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When Deprogramming is Necessary



Destructive cults are groups that are unethical and deceptive in how they recruit and indoctrinate their members. Most importantly, they use strong influence techniques, or mind control techniques, on these recruits without their consent or knowledge. The result of such a thought reform program for the recruit can be a diminished capacity to assimilate and critically analyze information about the following:

- 1: The individuals exerting control over him or her (the group's leadership).
- 2: The conditions affecting his or her well-being (including diet, living conditions, health or safety hazards).
- 3: The influence of his or her actions, because of these circumstances and conditions, on others (such as family, peers, or more helpless members of the group).

This "programmed" state can, in some instances, be created by dynamics not traditionally considered to be cultic, such as in gangs, prostitution rings, or even therapy settings, but which do subject the individual to elements of a thought reform program.

Often the most sincere efforts to help individuals in situations where such "programming" has occurred are ineffective because meaningful communication cannot be established with the person. The individual refuses to recognize or admit to any exploitation of the self by the group.

What is Deprogramming?

As the number of destructive cults increased in the 1960s and 1970s in this country, the term "deprogramming," now frequently referred to as exit counseling, was coined to describe methods to establish meaningful communication with individuals in cults, and to restore their capacity to critically evaluate the influences they were being subjected to by the thought reform programs of these cults.

Over time, negative connotations have been assigned to the word "deprogramming." Some families resorted to the illegal act of having their adult children kidnapped from cults so that they could be brought to counseling sessions for deprogramming these children would not otherwise consider.

This article is not an endorsement of such criminal acts. Reputable professionals do not condone involuntary deprogramming. The focus of this article, however, is on the actual process of trying to establish communication with a victim of a thought reform program, and does not address strategies to encourage an individual to seek such counseling. This article en-

dorses only legal methods of providing counseling for the purposes of establishing communication with and helping a victim of a cult or other totalist environment to evaluate significant influences of thought reform operating on him or her. This process need not even be completed in one session, but can be done in increments over several sessions.

Many people do manage to leave a cult, or are rejected by the cult because they are no longer productive or they have developed health problems for which the group does not wish to be responsible. These people may seek out deprogramming or exit counseling. Sometimes they seek it at the insistence of their family; other times they realize they need such help to overcome post cult problems they cannot resolve alone. Tragically, some walkaways from cults may have difficulty coming to terms with this realization that they need counseling unless they or someone picks up on their cult experience as a cause of continuing problems.

The key elements of an effective deprogramming process are conveying to the cult member an understanding of how thought reform techniques work, and then evaluating with that person how such techniques operate in the group within which he or she is involved. Significant facts about the group's activities and about the leadership of the group which the recruit may never have been told need to be shared with the individual.

Skills of the Counselor

While this process may sound simple enough, it requires specific skills on the part of the counselor. The counselor must have a good understanding of how thought reform programs work, and an ability to explain this clearly and simply to others. He or she must have high quality, detailed information about the group itself, or there will be difficulty establishing a common ground on which to dialogue for any length of time. Because a cult member has accepted as significant only those ideas and activities that the group leader also finds acceptable, such topics are often the only initial areas of common ground from which to begin dialogue. Finally, the counselor must have a sensitivity as to how to establish a rapport with the individual, even if initially that rapport centers only on insignificant topics.

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There is often a misconception that because someone is under the influence of mind control techniques implemented in a thought reform program, that the individual is incapable of communicating in any meaningful way with others. Actually, it is only in regard to significant matters central to the group's functioning that the inability to communicate occurs.

Armed with an effective knowledge of how mind control techniques work, put together in a thought reform program, use of these techniques, and what facts and actions the cult avoids disclosing to the member that show the deceptive and unethical nature of the group, a counselor who is sensitive enough to establish a common ground for dialogue may make significant progress in deprogramming an individual from a totalist situation.

Deprogramming has been called "more art than science," and to a degree this is true. The crux of a successful deprogramming is to establish a rapport with the individual, convince him or her it is in the individual's best interest to listen to the information the counselor wishes to convey, and then know enough about how to convey key ideas in non-threatening language that will sidestep topics that will bring up the individual's programmed "thought-stopping" techniques. Providing important information to the individual, without initially trying to show its relationship to the individual's own group, can provide an important foundation for productive dialogue.

Then pointing out details about the group that the individual may not have known about which reveal either the group's deceptive methods or its use of thought reform techniques can be very effective. Here, having former members of the group provide such details, whether in person or on video tape, or examining records and writings from the group that the individual knows to be authentic, but which he or she may never have read closely or has not yet been exposed to, can become a critically important part of the deprogramming.

Success in a deprogramming is not an absolutely definable condition. If the deprogramming is to some degree successful, the individual will begin to meaningfully discuss his or her knowledge of the group and the reasons for being involved in it. There will be an exchange of questions and answers between counselor and cult member, not merely a rote recitation of cult propaganda by the member.

Achieving Results

While the end result of a deprogramming session may, from a family's point of view, be to get an individual to decide to leave the cult or totalist group he or she is influenced by, the goal of the counselor should be more open-ended.

If all the counselor wanted to achieve was this break with the group, he or she could avoid explaining to the victim how influence techniques of mind control work, and could simply use those techniques in an equally deceptive manner to try to combat the original programming of the cult.

Far more ethical, and in the long run more valuable to the individual, is to get that person to understand how and why he or she became involved in the group, or could be influenced by any group utilizing a thought reform agenda. This can permit the individual to understand what personal vulnerabilities made the initial recruiting overtures of the group so attractive. The individual can then be made more aware of how to establish long-term goals for overcoming those vulnerabilities or coping with them in a healthy manner.

Additionally, if the individual understands how the recruiting techniques worked in the group, he or she will be more likely to recognize and avoid recruitment efforts by other designing individuals or cult groups in the future.

Ideally, of course, there is a strong family support system available once a person has been successfully deprogrammed. However, this is sometimes not the case. It may be undesirable, because of long-term problems in the relationship between an individual and his or her family, for the individual to return to living with the family, even temporarily. Or, because of economic necessity or emotional commitments (perhaps a spouse in the group), the individual may have to continue to maintain contact with the group. The individual, despite having received deprogramming, may want to delay severing ties finally with the group until a trustworthy support system has been developed.

If the individual truly comes to understand the control mechanisms of the group, then strategies for eventually severing ties can be developed on a long-term basis, and mechanisms for coping with continued exposure to the group on the short-term basis can be worked out. For some, certain deep-seated needs provided by the group cannot be abandoned overnight, even though the individual realizes that there is an unhealthy trade-off for staying with the group to have those needs met. In those cases, the individual must gradually wean himself or herself from the group, develop a support-system that he or she can trust, and then eventually make the break. For these individuals, the information offered in a deprogramming can be the critical difference that gives them the incentive to eventually gain the courage to strike out on their own outside the cult's influence.

Extensive follow-up counseling, even an in-residence treatment program, may be an important component of a comprehensive program which addresses the recovery issues of cult victims. The focus of this counseling is not so much on understanding thought reform or reviewing specifics about an individual's former group, but on long-term problems that should be addressed once the influence of the totalist group has been removed.

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