

CONDITIONS COMMONLY EXPERIENCED IN HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS, AND THE EFFECTS OFTEN EXPERIENCED AFTER EXITING THEM - 1

If you are going to see a mental health professional and are concerned that they might not have a good understanding of the control dynamics and destructive effects of high-control groups such as cults, give them a copy of this two page document. Ask them to read it and keep it in your file.

"A cult is a social system (group, relationship, or family) with an imbalanced power structure, a transcendent belief system, and structural and social mechanisms of influence and control. Typically a cult originates with a self-appointed leader who claims to have special insight or knowledge that he will share with you if you follow him and turn your decision-making powers over to him. A thought-reform program, on the other hand, refers to social-psychological processes and pressures that bring about desired behavioral changes in a variety of contexts. The use of a thought-reform program does not necessarily signal cult status, but almost all cults employ some type of thought reform to influence and control their members." J. Lalich & M. Tobias

People exiting from high-control groups such as cults, terrorist groups, prostitution rings, human trafficking organizations, political extremist groups, polygamist cults, multi-marketing schemes, criminal gangs, etc., have often been unduly subjected to some of the following conditions:

- Loss of individual freedoms (even if living and working in the larger community)
- Manipulation, Coercion
- Exploitation
- Undue Influence (discouraged from higher education and career advancement)
- Indoctrination
- Behavior Control
- Information Control
- Thought Control
- Emotional Control (Steven Hassan's **B.I.T.E.** model of controls used by cults)
- Unaccountable, Authoritarian Leaders
- Strong Peer Pressure
- Induced Phobias (e.g. fear of outside world)
- Rigid Schedules
- Limited Social Contacts & Support (which inhibits psychosocial development)
- Inferred, Symbolic and Literal Death Threats
- Us vs. Them Mentality
- Required Rigid Obedience
- Totalistic, Extreme (even Doomsday) World View
- Protected from Existential Realities – (taught they are 'exempt' if obedient)
- Suppression of Individual Needs & Wants
- Loaded Language Unique to Group
- Thought-stopping techniques
- Erosion of Personal Reality and Identity
- No Means for Creative Expression
- Being Spied Upon by Peers in Group
- Required Renunciation of Personal Dreams or Goals
- Erosion of Psychological Stability and Ability to Maintain Healthy Ego Defenses
- Demands for Purity or Goodness
- Premature Cognitive Closure (having to accept imposed beliefs)
- Not Being Allowed to Doubt or Ask Questions
- Premature Cognitive Closure
- Cognitive Dissonance

CONDITIONS COMMONLY EXPERIENCED IN HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS,
AND **THE EFFECTS** OFTEN EXPERIENCED **AFTER EXITING THEM - 2**

After intelligent, responsible people have been subjected to the above-described (page 1) treatment and conditions in high-control, repressive environments such as cults, and are finally able to exit, they can often exhibit some of the following traits, behaviors, symptoms, conditions, and more:

- Lack of critical thinking skills
- Lack of education (NOT a lack of intelligence), cognitive distortions
- Psychosocial developmental delays, arrested development, delayed emotional development
- Child-like dependency
- Learned helplessness, passivity
- Guilt and shame
- Fear and anxiety
- Feelings of incompetence and fears of assuming responsibility
- Grief and despair
- Self-blame, self-loathing and self-doubt
- Isolation and loneliness due to ostracism or shunning
- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Difficulty making own choices and decisions
- Loss of sense of self/identity, having a clone-like personality, no sense of personal autonomy
- False-self built to survive in cult environment
- Fragmented self (possible dissociation)
- Loss of belief system (even if it was erroneous, the loss leaves them destabilized)
- Seemingly irrational fears of punishment by group or God
- Fear of being harassed, demonized, denounced and of actual or anticipated death threats
- Fear world will now judge them as defective or impaired
- Friendless (no support system) with inclination to isolate and hide
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Impaired social skills
- Low feelings of self-worth, sense of failure
- Weak ego-strength
- Excessive rumination about being deceived, time lost, and wounds inflicted in group
- Anger, resentment, rage for deceptions and lost years in group
- Hypervigilance, PTS and/or PTSD
- Needing time to mourn multiple losses (world view, belief system, betrayal by friends, etc.)
- Difficulty adapting to new life outside of all-encompassing cult
- Needing time to understand and come to terms with what happened to them
- Needing to recover from any physical, emotional, spiritual and/or sexual abuse
- Needing to feel mental health professionals understand what they have been through

RECOMMENDED READING: **Cults in Our Midst**, 2003, Margaret Singer; **The Challenge to Heal**, 2016, Bonnie Zieman; **Combating Cult Mind Control**, 2015, Steven Hassan; **Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological or Spiritual Abuse**, 1993, Michael D. Langone; **Take Back Your Life**, 1994, Janja Lalich & Madeleine Tobias; **Opening Minds: The Secret World of Manipulation, Undue Influence and Brainwashing**, 2016, Jon Atack.

Document written by Bonnie Zieman, M.Ed, retired psychotherapist, and former born-in member of the JW.org cult. The above two lists are **not** comprehensive, but should provide a good overview of the dynamics of high-control groups, and the aftereffect suffered by their victims.