

Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups

Concerted efforts at influence and control lie at the core of cultic groups, programs, and relationships. Many members, former members, and supporters of cults are not fully aware of the extent to which members may be manipulated, exploited, or even abused. The following list of social-structural, social-psychological, and interpersonal behavioral patterns commonly found in cultic environments may help you assess a particular group or relationship.

Compare these patterns to the situation you were in (or in which you, a family member, or friend is currently involved). This list may help you determine if there is cause for concern. Bear in mind that this list is not meant to be a “cult scale” or a definitive checklist to determine if a specific group is a cult; this is not so much a diagnostic instrument as it is an analytical tool.

- The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader, and (whether he is alive or dead) regards his belief system, ideology, and practices as the Truth, as law.
- Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
- Mind-altering practices (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, or debilitating work routines) are used in excess and serve to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).
- The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel (e.g., members must get permission to date, change jobs, or marry – or leaders prescribe what to wear, where to live, whether to have children, how to discipline children, and so forth).
- The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and its members (e.g., the leader is considered the Messiah, a special being, an avatar – or the group and/or the leader is on a special mission to save humanity).
- The group has a polarized, us-versus-them mentality, which may cause conflict with the wider society.
- The leader is not accountable to any authorities (unlike, for example, teachers, military commanders, or ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream religious denominations).
- The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify whatever means it deems necessary. This may result in members participating in behaviors or activities they would have considered reprehensible or unethical before joining the group (e.g., lying to family or friends, or collecting money for bogus charities).
- The leadership induces feelings of shame and/or guilt in order to influence and control members. Often this is done through peer pressure and subtle forms of persuasion.
- Subservience to the leader or group requires members to cut ties with family and friends, and radically alter the personal goals and activities they had before joining the group.
- The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.
- The group is preoccupied with making money.
- Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities.
- Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.
- The most loyal members (the “true believers”) feel there can be no life outside the context of the group. They believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave – or even consider leaving – the group.

Naturally, each group must be observed and judged on its own merits and its own practices and behaviors as to whether it constitutes a cult. Cults can be chameleon-like, changing their focus or their mode of operation. Over time, many cults grow or shrink in size, move locations, take on new names, refocus (sometimes abruptly) immediate goals and projects, shift recruitment targets, and so on. And most importantly, even though the patterns of structure and behavior are similar, not all cults are alike. Cults may be placed on a continuum of influence and control, and their effects range from somewhat benign to mildly damaging to harmful or dangerous.

Source: Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships by Janja Lalich.