



Learn and teach cult awareness

What would lead 39 people to commit suicide, believing they could leave their bodies or "vessels" behind and be carried in a UFO to a new world? These people weren't crazy; they were victims of a cult group.

Heaven's Gate was a religious, millennial cult like many that popped up as the year 2000 approached. Millennial cults believed that the end of the world was coming soon, and like many religious cults, used and misinterpreted symbolic texts and signs found in the book of Revelation to support their belief.

Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Applewhite believed that he replaced Jesus, and that he and his followers must die so they could experience eternal life. Applewhite thought the comet, Hale-Bopp, was a sign of the end times and that a space craft that followed the comet would transport his followers to a new world. This cult group combined teachings of early Christian Gnosticism, an extreme Christian view that believes the body was totally sinful and should be punished, along with elements of teachings from New Age, Mormonism, and Scientology.

It all sounds a little unbelievable, but groups like Heaven's Gate continue to develop and draw in followers. They may not all end in mass suicides, but there are emotional, financial, social, and relational tragedies that can occur for members who are seeking something much different in joining or following a cult group.

A cult can be defined as (contemporary negative definition):

An extreme group or movement that shows excessive dedication to a person or cause. A religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader.

Cults use various behavior and mind control and influence techniques to control and persuade members to accept the group's beliefs and practices. The leader or group takes advantage of cult members, using them for a particular purpose (often to make money) and causing them to develop a psychological dependency upon the cult. Cult members eventually aren't able to think for themselves, but instead blindly accept decisions made by their leader. Cults are psychologically and spiritually harmful to members, their families, and the larger community.

Types of cults

- **Religious Cults** are extreme groups that go beyond the mainstream teachings of major religions. Western religious cults pretend to be Christian or Jewish, while Eastern religious cults claim to follow Buddhism or Hinduism. New Age cults are a mixture of astrology, spiritualism and Eastern religious beliefs. These groups have beliefs or practices that go way beyond the typical beliefs or practices of a healthy religion. Often, new members don't know the true beliefs of the cult, and teachings are kept secret.
- **Psychotherapy, Self-Help or Educational Cults** offer therapy and educational programs from the fringe that take advantage of emotionally-vulnerable people. Leaders make unrealistic promises and use mind control techniques to control individuals in the group.
- **Economic Cults** use mind control techniques and promise fast, easy money to anyone who follows without a question the practices and beliefs of the group. Groups often follow a pyramid scheme that involves recruiting more members.
- **Political Cults** are extreme groups or organizations that have a political agenda. They often teach and promote racism and hatred for others that are not part of their specific group or organization. They use mind behavior and control techniques and may promote terrorist and hate crime activities.

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Behavior and mind control techniques

Cults use a variety of mind and behavior control techniques to control their members:

1. **Group Pressure.** Also known as love-bombing, the group flatters individuals and encourages child-like trust, uncritical thinking or questioning. Recruiters might pretend to be interested in a person, telling them they're exactly the type of person their group needs. Recruiters might tell prospects that it's a church, discussion group, or business and not even give the real name of the cult group.
2. **Isolation.** New recruits may be invited to attend an informational retreat or meeting that is often located in an isolated location. Once involved in the cult, individuals are separated from others outside of the cult group and are allowed to only talk to members of the cult. They're not allowed to read outside books and newspapers that might be critical of the group.
3. **Thought-Stopping Techniques.** A state of dependency is brought about by excessive meditating, chanting, and repetitious activities. Slogans such as "trust the leader" or "don't question, just do" stop individuals from critical thinking and deepen their trust in the leader.
4. **Fear and Guilt.** The group ridicules or abuses those who confess doubts about the group or its activities. They may be told they can't survive outside the safety of the cult or even that they'll go to hell. Leaders may teach that everyone who is not part of their group is under the influence of Satan, and therefore can't be trusted.
5. **Lack of Sleep.** When individuals are tired, they are more easily influenced and manipulated. Those deprived of sleep become vulnerable to the teachings or practices of the cult and aren't able to think or examine what is happening to them. New members are kept awake or may be made to work long hours to bring in money for the cult group.

6. **Sensory Overload.** Individuals may be forced to listen to confusing and complex teachings without the opportunity to ask questions about what they have been told. Those who ask questions might be told the question is stupid or that there's something wrong with them for asking. Recruits quickly learn that it's not acceptable to ask questions about the group or its leaders.
7. **Deception.** Cults often tell deliberate lies or make unrealistic promises about what prospects will obtain from the group. Leaders share only limited information, giving hidden teachings or secrets only after members have proven themselves or demonstrating commitment. Promises may include becoming like god, or achieving fame and fortune.
8. **Drugs and Physical Abuse.** Cults may use physical abuse to control individuals or offer hallucinatory drugs that distort reality and cause hallucinations. Not all cult groups use drugs and physical abuse.
9. **Dependency.** Cults encourage individuals to become dependent, trusting the leader or group instead of making their own decisions or consulting outside friends, family, or institutions. A break with previous friends, family, organizations, or communities is often required.
10. **Turning Over Assets.** Cults often deceive recruits into turning over to the cult all their money and property. Members may be expected to work in jobs the cult provides or to turn over most of their wages to the cult.

Checklist of harmful or exploitive cult behaviors

In *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*, cult counselor Steven Hassan describes his "BITE model" stating that it is not necessary for every item or factor to be present for a group to be harmful, abusive, or exploitive of its members.

+ Behavior Control

- Regulation of individual's physical reality
- Major time commitment required for indoctrination sessions and group rituals
- Need to ask permission for major decisions
- Need to report thoughts, feelings, and activities to superiors
- Rewards and punishments (behavior modification techniques—positive and negative)
- Individualism discouraged; "group think" prevails
- Rigid rules and regulations
- Need for obedience and dependency

+ Information Control

- Use of deception
- Access to non-cult sources of information minimized or discouraged
- Compartmentalization of information; Outsider vs. Insider doctrines
- Spying on other members is encouraged
- Extensive use of cult generated information and propaganda
- Unethical use of confession

+ Thought Control

- Need to internalize the group's doctrine as "Truth"
- Use of "loaded" language (for example, "thought-terminating clichés"). Words are the tools we use to think with. These "special" words constrict rather than

expand understanding, and can even stop thoughts altogether. They function to reduce complexities of experience into trite, platitudinous "buzz words."

- Only "good" and "proper" thoughts are encouraged.
- Use of hypnotic techniques to induce altered mental states
- Manipulation of memories and implantation of false memories
- Use of thought-stopping techniques, which shut down "reality testing" by stopping "negative" thoughts and allowing only "good" thoughts
- Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism. No critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy seen as legitimate
- No alternative belief systems viewed as legitimate, good, or useful

+ Emotional Control

- Manipulate and narrow the range of a person's feelings
- Make the person feel that if there are ever any problems, it is always their fault, never the leader's or the group's
- Excessive use of guilt
- Excessive use of fear
- Extremes of emotional highs and lows
- Ritual and often public confession of "sins"
- Phobia indoctrination: inculcating irrational fears about ever leaving the group or even questioning the leader's authority. The person under mind control cannot visualize a positive, fulfilled future without being in the group.

Reasons that young people join cults

Young people join cults for a variety of reasons:

- **Time of Searching.** Many adolescents are struggling with life questions and wondering how they fit into the world. Cults promise seemingly easy solutions, answers, and guidance.
- **Crisis.** Young people are especially vulnerable in times of crisis: relationship break-ups, parental divorce, pressure over getting good grades, depression, or when feeling lonely and unconnected. Since starting a new school or going off to college is a particularly vulnerable time, college campuses are favorite spots for cult groups to recruit new members.
- **Rebellion.** Adolescence is often a time of questioning parents' values. Rebellion can be healthy if it doesn't go too far, but adolescents who are angry at parents may join a cult as a way of protesting their parents' values or beliefs.
- **Time and Money.** Cults target adolescents because they often have an abundance of time and money, both of which can be used by the cult.
- **Deceived.** Most adolescents join cults because they have been fooled or deceived. Everyone is capable of being duped, especially under vulnerable circumstances.
- **Belonging.** Many young people are lonely because they believe they have no friends or family who care for them. Young people have a need to belong and be accepted, and will seek love whenever they can find it. They can mistake a cult group's interest in them as love or acceptance.
- **Family Involvement.** For some young people, living within a cult is a way of life for their family. Some cults recruit entire families to be a part of their group.

What you(th) can do about cults

1. **Educate yourself** and others about the dangers of cults. Learn about how cults recruit and operate. Cults recruit individuals at school, at a mall or store, on the street, at work, and often over the Internet.
2. **Be aware** of unfamiliar groups or organizations within your area. Identify a list of cult groups that may be active in your community and share this information with others. Read about their beliefs and practices; talk to someone who knows about them.
3. **Ask critical questions** when invited to attend an unfamiliar group. God created us with minds that can think critically and ask questions. If the group is healthy, it should be able to welcome questions and provide sensible answers to your questions.
4. **Talk to parents or trusted adults** about concerns you have about a group. Open and honest communication with parents, teachers, counselors, pastors and youth leaders are extremely important.
5. **Learn to trust yourself.** If you feel uncomfortable about someone, their ideas, or about a group, consider it a warning sign. Learn to trust yourself, remembering the values from family and church that have shaped you.
6. If someone you know is in a cult group, **let them know you care about them.** Encourage them to ask critical questions or to talk to a trusted adult or counselor who knows about cults. It's not against the law to be part of a cult, but letting someone know you care may help them consider leaving the cult. Talk to parents or trusted adults so that others know what is going on and where the young person is—for the sake of their well being and safety.
7. **Reach out** to those who are lonely and vulnerable. Invite them to attend your church or youth group. As Christians, we have much to offer vulnerable people. Young people need to feel they belong, are needed and appreciated. They also need to feel emotionally and physically safe.
8. **Compare cult teachings** with the teachings of your church. What does Christianity have to say about various cults' beliefs? Are the beliefs compatible with your faith? What are some of the similarities in teachings that may seem confusing? As a youth group, invite both youth and parents to attend education programs focusing on cults.
9. **Practice your Christian faith.** Worship, youth ministry opportunities, scripture and prayer as an individual and as a community strengthens our faith. The stronger your faith, the less likely you'll be swayed by the empty promises of a cult.

Ways to use this "Help Sheet" as a resource with youth

- Use it as a lesson for a Sunday school or Peer Ministry class.
- Invite a "cult expert" or former cult member to speak to your youth.
- Break into small groups to study the cult information. Brainstorm about ways your church can counter the ways of cults. How can you strengthen your congregation's ministry and outreach with youth?
- Find creative ways to educate young people on cults and on the Christian faith. Help them struggle with their own beliefs. Keep a running list of theological and faith questions young people raise as a way of generating discussions and deepening understanding as you seek answers.
- Talk about the different religious groups in your community. What do you know about them? The BBC's Religion & Ethics Web site has helpful descriptions of different faith groups and practices: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/>

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