

INFORMATION DISEASE

HAVE CULTS CREATED A NEW MENTAL ILLNESS?

BY FLO CONWAY AND JIM SIEGELMAN

"Because your mind troubles you, give it to me. It won't trouble me."

—Guru Maharaj Ji
Divine Light Mission

"A very effective thought-control technique could also be worked out from Scientology, which could be used to make individuals into willing slaves."

—L. Ron Hubbard
Church of Scientology

"I am your brain."

—Rev. Sun Myung Moon
Unification Church

"Can't function properly in society due to instability. Still suffering from amnesia and sexual dysfunction. I've lost a great deal! Totally different person. Without initiative. Extreme drop in faith and belief in God. Can't feel or find myself."

—former Moonie

Cult mind control. In the three years since a U.S. congressman, three journalists and more than 900 other Americans lost their lives in the steamy jungle of Guyana, the cults have not faded away. Since Jonestown, they have grown larger, richer and more powerful; they may have also created an extraordinary new kind of mental illness.

An editorial note on the authors and Science Digest's support of their study is on page 6.

Our nationwide survey of former cult members, the first of its kind, reveals that in their recruiting and rituals, many cults are using a new form of mind control—a sweeping manipulation unlike anything ever witnessed before in our society.

Comparisons with brainwashing are misleading. That method of thought reform, first observed in the early Fifties in Chinese and North Korean prisons and "reeducation" camps, rests firmly on the principal fact of physical coercion. In America's cults, participation almost always begins voluntarily. From first contact to conversion and in daily cult life, control is achieved not by physical coercion but by an even more potent force: information.

CRIPPLING TACTICS

For the past six years we have been studying the communication techniques that some of America's cult leaders use to gain control over people's minds. Most rely on the use—and abuse—of information: on deceptive and distorted language, artfully designed suggestion and intense emotional experience, crippling tactics aggravated by physical exhaustion and isolation.

How is it done? Most groups actively seek out new members by using slick sales pitches: glowing images of easy pathways to ecstasy and personal encounters with God, Jesus or the group's own living messiah. Once an individual has been drawn

into the cult, there is usually a single moment of conversion, an intense experience engineered through the skillful manipulation of information. A vivid example: the Hare Krishna's *arti ka* ceremony, in which new recruits, led by older members, perform a feverish, jumping dance amid flickering lights, heavy incense, loud, droning music and pounding drums until they are physically and emotionally overcome.

Next, most cults step up the indoctrination process, inculcating the group's beliefs and values at a time when the new convert is highly receptive. More importantly, at this stage group leaders begin to sow the specific suggestions that lie at the heart of the mind-control process. Calls to "surrender," to "turn off the satanic mind" or merely to "let things float" act as covert hypnotic suggestions. If heeded, they can place the new convert in an ongoing trance.

These simple self-hypnotic rituals close off the recruit's mind to doubts, questions and disquieting memories of family and the outside world. They also produce a kind of "ecstasy by default," a numbed, mindless high that many interpret as the attainment of their ultimate spiritual goal. But the price of this bliss may be incalculably high. It is here that the cult experience departs from what has always been respected as valid religious or spiritual experience.

In our initial research, we noted more

Illustration by Alan E. Cober



1 Adam E. Cohen - 22 Sept 1981 - 9:56 P.M. 11

than 20 serious mental, emotional and physical effects of cult life. Physiological problems included extreme weight gain or loss; abnormal skin conditions such as rashes, eczema and acne; menstrual dysfunction in women and higher-pitched voices and reduced facial-hair growth in men. The pressures of cult life also led to feelings of fear, guilt, hostility and depression, sexual dysfunction, violent outbursts and self-destructive or suicidal tendencies.

But the most startling effects of all were bizarre disturbances of awareness, perception, memory and other basic information-processing capacities. Former cult members complained of disorientation and of "floating" in and out of altered states; of recurrent nightmares, hallucinations and delusions; of instances of bewildering or unnerving "psychic" phenomena; and—widespread among former members of groups known for their intense repetitive rituals—of an inability to break mental rhythms of chanting, meditation or speaking in tongues.

No term exists in medicine or mental health to describe this new kind of illness that is infecting America's cult members. In our 1978 book, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, we introduced the term "information disease" for what may represent a disorder of awareness caused not by germs, drugs or physical abuse but by the manipulation of information feeding every sensory channel of the nervous system.

Can the way a person thinks and feels be altered solely by information? Research in neurophysiology has established that, from birth, information-processing pathways in the brain are shaped and maintained by the steady flow of information throughout the nervous system. Our findings go even further and suggest that, at any age, these same pathways may be altered or impaired by a sudden bombardment of new information or experience.

SYNAPTIC CHANGES

From interviews with neurophysiologists and bio-information specialists at Caltech, Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley, we learned that, in some cases, new and intense experiences may bring about a reorganization of long-standing synaptic microstructures; in others, new patterns of thought and feeling may simply bypass or be superimposed over older ones.

Yet from the beginning of our research we observed an apparent link between the frequency and severity of reported effects and the amount of time spent practicing cult mind-stilling rituals. Extended practice of these techniques appears to have a lasting impact on the mind. In conversations with former cult members, we heard

of disturbances in thinking and feeling that persisted for months, even years, after they left the group. In anguished testimony, they talked of experiencing "physical pain" while attempting to make reasoned, independent decisions for the first time in years; they described frightening periods of being unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

"My life was blown to bits by the experience," said a former member of an Eastern mystical cult. "I never knew such bewilderment, pain and feeling on the brink of insanity," said one former Moonie. "I cried all the time," said another. "I experienced more fear and terror than I imagined existed."

Some former cult members claimed that they had become *unable* to think; they were uncertain of their perceptions and incapable of remembering events from their time in the cult or from their life before they joined. One young woman reported that, after several years in the Church of Scientology, she realized that her mind had stopped functioning altogether. "I'd been sleeping, mentally shut

"When I left," says one former member, "I felt broken, shattered and scared of everything and everyone, even myself."

off for nearly six and a half years," she told us. "I hadn't developed personally, intellectually or emotionally since the first day of doing the cult exercises, when I was apparently dazed or hypnotized somehow."

Our study, completed in 1981, surveyed more than 400 former cult members from 48 different groups, including the five major international religious cults (see chart), local sects and minor cults such as the Children of God, the Summit Lighthouse and the Love Family, followers of Eastern gurus such as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and participants in self-help therapies such as est (Erhard Seminars Training) and Lifespring.

We solicited 98 detailed answers and 4 open-ended responses to questions covering every stage of the cult experience: recruitment, cult life, separation, deprogramming, rehabilitation and long-term effects.

Our respondents varied widely in age—from mid-teens to mid-fifties (average age: 21 years)—and in length of time spent in the group—from 3 days to 12 years (average time: 34 months). They di-

vided almost evenly by sex (51 percent male, 49 percent female) and broadly by religious background (46 percent Protestant, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 21 percent Jewish, 7 percent atheist, agnostic or other).

The grim realities of the cult experience emerged from our questions about daily life. For most members, cult life is perpetual motion, an exhausting program of menial labor and around-the-clock fundraising and recruiting duties suffused throughout with endless ritual and devotional activities.

"HAPPY HOOKERS FOR JESUS"

Among the shuffled priorities of most cults, sexual relations ranked low. Celibacy predominated (72 percent), although roughly one-quarter (24 percent) reported having heterosexual relations at least occasionally while in the group. Sexual exploitation of members by group leaders was minimal. Only 5 percent reported having sex with leaders of their group. A notable exception here was the Children of God (a.k.a. the Family of Love), whose female members are commanded to become "fishers of men" and "happy hookers for Jesus." Here 60 percent reported having sexual relations with leaders of the group.

Incidences of physical punishment, reported by approximately one in five respondents, included beatings, starvation, physical bondage, cold showers and dousings and long hours of humiliating and degrading labor. "I was beaten, harassed and locked in a room," said one woman who had tried to leave a cult and had succeeded only on a second attempt. A former Scientologist reported, "I was held in a 'prison camp' under guard and isolated for fifteen months. During this time they tried to convince me that I was evil and psychotic."

Cults expect more than spiritual dues-paying. Our modest sample donated more than \$1.3 million of their own savings and possessions to their groups (average gift: \$3,250), and nearly half of those responding worked on fund-raising drives and at outside jobs that brought in another \$5.7 million over the time they spent in cults (average earnings: \$25,000).

Without exception, the most compelling acts of cult life were the intense daily ritual or therapeutic practices required by every group. These methods varied widely according to cult: meditation in the Divine Light Mission, the Moonies' act of "centering" on the teachings of Rev. Moon, the "tongues" ritual in The Way, Scientology's "training regimens" and "pastoral counseling," the Krishnas' chanting of their familiar mantra. Our respondents reported spending from three to seven hours per day practicing one or

more of these techniques. Members also reported spending time each day in group rituals, including sensitivity sessions, psychodramas, guided fantasies and a variety of emotion-filled confessional activities. Moreover, nearly all our respondents reported spending an additional *20 to 30 hours per week* at lectures, seminars, workshops or required private study of cult doctrines.

This grueling schedule of devotional activities adds up to a numbing *40 to 70 hours per week* (average time: 55 hours per week) spent in various mind-control practices.

The result may be catastrophic. Nearly all of our 400 respondents reported experiencing one or more of the negative long-term effects we had cataloged in our initial research. (In this part of our study, we eliminated any subjects who reported a prior physical or mental-health problem.) We found that nearly one in five experienced some lasting health problem and two-thirds experienced long-term emotional difficulties.

"When I left the cult," said one former member, "I felt broken, shattered and terrified of everyone and everything, mainly myself." And an ex-Moonie raged: "I'm really mad! My body is damaged from poor nutrition and years of fear and guilt and pressure on my nerves."

But, as we expected, it was in the area of disturbances of perception, memory and other information-processing capaci-

One in seven respondents suffered from delusions or hallucinations for up to *eight years* after having left a group.

ties that our survey was most revealing. More than half of all who responded experienced one or more disorders in this category. Fifty-two percent reported periods of disorientation or of "floating" in and out of altered states. Forty percent reported suffering from nightmares about the group. More than a third (35 percent) reported being unable to break mental rhythms of chanting, meditation or speaking in tongues. One in five (21 percent) experienced some memory loss. And one in seven (14 percent) reported suffering from hallucinations or delusions for up to *eight years* after leaving the cult!

"It hurts to think, physically aches," said a former member of the Divine Light Mission. Wrote an ex-member of another cult: "In times of stress or loneliness, I still find myself meditating without having decided to do so. I have memory lapses and find it hard to remember details." "The cult has limited my imaginative and creative abilities in ways that may be irreparable," said an ex-member of a Christian cult.

For many ex-members, coming out of the cults proved to be the most harrowing ordeal of all. On the average, full rehabilitation took more than 16 months. More than one in five respondents reported having suicidal or self-destructive tendencies during this crucial time, and more than one in three sought professional follow-up counseling or therapy.

Do these widespread reports of traumatic effects prove that cults cause information disease? Not by themselves, of course. But our research showed what appeared to be a direct relationship between the number of hours spent per week in cult ritual and indoctrination and the number of long-term effects. In addition, we found a similar correlation between hours per week spent in ritual and indoctrination and the reported length of rehabilitation time. Put simply: our findings appear to confirm that *the psychological trauma cults inflict upon their members is directly related to the amount of time spent in indoctrination and mind-control rituals.*

Perhaps most startling of all was a second finding: in most cults, after the first three to six months of participation, the impact of ritual and indoctrination varies little over the member's remaining time in the group. In other words, *most of the damage appears to be done in the first few months.*

Two groups in particular showed signs of inflicting the most severe physical, mental and emotional harm on their members: the Hare Krishna and the Church of Scientology. Among all groups, Krishna and Scientology tied with the Unification Church in reports of physical deprivation. Their members reported getting the least sleep per night and having the most deficient daily diet. The Krishnas also chalked up the most hours per week of ritual and indoctrination (70 hours), highest reported celibacy rate (95 percent), highest average earnings per member from fund raising and outside jobs (\$72,000), and the second highest incidence of physical punishment (32 percent). Krishna members obsessively chant the mantra almost seven hours per day on the average, nearly double the time spent by all other groups in mind-stilling rituals.

"MY MIND, THE ENEMY"

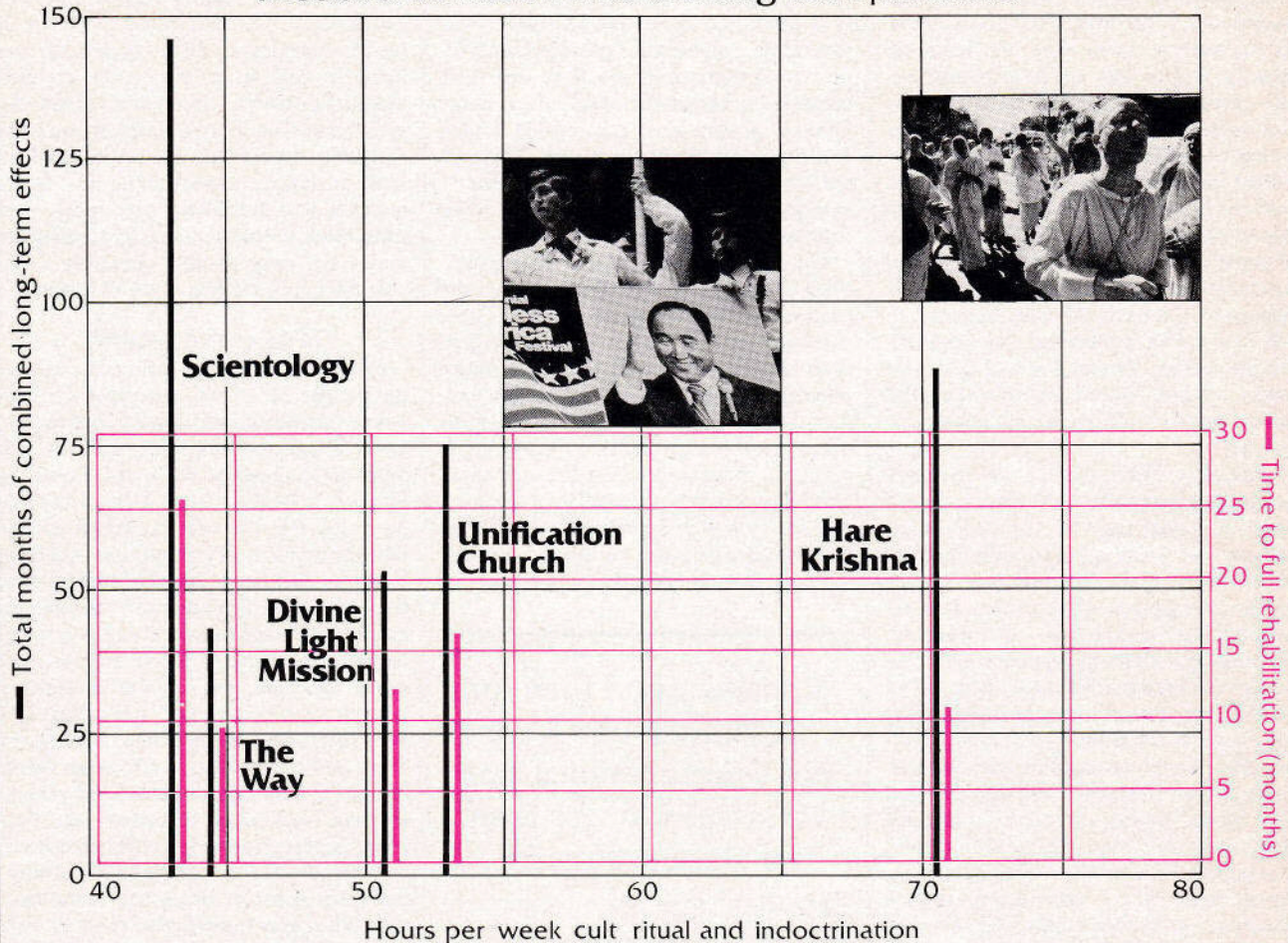
"I was taught to think of my mind as the enemy," said one former member. "For me, the chanting lasted twenty-four hours a day," said another.

The rituals of the Church of Scientology bear little resemblance to those of any other cult. With its extensive program of "training regimens" and expensive "auditing" counseling, Scientology operates successfully as both religion and mass-

D I S E A S E

RITUAL VS. RECOVERY

How the number of hours spent in cult indoctrination affects rehabilitation time and long-term problems.



Figures based on reports from 262 former members. Copyright © 1982 by Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman

Combined figures for all 48 cults reflect the study's basic finding—that the number of hours of ritual a week affects the extent of long-term problems and recovery time. The five biggest cults vary widely in methods. Some highlights: Scientology offers a "personality test," which reveals problems that may be cured by its "communication course." The Way International has been criticized for its alleged anti-Semitism and growing emphasis on weapons training. Divine Light Mission recruits people by offering free meditation instructions. The Unification Church's ultimate goal is an anticommunist world "theocracy" under founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon. Hare Krishna members rise at 4 A.M. to take icy showers and chant 1,700 "rounds" of the mantra.

A SAMPLING OF FINDINGS

	Moon	Hare Krishna	Church of Scientology	Divine Light	The Way	Average, all 48 groups
Average length of time in group (months)	17	33	36	49	23	34
Average hours per day spent in ritual processes	3.3	6.9	3.1	4.4	3.2	4.6
Total hours per week: ritual & indoctrination	53.2	70.1	42.9	50.8	44.8	54.5
Percent of ex-members who were deprogrammed	78%	79%	24%	80%	91%	71%
Long-term mental & emotional effects*						
"floating" in and out of altered states	52%	93%	47%	52%	60%	52%
nightmares	42%	60%	53%	42%	30%	40%
amnesia	16%	40%	31%	18%	25%	21%
hallucinations and delusions	11%	7%	28%	10%	15%	14%
inability to break mental rhythms of chanting	35%	80%	19%	42%	40%	35%
violent outbursts	12%	20%	28%	15%	20%	14%
suicidal or self-destructive tendencies	22%	20%	44%	25%	15%	21%
Average rehabilitation time (months)**	16.6	11.1	25.6	12.3	9.5	16.0

* Percentages show members responding in each group.

** Based on members out of groups six months or longer. Many reported ongoing effects; actual figures may be 5 to 10 percent higher.

marketed therapy. According to those who responded to our survey, however, Scientology's may be the most debilitating set of rituals of any cult in America. Overtime Scientologists who answered our questionnaire reported that it took them, on the average, more than two years (26 months) before they felt fully rehabilitated—more than *twice* the time of those from other major cults. Moreover, former Scientologists surpassed all others in reported incidences of physical punishment while in the group (35 percent) and, upon departure, they claimed the highest rates of sexual dysfunction (22 percent), violent outbursts (28 percent), hallucinations and delusions (28 percent) and suicidal or self-destructive tendencies (44 percent). On the average, former Scientologists surveyed reported more than *twice* the combined negative effects of all other cult groups.

Ironically, although claiming the most severe long-term effects, former Scientologists surveyed reported the *lowest* total of hours per week spent in ritual and indoctrination. This apparent discrepancy seems to support opinions we have expressed earlier that, in combination, Scientology's training regimens and "auditing" counseling sessions (conducted on an E-meter, a kind of crude lie detector) may have an intensifying and compounding effect on the nervous system that goes beyond that of simpler cult rituals. And our survey findings appear to confirm that, *hour for hour, Scientology's techniques may be more than twice as damaging as those of any other major cult in America!* In our view, this could be a vital direction for further research by scientists working in the field of neurophysiology.

"The overall impact? Devastating!" wrote one ex-member. "I still tend to view the world in Scientological terms: 'Truth is only an illusion.' 'People are robots.' 'People are basically insane and dangerous.'" Another was even more bitter: "The only thing I got out of this scam was deep suicidal depression coinciding with the fear of death within five years after separation. We were told that ninety percent of all 'refund cases' eventually commit suicide."

LIFESAVING INTERVENTION

Some of the most impassioned comments came in response to our questions on separation and deprogramming. Since the early Seventies, when the practice of abducting young cult members at the request of their families first began, deprogramming has been a sensitive civil liberties issue. Cult spokesmen condemned it as a brutal violation of individual rights and Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, while former cult members praised the process as a lifesaving inter-

vention that helped them regain their freedom of thought. In their defense, deprogrammers have claimed that abduction is used only as a last resort and that the deprogramming process itself is merely a marathon question-and-answer session. Cult members are provided with information about cult practices and their possible effects on the mind and encouraged to examine their own buried doubts and questions about the group. Through this process, most cult members usually emerge from their trancelike state in as little as a few hours or days.

Our survey confirmed that deprogramming is indeed a vital first step on the road back from cult mind control. Three distinct steps in the process emerged: first, separation, which, for those under mind control, may require involuntary removal from the cult; then the deprogramming proper; and finally a slower rehabilitation process in which the individual gradually rebuilds his weakened thinking and decision-making capacities, much as one would strengthen an injured muscle.

More than two-thirds (71 percent) of

Rehabilitation time for ex-cultists who were not deprogrammed was 10 months longer than for those who were.

those in our survey were deprogrammed, but only about 40 percent were abducted. In almost every case, those who were deprogrammed recovered more quickly and experienced fewer long-term effects than those who were not. Deprogrammees needed an average 10 months less rehabilitation time than non-deprogrammees (14 months instead of 24 months) and reported, on the average, less than half the long-term effects.

"Deprogramming was a godsend," said a former Krishna. Another waxed philosophical: "Being deprogrammed forced me to accept responsibility for my actions and control over my own life. I sometimes curse that fact. It isn't as much fun having to blame myself for my own failures."

We found little evidence to support allegations that deprogramming is violent or brutal. Only five percent said threats or verbal abuse played a significant role in their deprogramming. Only 10 people out of 400 described any instance of physical injury during separation or deprogramming—and 6 of those injuries were self-inflicted. However, serious shortcomings were cited among some deprogrammers

with regard to their personal styles, experience and specific knowledge of each group's methods.

The fledgling field of deprogramming remains at the leading edge of the cult controversy, yet leaders of the mental-health community have steadfastly refused to call on it. As public concern mounts, a growing number of veteran deprogrammees and undertrained amateurs are being drawn into the action and, in some instances, undermining the field's tenuous and hard-won credibility. Despite these problems, deprogramming remains the only remedy currently available for many victims of mind control.

WREAKING HAVOC

For most people, the term *cult* conjures up images of arcane, secretive societies whose members hold bizarre beliefs and swear allegiance to a living guru or self-proclaimed messiah. We found something like this to be the case in most of the major cults. But we were surprised to find that the majority of cult groups, including many we had never heard of before, were fundamentalist Christian sects apparently employing sophisticated mind-control techniques. Thirty of the 48 cults we surveyed emerged out of this traditional branch of Christianity, including The Way International, the Christ Family, the Tony and Susan Alamo Christian Foundation, the Church of Bible Understanding and—not to be forgotten—the People's Temple. As a group, Christian-based cults reported the highest average hours per week spent in ritual and indoctrination. They also rated higher than all cults except Scientology in combined long-term effects and average rehabilitation time (19 months).

As we write, newly completed surveys continue to arrive in the mail. Daily we receive new evidence that cults in America are wreaking havoc on the minds and lives of millions. Yet each day it becomes clearer to us that support for official action from those in positions of responsibility is virtually nonexistent.

The cults continue to claim that any inquiry into their operations and practices is forbidden by the Constitution. Yet U.S. courts have repeatedly ruled that the First Amendment provides only unqualified freedom of religious *belief*, not unlimited freedom to practice those beliefs in ways that may violate existing laws or pose a threat to the health and safety of individuals or society. Similarly, the mental-health establishment has historically been slow to examine matters of faith in medical or scientific terms. But in the eloquent testimony of these hundreds of former cult members—the first victims of information disease—there is a plea for help that should not be ignored. ■