

Negotiating the Potholes on the Road to Recovery

Observations for Those Newly Emerging from Cultic Groups

by

Wm. Kent Burtner

In this article I look at the issues common to healing from a cult or high-control group which can be broadly categorized as those affecting your internal life and those related to your relationship to the “outside” world.

I gained my experience in this field as a pastoral counselor (I was a Roman Catholic priest for twenty years), as a program manager for an interfaith social-services agency, director of the agency’s Cult Resource Center, and interviewing numerous former members and what I present here is my take on the insights that have come to me through speaking with many former members of a wide variety of high control organizations over forty-five years and much reading and research, including the work of Dr Margaret Singer whose cornerstone article, “Coming Out of the Cults,” (1979), which helped me understand the issues.

Most of the challenges that present themselves on the road to recovery are the result of *normal* responses that you made to a very *abnormal* situation. As we review these, you will discover that you are not “crazy,” haven't lost your sanity, and most people learn to cope with these issues.

I am not attempting to list all the issues faced by former “first generation” members (people born into these groups have many different issues to deal with) when they first leave their groups, but rather to touch on some with observations that may be helpful as you start your journey.¹ You most likely won't experience all the issues listed here; take what you find useful and leave the rest.

Before we start I just want to remind former members that when you joined your group, you were offered something that seemed valuable: increased self-knowledge, a

chance to make the world a better place to live, an opportunity to increase your earning potential, the hope of becoming a better athlete, etc. Often, though not always, the group caught you at a time that you were vulnerable. What is universal is that the group and its leadership used psychological and social manipulation to gain your allegiance and to solidify your membership, to the point that for a time and a season it was virtually impossible to oppose the group. Learning about these mechanisms will foster your healing. Congratulations on freeing yourself.

The issues common to healing from a cult or high-control group can be broadly categorized as those affecting your internal life and those related to your relationship to the “outside” world.

Recovering on the Inside

Depression and loss:

Depression is by far the most common experience I have observed in people emerging from cultic groups, because leaving a group makes them aware of how much they lost while in the group.

You may have an acute sense of loss because you cut ties with your family or because they now see you as a deployable agent of your group's leadership, rather than the person you once were. Reestablishing ties and normalizing relationships takes time and effort.

Then there are those lost years, time you spent with your group, that has left you out of sync with your peers and behind the curve on your career path. There is a loss of innocence having gone from a naive preoccupation with saving the world to dealing with the not so black-and-white issues of the day. And you may have the feeling that you've been used. You enriched your group and its leader, spread ideas that to your old self and your present-day self you find abhorrent.

You will likely find that you adopted a “cult pseudo-identity” while you were in the group and your real self was buried deeply underneath the demands for conformity to group ideology, mores, and its own sub-culture. As your real self emerges, it may seem an overwhelming task to recover that self and you may be overwhelmed by the sense of loss that accompanies departing a group and realizing the enormity of what you left behind to join it.

You have likely gone from a 24-hour-a-day schedule of work, ritual and community to the work-a-day issues of common living. That's challenge enough, but along come some other issues: everyone has "unfinished business" as they go through life. Joining a cult or high demand group usually means that these items have been placed on hold and stored away from day-to-day consciousness: there usually wasn't time to deal with them, and when someone is on a mission to save the world, it might be perceived as selfish to deal with relatively unimportant things. Thus, the former member becomes aware of lost opportunities to deal with personal and developmental challenges. People who joined a group at 18 and left a 30, for example, may feel like they are psychologically 19 years old.

Guilt and Shame/thoughts and feelings

We feel guilty when we have wronged somebody. We feel shame when we view our self as bad. Cultic groups are skilled at inducing and manipulating both feelings.

Guilt is a powerful tool for social control. A person skilled at manipulation will be sure that you find yourself in a guilt loop, a never-ending cycle of guilt induction followed by temporary relief of guilt through compliance with the leader's demands, including that you seek "forgiveness" and "absolution" for your "sin."

Manipulators are likely to target certain thoughts and feelings and label them as evil or somehow wrong. In fact, they may do their best to arouse these feelings so that they can make you experience guilt, and ultimately shame, over having them. For example, a leader may berate you harshly for being one-minute late for a meeting. You may feel guilty about that transgression. But if the leader then rails on and on and accuses you of being selfish, a narcissist, a person who doesn't think of others, then he is adding a sense of shame ("I am a bad person") to a guilty act ("I did something bad").

It is important to distinguish between the guilt cultic groups try to instill, and the guilt former members often experience after leaving, as they recognize that some of the deeds they committed in the group were unethical. For example, having participated in the manipulation of others, both inside the group or outside of it, often leads to a feeling of guilt after someone has left a cultic group. At the time you manipulated someone, you may have had uncertain feelings, but did what the group wanted you to do. Your own morals and the cultic group's moral compass may have been at odds. In some instances, your own moral values may have been buried too deeply for you to consider your actions in relation to what the group wanted of you, at other times, you saw what you were doing in light of your own moral values and acted according to

the group's program anyway. In other words, you were not bad, you were misled.

Understanding this, many former members have gone to their families to ask forgiveness for the way that they treated them during the time that they were in a group that held itself to be morally superior to everyone else. The point is that to the degree you were under psychological duress you were not responsible for those behaviors and you are justified in forgiving yourself.

Shame is the result of a message saying that what you *are* is not good enough, that you are unworthy, that your very being is bad. The application of shame by the group leadership or system is simply an all-out assault on your sense of well being. Diminish someone's ego-strength, they become more pliable and dependent and thus easier to control.

A recovery challenge, then, is to recognize that any residual shame you may feel as a result of this assault is not warranted. A fundamental assumption of democracies and the mainstream religious traditions is the inherent worth of all human beings. If your group experience leads you to feel about yourself that you are unworthy of respect from others, that you're a loser or "dammed," then you have fallen into the trap that the group leaders created to keep you under control. The challenge is to recognize that you have developed a negative self image. Consider making a list of your gifts, talents and accomplishments and see that these things outweigh the negative messages of the group. Ask a friend or family member who knows you well you to help you do this. If this isn't sufficient to raise you from the group-induced shame, talk with a helping person or clergy who can help you gain perspective. You suffered enough at the hands of the manipulators, you do not deserve to suffer from a negative self perception, too.

When you leave your group, you may continue to experience intense feelings of guilt when you experience the group's forbidden thoughts or feelings. This is a sure sign that the guilt you feel is a direct result of the group's manipulation.

One way to heal from this is to look at the thought or feeling objectively, outside the context of the group. Does feeling guilty about it serve the group's interest in controlling you? In fact, when one feels or thinks those things, is there any wrong there at all?

Having thoughts and feelings does not make you good or bad, but gives you something to reflect on and then make wise choices after reflection. It's important to realize that having thoughts and feelings is itself morally neutral. Having any kind of

feeling doesn't make you good or bad. What matters is what you do with thoughts and feelings. An example is the feeling of doubt. It isn't "wrong" to have that feeling. It is a chance for you to rethink the topic around which you feel doubt and come to a new conclusion about it. One former member was told, often, that if she ever doubted the exalted role of the group's leader, she would lose her faith in God and become a "fallen" person. But she allowed the doubt she felt to give her a chance to rethink her belief in the leader and realized that she still believed in God. She later left the group, realizing that the doubt she once had led her to both God and personal freedom. Her feeling of doubt led her to something good.

Anger

An area where I have seen former members face great challenge is addressing the anger they feel after leaving the group. Former cult members may feel guilty about angry impulses toward the group and its leadership, because they were indoctrinated to suppress anger in the group. However, being angry may well be a response to a growing awareness of how unjustly you were treated in the group, how "well" you were manipulated and exploited. This is righteous anger about which you need not feel guilty. In fact, this anger may well be energizing. What matters is how you deal with that anger.

Former members have used the energy derived from their anger at the group or leadership to do things like write articles for a local paper about the group, make law enforcement aware of illegal activities in the group, or join support groups (on-line or in person) to help others who are considering leaving or have left a high control group. If you find that your anger is directed at people who are not group-related, you might consider whether you are misdirecting the anger you feel from your group experience at them. A good helping person, clergy person or therapist will be a source of resolution and clarity.

Reclaiming the Real Me

Once in a cultic group, it is normal for a person to suppress their personality as a defense against all the forces of manipulation and express a "cult personality" that manifests all that the group system believes they should be. Reclaiming one's original self starts with the premise that that original self is buried under the paving of social control and can be recovered over time. The question to ask is "who was I before this experience?" And that question starts with the simplest things: what did you like to

eat before you joined the group? What music do you remember listening to? What kinds of people were your friends? Asking these sorts of questions helps rebuild one's sense of self.

Finding one's "real me" is a lifelong journey for all of us. The forces distorting us while in a cultic group make that journey more difficult, but it may be helpful to recognize that you are not alone, and that even those who seem to have "found their way," if they are honest, will probably acknowledge that they are still in process.

Self Worth and Humility

In a high-control group, you are "good" because you belong to and follow the dictates of the group. The group discourages you from believing in yourself through the use of guilt and shame. Your own skills are not seen as valuable and may be taken as prideful, unless, of course, they are useful to the group. For example, sometimes people who played musical instruments were told that to do so now that they were in the group was "showing off," and filling up places in themselves that they should be giving to God, that is, that they lack humility, so they put aside these talents. Or, they only used their talents to promote or advertise their group.

Many former members, then, leave their groups with a distorted sense of humility. Their groups equated humility with self-denigration and subordination to leadership. The Greek word root of humility, however, is *humus*, the stuff of the earth. Being grounded in the earth is a start of humility. And the 13th century philosopher Thomas Aquinas held that to be humble is simply no more, or no less, than being truthful about what is. If you have a gift for music, acknowledging that gift and offering it to others is to be truthful about what is, and thus is humble.

Black and White Thinking

Black-and-white thinking is what you have most likely been doing in your group. For example, your group probably looked at the world inside and the world outside very differently. The inside was the realm of the good, saved, enlightened people and the outside was the realm of the unenlightened, the worldly, or maybe the evil or satanic corrupted individuals. You were encouraged to be highly judgmental.

Additionally, your group wanted you to think in cliches, where considerations about

the most subtle things were reduced to simple formulas, where the real mysteries of life became catch phrases while some of the most mundane things were elevated to great mysterious reality, which only the group and its ideology could truly explain.

The solution to black-and-white thinking is to step outside the loaded language of the group. Embrace the notion that many things aren't simply one way or the other, that there are shades of gray, that some solutions to the simplest questions are really simple, and to others, really complicated. Sometimes, the answer to a question is not either/or, it is both/and. This is the way the "real" world is made.

Forgiveness

How do I or why should I forgive the group or its leader? For many people leaving Christian based groups, or people returning to a Christian faith tradition, forgiveness becomes a serious issue. But trying to forgive without first acknowledging the injustice that was done to you is to put the cart before the horse.

In recruiting you into a highly controlling group where you gave up your time, money, vital energies, friendships or family, a terrible injustice was done to you. You may feel a great anger toward the group and its leader. That anger is a righteous and appropriate response to the injustice done to you.

In normal human relationships, reconciliation can come about when the person who has committed an injustice against another acknowledges to that person what they have done. The aggrieved person then can choose to forgive the offender and move on. But with a cultic group, there is very little likelihood that the injustice done you will ever be acknowledged. It's more likely that you will be called a traitor, apostate, fallen person, or worse. In this situation, you may reach a point where you are ready to let go and realize that to do so is for your own good. You choose to forgive, to let go of the hurt and pain so that you may be free of it, but forgiveness never justifies the wrong that was done to you. Forgiveness leaves you "clean," returning the feelings back to the group and knowing that no one will ever do this to you again. You can take those memories and put them into a box and put the box on a shelf so that they disturb you less, but neither you nor anyone else should condone what was done to you.

Long Lost Thoughts and Feelings

If you're in a high-control group, it is normal that the thoughts and feelings you brought into the group with you seem to “disappear,” especially those that in any way conflict with the ideology of the group or the feelings of its leader. Where did they go? The answer is easy: they went “underground,” inside of you. They are still there, awaiting permission from you to resurface. So ask yourself, “What things did I suppress in order to conform to the group?”

You'll find a trove of ideas, thoughts and feelings, and also doubts. Some of them might feel good to have back. Some may make you feel uncomfortable. If you were in a group that suppressed your sexuality, it might feel uncomfortable having those feelings back again, but you can find ways to accept them and see that they are part of being human.

What of doubts? Doubts are not signs of evil creeping into you, rather they are an opportunity to ask good questions and to come to an understanding of what is real in your own view of the world.

Cognition Problems

Do you find yourself saying, “My mind used to be really good! Now I feel really dull, not as smart as I was?” This is especially true of people who participated in groups where there was a lot of chanting, long periods of meditation, praying in tongues for long periods or listening to repetitive lectures. Often people report that they can't hold down the same “pre-cult” job they had held.

The reason is that those practices literally shut down cognitive functioning and the brain, which thrives on use, slows down. Most people find that as they take time to exercise their brain, it comes back to speed. You may have to take a less challenging or even a menial job at first until you feel competent again to take up a more mentally challenging position, but don't let the feeling of having slowed down stop you from accepting the challenge of a better position. Though some people can manage on their own, others may need professional help to deal with such recovery issues.

Group Language

Most high control groups redefine words so that they have meanings and associations that are unique to the group. Robert Lifton calls some of these words or phrases “thought terminating cliches.” If you continue to use those words and their cultic group's definitions, you in effect keep restimulating group associations and thoughts. It's one more way the group keeps you hooked into their way of thinking and behaving and feeling.

What lots of former members have done is to first check out their own speaking and find group words they might still be using. Identify the concepts you really want to express and find “normal people words” for them. In essence, you are creating your own new internal dictionary.

Catching Up Developmentally

“I joined my group when I was 18, now I'm 30, but I feel like I'm just going on 19!”

This is not a unique quandary. Many former members of cultic groups and thought reform groups experience feeling like they have gone backward in their emotional growth. While they were in the group, they lived the group's collective persona, putting on hold the normal developmental tasks they would have taken on had they not joined. Dr. Singer called this the “ice box effect.”

The good news is that while you got delayed, you can catch up. Having a few good friends who understand where you were helps; they can be your coaches about how people normally behave and choose, assisting you to catch up quickly. There are good books that will help you understand the new rules you get to live by.

Loneliness

Despite the problems your group presented, some of them problematic enough to make you leave it, you also left a ready-made set of relationships and some friendships, though mediated through the group's ideology and practices, that were still consoling and supportive. When you chose to leave, those friendships most often disappeared.

In the new-to-you “normal” world, it takes time to make friendships. People become close slowly as they gradually share insights and reflections about themselves that say “who they are.” You have to work at building trust with another person. Trust needs to be built on both sides as you *earn* each other's trust.

It's important to realize that trust is something that is earned over time as your new friend/s show themselves able to be trustworthy. It's OK to go slowly, one step at a time, as trust grows and the strength of the friendship bond increases.

Sexuality

Most high control groups use sexuality as part of their program to control members. They may repress sexuality with strong rules that affect dating, courtship, and marriage. For these groups, only “brotherly” or “sisterly” love is acceptable. Sexual feelings are deemed inherently evil and need to be repressed, confessed and driven away. Very often, sexual feelings for someone of the same sex are considered especially heinous and are dealt with harshly.

For someone recovering from this type of group, it's important to rediscover your whole self, as was discussed above, but especially your own sexual identity. For some, it's easy, as if breathing a sigh of relief. Others require a time of gentle exploration and reflection to discover and accept this part of yourself.

Other groups will take the opposite mode, eroding or eliminating boundaries all together. They break down inhibitions and remove generally accepted societal boundaries. Leaders may assign partners, arrange divorces, change partners on a whim, or demand sex from certain members. The leader's control of sex increases dependency on the leadership. Here, a former member does well to reclaim their identity by “slowing down,” realizing that in “normal” society, boundaries are different, maybe like they were before you joined the group, realizing that, for example, in a new dating relationship, sexual boundaries need to be addressed and discussed.

Indecisiveness

Often, former members are anxious as they discover how difficult it is to make a

decision. On reflection, that's not hard to see. You may have moved from a highly planned and structured environment to a place where you have a "future void." Virtually everything you do has to be thought about and decided about. I've met former members who, as they described it, "nearly freaked out" over having to choose a salad dressing, or a flavor of ice cream.

As with gaining skills in other areas of life, practice helps. Start with the simple things. If you had a life before the cult, try to remember what you liked before you joined the group. Try that out; if you like it still, great. If not, do some simple experiments and find what suits you. Once the process of making decisions is familiar, the harder decisions will come more easily.

Slipping Into Altered States

In cultic groups, altered states result from a variety of input. Among these are long, repetitive lectures couched in hypnotic metaphors and exalted ideas, hours of chanting, hours of attention-focusing songs and games, hours of meditation, and outright hypnotic induction. Once away from a cultic group, it may be frightening to find yourself slipping into one of these altered states. They can be set off by many different stimuli, and leave you "spaced out," replaying mantras in your mind, feeling a tremendous sense of fear, or reliving thoughts or feelings or events.

A former member of a cult based on charismatic Christianity spoke of how he prayed in tongues in the group whenever something challenging to his belief came into play. He reported that when he found himself in a high stress situation, he started praying in tongues again. A woman who was in a Catholic cult told how she spontaneously started praying the rosary prayers when confronted with a challenge to her faith. When she found herself the subject of an intervention, she started praying the rosary to close out the information that the counselors were giving her. Even after leaving the group, she still found herself spontaneously taking up the rosary in stressful situations.

Phobias

Many cultic group leaders can leave behind phobias like "if you leave our group, you'll wind up in the gutter, you'll never have a happy life, all that you have learned in the group will be lost forever, you'll be friendless, you'll commit suicide, you'll dwell

in outer darkness forever.” These sorts of fears are, of course, very self-serving to the cultic group leader. But for the most part, they generally never come true. But once outside the group, if things don't go perfectly well and you experience the normal glitches of daily life, those sorts of phobias and fears may arise. The good news is that these fears and phobias pass as you discover that the messages you were given were untrue.

Intrusive Thoughts and Triggers

The same is true for intrusive thoughts, which are unwelcome, involuntary thoughts, images, or unpleasant ideas that come to mind spontaneously and sometimes obsessively.

If some event occurs in your life and an intrusive thought is triggered, try to think about what was happening when the thought arose, and see whether it is related to a message that the cultic group gave you. Once you understand what it is, you may be able to assign new meanings to the stimulus. A woman who left a meditation group found herself thinking of a mantra almost every day. Realizing that it came at the same time each day, she realized that in the group at that hour everyone stopped and did a meditation directed by the group's leader. Once she realized this, she was free from the “spontaneous” mantra.

Of course, these simple techniques do not work for everybody, so sometimes a deeper analysis, such as occurs in psychotherapy, may be necessary.

Issues For Which You Might Want Help

There are three issues that you might particularly want to seek help in addressing.* These are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, self-medicating, and psychotic episodes.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is typical of veterans returning from war, people who have suffered great personal, life threatening trauma, and cultic group survivors. The challenge for cultic group survivors is that you not only were traumatized once, but in an ongoing way. This is sometimes called Complex PTSD.

PTSD is marked by disturbing thoughts, feelings or dreams related to the events of your cultic group life, mental or physical distress to trauma-related cues, attempts to avoid trauma-related cues, alterations to how you think or feel, and an increased fight-or-flight response. You will want to find a “trauma informed” therapist or helping person to assist you through the healing of Complex PTSD. They will help you to *gently* find the cues that restimulate the trauma you experienced and become more comfortable with them, taking away the traumatic response.

Self-medicating is one way of dealing with lingering guilt or avoiding phobias, or PTSD response. The important thing is to realize that you are self-medicating in the first place. You may be using food, sleep, sex, alcohol, street or prescription drugs to cope with feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, sadness, or other feelings that make you uncomfortable. Finding a place to deal with those feelings is very important. Professional help can be an effective remedy. If the self-medicating becomes an issue of its own, a 12 Step group may be an option for some persons.

Psychosis

Psychosis is a “break from reality.” It may be driven by bio-chemical problems or emotional trauma. Often, former cultic group members have asked me if they needed medications, especially when recovering from the hypnotically induced phobias they have experienced. Perhaps these events that make you think you're crazy are the natural results of what the cultic group did to you and not a break from reality.

For example, one lady was in a group that decided she needed an exorcism from the worldly, demonic things that had “possessed” her. Late one summer evening, they took her to the back yard of her home, lit a bonfire and started burning things that she had kept that they deemed worldly. They burned her favorite books, they burned records, they burned photographs, all the while praying over her demanding that the evil spirits come out of her. She suffered intensely from this, being at once fearful, anxious, and terrified. After several hours of this treatment, she fell down on the ground, writhing in distress. Her cult leaders rejoiced, certain that this was evidence of the evil spirits leaving her.

What had actually happened to her was that her cult mentors had overstimulated her nervous system to the point that her parasympathetic nervous system had taken over.

Basically, anyone who experienced this sort of intense over stimulation would do the same thing.

Another former member of a meditation cult would look at portraits hanging on a wall and see the face of the cult leader instead of the actual person depicted in the photograph. Again, this was a result of the altered state resulting from many hours of meditation done while staring at a picture of the group's "saint." These episodes diminished over time, and she was no longer afraid to look at portraits for fear of seeing her cult leader.

While these experiences can be very frightening, they are normal responses to very abnormal circumstances. They are the result of your brain adapting to the stresses of the cultic groups' fears, phobias or trance inductions.

There *are*, sadly, incidents where the stressors applied to cultic group members are so intense that the individual cannot cope and they have a genuine psychotic episode. People in these cases need a psychiatrist and sometimes hospitalization. While rare, these situations need careful attention by the physician and a helping person familiar with cult recovery so as to sort out those genuinely psychotic thoughts and the cult-induced trauma.

Finding a Helper/Therapist

Most therapists are not familiar with the intense manipulation techniques used in abusive groups, and tend to attribute difficulties to a problem intrinsic to the client rather than things that are a result of the group's high control techniques. Therefore, ask a potential helper about their experience with "cultic groups" or "thought reform" groups. If they have little or none, and you might like to work with them anyway, ask if they are willing to do some serious reading on the topic, and give them some references such as found in the bibliography. If they do not feel the need to educate themselves on the topic, you need a different therapist/helper. If you have a therapist or helper already, ask them if they are willing to read up on the techniques of social control and, if so, share with them items from the bibliography. Additionally, your helper should be "trauma informed."²

Recovery and the Outside World

Fear of the Group

It is not uncommon for people who leave cultic groups and other high control groups to fear the group, or fear what their group might do to them, once they have left. They believed that the group was powerful, well connected, etc., and the group tells members that if they leave, they will know where you are and what you are doing.

Many people leave groups that are “spiritually” based and believe that the leader can see them, know what they are thinking, etc. This is 100% hogwash! The leader instilled phobias about his/her powers that carry through the leaving process, but it is this fear that is the case, not the reality. There have been cases where a group has someone followed, or has tried harassing them on the phone or by letters, but this is rare. Unless you pose an enormous threat to the group, you aren't worth the effort, they can go out and recruit someone new more easily.

There is a special consideration when people leave a cultic group and leave behind a spouse or children. They might well like to convince the spouse to leave so that they can re-establish the family, but this is fraught with problems. In the event that the non-cultic group parent tries to obtain custody of the children, they can generally expect that the cult will provide the cult parent with resources to fight the custody battle. The non-cult parent can prevail, but usually not without the help of qualified expert witnesses and testimony of former members.

Extreme Suggestibility

Some former members report becoming hyper-obedient to others, such as a boy or girl friend, manager at work, or other authority types. One woman left a cult and got a job working in an office. Her manager set her on a task, and as she started it, a co-worker asked for help on a project. As she got to work on this, a third person asked for assistance with a copy machine. While she worked on the copier, a fourth person asked a favor! What to do?

Of course, it's a question of boundaries so that we can recognize and resist demands

that are not consistent with our safety and autonomy. Saying, "No," for example, is not a sin, nor will it bring down terrible wrath. Understanding and setting boundaries helps you prioritize those things that are important, and recognize those that are inappropriate and perhaps even unsafe.

Compassion

In the group, outsiders were looked upon as lost, captured by darkness, or even dangerous. And inside the group, members were superior to the outsiders, who lacked the great mission possessed by the group. But once you are out of the group, these folks don't seem as terrible as they were supposed to be. You can have compassion for others now.

With compassion, it's best to start with yourself. It is so easy to be full of self-recriminations about the fact that you got suckered into joining the cultic group. "How could I have been so stupid?" or other similar thoughts are quite normal after leaving a cultic group. But you got recruited because the group offered you something valuable, and maybe at a time when your guard was down because of other circumstances in your life. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time, maybe looking for the right thing, but from the wrong people.

The root words for compassion are from the Latin: *cum* and *passio*, literally meaning "to suffer with." Compassionate people relate to others' suffering from their own. Some of the most compassionate people I have met are former cultic group members. From their cultic group they have gone on to become therapists, educators, social workers and members of a wide variety of helping professions, including politics (taken in the right way, you can understand what Aristotle meant when he said that politics the most noble of the human professions).

The Fishbowl Effect

Margaret Singer coined this term to describe the watchfulness of family and friends once you have left the cultic group. They fear that some difficulty or encounter with the cult could send their loved one back into the clutches of the group, and so they become overly protective. This is exacerbated when you talk about the positive aspects of the group.

The “fishbowl effect” may be ameliorated if you bring the topic out into the open and help family and friends know that life in the group was not all evil and that no, you will not return to the group, but need them to hear all of your thoughts and feelings about the people and events you experienced.

Explaining to Others That You Were in a High Control Group

The concept of a “cult” is not well understood in the general population. There are lots of misconceptions and assumptions, the worst of which is the assumption that there must have been something wrong with you in the first place for you to have gotten into a nutty group. That makes it hard to talk with people, old friends and new ones, and especially dates!

But if you are with a person who is genuinely able to hear your feelings, what you went through, how you got recruited, and why you simply could not walk away, your explanations will be respected and you will have brought someone else into the circle of trying to understand the phenomenon of cultic groups and thought reform programs.

Finding a job with a “hole” in your resumé, i.e., gaps in your employment history, can be daunting for some. Some former members have gotten a bit creative when describing these months or years. For example, one fellow worked in the dirty-tricks and spying program of a large, international cult. He rewrote his time as a “security specialist” and described the (legal) things he did for the group. Your time in “brand X” cultic group may well have ways for you to reflect skills you developed in spite of the context.

Altruism

How do I find a way to do good in the world without becoming another groupie? Most folks find that by taking it slowly, you'll find a pathway to be the altruistic person you are. The most important thing is to heal yourself before trying to save others. Come to learn and understand the psychological and social control techniques that were used in the group and in particular, the ones that “got you” the most and how they worked on you. Doing that will help protect you from being sucked into

another group. You'll be better able to recognize cultic recruitment techniques from a long way off.

Money

The group you belonged to may have been active at raising money. In fact, some former members report that they made more money in the group than they ever expect to see in their post-group lifetimes. However, you may find that despite all that fundraising, you had little personal funds available to you. Many groups managed all the money for you.

For some, learning how to manage money, create and live on a budget, and save money are all new skills. There are good books out there and a trustworthy friend may help you find the way on that path.

Finding an Authentic Spiritual Path

Like our thoughts and emotions, our spiritual selves can be manipulated and even fooled. If it is true that who we are at the deepest level is our spiritual self, then spiritual abuse is the worst form of abuse there is. For people whose group was "about" religion or spirituality, finding a safe spiritual community after leaving a spiritually abusive group can be very challenging. And some former members assume that spirituality itself was part of the con of a manipulative group and reject all spirituality and religious organizations.

There IS hope in what might otherwise seem a daunting challenge. Getting there requires a level head and patience.

If you participated in a spiritual community before your cultic group experience, consider revisiting that church, synagogue, or other religious place of worship and explore it, asking good, tough questions to make sure this religious community is not manipulative. After you've checked this area out, you can decide if you want to continue and grow there, or explore other options.

If you decide that you want to explore other faith traditions than the one you came

from, here are some useful suggestions. In the Western Christian traditions, denominations are a good thing. They provide a structure that assures accountability from a lower level to a higher one. Research the websites of the various traditions. Meet with some pastors and ask all the questions you like. If you look at a non-affiliated church, be sure that the pastor is accountable to a higher authority (other than “just” God) before you take a leap there.

Interested in Eastern religion? Many Eastern teachers work out of a tradition that demands total subjugation of the student to the teacher. Beware and proceed with caution. There are many Eastern groups that do not make this demand. One former member reported finding a teacher who was very down to earth, didn't ask for honorifics from his students and even enjoyed the occasional practical joke. Moreover, he was able to laugh at himself. Humility in any person in a leadership position of a religious group is laudable.

All of the great faith traditions will welcome your questions or challenges. An understanding priest, rabbi, pastor, imam, or spiritual teacher will accept your questions as an opportunity for growth. If they turn the questions around or make you feel foolish for asking, or tell you that you are lacking faith, it's time to look for someone else to talk to!

Conclusion

In summary, recall that you were called upon to adapt to very challenging life situations in a high-control group or cultic group. As you leave the group and adapt to life in the non-group world, you will come to realize that the “potholes” on the road to recovery are because you made adaptations to a very abnormal situation. This is normal for anyone leaving a high-control group or cultic group.

I strongly encourage you to read in detail about the thought reform process. The books listed below are among the many resources for understanding how cultic groups influence our thinking. By knowing the “hooks” used by these groups, and how they came to affect you, you will enhance the freedom that you came to know in leaving. Congratulations on reclaiming the gift of yourself.

Notes

1. Because most of my experience has been with those who joined cultic groups as adults or young adults, I will not address the special issues of those born or raised in groups. A useful collection on this subject can be found under "Resources" on the ICSA website, icsahome.com.
2. I use the term helper here because there are many good people who know and understand cultic groups but are not necessarily licensed therapists. This could include clergy, pastoral counselors, life-coaches or other people with professional training that is tangent to mental health. But in working with people in this category, be very cautious. Ask them for names of people who would vouch for their ability to be helpful. And your best helper may well be a wise, compassionate friend.

Resources for Recovery

On Line Resources

There are a tremendous number of good resources, but I list these as starting points. They all have references to other sites as well that will be very useful:

<https://www.icsahome.com/support/former-members>

<https://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/booklist>

<https://www.spiritualabuseresources.com/home>

<http://www.freedomofmind.com/>

Starting Out in Mainstream America:

<https://sites.google.com/icsahome.com/starting-out?pli=1>

Books

Damgaard, Neil, D. Min., Ed., *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing From Spiritual Abuse*, International Cultic Studies Association, Bonita Springs, FL, 2021, ISBN: 978-0-931337-11-9

While it was written as an aid to help victims who are grappling with their faith, the book also seeks to clarify the meaning of spiritual abuse and instruct religious communities on how to effectively welcome victims of spiritual abuse.

Enroth, Ronald, *Recovering from Churches That Abuse*. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, ISBN: 0310398703

This book is a classic, following his Churches That Abuse.

Garrett, Kenneth J., *In the House of Friends*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 2020, ISBN 9781725266025

For anyone coming out of an evangelical abusive group, this is an excellent book for healing.

Goldberg, L, et al, eds., *Cult Recovery: A Clinicians Guide to Working With Former Members and Families*, Bonita Springs, FL: International Cultic Studies Association. 2017

A very important book for healing professionals

Hassan, Steven, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, Freedom of Mind Press, Newton, MA, 2015, ISBN: 0967068827

A classic book on social control and manipulation. Hassan consolidates the research of several professionals and adds his BITE model in a very readable and accessible form.

Jenkinson, Gillie, *Walking Free From the Trauma of Coercive, Cultic and Spiritual Abuse*, Routledge, London and New York, 2023, ISBN: 9781032305875

An excellent and thorough workbook for recovery and growth.

Lalich, Janja, & Tobias, M., *Take Back Your Life*, Bay Tree Publishing, Berkeley, CA, 2006, ISBN 10:0-9720021-5-4

An excellent self help book for healing from a cultic group or high control group experience.

– *Escaping Utopia*, with McLaren, Karla, Routledge, New York, 2018, ISBN:978-1-13823974-6

If you're not sure whether your group is healthy or not, this book helps sort out the important questions and helps you find your own answers.

Lifton, Robert J., *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, (c.f. Chap. 22), Norton, New York, NY, 1961, ISBN: 1614276757

Chapter 22 is essential reading for anyone leaving a high control group.

Singer, Margaret T., *Cults In Our Midst*, Jossey-Bass, Hoboken, NJ, 1996,

Dr. Singer lays out six steps by which people are unwillingly inducted into high control groups and discusses many control mechanisms used in cultic groups.

– “Coming Out of the Cults,” *Psychology Today*, January 1979

A very important contribution that was a landmark when originally published.

End Note:

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Kent Burtner may be reached at wkburtner@aol.com or (503) 475-3429.