"What exactly is a cult, anyway?"
A cult is a group of people who organize around a strong authority figure. Cults, like many other groups, attempt to expand their influence for the purposes of power or money. However, to achieve these ends, destructive cults employ a potent mixture of influence techniques and deception to attain psychological control over members and new recruits. This fundamental level of control is known alternatively as 'brainwashing,' 'thought reform,' or 'mind control.' A successful induction by a destructive cult displaces a person's former identity and replaces it with a new one. That new identity may not be one that the person would have freely chosen under her own volition (Hassan, 1990).

There are over 3,000 destructive cults in the US, with approximately 4 million members. They fall into 4 basic types:

- Religious -- the type we hear about most frequently;
- Psychological/Enlightenment -- offering expensive "enlightenment" workshops;
- Commercial -- including certain pyramid and multi-level marketing organizations;
- Political -- which are organized around a political dogma. Nazism was originally a cult, and cults can still be found lurking in the left and right wings of American politics.

"What's the difference between a cult. . . and my church, my service club, or, say, Alcoholics Anonymous?"
There are lots of differences, but the major difference is that of ultimate goal. Established religions and altruistic movements are focused outward--they attempt to better the lives of members and often, nonmembers. They make altruistic contributions. Cults serve their own purposes, which are the purposes of the cult leader; their energies are focused inward rather than outward (Singer, 1995). Also, religions and altruistic movements typically lack the distinguishing characteristics of overbearing authoritarian control, the use of deception in recruitment, the use of coercive influence techniques, and the replacement of one identity with another which would not have been freely chosen by the individual before joining the group (Hassan, 1990).

Upon hearing about cult influence techniques, some of my students reason thus: if cults use influence tactics A, B, and C, and my church (or health club or debate team) also uses influence tactics A, B, & C, then my church (or other group) is no different from a cult. This sort of reasoning represents the logical fallacy called "affirming the consequent."

Common Characteristics of Cults

- Cults are generally religious in nature
- Cults deviate from mainstream ideas or beliefs
- Cults are usually formed by a single male who enunciates group doctrine and establishes rules
- Conformity and commitment are expected of members
- Cult members show devotion, if not reverence, for their leader
- Information management and manipulative techniques may be used to promote dependency and subservience

"What kinds of people join cults? What's wrong with them?"
In the wake of the UFO/Heaven's Gate cult suicide, I have heard several media personalities ask these questions of former and current cult members. The questions make me laugh, because they're a perfect example of how the wrong questions can frame and obscure an issue. Even when cult experts correctly point to the powerful environmental constraints generated by cults, rather than to the personalities and backgrounds of individual cult members, these media personalities single-mindedly press the question, "But what's wrong with cult members?" The answer, for the vast majority of inductees, is that there was nothing "wrong" with them--at least, not until they were persuaded to join a cult.

For the most part, normal, average people join cults--people like you and me. Research indicates that approximately two-thirds of cult members are psychologically healthy people that come from normal families. The
remaining third are likely to have depressive symptoms, usually related to a personal loss—perhaps a
death in the family, a failed romantic relationship, or career troubles. Only 5 to 6 percent of cult members
demonstrate major psychological problems prior to joining a cult (Singer, 1995). Cults don't want, and
don't recruit, people with psychological problems or physical handicaps—they represent a loss rather than
a gain of cult-oriented productivity. Cults prefer intelligent, productive individuals who are able to contribute
money and talent to "the cause," whatever it may be (Hassan, 198-).
One of social psychology's great discoveries has been the overwhelming influence that the environment--
the immediate situation--exerts on people's behavior. Yet, when assigning cause, observers will usually
attribute cause to a person's personality, not the constraints of the environment.

This is such a persistent and reliable human bias--to assign cause to the person rather than to the
environment--that it has been given the name of "the fundamental attribution error."
The fact is, the environment can easily dominate personality-based differences among people, making
person differences a relatively minor variable in the equation. In other words, given a powerful and
engaging situation, people often react to it in a uniformly similar fashion, regardless of personality
differences. This truism has been demonstrated numerous times in the laboratory (Sharif, Asch, Milgram. . .
) and more frighteningly, in real life (Nazism, Bolshevism, Jim Jones . .).

True to this discovery, there appears to be no reliable personality factor that predicts cult membership.
However, certain situational elements make people more vulnerable to cult recruitment, and they include:
loneliness (as experienced by someone who has recently moved to a new location); depression (as we
feel after a failed relationship); and uncertainty about how to proceed (as I felt when I first went to college).
These situations create the desire for quick, simple solutions. Cults provide a myriad of "solutions," which
are more importantly accompanied by structure, authority, and close social contacts--elements that people
want, need, and which most of us take for granted in the course of our everyday lives.

According to psychologist and cult expert Margaret Thaler Singer, cults flourish during periods of social
and political turbulence and "during breakdowns in the structure and rules of the prevailing society." Cults
were prevalent after the fall of Rome, during the French Revolution, and in England during the Industrial
Revolution. Cults arose in Japan after World War II, and in Eastern Europe after the breakup of the
Communist regime. Here in America, cults flourished during the rule of the 1960s counterculture. Civil
unrest, the drug culture, the sexual revolution, and the weakening of the family left people looking for
answers and assurance--which cults enthusiastically provided.

Motivation to join extreme cults is almost exclusively based on dissatisfaction with life and difficulty in
coping with its demands. Cults provide a measure of identity and give meaning to life. Rules and
regulations provide structure to those who feel adrift. The sense that others care makes the person who
joins a cult feel secure and loved.

Destructive Cult Ideology

1. **Submission to Leadership** - Leaders tend to be absolute, prophets of God, God Himself, specially
   anointed apostle, or just a strong, controlling, manipulative person who demands submission even if
   changes or conflicts occur in ideology or behavior.

2. **Polarized World View** - The group is all that is good; everything outside is bad.

3. **Feeling Over Thought** - Emotions, intuitions, mystical insights are promoted as more important than
   rational conclusions.

4. **Manipulation of Feelings** - Techniques designed to stimulate emotions, usually employing group
dynamics to influence responses.

5. **Denigration of Critical Thinking** - Can go so far as to characterize any independent thought as selfish,
   and rational use of intellect as evil.
6. **Salvation or Fulfillment** - Can only be realized in the group.

7. **End Justifies the Means** - Any action or behavior is justifiable as long as it furthers the group's goals. The group (leader) becomes absolute truth and is above all man-made laws.

8. **Group Over Individual** - The group's concerns supersede an individual's goals, needs, aspirations, and concerns. Conformity is the key.

9. **Warnings** - of severe or supernatural sanctions for defection or even criticism of the cult - This can go so far as to apply to negative or critical thought about the group or its leaders.

10. **Severing of Ties with Past, Family, Friends, Goals, and Interests** - Especially if they are negative towards or impede the goals of the group.

The following are techniques of unethical thought reform and mind control:

1. A focus on felt needs, defects, with exaggerated promises of fulfillment.

2. Rigid Control of Time and Activities - Often physically and emotionally draining activities leaving little time for reflection, questioning and privacy.

3. Information Control - Cutting off or denigrating outside sources of information especially if it is critical of the group. This can also include misrepresentation and information overload.

4. Language Manipulation - Ascribing new "inside" meanings in ordinary words or the use of an exclusive vocabulary subtly moving a person to want to become an insider.

5. Discouraging Critical, Rational Thought and Questions - For instance, comments like, "Satan is the cause of all doubt; he wants to keep you from the Truth"; or, "one must move beyond the cognitive left-brain and get in touch with one's higher self - his right-brain, intuitive self for true knowledge".

6. Instruction and Repetition in Trance Induction Techniques - These include progressive relaxation, chanting, hypnosis, meditation, trance states, guided imagery or visualization, deep breathing exercises - all of which make a person highly suggestible, often unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and can cause psychopathology such as relaxation induced anxiety.

7. Confession Sessions - Promoting full disclosure of all secret sins, thoughts, temptations which can become a powerful tool to manipulate, blackmail, and emotionally bond you to the leader or group. It is actually a depersonalization or stripping yourself - a submission to the group.

8. Guilt, Fear - Weapons used to maintain group loyalty, suppress questions and defections.

9. Control of Sexuality and Intimacy within the Cult - This may extend to marriage decisions (Moonies), sexual relations, promiscuity (Children of God), group sex (New Age Therapy groups), child sex, adultery, and polygamy (Branch-Davidians).

10. Excessive Financial Obligations - More and more money is needed to attain higher degrees of spirituality (Scientology), or complete submission to God requires one to give up everything to the group or leader.

The amount of points of ideology and conversion methodology that are in place and the degree of the intensity of their application is proportional to the effect and damage of the mind control.
These factors tend to make normal evangelism, or even dialogue, much more difficult. Therefore, some people have looked to deprogrammers or exit-counselors to help break the mental head-locks (brain-washing) of their loved ones in an attempt to rescue them from the cult.

**Questions:**

1.) What is the definition of a cult?

2.) What are the four types of cults?

3.) Why do people join cults?

4.) Why do cults focus on “normal” healthy people as potential members?

5.) Do researchers believe nature or nurture influences whether or not a person will be a cult member?

6.) What type of situations cause a person to be more vulnerable to cult recruitment?