The Risks of Cults

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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The purpose of this project is to identify the reasons behind joining a cult, what should be done when suspecting someone is a part of a cult and factors counselors should be aware of when working with those who have survived/excaped a cult.

Finding accurate and detailed information on cults has proven to be difficult due to their nature of secrecy. A few cults have gained media attention, such as Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate, due to the members and leaders committing suicide. While suicide is not a factor that is often seen in cults, it is important to acknowledge based on history and the potential of it occurring in the future. One research study found that 25% of members within a cult attempted suicide.

Many differences have been identified in how cult activities have changed over time. In recent years, cult leaders have begun recruiting senior citizens in an effort to utilize their financial assets. Another difference is the use of weapons. Modern cults have been known for creating large stashes of weapons, allegedly for protection from outside forces. Many children are now being born into cult groups and raised within the group. These children are frequently enrolled, poorly schooled and subjected to various forms of abuse and neglect. We can expect the evolvement of cults to continue as new targets and purposes are selected.

According to Goldberg (2015) keeping members of cults isolated and afraid is what keeps them dependent and obedient to the cult. Often when family members attempts to confront another member they suspect of joining a cult, it ends with a shutting down of the exchange. Goldberg discusses multiple communication techniques to practice when confronting a member of the family you suspect to be in a cult. Members do not realize that they are harboring unconscious doubts about the cult of which they are involved and they will not allow those beliefs to come to light.

First, the foundation of the conversation consists of building rapport. By building rapport you are creating a safe space for further dialogue. The article discusses that the point of the conversation is not to debate or argue with the member because this will then lead to the shutting down of the dialogue. Finally, the article advises talking about a time where you were in a situation where they felt out of control. This could include a contract, addiction, controlling relationship, etc. This can make the member feel more releatable and understood.

The limited amount of research may allegedly, leave counselors feeling unsure of how to help the individual that is seeking help. According to a study done by Cyndi H. Matthews (2017) twelve themes were noticed throughout the participants responses and she discusses how each of the themes played in participants of being inside the environment, deciding to leave, the leaving process, and living outside of the cult. The twelve themes include:

- Patriarchy and gender roles, obedience to authority, decision making, group and relationship support, relationship with parents, religiosity and spirituality, abuse, outside influence, sense of identity, emotional consequences of life in the cult, fear and courage, and long process of change.

The repercussions that individuals experience once they leave the group are damaging and life changing. Regardless of the negative effects that cults have on those who were involved, there is a lot counselors can do to support those who found their way out. Coping skills that may be taught consists of assertiveness, setting appropriate boundaries, discussing trauma, allowing the client to process their feelings of guilt, shame, anger, validation, empowerment, and lastly, instilling resilience. Although these are not the only interventions a counselor may use, it is a good foundation on how to start the healing process with your client.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

- Leaders are charismatic, have the ability to influence and manipulate others. A risk factor for joining a cult is family member already involved. Some children are born into the group because there family is already in it. Once someone has joined, the controlled environment leads to attachment to the group leader and also a close support system from those members of the group. The group is usually separated from the outside world that is why the attachment to the leader is high. Members are taught that they are better than those that are not in the group. They are taught different deceptive techniques that are considered to be brainwashing.

- Research has looked at how members are introduced to these groups. Most people have factors such as search for meaning however, anyone can be recruited into the groups. This can include a search for self-change. This can include a search for meaning, empowerment, and lastly, instilling resilience. Although these are not the only interventions a counselor may use, it is a good foundation on how to start the healing process with your client.

- A cult is defined as a life encompassing religious organization that seeks to control members’ choices, decisions, and lives. The goal of this research was to see what risk factors if any that are those that join a cult. Some factors include searching for self-change, life dissatisfaction, a sense of lacking purpose, and having a family member already involved. Being part of these organizations can be dangerous because of the control and charismatic traits of the leader. It has been shown that the risk of having mental health issues can be increased because of the environment and demanding way of living in cultism. It is important to consider how to best work with former members of these groups as a clinician. There are a few topics to be aware of when working with individuals such as: difficulty making simple decisions, boundaries, negative outlook on gender roles, feelings of isolation, guilt and shame, lack of education, identity confusion, and depression. Whatever the effect or symptom is for the client, the counselor can be there to listen, understand, empower, validate their feelings and emotions, respectfully educate, and most importantly instilling resilience for that person to have a fulfilling life.

REFERENCES