

The Role of Critical Thinking in Recovery for Ex-members of Destructive Groups

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Introduction: Dr. Margaret T. Singer, one of the most well-known psychologists who specialized in the cultic studies arena and the recovery process, stated that the most important aspect of recovery is psycho-education -- the ability of the former member to understand what happened to them and how it affects them throughout the recovery process. Key to that understanding is the role of critical thinking. We need to be able to learn the techniques and coercive influence practices that were used to gain commitment and compliance, shut down critical thought processes, manipulate experiences and emotions and isolate members psychologically from gaining information and feedback from the world outside the group. We need to understand these in order to begin to break them down and unravel them. (Carol Giambalvo)

In this article, I want to explore the nature of critical thinking in the role of recovery for ex-members of destructive groups. Former members face many difficult changes in the recovery process including anger, intimacy, and how to just get along in life, to mention just a few. I want to focus on critical thinking for the purpose of clarifying the role it plays in recovery and try to clear up misunderstandings of what we mean by critical thinking.

To start, let's look at what critical thinking is. There are many popular ideas about it. I have heard everything from defining critical thinking as "a measuring stick to reality" to a more base definition as "a crap detector". Both of those have some validity, but I prefer to use the definition from the *Dictionary of Psychology* by Arthur Reber. The dictionary defines critical thinking as a cognitive strategy consisting largely of continual checking and testing of possible solutions to guide one's work. Another way to look at it is to test existing ideas and solutions for flaws and errors. Looking at this definition, destructive groups block critical thinking.

One of the biggest components to critical thinking is the ability to question. The ability to question helps us to clarify goals, check for accuracy, test assumptions, develop a point of view, and look at solutions to problems. Basically, this helps us with all our decision making whether joining a group, looking at a new job or even buying a car. Imagine going to the grocery store and trying to decide what food you want to get without being able to ask questions to yourself. Not allowing you to ask if an item would taste good to me, what can I mix with it, does it have any nutritional value, how much does it cost, what ingredients are in this product that I may be allergic to. Get the idea? This skill is used every day and having that ability shut down greatly inhibits our thinking. Destructive groups shut down this process by turning the questions back on the individual. Guilt induced by the destructive group about questions is phrased in terms of "not being holy enough, not fighting for your race, not wanting to find God, make the planet a better place." The guilt is always turned on the individual doing the questioning, never the group or group leader.

Before I take a look at the blocks to critical thinking, we need to go over some educational learning theories. That is, how do we learn and make decisions? Decision making isn't just a collection of facts; it involves experiences, and memories of those experiences. There are many theories on learning, but for the sake of simplicity, I divide up learning into visual, audio and tactile. For example, I was trained in the Air Force way of doing things. That is: watch a step, do a step and get a banana as a reward! That is a visual, tactile system. We all learn a bit differently. Sometimes a learning event, which can be traumatic, will include other sensory inputs. I believe that's why many ex members talk about triggers that they can't explain. A smell, sound, color of light may possibly be registered at the same time the event occurred. These triggers can make people anxious, angry, and depressed.

There are many blocks to critical thinking that can occur. Nutrition is one that many people don't even think about. It's a physiological fact that if someone has a poor diet, especially a lack of protein, his or her motor skills decrease. Thinking is also affected. Reciprocation is another thought stopper. Robert Cialdini, in his book, *Influence*, goes into detail about reciprocation. What that term means is, a sense that one needs to repay a favor, a sense of obligation. This can occur even when the "favor" is unsolicited. For example, we had a white supremacy group go through the jail system in California and post bail for some of the kids they thought would be good Aryans. The individuals that came out of the jail were not racist to begin with, but felt a sense of obligation to repay this favor. So, they hung out with the group members and that's where the indoctrination began.

The area that seems the most popular for discussion on these blocks to critical thinking is Cognitive Distortions, or making mistakes in thinking. Aaron Beck did a lot of research on this and the following is taken directly from the book, *Taking Back Your Life* by Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias. These are the best examples that I have seen on the subject:

1. **All-or-nothing thinking.** Cults teach black-and-white thinking, such as "Everyone outside the group is controlled by Satan or is evil," "The leader is God and cannot make mistakes," and "You must always strive for perfection in order to reach the group's goal." Such thinking stifles personal growth and keeps a person pitted against the rest of the world.
2. **Overgeneralization.** Simply making one mistake can cause a former member to leap to the conclusion that her leader's predictions that dire consequences will befall those who leave are indeed coming true. Former members often have difficulty allowing themselves to make mistakes without hearing harsh criticisms in their heads. Reviewing actions at the end of the day, no matter how simple, can help counterbalance this internal cult chatter.
3. **Mental Filter.** Cults teach people to dwell on their mistakes and weaknesses. In many cults, each day's activities are reviewed, with concentration on alleged sins, errors, slippages, or wrongdoings. All thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are cause for criticism and repentance. After such training, a person may obsess about a small mistake and lose sight of positive things that are happening. Anything negative becomes a lens that filters out everything else.
4. **Disqualifying the positive.** One means of cult control is to not allow members to take pride in their achievements. All that is good comes from the Master, while members are made to feel stupid and inadequate. Making lists of personal strengths and accomplishments may counteract this reaction.
5. **Jumping to conclusions.** There are two forms of jumping to negative conclusions, which are probably familiar to former members:

- Mind reading. Those who were in New Age or Eastern cults may have been led to believe that mind reading is real. This belief is used to make assumptions about others. Doing the same now may be counterproductive. Don't jump to conclusions about another person's actions or attitudes. Don't substitute assumptions for real communication.
 - Fortune telling. Cults predict the failure of their critics, dissenters, and defectors. Former members sometimes believe that depression, worry, or illness is sure to hound them (and their family) forever. Remember that such phobias and distortions have nothing to do with reality, but rather have been instilled by the cult.
6. **Magnification (catastrophizing) and minimization.** Magnifying members' faults and weaknesses while minimizing strengths, assets, and talents is common in cults. The opposite holds true for the leader. This trend has to be reversed in former members in order for them to rebuild self-esteem, although reaching a balanced perspective may take time. Feedback from trustworthy, nonjudgmental friends may be helpful here.
 7. **Emotional reasoning.** In groups that place emphasis on feeling over thinking, members learn to make choices and judge reality based solely on what they feel. This is true of all New Age groups and many transformational and psychotherapy cults. Interpreting reality through feeling is a form of wishful thinking. If it truly worked, we would all be wealthy and the world would be a safe and happy place. When such thinking turns negative, it is a shortcut to depression and withdrawal – "I feel bad and worthless: therefore I am bad and worthless."
 8. **"Should" statements.** Cult beliefs and standards often continue to influence behavior in the form of "should," "must," "have to" and "ought to." These words may be directed at others or at yourself; for example, if you think "I should be more perfect." The result is feeling pressured and resentful. Try to identify the source of those internal commands. Do they come from the former cult leader? Do you truly obey him anymore?
 9. **Labeling and mislabeling.** Ex-members put all kinds of negative labels on themselves for having been involved in a cult: stupid, jerk, sinner, crazy, bad, whore, no good, fool. Labeling oneself a failure for making a mistake (in this case, joining the cult) is mental horsewhipping. It is over-generalizing, cruel, and, like the other cognitive distortions, untrue and self-defeating. Labeling others in this way is equally inaccurate and judgmental. If there must be labels, how about some positive ones? For instance, you could see yourself as trusting, idealistic, imaginative, dedicated, or loyal.
 10. **Personalization.** A primary weapon of cult indoctrination is to train members to believe that everything bad is their fault. The guilt that accompanies this sort of personalizing is crippling and controlling. You are out of the cult now, so it is important to take responsibility only for what is yours.

Once the blocks to critical thinking in a group are uncovered, the majority of recovery has occurred. There are several suggestions that other former members have used to aid in regaining those particular skills.

1. **Reminiscing.** Many former members have reported memory loss as a result of being in a destructive group. One of the best ways to recover some of those memories is talking to old friends and family. Recovering those experiences that have been quashed in a group can help tremendously in regaining the real self-identity and re-establish the experiences that helped shape one's decision making. Old photo albums, home movies, scrapbooks and other such items are of use here as well.
2. **Journals.** By keeping a journal through the recovery stage, one can measure feelings, measure progress and discuss decisions that have to be made. This is a way to gauge your progress and do this in a very personal way.

3. **Hobbies/fun.** This is where I tell people they have to re-learn how to have fun! Not only is it necessary to be able to have fun, but hobbies and such can aid in the thinking skills. Hobbies such as reading, chess and arts and crafts can re-establish those skills and it is all on your terms, not a destructive group leader's terms.
4. **Humor.** Related to the above is humor. In most of the groups, humor was taboo. Most of one's time was spent in grim types of settings. Any humor was seen as useless except when the leader used humor to degrade a member for something they did or did not do. In *Psychology Today*, an excellent discussion on humor was the major theme. The discussion outlines the types of humor out there as well as its importance and role in everyday life.
5. **Give yourself a break.** Simply put, you don't have to do all this recovery work in one day. In fact, it won't work! The idea that this is on a concrete timetable is the sort of thing that a destructive group would insist on. The time frame depends on the individual and the circumstances as well as the group that the person left. There is no one formula that works. While you are at it, give others a break too. You shouldn't expect perfection from yourself or others around you.

The whole subject of critical thinking is very complex. Many other areas in recovery overlap with critical thinking. This is just a synopsis of what I find most useful for former members in this part of recovery. If you would like to go online and read more articles, there is a website I recommend: www.criticalthinking.org. They have wonderful selections on how critical thinking is used in education and everyday life.

References

1. Lalich, J. and Tobias, M. *Take Back Your Life*. Berkley, CA.. Bay Tree Publishing. 2006.
2. Cialdini, R. *Influence: Science and Practice*. Allyn and Bacon. 2000.
3. Reber, A. *Dictionary of Psychology*. New York, New York. Penguin Books. 1986.
4. Powell, A., Symbaluk, D., and MacDonald, A. *Introduction to Learning and Behavior 2nd edition*. Boston, MA. Wadsworth Publishing. 2006.
5. Shulman, P. "Crack me up!" *Psychology Today*. August 2006. 66-73.
6. Dobson, L. "What's Your Humor Style?" *Psychology Today*. August 2006. 74-79.

Further reading:

Critical Thinking: Ethics Without Indoctrination

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/ethics-without-indoctrination/494>

Critical Thinking: Moral Integrity and Citizenship

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-moral-integrity-and-citizenship/487>