

CHAPTER 12

SUPPORT GROUP FOR FORMER CULT MEMBERS

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In March 1982, we published an article about our support group for former cult members (Goldberg & Goldberg, 1982). In that article, we described the typical symptoms former members experienced, which we awkwardly referred to as a *post mind control syndrome*. The purpose of this chapter is to update our original article with the hindsight of another 34 years of experience in facilitating this group, to discuss changes that we have seen in the typical former cult member who attends our group, to revise some of the conclusions we reached in the first article, and to discuss some of the errors that we have made over the years.

All groups have the power to harm or to heal. All the former cult members who have attended our support group have believed group processes have harmed them. (Even one-on-one cultic relationships utilize group processes; in these cases, the group is a dyad.) The fact that groups are a powerful force that can be used to help or to harm, of course, continues to be a factor in our work and is one main reason we find the support group to be such a good means of helping former cult members.

RATIONALE FOR STARTING OUR SUPPORT GROUP

We see our mission for the support group as helping to foster a comfortable environment to allow all the participants the freedom to help one another. We began our group in 1977 because former cult members felt isolated in their recovery efforts. There were no chat rooms, Google searches, or Listservs to join. There were few articles in the popular or professional press. At the time we wrote our original article, we knew of only one other former-cult-member support group (Singer, 1979).

Therefore, because of the isolation those who were leaving cults experienced, we felt that it would be helpful for former members to have the opportunity to share their postcult difficulties with others who were going through the same experience. We also believed that, if group members could see that former members from different cults had experienced the same dynamics, this process would demystify the cult experience.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF MEMBERSHIP

In 1982, the age of the typical member of our group ranged from 18 to 22 years, and former members had been recruited into the cult from college or soon thereafter, had been deprogrammed by someone hired by their parents, and had been members of one of four or five big-name cults. Potential members were referred to our support group through word of mouth.

By the late 1980s, our group primarily consisted of older former cult members, many of them in their thirties and forties, and many of them had walked away from cults years earlier. Those who had left on their own often reported that they initially had not realized that the group they were part of might be considered a cult. They just knew there was something wrong, and they no longer felt comfortable there. Some former members felt that leaving their cults rendered them unprotected from potential harm. Some believed they were inadequate or failures; they had withdrawn from their cults because they could not allow themselves to be as selfless, devoted, single-minded, or idealistic as those who remained. These beliefs, which mostly stemmed from cult suggestion, might leave them with a host of postcult symptoms, which became a topic for exploration in the support group.

Those who had left their groups with the help of cult education were no longer leaving through a deprogramming process. Instead, they often voluntarily agreed to take part in an exit-counseling or cult-intervention process (see "Exit Counseling," by Carol Giambalvo, Chapter 3). This process seemed to prevent them from experiencing the feelings of inadequacy or sense of failure that those who walked away often experienced. Instead, those who went to cult educators learned how they had been manipulated and deceived by the cult, and how the cult had made them fearful of the consequences of leaving. Sometimes, support-group members who had the benefit of cult education then recommended this process to those who had walked away.

At this point in our group, there was more information about cults had become available to the general population, and articles about cultic influence were appearing in both popular magazines and professional journals. Many of our support-group members had come across books in the library or in bookstores and had begun to recognize that they had been in a cult. Although we continued to have support-group members who had been members of the large, well-known cults, we also began seeing people who came from smaller cults, some of which had fewer than 10 members. Some former members continued to be referred to our group through word of mouth, but others read about the group in the index of some of the books that were now available; or they were referred to us through organizations such as the original Cult Awareness Network (CAN) or the American Family Foundation (AFF), which now is the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA).

Today, our group is more heterogeneous, with categories of members that we would never have considered 40 years ago. Currently, the majority of our members have not been exit counseled. They have left their cults on

their own (walkaways), after confirming their negative beliefs about their respective groups on the Internet. Often, former members of a cult refer others to our support group. The support-group members today range in age from their late teens to their seventies. Some are survivors of the troubled-teen industry and such groups as the Straight program, which we have come to learn has a great deal in common with other cultic groups. Some support-group members had been part of second-generation cults—offshoots of the major cults we had seen 40 years ago. We discovered that sometimes members of the original cults had reconfigured and renamed these cultic groups, but the new leaders would continue to engage in the earlier cult's practices. Many members of our support group are second-generation adults (SGAs), who were raised in the cult as children but subsequently left, either with or without their parents and siblings¹.

The heterogeneity of the members has enhanced the support group. Those who are attending their first meeting benefit from the experiences of the more longstanding members. Also, participating in the same support group has increased the empathy of first- and second-generation former members for each other. We have watched some touching interactions, such as when a second-generation member comforted a guilt-ridden first-generation parent by saying, "You thought you were doing what was best for your child." Members who have attended many meetings act as mentors to newer group members. Some individuals return to later meetings and report on how the group helped them in making a specific decision or gaining a particular understanding.

THE FACILITATORS' APPROACH

From the beginning, we made the decision that our group was to become a support group rather than a therapy group. We focused upon support because we wanted to be an approachable resource for former cult members. We felt it was our mission to reduce the anxiety new members felt, and also to rely on members to gain strength from helping one another. In addition, a therapy group would require a commitment from participants to attend a certain number of meetings, which would be an obstacle for former cult members who might be commitment wary. We decided to leave attendance in the group open so that participants would have the option to attend as many or few meetings as they saw fit. It also was our desire to respect each individual's defenses and character styles in our group. Those who wished to explore how their individual personality dynamics undermined their life could find that approach within the context of individual therapy.

¹ We recently facilitated the second support-group meeting of parents of SGAs, and one of us has facilitated a support group for these former members at the annual conference of the ICSA. (To understand the special concerns of former-member parents, refer to "Helping First-Generation Parents and Second Generation Children Heal the Impact of Cult Harm," by Lorna Goldberg, Chapter 11 in this volume.)

In keeping with a support approach, our group is informal in style, and the focus is psychoeducational, with an emphasis on shared learning. Much of the group's time is spent problem solving, as members contribute their outlook on problems that other members in the group raise. (We explain the style of the facilitators and our group format in a later section of this chapter.) We do not examine group processes to explore the underlying meaning of behaviors displayed in the group, as we would do in a therapy group. When problematic situations or conflicts arise, we deal with the members involved outside the group. We do not use the group to analyze any of the behaviors and interactions of any of the participants. Instead, the group functions to provide information and support to those who are dealing with postcult life. The group enhances critical thinking in that all members weigh in from various points of view on a problem presented. We emphasize the stance that there is not one correct answer; instead, people will find the answers that work most effectively for them. We find that this process of encouraging members to share their thoughts and experiences helps all members better understand themselves, and that members feel strengthened by providing help to others.

Our group does not use cult-related material, movies, or television shows to stimulate discussion, although materials might be suggested to help solve a problem a member has presented. We do not begin the group with a suggested topic. Topics are open-ended, and those in attendance choose the topics for each particular group meeting.

The support group meets monthly, and meetings are held in our living room rather than in our offices. We believe that having the meeting take place in a home environment provides a warmer, more beneficial setting. In the early years of the group, we met at a different member's home each month. But we found that this approach was too fragmented and confusing for group participants, and that selecting one consistent venue for the meetings works better.

The formal support group meets for 2 1/2 hours. Snacks are provided for all, and we also offer a simple meal for those who have traveled long distances. Members usually remain for about 30 minutes after each meeting to chat with one another, and we encourage them to contact one another between group meetings, as well.

REFERRALS AND SCREENING

At the present time, we receive referrals for the group from other group members and from therapists. At conferences, former cult members have the opportunity to meet us and, if they live in the New York Metropolitan area or are planning a trip to New York, we welcome them to attend a group meeting. Individuals who have learned of our support group from books and articles or through the Internet and our website also contact us.

We ask those potential members whom we have not previously screened to meet with one of us for an intake screening. There is a sliding-scale fee for this intake, but there is no charge for the group. The intake, which typically

lasts for approximately one and a half hours, helps the potential participants gain an understanding of the nature of the group. The screening also helps us to assess whether the group would be the best vehicle to help the former cultist, and it provides us with the opportunity to suggest particular readings and activities that might be helpful in each individual's recovery process. We have found that if an individual attending the support group is ambivalent about whether or not to leave the cult, the other participants will focus on clarifying cult involvement for that person. As helpful as this discussion may be for the cult member, however, it prevents the group from accomplishing its purpose—to discuss postcult issues. We want to keep the focus of the support group on issues that arise after the former cult member has made the decision to leave.

One purpose of the intake interview, therefore, is to screen out present cult members if possible. However, intakes are not foolproof. Despite our best efforts, members of cults on occasion have infiltrated our support group. One couple, for example, acted as *agent provocateurs*; they attempted to trap us into encouraging other support-group members to sue their cult. We resisted that attempt, believing that it was not our role to encourage or to discourage lawsuits. After they attended a few meetings, the couple left the support group. At a later date, we learned of this deception from someone who had been a member of the couple's cult at the time of their attendance in our group. The former member stated that the cult had sent the couple to spy on us and gather ammunition to attack us for harboring animus against the cult. Another time, a current member from a different cult was sent to secretly record our meetings. But after he had attended several meetings, he told us that hearing the stories from other members had deeply affected him and generated self-reflection. He subsequently decided to leave his cult.

CRITERIA FOR SUPPORT-GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Most former cult members are appropriate referrals for our group. However, we have found that a few people are not appropriate. We do not include members who continue to have major doubts about their decision to leave their cult. We also do not include those individuals who are highly aggressive or would be unable to work collaboratively in the group context.

However, we welcome members who are struggling with a variety of symptoms. Postcult symptoms result from multiple factors. Differing pre-cult temperaments and a wide range of life events, along with different cult experiences, impact former members.

For example, we have had members of the group who were actively struggling with reality and need the group for stabilization. In such situations, we focus on cult-induced pathology that can occur when individuals are encouraged to have delusions and hallucinations. We also consider that some individuals might have had more fragile boundaries between reality and fantasy before their cult involvement. In these cases, we recommend a psychiatric evaluation.

Some members of the group may have spent time in a psychiatric hospital. Former members often leave their groups in a state that might indicate a severe mental illness. Sadly, many mental health professionals have misdiagnosed these individuals. However, many of the individuals can be stabilized by cult education and thereby gain an understanding of the destabilizing forces that can occur during cult membership. Similarly, some of our members have been on psychotropic medication, and in the support group they have discussed the benefits and drawbacks of their experiences with medication.

We have other members who tend to feel anxious and may avoid engaging in new relationships after their cult involvement. Many of them have been able to rely on the group for friendship and socialization. Subsequently, these members have gained the confidence to reach out to individuals outside the group after they have become helpful and respected participants within the group.

Some group members have reported on past experiences with substance abuse and various addictive behaviors. Most participants have dealt with depression and anxiety, and many have experienced a range of post-traumatic symptoms. Support group members have felt relieved to know that other participants will accept them and their difficulties. As with other types of support groups, older members have described their initial difficulties and how, over the years, their lives have shown improvement. The group generally tends to be optimistic about the future, and this outlook also reflects our tone as facilitators.

We do not exclude spouses and siblings if a member requests to bring them to the group. Usually members bring family members when they wish to have these individuals gain a sense of their cult experience, or when they are apprehensive about attending on their own. However, we have excluded parents. For instance, in an early meeting when a member requested to have her mother attend, we told her we had to receive the group's permission. The members assented, but the mother's presence had a chilling effect on the freedom of dialogue in the group. Despite requests we have received, we do not permit the media, researchers, or interested professionals to attend the group. Our members have to feel that the group exists for the purpose of former cult members helping one another, and for no other purpose.

ROLE OF FACILITATORS

At the beginning of each meeting, one of us states the purpose of the group and the importance of confidentiality. We then ask the group members to introduce themselves, to name the cult they left, and to mention any issues with which they are presently struggling. Giving everyone a chance to speak usually breaks the ice and sets the stage for the back-and-forth discussion among group members that follows. We attempt to ensure that everyone who wishes to have a chance to speak has the opportunity to do

so. At times, the facilitators need to help amplify the contribution of some participants and shorten the length of speaking time for others.

As mentioned previously, we see our role as fostering a comfortable environment and to allow all participants the freedom to help one another. When a member cuts off another member or begins to act in a potentially conflictual manner, we intervene. However, at times, we have found ourselves pulled into the group action.

For example, when a former member who was a mid-level leader in her cult attended a meeting with several other former members of her cult who had been in lower positions, she was verbally attacked by one of those former members. Although another, third former member of her cult in attendance had a milder response to the former leader and said that she saw the situation differently, the former leader was quite shaken from the confrontation by the first person.

As facilitators, both of us were pulled into the action as it was occurring, and neither of us initially came to the former leader's defense. At the time, we both were feeling impressed with the lower-level member's ability to speak out about the abuse that had occurred to her in the cult, some of it at the hands of the present former leader. Our neglect of our responsibility to provide a safe environment for *all* members was a case of countertransference triumphing over good therapeutic judgment. After the interaction occurred, we emphasized how, similarly, many former members found themselves pulled into behavior in the cult that they regretted later, after they left the cult.

When the meeting ended, one of us reached out to apologize to the former mid-level leader. However, she declined to attend future meetings, believing that we had not protected her. Although it could have been a transforming moment for this former leader to apologize to the other former member, she had a right not to be ready to do so. Since that time, we as facilitators have checked in with one another about any countertransference reactions, including protectiveness, biases, or negative feelings toward any of the members. This practice has been useful because it has allowed us to better address our potential countertransference responses.

Likewise, if some members of the group begin to treat us too deferentially, we address that behavior. We do not want to dominate the support group, and we see our role as taking a back seat in the discussion, adding only information when it appears that doing so will advance the problem-solving ability of the group. At times, we also are self-revealing if we believe it will further the group discussion or lessen the self-punishing attitudes of members. For example, we briefly might focus upon mistakes we have made, or how others have scammed us. We wish to emphasize the belief that to be human is to be fallible. Within the group, our personalities are pretty much the same as in everyday life. Therefore, there might be times when we disagree with each other, and we believe that it is important for the group to see this behavior, as well.

As we move to end of our meeting time, we check in with all members to see whether everyone has had an opportunity to speak. After that, we end the meeting by passing out material about different cult-related activities and distribute our calendar of meeting dates for the coming year. We do not publish dates of future meetings on our website because we do not want people to appear at our door who have not been invited to attend.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT HOW OUR SUPPORT GROUP HAS EVOLVED

Early on, we established the policy that there is no obligation for participants to attend meetings because we believed that not requiring group attendance would contrast with the pressures of the cult environment. Even though the membership varies from month to month, the group members carry over group norms from one meeting to the next. Over the years, we have had as many as 30 members and as few as one member arriving for the meeting. Typically, group attendance is between eight and 16 members. Some participants attend almost every meeting and others attend only one or two and do not return. Some attend when they are visiting the New York area, when there is something in particular with which they are struggling, or when they are bringing new former members from their cult. Some people attend one or two meetings before they feel comfortable speaking. Some of the older participants adopt more of a helping role. However, from time to time, older members continue to share their own present struggles. In this context, we see our role as informing the group that life outside the cult will always have better periods and more difficult times; the issue becomes how individuals deal with these situations as they present themselves.

Participants sometimes will use the group to play out their own conflicts. For example, one guilt-ridden former member attempted to have the group condemn her for her neglect of her son while she was in the cult. When the group responded to her story with empathy, she angrily yelled, "YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!" and quickly left the astonished group. It was helpful for the group to look at this experience as an example of how former cult members can continue to be flooded with tremendous guilt after they leave the cult environment.

When former members of the same cult attend a meeting, transference reactions or unfinished business play out in front of the group. For example, at one meeting a highly regarded former member who had been a mid-level manager in the cult joined the group while on a visit to New York. Another former member from the same cult had known this individual while in that group, and the lower-level former member treated the higher-level former member in a deferential manner. Sometimes, support-group members will experience other members as siblings, children, or parental figures. If the transference seems to be interfering with a realistic appraisal of the other person, one of us will point out this fact. It is not healthy for anyone in the group to be unduly idealized or denigrated. We see our role as reality enhancing.

BENEFITS OF THE SUPPORT GROUP

The support group provides an opportunity for a new supportive community for former cult members. This kind of support is particularly important for those who have been shunned by cult members or stigmatized by people who denigrate others who have had cult experiences. It is helpful for those who have had such experiences to hear how others have coped with the similar difficulties.

Participants often discover that individuals from other types of cults have the same emotional experiences, fantasies, doubts, and fears that they have. This discovery serves to normalize the postcult experience. New friendships can develop at a time when former members might feel isolated and lonely after having lost the cult community.

SUPPORT-GROUP THEMES

Some of the topics that participants typically address at group meetings include the following:

- Dealing with the aftereffects of cult membership, particularly feelings of shame about having made a mistake in joining the cult;
- Fears of meeting a member of the cult on the street or being contacted by the cult by phone or email;
- Concerns about discussing cult history with others or about the right time for this to be addressed;
- Dealing with the cult years when applying to school or for a job;
- Concerns about issues related to spirituality and precult religious beliefs;
- Handling harassment from cult members;
- Dealing with family members;
- Dealing with dating and love relationships;
- Dealing with powerful emotions of anxiety, anger, or depression;
- Dealing with cult-related dreams;
- Deciding whether or not to take psychotropic medication;
- Learning assertive behavior (i.e., to say "No");
- Dealing with feelings about not having accomplished as much as peers from childhood or from the work world;
- Dealing with distractions and spacing out (dissociation);
- Dealing with sexual feelings;
- Dealing with postcult symptoms, including phobias, hallucinations, delusions, and nightmares;
- Dealing with those who are seen as having power over the former cultist (e.g., bosses);
- Making friends and handling friendship difficulties;

- Defining the following words: mind control, dissociation, hypnosis and suggestion, idealization, narcissist, antisocial personality, mood disorder and personality disorder, trauma;
- Feeling unable to trust one's instincts;
- Dealing with family members;
- Dealing with feelings about therapy, therapists, and the mental health community;
- Dealing with feelings about charismatic individuals (e.g., promoters of New Age, spiritual, therapeutic, or political ideas that are seen on television or in everyday life).

SUPPORT GROUP AS AN ADJUNCT TO THERAPY

Most of those who attend our support group do not meet with either of us for individual therapy, and some former cult members who see us in therapy do not wish to attend the group. At times, a support-group member will request to begin therapy with one of us, which we are usually willing to do. However, a large number of our group members come from New York City and see therapists within the city. Sometimes, it is beneficial to see how those who have shown growth in individual therapy tend to take a more therapeutic role with their peers in the support group.

It has been helpful to the group members to have a clearer understanding of all the alternatives that are open to them for the recovery process. Support-group members usually talk freely with one another about their experiences of therapy, including the benefits and the negative aspects of seeing a therapist for individual therapy. They also speak about the benefits and the negative aspects of taking various psychotropic medications. Some members have attended ICSA's recovery workshops and have recommended workshops to others in the support group. Many attend the ICSA education meetings in New York. Most have attended some of the annual ICSA international conferences. And some have recommended cult-education counselors for postcult help.

We emphasize that there are many roads to cult recovery, and that former members can choose the road that is best for them. In contrast to the single path of the cult, we emphasize the need for all individuals to choose their own approaches. We understand that the support group can be helpful to former cult members. However, we see the group as one service alongside many other therapeutic interventions. We understand that, for some, the idea of joining any group will be uncomfortable. We respect that feeling and suggest other therapeutic modalities that may be more suitable for those former cult members who would rather not join a group.

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Lorna Goldberg, LCSW, PsyA, board member and past president of ICSA, is a psychoanalyst in private practice and Director, Institute for Psychoanalytic Studies. In 1976, she and her husband, William Goldberg, began facilitating a support group for former cult members that continues to meet monthly in their home in Englewood, New Jersey. Lorna and Bill received the Hall of Fame Award from the authentic Cult Awareness Network in 1989 and the Leo J. Ryan Award from the Leo J. Ryan Foundation in 1999. In 2009, Lorna received the Margaret T. Singer Award from ICSA. Along with Rosanne Henry, she cochaired ICSA's Mental Health Committee from 2003 to 2008. Lorna has published numerous articles about her therapeutic work with former cult members in professional journals, including, most recently, Goldberg, L., (2012), "Influence of a Charismatic Antisocial Cult Leader: Psychotherapy With an Ex-Cultist Prosecuted for Criminal Behavior," *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, Vol. 2, 15–24; and Goldberg, L., (2011), "Diana, Leaving the Cult: Play Therapy in Childhood and Talk Therapy in Adolescence," *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, Vol. 2, 33–43. She also wrote the chapter "Guidelines for Therapists" in the book *Recovery from Cults* (1993), edited by Michael Langone. She cowrote with Bill Goldberg the chapter "Psychotherapy With Targeted Parents" in the book *Working With Alienated Children and Families* (2013), edited by Amy J. L. Baker and S. Richard Sauber.