

CHAPTER 1

WORKING WITH FAMILIES

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In a previously published article (Goldberg, L., & Goldberg, W., 1989), Lorna Goldberg and I wrote about the typical family's response to a young adult's cult membership. We indicated that families will commonly go through phases in their reaction to a family member's joining a cult: ignorance or denial, recognition, exploration, and action. In this chapter, I discuss a mental-health professional's intervention during the exploration phase, when the family most often requests a consultation.

It is often helpful for families to meet with a mental-health professional to discuss the cult member's involvement so that the family members can better understand the changes they may have witnessed in the cult member. Such a meeting can help the family clarify potential options and understand the possible consequences of adopting one of those options. Additionally, the mental-health professional can help mobilize the family members to decide what approach they should take in this situation. Finally, a family consultant can be most helpful in suggesting potential responses that can facilitate communication with the cult member.

Elsewhere in this volume, the role of family mediation is discussed (see Chapter 2, "Conflict Resolution for Families in Distress," by Patti Millar and Cristina Caparesi). This type of intervention often takes place with the active participation of all family members, including the cult member. Although mediation is one of the possible interventions to be discussed in a family meeting, the family work that I focus on in this chapter is conducted with family members who are concerned about the cult member's membership and who see that membership as problematic. Initially, the cult member, by definition, would not meet this criterion and would therefore be excluded from this first meeting. The member may be invited to future meetings, depending upon the family's planned strategy for intervening in the situation.

INITIAL CONTACT

Before the family meeting, I typically receive a phone call from one or more family members. Generally, the parents of the cult member initiate the first call; I will use this typical situation to clarify my approach. When I ask why the family is contacting me, a common response is that their son or daughter is in a cult, as if that statement alone would be sufficient to explain the family's discomfort. It is helpful at this time for me to ask the parents to clarify what it is about the family member's cult membership that upsets them, and what they are hoping to accomplish in their meeting with me. Clarifying the family's issues with their child's membership in the group helps them to begin the process of formulating a presentation of exactly what it is about that membership that alarms the family. This information will be important later on in the consultation, when we are discussing ways that the family and cult member can open more lines of communication. I have never encountered a situation in which a cult member left the cult simply because his family labeled the group as a cult; nevertheless, when the family members are able to articulate specific concerns about the changes they have observed in the cult member, the cultist is more likely to begin to engage them in a dialogue.

I ask the family members what they hope to accomplish from our consultation, and this discussion affords me the opportunity to clarify my role in helping them. I explain that I will not be able to give them a magic answer that will cure cult membership; instead, I can offer them a forum in which they can clarify their concerns and develop a strategy. I explain that the initial consultation will last for approximately 2 hours. I tell them that, for the first part of the interview, they will be doing most of the speaking. The primary focus will be on the cult member's history, emphasizing important events and the individual's reaction to these events, and specific personality dynamics of the member and how these dynamics are connected to relationships with family members, friends, and significant others. I explain that we also will focus on the cult member's reactions to stages of life and factors that might have made the lure of this particular cult more attractive. Next, we will discuss the specifics of how the cult involvement occurred. For the second part of the meeting, I will discuss my impressions of the cult member based upon the family's observations and my own assessment of the family dynamics. I will focus upon the possible appeal of the cult for the cult member, and I will help family members devise a strategy for dealing with the situation that is tailored to the specifics of the cult, the particulars of the individual's cult membership, and also to the strengths of the family members involved.

One decision that will need to be made in the initial telephone contact is to determine who should attend the family consultation. If we are talking about a young adult, I request in almost all cases that both parents attend. If the parents have been divorced, I ask how the other parent (who did not call)

views the situation; I also ask how the parent who called me feels about inviting the other parent to participate in the consultation. The response to this request helps me to assess the parents' abilities, even in a divorce situation, to mobilize to intervene in the cultic situation. If I am told, for example, that the other parent should not be invited because she is allying with the cult member against the alarmed parent, a family meeting with a different agenda is in order.

I also ask at this time whether there are other significant individuals in the cult member's life who should be invited to the consultation. Potential allies might include an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, a coach, a former teacher, or a close friend.

Whether or not siblings should be invited to the meeting depends on several variables. First, the age of the siblings should be considered. In general, adult siblings who are concerned about the cult member should be invited because they will generally have a perspective on the cult member that the parents may not have; also, they are likely to be sources of support for the parents. I do not suggest inviting young children to the consultation because the entire situation would likely be too upsetting and confusing to them.

A mature teenager or a young adult may participate. Often, this individual will benefit from being involved in the consultation because such participation might give him an opportunity to discuss fears and concerns, and perhaps provide an explanation for the frightening changes family members have observed in his sibling. However, before the younger sibling is invited to the meeting, it is important for the professional to explore potential reactions to the situation. For instance, if a sibling indicates discomfort with parental concerns about the cult member or is not interested in joining the meeting, it is best not to place the sibling in the position of needing to choose between loyalty to a brother or sister and loyalty to a parent. Even if the sibling believes the cult member is in danger, she may not wish to be involved in figuring out a solution. For example, she might feel anger or hostility toward the cult member for abandoning the family, or she may be jealous of the amount of attention and concern the cultist is receiving from the parent. If these conditions pertain, it is usually best not to pressure the sibling to be involved. In contrast, if the sibling is upset about the changes she has witnessed, is not ambivalent about helping, and has the capacity to rise to the occasion as a source of information or as an aid to the parents, she should be included. (If a family member does not attend the meeting, it can be useful for the mental-health professional to help the parents gain a fuller understanding of the reasons for this behavior and perhaps help them become more attuned to the emotions underlying this resistance. This increased understanding might open up a needed dialogue between the parent and sibling at a later time.)

SPECIFICS ABOUT THE FAMILY MEETING

I try to accomplish several tasks in each family meeting. First, I ask the family questions about the cult member so that I can get a sense of the individual before he joined the cult, and the changes family members believe cult membership has brought about. Then I summarize the family's observations and attempt to put into perspective what they have observed. I describe what the appeal of the cult may be to this particular individual. I delineate the options that I believe are available to the family and, based on my experience and knowledge of the cult and family dynamics, what the chances of success are for each of those options. Finally, I make recommendations to the family about how to keep the lines of communication open with the cult member.

In the beginning of the consultation, I ask the family to discuss the cult member before he joined the cult. I am particularly interested in whether he was gregarious or shy, open with expressing feelings or more guarded. I ask about his relationship with each member of the family, and whether those relationships have changed over the years and more recently. I ask about his interests and worldview. At this point, the family may draw a contrast between the communication patterns of the cult member before the cult came into the picture and after. I acknowledge the importance of the changes that the family has observed and explain that it is important to gauge the discrepancy between the individual's modes of communication before and after he became a member of the cult.

In general, the more open the cult member has been in the past, the more willing he has been to examine beliefs and to acknowledge mistakes, and the more open he has been to examine her stances, the better the prognosis will be for his eventually leaving the cult. If the rest of the family and the cult member have a history of frank and free-flowing discussion of ideas in the past, the cult member is more likely to perceive a frank and free-flowing discussion over cult membership as a continuation of that family tradition. A dialogue in which all parties state their points of view about the cult almost always has a benign outcome (See Chapter 2, "Conflict Resolution for Families in Distress"). In the best of circumstances, with some coaching and guidance, family members are able to present their concerns to the cult member without professional assistance.

In contrast, if the cult member's history is one of secrecy, resentment, and blocking of communication (i.e., if the precult and postcult mode of communication are not that different), or one of rigidly clinging to an assumed position regardless of reasonable arguments in opposition to that position, the task of helping the cult member to examine his decision to join the cult will require a different strategy.

Another issue that I explore during this consultation is how the cult member has dealt with losses in the past. I ask about the member's reaction to past losses—of grandparents, friendships, pets, girlfriends or boyfriends, and

so on. An example of a healthy reaction is for the individual to enter into a time-limited mourning period, followed by a rebound; that is, after a sad retreat, the individual returns to an investment in everyday life. This grieving process sets a tone for how the individual will respond to the loss of the cult. When an individual leaves a cult, he will be dealing with several losses at once. The former cult member is faced with mourning lost relationships, the loss of a sense of certainty, the diminishment of one's grandiosity, and certainly, the loss of his sense of innocence. How the cult member has dealt emotionally with losses in the past indicates a possible pattern for how he might deal emotionally with this loss. For example, if he tended to be self-blaming after past losses, he might have that same tendency after the cult. This review of the cult member's reactions in the past gives the parents a sense of how he will deal with the prospect of leaving the cult, and the kind of reaction he might have after he leaves.

I ask about drug and alcohol use, and sexual experience as a component of hypothesizing the degree of boundaries versus freedom that the cult member may be seeking or avoiding. For some cult members, the appeal of the cult may be that the cult imposes boundaries on impulses over which they otherwise may feel out of control. For others, the cult may represent freedom from a family they may perceive as stifling. For some young adults who have never rebelled from their families, the cult may be a vehicle for them to declare their independence without in actuality having to abandon their dependency.

During this assessment phase, I also attempt to determine, as much as possible without having met the individual, whether the personality changes the family is describing are typical of cult-induced pathology, or whether they may stem from a different form of emotional or mental illness. In and of itself, cult membership is not an indicator of mental illness. However, neither does cult membership exempt an individual from mental illness. My assessment of precult psychopathology, although far from definitive, can help the family to plan for possible postcult therapy or psychiatric intervention if needed.

I acknowledge that different family members may have different viewpoints on some or all of these perspectives. I encourage everyone present to speak up if their perspectives are different from other family members. I always note whether one family member does most of the talking, or whether more than one person answers my questions. I note who defers to whom, whether there is an acceptance and respectful attention paid to differing points of view, and the role that the siblings of the cult member assume in the family discussion. My observations of these roles will come into play when I make my recommendations for how the family might handle the situation. In general, a family that allows for and accepts various viewpoints without acrimony will contrast in a positive way to the cult leader's authoritarian need to dominate with one worldview.

I discuss with the family the different strategies for interventions. For example, if the indicators point to an individual who would be more likely to be amenable to an intervention with an honest and respectful back and forth with the family, the structure for the rest of this initial meeting will focus on who should participate in that family meeting, and which elements of the family's concerns each participant should voice. For example, Mom may emphasize the fears she is having about the cult member's future if he follows through on his plans to abandon his education. Brother may emphasize how much he misses the conversations that he used to have with his sibling, and how much he wishes that could be a part of his life again. An outside consultant might discuss the history of the cult and the cult's biblical distortions, or she might introduce former cult members who can give their reasons for choosing to leave the cult. Dad's role may be just to be a loving presence in the room, and to reinforce the concerns of the other family members.

In the next phase of the family meeting, I discuss the changes that the family has observed in the cult member, and I try to explain how those changes might have occurred. My goal is to demystify the cult experience for the family. I attempt to help the family members understand the changes they have observed as predictable responses to the pressures that the cult member has experienced. I may recommend that family members consult with former members of this particular cult, or that they read articles or books written by former cult members or scholars about the cult phenomenon. In demystifying the experience, my goal is to help the family to mobilize so members can come to a conclusion about how they may intervene in the situation rather than continue to feel helpless and confused.

Interventions

Family typically want to know what practical steps they can take to expose the cult member to information about the cult. Usually, they have heard of the concept of bringing in a cult consultant or interventionist (formerly known as an *exit counselor* or *deprogrammer*) to speak with the cult member; but typically they do not understand how this process works, what the cult consultant does, or what kind of an outcome they can expect from such an intervention. Here again, my role is to attempt to demystify this concept. I explain that most cult consultants are former cult members themselves, and that they have experience in delineating the artifices and stratagems cults use in the recruitment and retention of their members. The exit counselors often will have facts about the cult and the cult leader that the cult member is not privy to. I tell the family that a successful exit counseling does not guarantee that a cult member will leave a cult. A successful exit counseling will merely give the cult member the opportunity to see the broad picture of her cult involvement and how she was manipulated. In other words, the cult consultant will supply the cult member with informa-

tion, but the decision about whether or not to leave the cult remains with the cult member. Sometimes families are concerned that the cult member will react adversely to having her worldview destroyed. Here, again, I reassure them that the power to stay in or leave the cult remains with the cult member. In the unlikely event that the member would be so upset by the negative information she received about the cult that she could not handle the situation, she could merely decide to dismiss the information and remain in the cult.

If the family members decide that they would like to attempt an intervention, I recommend in most cases that they hire a professional cult consultant (see Chapter 3, "Exit Counseling," by Carol Giambalvo).

As an alternative to hiring an outside expert, family members might wish to speak directly to the cult member. In preparation for this intervention, family members interview former members of the cult, read literature about it, and confront the cult member directly with the facts they have learned. Although in some instances this approach has been successful, I rarely recommend it. My initial concern around finding this method to be less desirable is that the family has not had experience countering the arguments that the cult has usually taught the cult member to employ when she is confronted with anticult literature and stories. The cult member has been strongly influenced by the cult to resist a point of view that is not the cult leader's. And cult counselors *have* had this crucial experience. Second, family members, because they are emotionally engaged with the cultist, can too easily become overwhelmed, impatient, or frustrated with the cult member. Although these often-intense reactions to the cult member may be understandable, they also may be counterproductive. Finally, because of whatever conscious or unconscious issues the cult member may be dealing with regarding her own dependency issues with the family, she may be too defended against family members and so unable to concede points with them that she may be able to concede with other people. The cult member also might resist giving up the cult's point of view because of concern about induced cult fears of the outside world (feelings of lack of safety outside the cult) or fears about losing face in front of the family. While family members and unconscious motivations potentially heighten an already charged situation, cult counselors are able to defuse the same situation with knowledge of timing and the presentation of facts. This combination of experience and knowledge is more likely to lead to emerging feelings of doubt in the cult member about cult ideology and that there might in fact be safety in the outside world.

Sometimes the family is not ready or able to decide to mount an intervention with the cult member and opts instead to take a wait-and-see approach. Families will sometimes explain that they have confidence that the cult member is a sensible person who has shown good judgment in

the past, and that they hope she will come out of the group on her own. I acknowledge that a voluntary departure can be a reasonable response to the situation, and that some people do leave cults without an intervention. After a period of waiting, the cult member might decide to leave, or the family might be more committed to developing an exit strategy.

Sometimes one parent wants to intervene in the situation right away, while the other wants to delay, to see what develops. Two categories of mistakes can occur in a situation such as this. A category 1 error is when the cult member would have come out on her own without an intervention, but the parents arrange for an unnecessary intervention. The consequence of this error is that the parents have gone to unnecessary trouble and expense. A category 2 error is when the cult member would not have come out on her own, but the parents do not arrange for an intervention. The consequence of this error is that the cult member stays in the cult. I stress that no one knows which of these situations prevails—no one can read the mind of the cult member, and no one can see the future. We therefore cannot determine which parent is right. Since that is the case, the worst-case scenario is when one parent begrudgingly gives in, an intervention is either attempted or postponed, and the decision turns out to be wrong. This situation can lead to hard feelings, regrets, and accusations within the family. To try to obviate this circumstance, I therefore suggest that, before they proceed, the parents attempt to come to a consensus on a strategy that both can accept.

Sometimes parents will decide to set up another meeting to review the situation again after a certain amount of time. I may suggest that they come to an agreement on how long they both consider reasonable before they attempt an intervention. For example, would they be willing to wait for 3 months to see whether there is any change in the cult member? For 6 months? For 1 year? I attempt to help the parents agree to a mutually acceptable date when they will review the situation again, and to agree to the criteria they will use at that reevaluation to determine their next steps.

At other times, I employ a similar approach to help the parents come to a consensus on an action that would spur them to arrange an intervention. For example, they may agree that they will not intervene as long as the cult member continues her college education, or as long as she maintains communication with the family. Again, when or whether the family should take action is not my decision. It is my task to help them to come to a decision they can both support.

As I have previously noted, a successful intervention with a cult counselor will only give the cult member the opportunity to make an informed choice of whether to stay in the cult or leave. Often, the family will ask me for my assessment of their situation and the prognosis for whether or not the cult

member will leave. I respond by reminding them that I have not met the family member whom we have been discussing, so my assessment tools are imprecise. However, I can delineate some of the factors that I have found enter into a member's decision to leave the cult. I note that these factors are generalities, and that many elements combine to influence an individual's decision to stay in or to leave a group. I also should note that there are many exceptions to these rules, and that not all or even most of these factors must be present for a successful intervention. With those caveats, the major factors that I have found to influence a cultist's decision to stay or leave include the following:

- **Precult history of the cult member.** The healthier the precult history, the better the prognosis that the individual will choose to leave the cult.
- **Health of the family unit.** The healthier and closer the nuclear family unit, the better the prognosis that the individual will choose to leave the cult. The healthy relationship will work as a corrective for the induced belief that life outside the cult is dangerous.
- **Length of time within the cult.** The longer an individual is in a cult, the less the likelihood that he will choose to leave. At the same time, it is also true that the longer the individual has been in the cult, the more likely it is that he has been introduced to the duplicity and hypocrisy of the group.
- **Discrepancy between the philosophy and worldview of the cult and the philosophy and worldview of the cult member before he joined.** The greater the discrepancy, the better the likelihood that the member will choose to leave.
- **Activities within the cult.** The more marketable the skills the member has gained within the cult, the greater the likelihood that the individual will choose to leave.
- **Relationships within the cult.** If the cult member has had a child while in the cult, the situation is complicated by that fact. If the child's other parent is still in the cult, and if that other parent is the custodial parent, the chances of the member choosing to leave are usually lessened. In contrast, a cult member who the custodial parent may wish to protect the child from the cult, and this fact may spur the member to leave.

If the member has married while in the cult, the influence of the spouse, who may remain in the cult, will depend on the nature of their relationship. If this was an arranged marriage and there is no real relationship, the pull can be negligible. Alternatively, if the member holds tender feelings for the spouse, the relationship can be a key factor that keeps the individual in the cult.

Communication With the Cult Member

I generally end the consultation with a discussion about communication with the cult member. Of course, each family is different, so the guidelines I present pertain to most families.

In most cases, I recommend that family members should maintain an attitude of moderate (as opposed to vehement) disagreement with the cultist's membership in the cult. Family members should not be engaged in constant arguing, but neither should they feign wholehearted support of the cultist's membership in the group. I usually advise family members to point out the discrepancies that they see between the cult's professed beliefs and their practices. Their stance should result in confusion for rather than confrontation of the cult member. For example, "I wonder how you feel about the fact that you used to love to listen to music, and now you never do that anymore." Most former cult members have told me that they had moments of doubts when they were in their cult, but they learned to squelch those doubts.

By asking these types of questions, family members are prodding the cult member to bring to consciousness, even for a moment, the doubts that may have been squelched. The answer that the family receives is less important than the fact that the question has been asked and the member has contemplated it for that moment. For a complete list of the kinds of thought-provoking questions a family can ask, I recommend *Releasing The Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*, by Steven Hassan (see the Bibliography).

I also remind the family that every moment with the cult member does not have to be spent trying to talk her out of the cult. Having a pleasant visit during which the member is reminded of the family roots and bonds, and she and the rest of the family are able to have spontaneous fun together, which contrasts with cult orchestration, also has a salutary effect. If my hypothesis that most cult members have periods of doubt about their cult membership is accurate, then, by providing the member with a refuge where she will not have to answer to the cult and will not have to defend the cult, the family may be offering a method for her to leave the cult before she even realizes that is what she is looking for.

Toward that end, if the cult member is in another city or country, I may suggest that the family invite her home for a vacation or a weekend, just to touch base. She should be reassured that there will be a round-trip ticket for her, and that she will not be discouraged from returning to the cult when the visit is over. Some individuals who are in a cult cannot contemplate the thought of permanently leaving the cult, but they can permit themselves to take a vacation from it, as long as they can convince themselves that they will be returning.

Finally, I tell the family that the most important single factor in helping them lead the cult member to reconsider the group is that of loving and concerned communication, and that communication is the most important tool they have. As long as the other family members and the cult member are talking, they will have a sense of what the member is thinking and feeling. In those talks, family members also have an opportunity to remind the cult member of important memories from a shared past. To that end, I suggest that at some point family members say to the cult member that the one circumstance they cannot tolerate is to lose communication with her, and that they extract a promise from her assuring them that will never happen. Of course, that pledge can be broken; but the hope is that if the cult member has given her word, it will be harder for her to break that pledge.

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