

Issues in Diagnosis and Treatment

Transcript of presentation by Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D., September 22, 1986

I hope in our time here I will give an introduction and presentation, mostly focused to the mental-health professionals. And then we will have a question-and-answer period.

Let me first of all define two things: what a *cult* is, from my standpoint, and what I mean by a *cultic relationship*; and what a *thought-reform program* is.

The term *cult* refers to the structural organization. By *cultic relationships*, we refer to those relationships in which a person intentionally induces others to become totally, or nearly totally, dependent on him or her for almost all major life decisions, and inculcates in these followers a belief that he or she has some special talent, gift, or knowledge.

So when I am using the term *cult*, I am talking about the relationship of the followers to the leader. And perhaps later on we will talk about the structure of cults—most of them [the groups] are pyramid shaped, with total leadership at the top. They are not your basic democratic organization.

A *thought-reform program* is the technical name in the literature for the behavioral-change technology that we have seen applied to people across many decades, in which management in an organization is able to get people to break up their own reflective thinking and adopt the content that management wants. But we will get into what a thought-reform program is in more detail [later].

Now what I am going to start with is that there is a tendency among us humans to blame victims. And blaming victims, from the woman who gets raped, to the person who gets mugged on the street, to the person who has a street scam run on him or her; or the people who get into cults... There is a tendency in mankind to blame victims, which goes clear back to the primitive days, when people used to say, "Don't get near the river bank. The crocodiles will get you." And anyone who went near the river bank and got bitten by the crocodile, and lost a limb, or their life, was blamed for disobeying. Victims were blamed for walking too near the river bank those days. And we see the attitude continuing. It is very human. There is a lot of research in the social-psychology literature on blaming victims.

The social psychologists have found that all of us believe in a just world. That is, we think that if we just obey and follow the laws and rules, things will turn out all right; that bad things happen only to people who are weak individuals or disobedient individuals. Social psychologists have done many studies showing both this "just world" notion and the tendency to blame victims.

The tendency to blame victims prevents both lay and professional persons from seeing that many or most persons who become involved in cultic relationships are a fifth kind of victim. Most citizens recognize four classes for victims—that is, first, we all recognize victims of violent crimes. Second, we recognize victims of natural disasters and serious illnesses. The third group of victims includes the victims of terrorists and kidnappers. The fourth group of victims includes the ones known to the legal profession—people who have suffered civil torts in which they have had personal injuries; they have had negligence and malpractice done upon them. But the fifth class of victims doesn't get sufficient recognition and understanding. This group includes those who have been in what I call "enforced dependency positions" as a consequence of having been put through a thought-reform regime.

Singer's Conditions for a Thought-Reform Program

As I mentioned, in over-simplified terminology, a *thought-reform program* is a behavioral-change technology, or a behavioral-reconstruction program. This program is carried out by design and intent. It is a program of the systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence techniques. Six conditions need to be present to carry out a thought reform program. These six conditions are the following, and they all have to be present, and all present at once:

1. In one way or another, management must get control over a follower's time.

Sometimes this is done by getting physical control over you by having you move in. But you don't have to move in on the premises. Management can instruct you to chant or to meditate, to keep your mind occupied at all moments during the day when you are not doing their business. Many groups run thought-reform programs as a method of indoctrinating their members, but the members live and work in the outside community. But they are taught how to have so much of their time occupied by group-related business.

So, first of all, management in one way or another gets control over almost all of the person's time, especially the person's mental, thinking time.

2. In one way or another, the group is able to create a sense of powerlessness in the person.

This is usually done by separating you from your past social support systems—getting you away from parents, friends, your old job, your old associates; getting you away from the past. Because most of us are very dependent upon our past belief systems, our past family, our relatives, our friends, our job, our whole sense of identity is supported by the surroundings. So one way of creating powerlessness is to get you away from those support systems.

Second is to get you in a group where they all talk a new jargon, they all act a new way; and as a newcomer, you feel very powerless and outside. And you start imitating the models of how to talk the talk, how to walk the walk, as they say in some groups.

3. Management is going through the manipulation of a series of punishments, rewards, and experiences in order to elicit new behavior.

By experiences, I mean teaching people how to say chant or to do various types of over-breathing so that they hyperventilate, and get a hyperventilation syndrome, and get to feeling very giddy and light-headed. And management interprets the natural consequence of over-ventilation, hyperventilation, as a new psychic state that has been achieved. So [management uses] many centuries-old techniques, such as trance induction, or hyperventilation, and all types of techniques—such as trance dancing, repetitive body movements, anything that produces a trance—without announcing them, to induce trances.

What do we mean by *trance* or *hypnosis*? The best definition is from the book by Spiegel and Spiegel, in which the definition is that hypnosis is the over-focusing of central attention, the decrease of peripheral awareness, and a special relationship with a person you then trust and follow. But trance induction can be done many ways

without announcing it. Some of you have heard me tell many times with group, I start phrasing my speech in such a way as I am doing now..., slowing it down..., really getting your attention. And because you are working on trying to follow the meaning, you focus and focus your attention. You get this high, central-focused attention, decrease your peripheral awareness, and get a kind of relationship going with the speaker. If I do this for enough minutes and with enough patterning, I can help most of you enter some low level of a trance state. So one of the methods of manipulating experiences is through the way you speak, through the type of assignments you give to people, and so on.

That's the third property of running a thought-reform program. First, get control of time. Second, create a sense of powerlessness. Three, manipulate rewards, punishments, and experiences in such a way as to elicit new behavior.

4. Manipulate rewards, punishments, and experiences in such a way as to suppress the old behavior that management does not want expressed.
5. The program is done in an authoritarian, closed system; it is done with a closed system of logic and control.

That means that there is no complaining to management. There is no altering the system. The system comes down in a pyramid political and power structure. It is a closed system of logic. If you complain, the complaint is turned against you.

If it is a political cult, and you complain to management about some policy, you are told that it is just your "bourgeois mind" that is still functioning, or it is just your "capitalist mind," or it is your old "communist mind"—it depends on what philosophy the particular political indoctrination group is using.

So this fifth quality or condition is that it is an authoritarian, closed system of management, and that it is based on a closed system of logic and control.

6. There must be a noninformed state present in the person.

The person must be unaware that, a step at a time, management is changing his or her behavior, and that there is a double agenda, so to speak—the agenda that management wants, and the seeming agenda that the new recruit to the organization sees.

Later on, we can get more into it, because time prohibits further discussion of the methods, aims, and results of a thought-reform program other than to summarize by saying that thought-reform programs produce states of enforced dependency and produce what I am calling the fifth type of victim from society's viewpoint, a victim of enforced dependency.

Cult Trends and Recruitment Strategies

Now, because we are today focusing mainly on mental-health problems and how to treat people, at this point we won't get much into the details of cult recruitment and so on.

But I would like to tell you that, across time, from the early '60s, we saw first far-Eastern groups coming in—that is, people who had taken Zen and Hindu and Eastern philosophies as the basis of the content of their group. Then there was a wave of neo-Christian groups. And then soon we saw a burgeoning of psychological-based cults, political cults, flying-saucer cults, you name it. People come to see how easy it is to influence and control other people, and they begin to set up their own group.

So what we are seeing now in the way of people coming [for help] are individuals who have developed mental-health and emotional conditions as a consequence of attending what are called large-group awareness trainings (LGATs). These are those programs in which you pay \$450, \$750, \$1100 to go and be in a large-group awareness training. These are commercially sold groups that operate all across the United States. Many people go to those LGATs, learn the techniques, and then start their own little groups. And they call these small groups trainings, seminars, and workshops.

We have also seen, as the economy got a little on the downhill side, particularly in California, a burgeoning of prosperity groups, in which people would go around and put signs up on kiosks and posts saying, "Come to so and so tonight and learn to think money, to think power, to think wealth." So people started little cultic groups, little intense indoctrination groups, as the economy got a little tight, and they used prosperity thinking as their method.

So, you see, there is the cultic relationship in groups. And then, in one way or another, a thought-reform program is instituted to get the people to follow and accept the philosophical content of the group.

We also see a number of closed, intense cultic groups growing up in the self-improvement area, in which there are now a number of diet cults, music and sports cults. Or, for those of you in law enforcement, you might think of them much more as just straight scams. The sports-camp scams work this way: The person sees an ad in one of the popular sports magazines, and it says, "High school athletes: You didn't make a college team. College athletes: Pros didn't draft you. Come to our camp. We will help you." Now this doesn't mean that every sports camp is a scam. But there are a number of them around the United States that, when the people pay their money... And usually they are asked to send \$4,000 to \$8,000. So many young people borrow money from families, relatives, send off their \$4,000, and go to the supposed athletic camp, only to find that someone is doing what we would all think of as a thought-reform program, in which they are not taught and coached athletic events. But they are put in rooms, taught to chant, and are told that their personality has to be altered for them to become a better athlete. And then, once they are there, those people are bonded into staying with the leaders of the group. They are often sent out to be bus boys or waitresses in nearby facilities to earn more money to pay for more courses. This also goes for some of the music-improvement groups, which, after these folks see the ad or are told by a friend to come in, turn out to be cultic relationships and thought-reform programs.

We are also seeing a number of psychotherapy cults growing up. There have been two very well documented articles. One was by John Hochman, in the August 1983 *Journal of Psychiatry*. I am going to leave some papers, copies of some of these articles, with Mrs. Carroll, so that some of you who might want to borrow those would borrow and Xerox them. There was another article by Dr. Maurice Temerlin a couple of years back in the *Journal of Psychotherapy*. It was the first published article on psychotherapy cults. I have been studying a number of psychotherapy cults in California and elsewhere. These are psychological-based cults, in which actual licensed psychologists and psychiatrists and social workers go wrong. They get a multiple relationship going with their clients, in which the therapist gets the clients or patients to move into apartments or buildings they own. They become their employers, their lovers, their financial advisors; they get very convoluted, multiple controlling relationships over their patients and literally start a psychotherapy cult.

One group was started in a Southwestern state and got in many, many legal difficulties. And then it moved to Los Angeles and has started up under a totally new name in Los Angeles. They brought their old patients from the Southwestern state into Los Angeles, renamed the group, have recruited a new bunch of people, and have approximately 300 members attached to them.

I testified during the past year for the Attorney General's office in California against a series of psychologists who for 10 years ran a psychotherapy cult, in which they had approximately 450 people move into premises owned by the 9 to 11 therapists. And no women during those 10 years were permitted to have a child. They would have to get abortions if they became pregnant. The therapists allegedly beat patients. They had sex with patients. [There were] many, many violations of all of both the business and ethics codes. So there are a number of these psychotherapy cults in which licensed practitioners have gone wrong. And then, because it is so easy to use psychological techniques to intimidate people, a number of people have started their own little psychological groups.

There is one on the West Coast, a man who used to be a lawyer, in a town not too many miles north of San Francisco. He discovered that it was awfully hard work, going to the office, trying cases, dealing with clients. He seemed to realize that processing people was a much easier thing to do. And he thought of going around large airports on the West Coast—from Seattle down to Los Angeles. And so when female flying personnel come into a restaurant late at night to get a sandwich or something after duty, this guy goes over and sits down and talks to them. He is a short, rotund, quite bald gentleman; very gentle, sweet guy. And he starts telling them he is divorced; he has three little children; he lives alone. He has a few people who live in a big house. And he invites the flight attendant to come by on her next day off. He gives his address, his phone number, and so on. And the lonely flight attendant will drop by this gentleman's house some time. And he gives talks. She will see other young women of her own age—6, 8, 10 of them—sometimes he has as many as 16. He uses psychological content in a thought-reform program to start a cult of flight attendants. He eventually gets these women to move out of their apartments and use his house as their West Coast base. And he gives them the notion that they must show trust and integrity. He has gone to a lot of the large-group awareness trainings. He gets people to give money by putting \$1,000 a month off into a big bowl in the middle of the dining room table, as a sign of their "trust and integrity." And then these women are available to watch his children, and so on. Of course, for some of them, their families, men friends, and women friends eventually come and talk them into thinking it over. He loses followers, but he recruits so readily, and he is very skillful at it. He uses psychological-type techniques to both recruit and retain people. I gave therapy to a number of women who had been with him for periods of many months to several years.

We also currently see a number of satanic and occult groups growing up. Many high-school-aged youngsters are getting involved in the satanic cults.

Post-Cult Problems and Treatment Methods

Let's move on into the treatment of situationally induced states and reactions. Most people, after they have been in a cult, or whatever we want to call them... Now let me read you some of the names that have been applied: cult, New Age groups; New Movement groups; totalistic groups; intense, closed groups; intense indoctrination programs; and for those of you in the legal world, undue-influence groups or relationships. All of those are referring to essentially cultic relationships by a person or organization that then is applying the

behavioral-change technology of a thought-reform program. So when we talk about cults or intense, closed groups, it is a way of referring to a mass of quite diverse groups.

To really do good counseling or therapy with a person who comes out of one of these groups, an individual has to know a tremendous amount about each of the groups. At this point, as mental-health professionals, what we first need to do is find in our communities the sources of information, such as all of the literature that is available that has been written by professionals—by ex-members of these groups—so that we can begin to study what has been written, what has been observed about these groups.

Second, get in contact with ex-members, and especially ex-members who have met exit counselors. Now, what is *exit counseling*? This tends to be an information-providing period given by, at this point, mostly former members of a group. If you have a son or daughter or friend who is in Brand X cult, you find an ex-member of that group who knows how [the process works] and has available many, many clippings from the world press; who has video tapes that he or she has made from the many, many newscasts, the *20/20* programs, the *60 Minutes* programs. Most of the reentry or exit counselors have a huge supply of video tapes about special cultic groups, and huge amounts of newspaper and journalistic clippings and articles written by professionals and ex-members about various groups. Because those people who have met [an exit counselor]—and I have at this point worked with more than 3,000 people who have been in one or another of these cultic groups... The ones who have met an exit counselor prior to coming to me for therapy come in much better shape, and their period of adjustment is shortened, because former members have been able to give them the educational material and background, and talk with them. [This is so helpful] because most of the groups talk a very special language and jargon, and you need to know the structure and jargon.

But the tendency for most mental-health professionals is really to blame victims, to assume that only ambulatory schizophrenics or borderline people would get into a cult. They don't realize how very subtle and how very active the recruitment programs are by the various cultic groups.

The second feature here is that the responses that you see in people who have been in cults range across a continuum, from mere embarrassment of a transient kind (at having to admit all the time that they gave and the things that they did while they were in the group), to severe, prolonged, impaired functioning and to psychotic reactions of various kinds and durations.

In my sample of more than 3,000 people, and in two other large studies, approximately two-thirds of all the people examined who have come out of cults were normal before going in. [They were] functioning people with average to excellent relationships with their families prior to joining. About 6% had had prior contact with the mental-health system, meaning they had seen therapists for something more serious than transient, age-related depressions. So that gets us up to about 73% of the people—about two-thirds of them "normals," about 6% who had had therapy for a major reaction of some kind. And it leaves us with the other one-fourth of the people who, prior to going into the cult, were in a transient, age-related, depressed period. The point I am making is that at somewhat vulnerable times, any of us could, in one way or another, be highly influenced by a dedicated recruiter or a group.

So I am trying to get the notion across to stop blaming victims from a mental standpoint, and stop thinking only rather dilapidated people get in. As you will see today, you are going to meet a number of really excellent, very bright, very functioning people who were in cults.

And, as I have mentioned earlier, some [cultic groups] are religious in content; some are philosophical; some are political. There are [those with] psychological content, the growth groups. There are a number of drug-treatment programs that have slipped from being drug-treatment programs to being harsh, intense, indoctrination programs. And a number of people evaluating those programs have begun to compare what is done in the treatment programs with some of the cultic and thought-reform programs. There is good literature in the social-work field growing up there [in this context].

I want to say to you, each individual must, as in all mental-health assessment and treatment, be assessed as an individual. And each cult has to be looked at in its entirety because each of the cults is somewhat different. So I am going to talk in some general terms now that won't apply to every cult, and they won't apply to every person. These are things that I gleaned from working with more than 3,000 people.

What are some of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral problems that people experience after coming out of a cult? Sometimes these problems are induced by attending the large-group awareness-training programs.

Cognitive Problems

First, and foremost, [we see] concentration problems, resulting from persons having been taught to interrupt their own reflective thinking.

In most of the groups, and when management is running a thought-reform program, each time they start using their old belief system, the followers are taught literally to divert and think about the new content that is being taught to them. So when they come out, they just can't concentrate because they have spent months to years being taught how to interrupt their own reflective thought and divert off to the cult content. They divert from their own reality basis of reasoning and reflecting, and insert the new. And many times, when you talk with people who have been long-term members of some of these groups, they are unable to read the newspaper, to read books. They sit and they read, but because they keep diverting all the time, the information really isn't getting into their short-term memory and being transferred into long term-memory. So they read, and it just doesn't register. Those of you who are experts in learning and in psychology will be very interested in this phenomenon of how people are taught to interrupt their own reflective thought.

Don't get the idea that someone who has been indoctrinated in a thought-reform program in a cult or one of these large-group awareness trainings is going to look like that old movie called *The Manchurian Candidate*. People who have been subjected to a thought-reform program look just like you and me. In fact, they are going to seem a lot more friendly and smiling than you and I because we tend to be sort of serious people, and we forget and let the smile come off our face. People who have been in some of these groups are overly friendly, overly smiling, because they have been trained that way.

And, you see, if you are going to run a tight, pyramid-structure, authoritarian system, one of the first things management does is to suppress all rebellion, all resistance, all negativity, by various social maneuvers. And that is why, many times, you meet people as they just come out of cults, and they just don't have a cross word about anything, until you touch on the cult content, because they have been conditioned for months to years to show no rebellion, to show no reflective, critical thinking, and to in no way show anything negative in the way of overt behavior.

With these concentration problems, where the people have been taught to divert, they also have had prolonged training in dissociating. That is, they have been taught to cut off

experiencing connections among thoughts, feelings, and reactions in the present sense. They have been taught that the moment they think anything negative about the cult, they divert from it. They have been taught that any time they feel anxious about anything, they are to smile, act upbeat, and extrude the models they have been taught to imitate while they have been in the group.

You are also going to be meeting a person who has had training in and prolonged periods of going into covertly induced trances. If you are unaware of Ericksonian trance inductions, do read some of Milton Erickson's work on unannounced trances, in which an individual does not hold up a watch and start swinging it in the old Svengali way and say, "I am going to put you into a deep sleep," and do a kind of hokey trance induction. If you really want to trance someone out, you don't announce it, and you go at it.

So you are going to have many clients and patients who have had prolonged periods in which they have learned to do meditation of the empty-mind type. I have worked with people who have done as much as attempting to have an empty mind 21 hours a day for 21 days on end, in which they attended a course called "21/21." These people do have a lot of trouble concentrating after they have attempted that.

Other groups teach people, and usually at relatively high cost for each of the courses, how to learn to do empty-mind meditation. Those of you who have read how various religious groups have taught meditation down through the ages, [know that] usually it is reflective meditation, in which you were taught in those groups to sit and think about yourself, your relationship to God, your relationship to the world, to do reflective meditation. This meant do not pay attention to the birds, the bees, the flowers, and the wind. Reflect for a set period of time. The modern-day cultic groups have learned to teach empty-mind meditation, in which the people are taught to divert, divert, divert and not let a stream of reasoning come into mind. That is their way to go. And it has a tremendous impact on people's ability to get the natural, reflective reasoning going again.

In some groups, individuals have not done meditation, but they have done chanting to learn to dissociate and to produce hyperventilation. So maybe during questioning we can talk some more about that.

In some groups, the speaking-in-tongues process is taught as a form of getting people to hyperventilate. In some groups, they do trance dancing. Trance dancing is done in the Middle East and Northern Sahara by certain groups, and it has been done for centuries. Some of the New Movement groups have begun teaching trance dancing.

Sometimes people have had these covertly induced trances from having to listen hour on end to tapes of the group leader. I have worked with people who not only have had to listen to tapes of the group leader all day long, but he made them go to bed, and sleep on their back with their headsets on, hearing his lectures.

Some of the groups do what they call *high-speed decreeing*. This is a type of chanting that resembles what the old and still-functioning tobacco auctioneers do. Do you remember, on radio, how they used to do the high-speed auctioneer's chant, and then yell "Sold American"? That type of high-speed use of syllables is what many of these groups use.

Another group has hit upon a way of trancing people out by having them sit either on the floor or in a chair, and clap, and turn the back of their hands over [palms up] —for two hours. And it pretty much guarantees that you do get most of the people tranced out. They fall over, tranced out, or exhausted. And then that is reframed or labeled as an excellent state of awareness and a new mental level, or good state.

So those are a few of the cognitive problems.

Emotional Tone Problems

Sometimes the patients and clients who come to you for counseling will have emotional tone problems:

1. [Some people exhibit] a sort of false gaiety and hyperenergetic demeanor, but they will be telling you how terrible they feel. You begin to think there is something very strange about their affect. They are trying to tell you what life is like, but they are still displaying the old smiling, hyperenergetic, recruiting demeanor that they had to display while they were in the cult.
2. Some people come in appearing both flat and/or depressed. Some people exiting from cults, or rescued and invited out from cults by their relatives, have come out at a time when they are very burned out, exhausted, [with] a crushed spirit. They have just learned to curb all their anger and dissent. They are really cult burnouts. If a person gets in this burned-out state and can't go out on the street recruiting, or soliciting funds, or doing cult-related business... When they [the leaders] get burnouts, they ship them home.
3. Some people feel depressed after they come out. Oftentimes their depression is a resurgence of some of the depressions about life choices they were experiencing at the time the cultic group met them. Sometimes it is a depression over realizing the lost years they have given. I have worked with people who have been 12 to 14, one woman 21 years, in a cult. Some of the saddest people of all are women who were retained by cult leaders beyond the period in which they could have children. The cult leader kept promising a blessed marriage, or whatever sanctioned marriages were called, until these women got so far into their forties that when they finally left, when they came out, their whole dream [was gone]. It has dawned on them what had happened to them, and they then have this very depressing realization that the eggs really have run out.
4. A fourth group includes people who have come out of these intense indoctrination programs who often have chronic feelings of guilt, anxiety, and unworthiness, which is related to the content of the group[\'s teachings]. So it is important for you to learn from ex-members what the contents are and how the guilt is induced in each of the different cult groups.

That is the fourth thing. The first thing was the false gaiety, the second was the flatness, the third was real depressions; and fourth is chronic feelings of guilt, anxiety, and unworthiness.

5. A fifth feature of emotional tone problems is the intense, episodic, uncontrollable bursts of anger. An interesting thing seems to happen to the human mind in these empty-mind meditation groups. If you keep learning to divert your reflective thought, after a long time, very strange inner pictures, much like dream content, start coming up in the daytime, in the meditation—a jumble of things. Just the pictures come up.

Problems with Rage

After people come out of those organizations, and they are still having this problem of splitting off and dissociating their thinking, they [might] have intense episodes of rage just

turn on. It is the rage that you see in people who have been confined a long time and not permitted to express any anger.

I worked for the Army during and after the Korean War and, based upon U.S. and British learning following World War II, the U.S. military repatriated the prisoners from Korea on a slow boat coming from Ancien to San Francisco, so there would be about three weeks of decompression and cooling-off time to let these people tell what had happened. [This gave them time] to let the anger out in sensible ways, in groups, in talking to other rotating troops, and in talking to medical and psychological personnel who were on the ships. You don't just talk people out of POW camp and let them get in a fast car—they crash those cars; they get mad at people on the freeway. They also went into bars after WW II. The repatriates had a much higher murder, suicide, and getting-killed rate because they were so angry. They would go into bars, and get in fights with toughs, and get knifed, and so on. So both the United States and the British had good statistics: Don't just release POWs because of the diverse anger that comes out.

This is also the reason prison systems have those gradual work-furlough programs, in which people are gradually taken out of the state prison. They go out and work in the community, come home at night, work for a number of weeks outside, living in apartments and rooms outside, to decompress their anger toward management, the other prisoners, etcetera, etcetera.

When people come out of cults, and they start having these moments of anger, and they become overwhelmed, they think they have become crazy; they don't know what it is. And they feel so guilty because they just have bursts of uncontrollable rage turn on. When treating these people, if you are going about it right, you are able to help them realize, "Hey, this is anger toward management back in your group. It is anger about all those lost years." And you help them talk about it in a rational way, and diffuse it. So you do have these problems of episodic, uncontrollable rage showing in people.

Problems with Memory, Motivation and Consciousness

A third very major psychological problem is the lack of planning, motivation, direction. They [Some ex-cult members] can't get going, or they start and get diverted.

I am working with some young men now who have been 10 to 12 years in an empty-mind cult, where they meditated many, many hours a day. And I realized that one of these men was really in bad shape—[and] he looked so healthy and in great shape. I was interviewing him and working with him by himself at the time. For some reason, I had to step out of my office to go get some papers I wanted to show him, or something. I knew it would take me three to five minutes to go and get these papers from my files, and I handed him a pencil and tablet and suggested he jot down some things. I gave him the instruction of what I wanted him to put down. It had to do with some dates or some information I needed. I stepped out of the room, and about five minutes later, I came back in. He was just sitting there with this empty smile on his face, looking across the room. And he didn't pick up the pencil, and he had done nothing. I said to him, "Here are the papers. Did you write down what I asked you?" And he sort of shook himself and said, "Oh, this happens to me all the time. I space out." And he described to me that he was spacing out in his apartment, sometimes for hours on end, unaware that he had totally spaced out into a kind of empty mind, keep-diverting-himself state. So he had lost many jobs. Prior to this he had worked in a bank, and he had a very responsible job in a bank. After 12 years with this group, he has been unable to work—even in a nursery, where a man showed him how to go and turn on faucets to water plants, because the moment the supervisor stepped out, he would just

space out. So he has had a whole series of [experiences] being fired from jobs because he would just forget. These people have been taught how not to let anything go from short-term to long-term memory [which would enable them to carry out orders].

So you are going to have a lot of clients who had a good education and good jobs before their days in the group, who need a period of time in very uncomplicated jobs that are totally supervised, so somebody helps them not space out. These people seem all right in interviewing because the interviewer is helping them function. But we ask about details of how recent days have gone, and this is when we begin to hear of hours of unfilled time, unaware, unaccounted for. Start by asking your clients, "What did you do from the time you awakened this morning, from the time you got up, until now?" Then find out what they did yesterday. So often you are going to find these great unfilled, spaced-out times. Your client is going to look just as ordinary as you and I, but this internal state has been taught.

And we are seeing extraordinarily regressed individuals when they come out of most of these groups, no matter their age, IQ, and education. So you need to do a kind of education and helpful management work with these people. They don't need psychotherapy. They need from us education and structuring.

So oftentimes I recommend to people to get a snooze alarm clock, and set it for every hour, so that at least every hour their little quartz clock goes off and they can look at their list. And I help them make lists. These are people with more IQ and more energy than, and sometimes equal education to mine. I am helping them write a list of what they have to do after they leave my office, and to have the alarm, the little clock they carry with them, so that the whole day doesn't just go into spacing out.

We also have to tell people how to detrance themselves. I help people understand what some of these tranced-out states they were taught to get into in the cult are like. And then I use the imagery of how you get people out of a trance. You know, with many hypnotic inductions, you have people think about walking down a very quiet, nice stairway, down into a very calm, beautiful garden, with a little bench there they sit upon; you do that slowly, and you get them down into a trance. Well, I tell them that is how, oftentimes, in ethical hypnosis done by dentists, psychologists, social workers, physicians, to help people in various ways, we teach them how to go into and deepen a trance. But, as part of it, we also teach them how to come out of the trance and back up to full room-level awareness. I say, "Okay, when you catch yourself in one of these states where you feel funny and out of it, think of this image at the base of the stairs I just described, with your eyes open. Get up off the bench and start up the steps. And let's say there are 10 steps. As you step on the first step, your mind is going to come up more toward room-level awareness. And as you go up the steps, bring your mind on up closer to full room-level awareness." Get them on up to step 10, back to full room-level awareness. You just teach a few of these little imageries of how to untrance themselves. Sometimes the people will have images that they prefer, and you say, "Okay, let's choose yours. That is better for you. Now how are you going to use it to get yourself out of the state you find yourself in?"

I also suggest to them that the moment they find themselves in one of these spaced-out states, they get up and just move about the room. (Even in this meeting, where, on the whole, most of the time you sit down and there's nothing wrong, if you notice that you are getting a little drowsy, a little spaced out, stand up. Motor movement will break you out of a low-level trance.)

I also suggest to them that, when they come in, they go right over to the radio and turn it on to a news or talk show, where there is a human voice talking to them—to break up [their] coming into the apartment and spacing out.

I also suggest to them that they get something they really want to read, and I help them pick. I don't say just "what you would like to read." For example, we decide, in my office, that they want to read the sports page, so they will know the names of the teams and who is doing well in Boston, or whatnot, these days. I have them pick what they are going to read so that, when they notice they have spaced out, they go and pick up the thing they have planned to read.

I also help them to break those states by telling them to focus very clearly on the here and now. "Come back from wherever you are in your mind, to looking carefully at the table, looking carefully at me, looking at any of my buttons. But get into the here and now."

Therapy, as you have heard me referring to it, consists of education and an explanation of what was done to the person. I have had numerous examples of people who went to a series of therapists, and the therapists would not let them talk about their days in the cult.

I recently testified at a trial [about a situation in which] a man had developed a very serious mental disorder in the middle of a large-group awareness training. He and his mother and father went to a licensed, trained, marital and family counselor in a large eastern city. And when the man, who had to be hospitalized with a schizo-affective disorder, tried to tell his out-patient family therapist, with his mother and father present, that he had been all right until he went to the large-group awareness training, the therapist said to him, "Now everybody just wants to blame things on other than themselves. We are going to work on what it was in you that caused you to go to that group."

This lady had no idea that membership in that group hinges upon people who have already purchased these trainings recruiting other people to take it. And this guy had no idea when he went to a meeting that he was being recruited to pay his money to go to a large-group awareness training. And she would not let him or the parents talk about the fact that, prior to this event, he had been an A student at a large eastern university; he belonged to a fraternity; he was a charming fellow; he was on the gymnastics team. This was an all-around functioning young man, and the intensity of the stress in the group just was too much for him to handle. The indoctrination program, plus the stress, caused a brief reactive psychosis to come on. And it was almost four years before this young man came upon a therapist who would let him talk about how it all began.

I ask mental-health professionals to really reevaluate our own tendency to blame victims, and to reevaluate our training that teaches us to take a purely intrapsychic view of causality, or our training in genetics. I want to tell you that most psychologists and psychiatrists and lay people's notions of what geneticists think about the causation of mental illness is totally incorrect. We are not walking time bombs because our grandfather was a depressed person. It is not that our genes are such causes. The correlation between mental illness in parents and first-degree relatives runs 10 percent to 15 percent concordance for schizophrenia and major affective disorders. This means that the best of genetic studies do not indicate that your genes are all that is necessary to produce a major mental disorder.

Oftentimes we blame victims because of the human tendency to do so. We talk purely intrapsychic views of causality and never put enough emphasis on what the induced surroundings were at the time the person was in the group, or [that] the mental illness began while he or she was in the cult.

Another thing we need to change in our thinking is that people seek out these groups. As I mentioned earlier, in most of these groups—and as Dr. McConahy brought out, power and money are central in the eyes of management of most cults—the recruitment is intense, deliberate. And most people are *recruited* into cults. They don't go out looking for a group to join. They were looking for friends; they were looking for some sense of community; but they were not looking for a specific cult.

Another thing: Because you went, as a professional person, to some large-group awareness training in which a trainer berated you and taught you the philosophy of a commercial organization, and you didn't decompensate, don't think that no one else ever does, or that only a rare, already-sick person further dilapidates in these trainings. As a mental-health professional, you have usually been exposed to various kinds of encounter-group techniques. You have had a lot more "psychologizing," so that [the methods used] in some of the large-group awareness trainings are just "old hat" to you as a mental-health professional. The 20-year-old who has no idea what encounter groups are like, who has no idea what confrontation and attack groups are like, and who pays his money to go to one of these large-group awareness trainings, may be made so anxious, so decimated, and have stuff brought up. Most of these groups do prolonged periods of guided imagery, which is a way of inducing trances. So just because you, as an adult professional, went to one of those programs, don't think they don't hurt people.

I have also had contact with trained, licensed professionals who, at the command of a cult leader, performed vasectomies on unwilling males. In one of the large, well-known groups, the leader decided one day that raising the members' children was too expensive. Tennis shoes cost \$25 to \$30. He said there would be no more children within the group. And whether the male members wanted vasectomies or not, other men in the group took them in. And I have worked with some of the physicians who now feel terrible, because they were members of the group, and they were in the mental set that whatever the leader said was okay. And they went ahead and violated their professional ethics and their legal obligations, and performed vasectomies on unwilling males.

I have worked with other physicians who sent all females who became pregnant during, as I said, a 10-year period of a cult's existence, to secure abortions. Let's call them "enforced abortions" were very frequent in the Rajneesh group up in Oregon, in which, if women members became pregnant, it is alleged and has been reported, they were sent out of the state of Oregon to have abortions at the orders of the leader.

I have worked with other individuals—these were therapists by training who got into these groups—who insisted that single parents in the group relinquish child custody to the ex-spouses, because the cult leader didn't want to waste money or time rearing children since youngsters didn't bring in money to the group.

I have also had contact with psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers who, while in cults or working for various New Age or New Movement groups, violated their doctor-patient professional confidentiality and revealed everything patients said to them to officials of the group. This includes one group leader who referred his wife and children to a therapist working for him, who then revealed back to the cult leader everything the wife and children told him.

And then, as I mentioned earlier, other therapists have developed their own cults and become the lovers, landlords, employers, financial advisors of their patients, and have had patients move close by or into premises owned by them.

So as I have been talking about kinds of problems people bring to the cult, I urge you all to read, to learn the contents of the philosophies of whatever group your client was in, to learn more about behavioral-change technologies used by groups to induce and maintain members. And, as you are learning here today, learn what some of the aftereffects are.

Think about the fact that in most of these groups there has been behavioral, emotional, and cognitive regression. This is because all major decisions are made by management, and people have to follow what has been going on.

We have talked about dissociation. Now let's take a look at what we call *trance junkies*. Some people really relish what it feels like to get into a trance. Or they really relish the high that comes from hyperventilation. And they are willing to go back, over and over after leaving the group, to make contact, so they will get that high from the guided imagery, or to get the high from doing hyperventilation-type chanting. That is part of what exit counselors and informed therapists help these people come to understand—that they literally have become hyperventilation and trance junkies. They are willing to hyperventilate to get that giddy, intoxicated feeling from hyperventilating because it helps them get rid of those miserable, anxious, depressed feelings that we all have to deal with at some time in any day or week.

Be able to explain to the person, as part of an education, how these behavioral and emotional conditions and cognitive conditions were brought about by what went on in the cult. And, if you don't know, get people in the community who do understand—former members who have movies, documents—to come and join in. Often, instead of referring ex-cult members to my fellow psychologists and psychiatrists, I say, "You know, I think, at this point in your career, you would be much better off to go and talk with Mr. Bob Smith. He was in the Moonies for six and one-half years. Or go and talk to Miss So-and-So. She was a 12-year member of another group." They will be doing education and information counseling with those persons. These people are not psychologists; they are not licensed professionals. They are persons with a lot of information. And you also will get information, talking a few hours with Mr. or Miss So and So, who can then inform other ex-members about the content, and so on. And [this interaction is] very helpful to them.

Do lots of planning with the client—list making, time-management planning. Also get a lot of readings that you can loan to clients, so they can take books and articles home that have been written about cults, that have been written about trance induction, that have been written about the after-effects of these things.

And when you send them off to read, don't just say, "You might like to look at this." Say to them, "Please read this today, while it is close to what we have talked about. Read it, and here..." I hand them a little card, a blue or green 3" x 5" card, and say, "Jot down some ideas here, so when we meet next time, we can talk about some notions from your own experience that this article brought up." If I don't give them that little colored card, they space out. They feel great. And then when they come in the next time to see me, they'll say, "You know, I read the article, and I was supposed to write something down, but I just floated off." So I learned right away to give them a colored 3" x 5" card, and it says "Margaret Singer," and the instruction "Read this article and jot down some notes about how it applied to you on it."

After people emerge, they are literally coming out of a period in which they were strongly bonded to some awfully nice other people. I am not saying great things about the cult leaders, but the other members have been really awfully nice, good, young adults. Or, in many groups that recruit total families and adults, they have been with some awfully nice

people. And they have had some awfully strong bonds with those people. They miss them. Talk about that. Don't let them or encourage them to go back and try to rescue the people. It is more likely they will get sucked back in than that they will be able, at that point, to be of help to any of their friends who are still back there.

Then, after this period of information giving to explain to them how they were changed by this behavioral-change technology, you are going to find that a lot of the problems will come up that were on deep freeze at the time the cult recruited. With young adults, most of the time, these are minor depressions about marriage, the family, sexuality, and career. So you might as well level with them that, "Hey, yeah, at the time you went in you were pretty depressed about 'should you go on with the residency in psychiatry or internal medicine, should you go to college...' Or you felt very badly because Mary Jo had jilted you and taken off with the captain of the track team." Pick up the old sadness, the old depression that simply was put out of mind and put in the closet or deep freeze while they were in the group, because those issues are still there to be worked with.

Often, the issues have been exacerbated because they went into the cult at age 18 and they are now 37 years of age. They have all those lost years. They feel terrible. They are out of phase in terms of marriage, child, career, everything. Some of them have a lot of trouble getting into graduate school, or getting jobs, because they have those unaccounted-for years, or years of doing something that was so off beat.

For example, one of the psychotherapy cults had almost all its patients out doing what they called "plant pushing." The cult had one man who had been a stockbroker, and for 10 years he had been a plant pusher. Well, no major brokerage house is going to take a guy on easily who was out selling potted plants door to door in office buildings for 10 years. They are going to think there must have been something really weird about the guy. And they won't easily employ certain people. So you are going to have clients who need a lot of support in how to get recycled. Sometimes I get permission from them to talk to potential employers, if the employers are somebody who is willing to take them after I explain what they were doing for the 10 years as a plant pusher. If they give me permission, then I talk with the potential employer and explain what happened, that this guy or gal is not a walking mess, but more of a victim of a psychological-change program to which they were exposed.

And one has to work with these people about the awful feelings they have, of feeling guilty about what they did to their parents, to their spouses, to their friends while they were in the cult, and how to help them clean up some of that.

Aftereffects of Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs)

There is an article I suggest you all find. It focuses more on the large-group awareness trainings. But everything in this article by J. Haaken and R. Adams—it was in *Psychiatry*, [Pathology as "personal growth": a participant-observation study of Lifespring training; August, 1983].and I have it somewhere in my collection—talks about large-group awareness trainings, and a specific one they attended. A lot of what I am going to say now is from that article. But what I am saying here is from my own work, from this observation study that these individuals did of the LGATs. Almost everything I am going to say now applies to any thought-reform program to which a person has been exposed.

1. First, ego functions have been systematically undermined, so that the level of ego control, meaning judgment and use of reflective thought, [is limited]. When you first meet the persons who emerged from a cult, ask, "What is their capacity for reality testing? How able are they to mobilize adaptive defenses now? Can they distinguish

between internal and external events? Can they distinguish between what they used to think and what the cult program taught them?" This need for information from ex-members and from knowledgeable people has to be brought in, to restore their ability to sort out what was originally their thinking, what is real in the world now, and what was literally implanted by the training program they were in. And finally, ask, "Can they bring their affective states under rational control?" While they were in the group, their affect was as management wanted. They couldn't cry unless permitted. They couldn't show anger, or they would get in trouble.

2. While those persons were in the group, regression was promoted—behavioral regression—by having almost total environmental structuring, and tremendous infantilizing of people because they were told what to do, when to do it, how to do it. While they have been in the group, regression has been promoted by a repeated emphasis on submission and surrender to management. The members have not been taught or encouraged to be independent adults.

But, at the same time they have been asked to submit and surrender to management, they have been taught to act a very aggressive, assertive, dominating role in selling the group to new members—how to go and recruit smoothly, get others in, and then very assertively, get people to stay. So there is a tremendous paradox felt by these people: "Submit to the leader of the group, but please go out very assertively and bring in new members through the various love-bombing procedures."

So those are the kinds of behavioral regression.

3. Cognitive regression has been promoted. These people have been taught to think in all-or-nothing categories, in spite of the fact that, prior to going in the cult, they thought as the rest of us do—in mostly gray, that nothing is all black, and nothing is all white. Life is mostly gray, and we have to make decisions all the time in the grayness. While in the cult, they have been told life is black-white, all or nothing. They have been taught absolutist logic.

And they have often been taught *magical thinking*—that if you just think something, or you just want something, you can make it happen. They also have made the people feel intensely guilty by telling them they are totally responsible. One of the groups tells members they are responsible for the fact that there are wars in the world. So every time one group gets after another in the Middle East, or warring factions in North Ireland get going again, or a terrorist kidnaps someone, the management of one of the cults tells the people it is because they have not been meditating properly and long enough, and that they are causing all of these ghastly things in the world. A number of the groups convey that idea.

So they tell them, "You can make magical things happen," at the same time they make them feel terribly worried that they have caused all of these terrible things. Most of the groups say that it is "just your old beliefs that stand in the way. If you can just drop your old beliefs..." And they never say whether they mean old religious beliefs, old beliefs of causality [or whatever]—they talk globally. It is "just your beliefs that stand in your way." And what is promoted is getting people to where their thinking is like the ego-centered thinking of young children. The groups promote fantasies of omnipotence, grandiose fantasies of unlimited power. The people are taught while they are in the group to speak in jargon, and to resist having reasoning and exchange-type conversations.

See, you and I, you come and ask me where I live, and I tell you; and “Do you read this?” and I say, “Yes,” or “No.” We have information-exchange conversations. Most of these people coming out of thought-reform programs have been taught to restrict reasoning, and to restrict interchange, and to do a dominance/submission pattern in which they tell to people what the cult has told them. And they are not to let anything in from the outsiders, because the groups are elitist, meaning that their system is the best and only one.

So those are types of regression: a behavioral kind and a mental, cognitive kind.

4. Then, in many of the groups, there has been a real denigration of reasoning. There has been an emphasis in some of the large-group awareness trainings on having catharsis; on spontaneity; on getting in touch with your feelings—let all your feelings hang out; go for it. So some of these people who come to you for counseling, who have “dilapidated” and come apart in large-group awareness trainings, are people who have their defenses stripped from them, and who have been encouraged to let all their emotions out. They have no one way of reconstituting themselves, and they come in [to you in] that state.
5. Also, both cults and the LGATs promote indiscriminate relating, false trust, and false intimacy. These people are sent out to recruit, and they are told to “Go out and go up to a person, get close, and act as if you are their friend.” So when they come out [of the group], they keep on displaying this false intimacy and false sense of closeness. And they get embarrassed.

One young man I have been working with recently keeps getting on... In San Francisco there is an underground—they don’t call it a subway; it’s the municipal railroad that goes underground—and in the early morning hours, it is “stand up,” like on a New York subway. This poor guy went to one of the LGATs, learned to be a heavy-duty recruiter for them, [and he’s now] emotionally dilapidated. And he gets on the underground every morning and starts hugging these people who have not had enough coffee. They don’t want to talk to anybody. And here’s this kid getting on, hugging them. They are already afraid that any male hugging them is going to give them AIDS, so this guy gets a major rebuff in the San Francisco underground. And [yet] he says, “You know, I just get on there, and the program comes on that I should hug everybody.” And so [we see] this indiscriminate relating.

See, some of these people come to your office, and you think you have instant, good rapport with them, [when] it *may* be that they are still displaying the demeanor that was taught to them, either in the cult or the trainings. And then, as I have already covered, they have learned those brief, intransient highs of different kinds, and become addicted to going back and getting those highs.

I just wrote huge amounts of stuff [to present here]. I have been a teacher in universities and medical schools for 45 years, and [as a teacher] your worst fear is to not be able to fill the time. [laughter] You just don’t know what 125 hungry, angry, tired, medical students are like early in the morning, or 2,000 University of California students who really want to get through school and get a degree. And you better fill this hour and train them all out. I prepared more than I can possibly ever do. A colleague and I have an article coming out in the next issue of *The Cultic Studies Journal* on “Attacks on the Peripheral Versus Central Elements of the Self and the Impact of Thought-Reforming Techniques.” It is sort of a heavy-duty title, but that article will cover stuff we have not had time to do here.

Issues in Diagnosis and Treatment 9/22/86—Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D.

Now I just want to tell you that if what I have said does not all fit together and does not answer all your questions, it takes more than a little over an hour to really convey to you what a cult is, how it works, what a thought-reform program is, how it works, and how you do therapy for the people after they have been impaired and damaged. But I would like to open it up for questions now about anything that comes into your mind related to what I presented just now—questions about therapy and working with ex-members of groups. I'll see if I can answer and, if I can't, maybe someone else can.