



Information
For
Mental Health
Professionals



What Counselors Should Know About Cultic Dynamics

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Definition

Although the term *cult* has no universally accepted definition, it is often associated with groups that are unusually manipulative, often deceptive, and highly demanding. Some people prefer the term *high-demand group* over *cult*. Others focus on the abuse—psychological and/or spiritual—that is often associated with cultic groups. Still others, including the author of this information sheet, emphasize the dynamics associated with cultic groups—that is, the processes that change individuals in ways that often disturb family and friends. The core of their concern usually is that a once-autonomous person now appears to be subservient to a leader.

Leaders of cultic groups want their followers to do the leaders' bidding. Successful leaders, then, are skilled in compliance strategies. They also know how to change their followers' identities such that the followers will advance the leaders' agendas even when they are not physically present. Thus, at the end of George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith, a former rebel, proclaims, "I love Big Brother." Whereas authoritarian groups are satisfied with compliance, cultic groups also want conversion. Obedience is not enough. Members must also believe in and be loyal to their leader and group. The totalistic nature of this cultic dynamic has profound clinical implications.

Prevalence

Research suggests that about one percent of the population has been involved in a cultic group at some time in their lives. Lottick's survey (2008) of 695 Pennsylvania psychologists has findings that are particularly relevant to mental health professionals: Of respondents, 13.1% reported personal experience—either their own or that of a family member—with cults. Thirty-three percent of the respondents reported that they had treated people who were or had been members of cultic groups.

Assessment and Treatment Considerations

Among other findings, the Pew Landscape study (2014) found that 53% of individuals said that religion was "very important" to their lives. Yet few counselors routinely ask about religious background and experience in their assessment of new clients. Though not all cultic groups are explicitly religious, most are. And even though most religious involvements are beneficial, some aren't.

Counselors may, then, ask clients a question such as "Have any religious or other kinds of groups had a significant impact on your life?" If they have, it's useful to inquire into whether that impact was positive or negative, while avoiding the easily misunderstood and potentially provocative term *cult*, even if what the client describes sounds cultic.

Current cult members typically view their involvement as beneficial. It's important to respect their perspective. Persuading somebody to leave a cult is a subtle and complex process that requires specialized skill and raises serious ethical questions. Moreover, the client may have come for help with a specific problem that has little to do with the group involvement. Nevertheless, counselors may consider inquiring about relationships with family. If family members seem concerned about the client's group involvement, the counselor may ask if the client would like help in dealing with family issues. Some who specialize in helping families concerned about a cult-involved loved one emphasize mediation or conflict resolution, rather than *exit*. Frequently, especially with less extreme groups, improving the relationship between a member and family is the only appropriate and feasible intervention. Mental health professionals, even without deep knowledge of cultic dynamics, may be helpful in family counseling that aims at reducing conflict, rather than persuading one member of the family to give up a group involvement that the member perceives as beneficial.

Some former cult members often require education before they fully understand the harmful effects of their group involvement. In a full-fledged cultic environment, when a member doubts the leader or group, the member must be wrong. In other words, “You’re not qualified to say *no* until you say *yes*.” Thus, former members will often be full of self-doubt and confusion. They may have left their group not because they concluded it was bad, but because, compared to the pain of staying, the pain of leaving provided relative relief. Such persons may be out of the group physically, but not psychologically. If the counselor encounters such a client, it probably would be wise to consult with an expert in cultic dynamics, who may help with the educational component that the person needs. ICSA can help you find these experts.

Other former members of cultic groups recognize that they were abused and exploited, even if they are not comfortable with the *cult* label. Again, it’s important for the professional to avoid that term unless the client uses it. Usually, terms that are closer to what the person experienced enhance communication (e.g., *spiritual abuse*, *psychological abuse*, *trauma*, *betrayal*). The assessment of such clients should explore their relationship to the group and to their family. It also should gauge the clients’ level of functioning and symptomatology. Sometimes anxiety or depression may be so severe that psychiatric consultation is called for, and occasionally hospitalization may be warranted. Consider referral to a cult and/or psychiatric expert.

Individuals who were born or raised in cultic groups may fall into any one of the three patterns of cultic behavior described above. However, because their personalities were formed in a highly demanding, catch-22, and totalistic environment, their psychological needs may be much greater than those of first-generation former members. When the born-or-raised leave their groups, they may feel like “strangers in a strange land.” Unlike first-generation former members who return to family and friends, the born-or-raised typically leave family and friends behind. Knowledge of cultic dynamics is vital when working with this population.

Last, families may come to a counselor for help regarding a loved one involved in a group they may view as cultic. Bardin (2000) is an excellent resource for families. Families will often ask, “Is such and such a cult?” A helpful response is often, “Suppose I told you it wasn’t a cult. Would you stop worrying?” That response is designed to take the person’s focus away from a label and toward a detailed description of specific behavioral changes that cause concern. The counselor’s assessment in such cases should explore these troubling changes and the possibility that they may be related to what goes on in the group. If there is no connection, then the family’s cult concern may be misplaced. If there is a connection, then consultation with cult experts may be advisable.

Resources

- Bardin, L. (2000). *Coping with cult involvement: A handbook for families and friends*. Bonita Springs, FL: American Family Foundation (ICSA).
- Goldberg, L., Goldberg, W., Henry, R., & Langone, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Cult recovery: A clinician’s guide to working with former members and families*. Bonita Springs, FL: ICSA.
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- International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) Web Resources:
 - icsahome.com
 - spiritualabuseresources.com
 - [youtube.com/channel/UCS_hc5L01HtMv0a8kRcLcig](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS_hc5L01HtMv0a8kRcLcig)
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Do you know how to counsel with clients who have been involved in cults or high-demand organizations?

One third of all counselors will work with a former cult member or someone with a family member involved in a cult or high demand organization (Lottick, 2005).

What is a Cult or High Demand Organization (HDO)?

According to Singer (1995) and Zablocki (1997), it is an environment and organization that:

1. Controls the person's social, physical environment, along with the person's time
2. Systematically creates a sense of powerlessness in the person
3. Manipulates a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to control behavior and a person's sense of identity
4. Puts forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that refuses to be modified except by leadership approval
5. Is at a high risk of becoming abusive to members because of the member's commitment to possible corrupt, power-seeking, charismatic leaders

Matthews (2019) conducted two separate studies regarding what works best in counseling with former cult members from the counselor's perspective and the client's perspective. Participants self-described themselves in the first study as counselors who worked with former cult members and in the second study participants self-described themselves as former cult members according to the definition above.

The Counselor's Perspective of how to counsel former cult members (sample: 112 counselors, therapists, psychologists from USA, Canada, Australia, Europe, and S. America) (Matthews, 2019).

Counselors reported that the most helpful theoretical orientations in working with former cult members included Humanistic or Person-Centered Counseling, Trauma Focused Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Psychoanalysis. Interventions that counselors reported worked best with former cult members included Crisis Interventions, EMDR, and psychoeducation. Topics that Counselors considered most important to cover with former cult members included thought reform (mind control), grief, loss, and mourning, identity formation, PTSD, and attachment issues.

The Client's Perspective (416 individuals born and raised in cults) (Matthews, 2019)

Counseling in the cult: Fifty-nine percent of participants reported having counseling while in the cult. Seventy-five percent of those participants reported the counseling was harmful or ineffective, with 50 percent describing their counseling as "pastoral counseling."

Counseling after the cult: Seventy-nine percent of participants reported having had counseling after the cult with nine percent of participants reporting the counseling to be harmful. One percent described their counseling as pastoral counseling. The most helpful types of counseling, according to the participants, were talk therapy, Trauma focused counseling, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Psychoanalysis, and EMDR. The most helpful discussions to discuss with clients themselves were identity development, thought reform (mind control), coping with fear, anxiety and depression, dealing with trauma and PTSD, and dealing with grief, loss, and mourning over losing family members, friends, and their history.

What can you do to learn more to become an effective Counselor with former cult members?

- Become a member of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) to learn more about how you can work with clients involved in high demand organizations and cults.
- Checkout the website: www.icsahome.com for resources, publications, newsletters, etc.
- Take a look at the book *Cult Recovery: A Clinician's Guide* edited by Goldberg, Goldberg, Henry & Langone

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Coercion, Power and Control: Cultic Dynamics in Intimate Relationships

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Intimate Partner Violence (IPV): Definition

Most counselors are familiar with the term *intimate partner violence (IPV)*, which has replaced the older term, *domestic violence (DV)*. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) governmental agency defines IPV as “a serious, preventable public health problem that affects millions of Americans ... [that involves] physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy” (CDC, 2017).

IPV and Cultic Dynamics

In 1997, ICSA² published a special issue of *Cultic Studies Journal*³ entitled “Women Under the Influence.” In this issue, several authors remarked on the similarities between IPV and the kinds of interpersonal manipulation, undue influence, mind-control techniques (e.g., gaslighting), environmental controls, and psychological (and at times physical) coercion routinely experienced and described by former members of destructive cults.

The Duluth Power and Control Wheel and IPV

With the original authors’ permission, public health professionals and graduate students Chelsea Brass and Abigail Hazlett have adapted the well-known Duluth Power and Control Wheel to include and reflect the cultic dynamics noted by clinicians and researchers since 1997; they presented their theory at ICSA’s annual international conference, held in Philadelphia, PA in 2018. The original Power and Control Wheel, reproduced with permission below, graphically presents the social and psychological basis for IPV.

In the original Duluth wheel, power and control are maintained by the abuser through a combination of processes that include



- Isolation (from nonapproved friends and family);
- Threats (e.g., threats of violence, to leave);
- Intimidation (e.g., inducing fear by displaying weapons, property destruction);
- Economic abuse (e.g., control of funds);
- Emotional abuse (e.g., constant insults and criticisms, gaslighting, inducing guilt);
- Isolation (from friends and family, controlling communication with others, limiting outside activities, etc.);
- Minimizing, denying and blaming (e.g., making light of abuse, saying the abuse didn't happen);
- Using children (e.g., threats of custody actions, using children to relay messages); and/or
- Using male privilege (e.g., treating women like servants, being the “master of the castle”).

¹ With special thanks to Chelsea Bass and Abigail Hazlett for their earlier contributions.

² Prior to 2002, ICSA was known as the American Family Foundation (AFF).

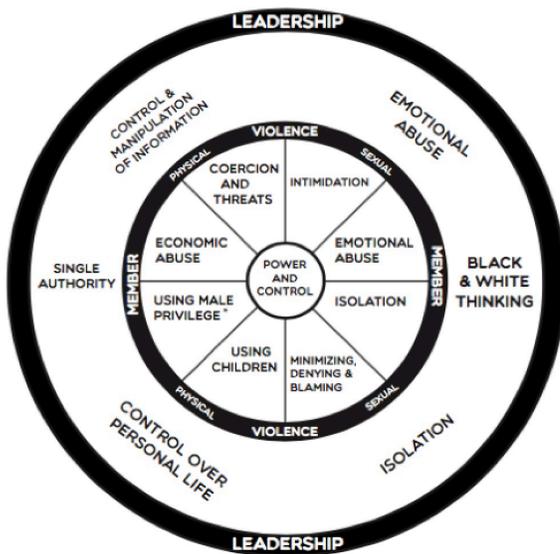
³ Now the *International Journal of Cultic Studies*.

Prevalence

According to the CDC (2017), almost 25% of adult women and approximately 14% of adult men report having experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime, while 16% of women and 7% of men have experienced sexual violence from an intimate partner (this includes contact offenses such as rape, being made to penetrate someone else, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact). A smaller but significant percentage of women and men also report having been stalked by a partner at some time in their lives.

The Duluth Power and Control Wheel and Cultic Dynamics

Many former members of cults—and often, especially female survivors—report dynamics that are strikingly similar to those identified in the Duluth Power and Control Wheel model. Thus, former cult survivors typically experience



- Total or near-total control of their personal lives (e.g., control over parenting their children, romantic and sexual relationships, finances, employment, leisure time);
- Single authority, typically claimed to be of a “divine” nature, and almost always under a male leader (guru, preacher, prophet, etc.);
- Control and manipulation of information (e.g., access to the Internet, to media, to educational sources);
- Isolation (e.g., demand to avoid contact with nongroup members, who may be possessed by evil entities),
- Emotional abuse (e.g., humiliation, often in front of other group members; “dispensing of existence”; demands for purity; demands to confess); and/or
- Black-and-white thinking (e.g., the doctrine is pure and infallible; nonmembers are inferior to members; the world is rigidly divided into good and evil).

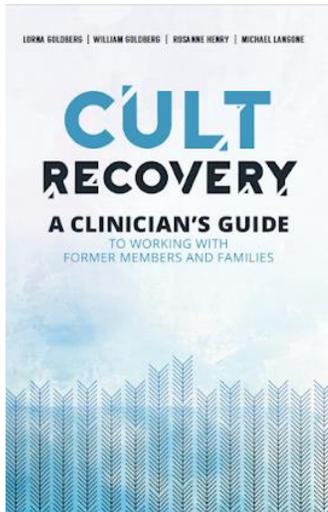
Not all cult members experience coercion, control, and interpersonal violence. Not all who experience intimate partner violence are subjected to cultic dynamics. Nevertheless, the overlap between these two groups is substantial. Therefore, further dialogue between experts in IPV and cultic dynamics is needed. ICSA seeks your help in facilitating such dialogue.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). (2017). Preventing intimate partner violence. Retrieved on 31 January 2019 from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-factsheet.pdf>
- International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). icsahome.com
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- icsahome.com/articles/prevalence

Cult Recovery: A Clinician's Guide to Working With Former Members and Families

Lorna Goldberg, William Goldberg, Rosanne Henry, Michael Langone (Eds.)



This landmark, 500-page book, with chapters from leading clinicians and researchers, describes the current state of the art in helping people adversely affected by a cultic dynamic, whether in a cult, mainstream religious denomination, psychotherapy, family, or other interpersonal relationship. The regular price is \$79 plus postage. Special event price: \$50.00 (including postage within the USA; \$75 outside USA).

Though primarily aimed at helpers, the clearly written chapters of this 500-page book can help family members and former members of cultic situations, including those born or raised in such environments.

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- Overview: Helping Families and Loved Ones - William Goldberg LCSW, PsyA
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- Conflict Resolution for Families in Distress - Patricia Millar PhD, PCC and Cristina Caparesi
- Exit Counseling - Carol Giambalvo
- Helping Former Members: Individual Psychotherapy
- Overview: Helping Former Members: Individual Psychotherapy - Lorna Goldberg LCSW, PsyA
- Cults: A Natural Disaster—Looking at Cult Involvement Through a Trauma Lens - Shelly Rosen LCSW
- Counseling Former Cultists: The Brief Intermittent Developmental Therapy (BIDT) Approach - Steve K. D. Eichel PhD, ABPP, CST
- Mentalization Attachment Approach to Cult Recovery - Rosanne Henry MA, LPC
- EMDR—Overview and Application With First- and Second-Generation Former Group Members - Leona Furnari MSW, LCSW
- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) for Former Members of High-Demand Groups - Madeleine Tobias MS, RN, CS
- A Modern Psychodynamic Approach With First-Generation Former Cult Members - Doni Whitsett PhD, LCSW
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- Support Groups
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- Support Group for Former Cult Members - William Goldberg LCSW, PsyA and Lorna Goldberg LCSW, PsyA

- An Independent Faith-Based Approach to Support and Recovery Groups for Those Affected by Harmful Religious Environments - Patrick J. Knapp MA, PhD candidate
- Recovery Workshops, Intensive Programs, and Residential Treatment
- Overview: Recovery Workshops, Intensive Programs, and Residential Treatment - Rosanne Henry MA, LPC
- The Colorado Model Recovery Workshop - Carol Giambalvo and Nancy Miquelon LPCC
- The Wellspring Program - Donna Adams-Weiss PhD, LPC, Ron Burks MA, MDiv, PhD, LMHC, Greg Sammons MEd, LPC, and Lois Svoboda MD, LMFT
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Join ICSA

Founded in 1979, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic groups, alternative movements, and other environments. ICSA is tax-exempt, supports civil liberties, and is not affiliated with any religious or commercial organizations.

ICSA's **mission** is to apply research and professional perspectives to:

- Help those who have been harmed by psychological manipulation and cultic groups
- Provide guidance and support to families
- Educate the public
- Promote and conduct research
- Support helping professionals interested in this area

The following **programs and projects** advance this mission:

- Periodicals: *ICSA Today*; *International Journal of Cultic Studies*; *ICSA Member Update*; *ICSA E-Newsletter*, and the ISCA News Desk Weekly Mailing
- Conferences

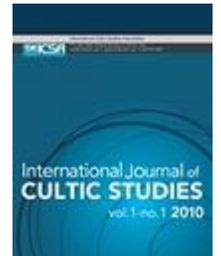


- Workshops
- Virtual events
- Websites: www.icsahome.com, www.SpiritualAbuseResources.com, www.icsaarts.com
- An e-Library with more than 25,000 documents
- Consultation with experts
- Local monthly ICSA meetings and special events

- Research
- Publication of special reports and books

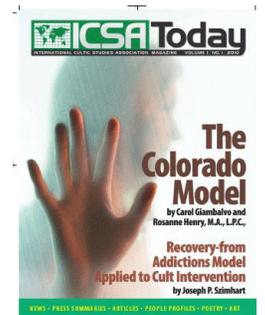
Some **members contribute** to ICSA's mission by:

- Donating beyond their basic membership
- Submitting papers and/or news to ICSA's periodicals
- Submitting proposals for conferences and other events, including artistic and literary submissions
- Participating in various ICSA committees, such as research, mental health, former member, religion, and study groups
- Opening doors to foundations and other funding sources



Members receive:

1. *ICSA Today* - Magazine (3 issues/year)
2. *International Journal of Cultic Studies* - Annual academic web journal that publishes scholarly articles and book reviews.
3. News Desk e-mail - bi-weekly e-mail of a news article deemed noteworthy by the ICSA News Desk.
4. *ICSA Member Update* - quarterly e-mail containing news about the activities (e.g., public talks, publications, etc.) of ICSA members.
5. *ICSA E-Newsletter* - news, articles, resource listings
6. E-Library - Access to ICSA's e-library of more than 25,000 documents and videos, with news articles going back to 1979.
7. Annual Conference Discount for member and immediate family
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