality a safe, happy place. But in a lot of cases, this type of lifestyle causes intense **psychological distress**. Many people experience a persistent fear of angering the leader or losing group approval. They must constantly avoid the tension between their cult world and their former life and stifle any doubts or longings that arise. In some cases, there is also the possibility of physical harm. Punishments for disobedience might be physical, and cult members are typically cut off from hospitals and regular medical care. Some studies show that children in destructive cults are more likely to be abused or neglected than in the general population.

This level of stress can lead to chronic anxiety, physical illness or even a complete mental breakdown in which a cult member may become unable to function in daily life. It's the people who experience cult life as stressful who are most likely to leave voluntarily. In the next section, we'll find out what options people have when it comes to getting out of a destructive cult.

NOTABLE CULT INCIDENTS

- 1997, San Diego, Calif.: **Heaven's Gate** 39 members commit suicide by overdose and suffocation.
- 1994-1995, Canada, Switzerland, France: **Order of the Solar Temple** More than 65 members and former members die in a series of mass murders and suicides.
- 1993, Waco, Texas: **Branch Davidians** 80 members die by fire and gunshots during a confrontation with the FBI and ATF.
- 1978, Jonestown, Guyana: **The People's Temple** Cult leader Jim Jones and more than 900 members die in a mass murder/suicide by poison and gunshots.
- 1969, Los Angeles, Calif.: **The Manson Family** Charles Manson and his followers commit mass murders that leave nine people brutally slaughtered over the course of two weeks.

Getting Out of a Cult

People might voluntarily leave a cult for any number of reasons. Some cult members become disillusioned and just walk out. This was the case with the Davidians, a precursor group to the Branch Davidians. The leader of the Davidians predicted the end of the world on a particular date. When that date came and went, some members were disappointed. The leader predicted a new date, and that date came and went with the world intact as well. By the time the leader died and his wife took over and predicted a new series of dates that failed to see the destruction of the world, there were very few members left in the group.

For some people, it's not that difficult to leave a cult. Some individuals are just less susceptible to mind-control techniques than others, and they may have retained enough of a sense of self to make an informed decision to walk out. But it's usually not that simple. There are ex-cultists who say they spent years working up the nerve to get out. A true convert is completely dependent on the cult for every aspect of life and consciousness -- to the truly indoctrinated cult member, leaving means being alone and starting over. His sense of self has been completely broken down to the point that he doesn't even know who he is without his cult family. He may not have made a decision in years.

Gathering the confidence to voluntarily leave a totalist cult requires a tremendous act of will and doesn't come easily. It might result from renewed contact with the outside world, such as a cult member speaking with her parents for the first time in a decade. It might happen when a cult member has a psychological breakdown and believes she is simply too worthless to meet the expectations of the group, so she leaves to spare her cult family the weariness of her presence. Or it might come about following a particularly traumatic experience that jolts the cult member into consciousness, such as witnessing the sexual assault of a child or a murder within the cult.

But making the decision to leave is only part of the process. The cult has to unlock the door, so to speak, in order for the member to get out. Some destructive cults do let people leave. Usually, they'll put a lot of pressure on a member to stay; but in the end, a person can choose to go and not have to climb a barbed-wire fence in the dead of night or sneak past any armed guards. In the mildest cases, a member who leaves may be "disowned" by the cult, forbidden any contact with the people that have been her family for months, years or decades, but the member won't suffer any physical harm when she walks out. In the most severe cases, though, a cult may stop at nothing to maintain control over its members, and a person may fear for her life if she tries to leave. When 16 members of The People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, decided they wanted to leave the cult in 1978 following a visit from a U.S. government group, several armed cult members followed them to the airport and opened fire. They injured 11 people and killed a U.S. Congressman, three reporters and one member who was trying to leave. Fear of the consequences of this incident is what triggered leader Jim Jones to initiate the mass suicide and murder of 900 members of the cult.

While a peaceful, voluntary exit is certainly the preferred method of leaving a cult, it doesn't always happen that way. There are those who don't want to escape at all but are grabbed from their beds at three in the morning and dragged back into the outside world. This is typically the first stage in what is known as "deprogramming," which is an extreme method of removing someone from a cult against his will.

It's not easy to get someone to leave a destructive cult. Talking is always the first step. But sometimes, the cultist is too well indoctrinated to really hear anything an outsider has to say, and other times there's no opportunity to talk at all. A cult member may have severed all ties to the outside world. Family members who fear for a loved one who's deeply involved in a totalist cult have to find another option if simple talking is impossible or doesn't work. At this point, they can go one of two ways: deprogramming or exit counseling.

On the next page we'll discuss the process of deprogramming.

Cult Deprogramming

Deprogramming is the more drastic of the two approaches because it usually involves an initial kidnapping to get the cult member away from the cult. For this reason, deprogramming is a very expensive service. It can cost in the tens of thousands of dollars. After the forced removal, deprogramming mostly involves hours and hours of intense "debriefing," during which a team of deprogrammers hold the cult member against his will and use ethical psychological techniques to try to counter the unethical psychological techniques used by the cult. The goal is to get the cult member to think for himself and re-evaluate his situation. **Debriefing** methods can include:

- educating the cult member on thought-reform techniques and helping him to recognize those methods in his own cult experience
- asking questions that encourage the cult member to think in a critical, independent way, helping him to recognize that type of thinking and praising him for it
- attempting to produce an emotional connection to his former life by introducing objects from his past and having family members share their memories of his pre-cult existence

Deprogramming was relatively common in the 1970s, but has fallen out of favor as an acceptable cult-removal method, partly because it's so expensive, partly because it involves kidnapping and imprisonment and partly because that kidnapping and imprisonment led to a lot of [lawsuits](#) over the years. Now, most families turn to "exit counselors." **Exit counseling** leaves out the kidnapping and focuses instead on employing psychological techniques that might get the cult member to voluntarily submit to debriefing. Exit counselors guide the family in the most effective ways to get a cult member to communicate with "outsiders." Family members must be non-judgmental, calm and loving, or else they'll only reinforce the belief that all outsiders are "bad" and dangerous. If they succeed, and the cult member agrees to participate in the process, what happens next is essentially the same debriefing that occurs during deprogramming, with long sessions that take place over a number of days, but the cult member is free to leave.

There's is no guarantee that any cult-removal technique will work. Some sources say that at least one-third of deprogrammings fail, and there are no definitive statistics on the success rate of exit counseling. But when it does work, the cult member finds himself back in the outside world -- with a whole new set of problems. People who leave a totalist cult can suffer from a laundry list of psychological problems. Some common ones include depression, anxiety, paranoia, guilt, rage and constant fear. They may have difficulty thinking clearly, making decisions, analyzing situations and performing everyday activities like picking out something to wear or going to the store to buy groceries. Psychologist Michael Langone describes a common post-cult state he calls "floating," in which the former member goes back and forth from "cult to non-cult ways of viewing the world ... stalled in a foggy, 'in-between' state of consciousness."

Not everybody is psychologically damaged by a cult experience. Some go on with their lives after a relatively short adjustment period. But most people who have undergone thought reform suffer negative consequences when they leave the insulated environment of the cult. It can take years for a former cult member to readjust to life on the outside. Some people never completely return to their pre-cult level of functioning. But in most cases, counseling and family support can go a long way toward recovery.

For more information on destructive cults and related topics, including links to organizations that help people who've been hurt by cult involvement, check out the links on the next page.

IF YOU NEED HELP

If you think you may be involved in a destructive cult, or you've recently left one, there are a lot of resources out there ready to help you. They can assist you in understanding the situation and taking action. Here are just a few organizations that specialize in helping people recover from cult involvement:

- [reFOCUS](#)
- [Support Group Locations](#)

- [Post-Cult Trauma](#)
- [Cult Information Service](#)

More Great Links

- [Court TV Crime Library: Cult Murders](#)
- [Cult Concern FAQ](#)
- [ex-Cult Resource Center](#)
- [International Cultic Studies Association - Cults: Questions and Answers](#)
- [reFOCUS](#) - includes phone numbers and contact information for support groups and ex-cult members who want to help

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