

The After-Effects of Cult Involvement as Experienced  
by Former Members: An Investigation

CIFS  
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*Although the general public believes that the cult problem is disappearing, the unethical psychological manipulation cults often practice continues to create serious problems for individuals and society (Rosedale, 1996).*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This Report, written on behalf of Cult Information and Family Support (CIFS), an organisation formed by a small group of parents who had children who had joined ‘cultic’ groups or relationships, the aims were to help former cult members and their families understand the common cult practices and their after-effects. In addition, in line with CIFS’ aims and objectives, this Report hopes to increase awareness and educate the public regarding the potential dangers of becoming involved in cults (CIFS website [www.cifs.org.au](http://www.cifs.org.au)).

To supplement the review of the literature, a small study has been conducted to help determine the nature of the after-effects of cult involvement experienced by former members of cults in Australia, and to ascertain if these after-effects are in line with those found in other studies.

### **1.1 What is a Cult?**

An estimated five to seven million Americans have been involved in cults, or cult-like groups. The total number of these groups range from 3,000 to 5,000, and there are approximately 180,000 new cult recruits every year in the US alone (Cult Hotline & Clinic, accessed 04/11/06). Unfortunately, statistics regarding cultic activity within Australia do not appear to be readily available.

As there is no generally accepted, single, current definition for the word ‘cult’, the definition by West and Langone (1986) has been chosen as it seems most complete:

*A cult is a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment,*

*promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.) designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community (West & Langone, 1986, pp119-120).*

Furthermore, according to Michael Langone (cited in Lalich & Tobias, 2006) the following three characteristics help to distinguish cults from other communities or groups:

- Members are expected to be excessively zealous and unquestioning in their commitment to the identity and leadership of the group. They must replace their own beliefs and values with those of the group.
- Members are manipulated and exploited, and may give up their education, career and families to work excessively long hours at group-directed tasks.
- Harm, or the threat of harm, may come to members, their families, and/or society due to inadequate medical care, poor nutrition, psychological and physical abuse, sleep deprivation, criminal activities, and so forth (p11).

## **1.2 Types of Cults**

Cults come in a variety of shapes and sizes, with many variations in beliefs, practices and social customs. For example, Professor Margaret Singer (2003), one of the world's leading experts on cults and brainwashing, has identified the following types of cults: Eastern Religious, Christian, Satanic, Occult/Witchcraft/Voodoo, Spiritualist, Racist, Zen and Sino/Japanese Philosophical-Mystical, Flying Saucer and Outer Space, Psychotherapy, Mass Therapy or Transformational Training, Political, New Age, Commercial and Communal/Self-Help. In addition, Lalich and Tobias (2006) include "one-on-one cults" and "family cults". In family cults the head of the family uses excessive persuasion and control techniques to keep the family functioning as he/she sees fit. One-on-one cults are two person abusive relationships that involve cultic characteristics (p72).

### **1.3 Who Joins a Cult?**

Singer (2003) notes that despite the myth that normal people don't get sucked into cults, research shows that approximately two-thirds of adolescents and adults in cults come from normal, functioning families and were demonstrating age-appropriate behaviour around the time they entered the cult. Of the remaining one-third, only five to six percent had serious psychological difficulties prior to joining. The remaining portion had depression relating to loss, or age related sexual and career dilemmas (p17).

As suggested by Singer (2003, cited in Lalich and Tobias, 2006) everyone is influenced and persuaded daily in different ways, but the vulnerability to be influenced varies. The ability to ward off persuaders is reduced when stressed, rushed, uncertain, lonely, indifferent, uninformed, distracted, or fatigued. Other vulnerability factors to joining cultic groups may include: feeling overwhelmed by the ambiguity of life, the number of choices one needs to make, the complexity of the world, and the conflict associated with life (Singer, 2003). When feeling overwhelmed, joining a cult can be attractive as they offer "instant, simplistic, and focussed solutions to life's problems" (Singer, 2003, p18). Further predisposing factors, as highlighted by Lalich and Tobias (2006), include: a desire to belong, unassertiveness, gullibility, cultural disillusionment, idealism, a lack of self-confidence, a desire for spiritual meaning and ignorance of how groups can manipulate individuals.

### **1.4 Cultic Behaviour**

#### Recruitment

According to Professor Philip Zimbardo and Michael Leippe (1991, cited in Lalich & Tobias, 2006), typical cult recruitment includes the following characteristics:

- Cult recruitment builds an initially small commitment into progressively bigger commitments (come to dinner, come for the weekend, stay for the week, give us your money)
- Cults offer repeated persuasive arguments with straightforward solutions to vexing personal problems

- Cults sway opinions through the power of group dynamics, both the numbers and personal attractiveness of all those agreeing and agreeable members
- Cults deny recruits the opportunity to counter-argue by keeping the recruit busily occupied with information and activities (and never alone)
- Cults offer some positive reinforcement (such as smiles, good food, that special brand of attention that makes one feel good) (p24).

### 'Mind control'

Exit Counsellor Steven Hassan (2000) explains that “mind control” techniques are used to keep new members dependent and obedient (p5).

As explained by Langone, “mind control” (also referred to as “brainwashing”, “coercive persuasion”, “thought reform”, and the “systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence”) refers to a process in which a group or individual “systematically uses unethically manipulative methods to persuade others to conform to the wishes of the manipulator(s), often to the detriment of the person being manipulated” (ICSA website, accessed 07/11/06).

The process by which cults come to exercise “mind control” over members is complex and varies a great deal; however, as identified by Langone (ICSA website, accessed 07/11/06) there appear to be three overlapping stages:

- 1 *Deception*: Recruits are tricked into believing that the group is benevolent and will enrich their lives. As a result of this deception recruits come to commit themselves to the group’s prescribed ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.
- 2 *Dependency*: By gradually isolating members from outside influences, establishing unrealistically high and guilt-inducing expectations, punishing any expressions of “negativity”, and belittling independent, critical thinking, the group causes members to become extremely dependent on the group’s compliance-oriented expressions of love and support.
- 3 *Dread*: Once a state of dependency is firmly established, the group’s control over members’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviour is strengthened by the members’ growing dread of losing the group’s psychological support.

Similarly, Hassan (2000) has identified the following four characteristics of “mind control”:

1. *Behaviour Control*: regulation of individual’s physical reality (where, how and with whom the members live and associate, financial dependence, etc.); need to report thoughts, feelings and activities to superiors; rigid rules and regulations; etc.
2. *Information Control*: access to non-cult sources of information discouraged (such as books, articles and television); outsider versus insider doctrines; need for obedience and dependency; etc.
3. *Thought Control*: need to internalise the group’s doctrine as “Truth”; use of “loaded” language; rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking and constructive criticism; etc.
4. *Emotional Control*: excessive use of guilt (over, for example, thoughts, feelings and actions); excessive use of fear (fear of the “outside” world); phobia indoctrination (including irrational fears about ever leaving the group or even questioning the leader’s authority) (pp42-45).

### **1.5 The Experience of Current Members of Cults**

After converts commit themselves to a cult, the cult’s way of thinking, feeling, and acting becomes second nature, while important aspects of their pre-cult personalities are suppressed (Langone, ICSA website, accessed 07/11/06). Research by Swartling and Swartling (1992) found that in 60 percent of cases, others (for instance, parents) noticed a change in appearance after the individual had joined the cult. Body posture became tense, with a frozen facial expression and eyes that had an absent or vague look.

Research by Dr Flavil Yeakley (1982, cited in Hassan, 2000) with 800 members of The Boston Church of Christ found that many members were beginning to match the personality type of the cult leader, regardless of their original personalities.

Similarly, research by Langone, Martin, Pile, Burks and Martin (1998) has shown it common for cult recruits to assume 'cult' personalities and subsume their core personalities. Langone et al. (1998) explain that many ex-cult members appear to have lost touch with their own feelings and have become emotionally numb.

## **2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: AFTER-EFFECTS OF CULT INVOLVEMENT AS EXPERIENCED BY FORMER MEMBERS**

Of the numbers of people who get involved with cults, more leave than stay (Cult Hotline & Clinic, accessed 07/11/06). People leave cults for a variety of reasons: some have interventions, some leave on their own accord (walkaways), and some are expelled (castaways) (Giambalvo, 1993). Reasons for leaving ‘voluntarily’ can vary dramatically, from having become disillusioned with the hypocrisy and/or corruption within the cult, to having become weary of the cultic routine (Langone, ICSA website, accessed 07/11/06).

Clinical observations and studies of former members of cultic groups and relationships indicate that cult involvement results in a significant level of distress for former members. For example, Hassan (2000) notes that former cult members suffer from a wide variety of difficulties and even years after leaving a cult, dealing with cult issues can be traumatic. According to Hassan (2000) some compare the experience to “falling head-over-heels in love, only to realise that their lover was two-faced and just using them” (p319). Others equate their involvement to a “spiritual rape of the soul” (p319).

## **2.1 Clinical Observations**

Exit counsellor Carol Giambalvo (1993) observed the following symptoms in her work with hundreds of former members: a sense of purposelessness and of being disconnected, depression, grieving for other group members, a sense of loss, guilt, anger, alienation, isolation, distrust, fear of going crazy, a tendency to think in terms of black and white (as conditioned by the cult), an inability to make decisions, low self-esteem, embarrassment, employment and career problems, dissociation, floating, nightmares, family issues, dependency issues, sexuality issues and spiritual (or philosophical) issues.

Similarly, from her work with more than 3000 former members, Singer (2003) noticed that symptoms experienced by former members varied according to the nature of the group. Former members of groups relying mainly on the use of dissociative techniques (meditation, trance states, guided imagery, past-lives regression, and hyperventilation) tended to exhibit after-effects such as anxiety and tics, panic attacks, cognitive inefficiencies and dissociative states. Those who were involved in groups using primarily intense aversive emotional arousal techniques (guilt and fear induction, strict discipline and punishments, excessive criticism and

blame) tended to experience after-effects such as guilt, shame, self-blaming attitudes, fears and paranoia, excessive doubt and panic attacks.

Additional after-effects outlined by Singer (2003) include depression, a sense of alienation, loneliness, low self-esteem and low self-confidence, phobic like constriction of social contacts, fear of joining groups or making a commitment, distrust of professional services and distrust of self in making good choices. Furthermore, she stresses most former members experience a sense of alienation and confusion resulting from the loss or weakening of previously valued norms, ideals, or goals. As Singer and Ofshe (1990) stress: “when the person leaves the group and returns to broader society ... the person feels like an immigrant or refugee who enters a new culture” (accessed from <http://www.refocus.org/mental.html>, 20/11/06).

The recovery issues observed by Hassan (2000) seem consistent with those outlined by Giambalvo (1993) and Singer (2003).

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## **2.2 Clinical Studies**

The studies that have collected statistical data on former members have, by and large, supported clinical observations. Among the statistical findings are the following:

Research conducted by Martin, Langone, Dole and Wiltrout (1992) to assess the psychological status of 111 former cultists found that this sample of former members could be characterized as having abnormal levels of distress in several of the personality and clinical symptom scales (including the Milton Clinical Multiaxial Inventory, the Beck Depression Inventory and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist). Their findings showed that a significant number of former members of cults suffered from chronic depression.

Conway, Siegelman, Carmichael and Coggins (1986) conducted research with a sample of 353 former members from 48 different groups, of which 20 percent experienced physical punishment and five percent had sex with leaders while in the group. Their research identified the following symptoms experienced by former members:

- 75% depression
- 68% loneliness

- 68% anger toward group leader
- 59% guilt feelings regarding leaving the group
- 59% feelings of humiliation/embarrassment
- 52% suicidal tendencies
- 49% fear of physical harm by the group
- 48% nightmares
- 42% inability to break rhythms of chanting, meditation, etc.
- 37% hostile feelings toward family
- 31% sleeplessness
- 25% memory loss
- 22% menstrual dysfunction
- 19% sexual dysfunction
- 18% abnormal weight loss
- 17% violent outbursts
- 17% bewildering, psychic phenomena
- 16% abnormal weight gain
- 15% hallucinations and delusions

Similarly, Langone, Chambers, Dole and Grice (1991, cited in Martin et al., 1992) conducted research with a sample of 308 former cultists from 101 groups, of which 11 percent were sexually abused in the group. They identified the following commonly experienced symptoms:

- 83% reported feeling anxiety/fear/worry
- 76% anger toward the group leader
- 72% low self-confidence
- 71% vivid flashbacks to group experience
- 67% depression
- 67% difficulty concentrating
- 61% despair/hopelessness/helplessness
- 56% guilt about what they did in the group
- 55% “floating” (a phenomenon similar to drug flashbacks)
- 51% felt as though they lived in an unreal world
- 46% had conflicts with loved ones

- 44% reported that the experience was very harmful
- 42% reported that the group experience was very unsatisfying
- 38% feared physical harm by the group
- 34% severe anxiety attacks after leaving

Knight (1986, cited in Martin et al., 1992) conducted research with a sample of 58 former members of a psychotherapy cult, of which 97 percent were verbally abused in therapy sessions while in the group, 78 percent were hit at least occasionally in therapy sessions and 25 percent had sex with their therapist while in the group. This researcher's study identified the following symptoms experienced by former members:

- 86% felt harmed by the group exposure
- 75% sought therapy
- 52% anxiety
- 48% depression
- 48% trouble making decisions
- 41% confusion
- 40% disoriented
- 33% lonely
- 18% menstrual cessation

Research by Galanter (1983) with a sample of 66 former members of the Unification Church found:

- 61% felt the leader, Rev. Moon, had negatively impacted on members
- 36% reported serious emotional problems after leaving
- 24% sought professional help after leaving
- 3% were hospitalized after leaving

Research conducted by Swartling and Swartling (1992) with 43 former students of the Word of Life Bible School found:

- 93% experienced anxiety, especially panic attacks
- 88% experienced feelings of emptiness
- 47% experienced psychosis-like symptoms
- 25% had made a serious suicide attempt

In short, according to the above-cited clinicians and researchers the most common symptoms former members experience are depression and suicidal tendencies, feelings of loss and loneliness, anxiety and panic attacks, anger, guilt, symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as nightmares, dissociative symptoms such as "floating" and family related issues.

Findings by other researchers and clinicians focussing on the most commonly identified symptoms include:

### **2.3 Depression and Suicidal Tendencies**

According to Lalich and Tobias (2006) and Hassan (2000) the majority of former members experience symptoms of depression. Grief and mourning, in particular when combined with despair, world-weariness, anxiety, self-blame, and shame, can lead to debilitating depression, with symptoms including sadness, disinterest, feeling lost, and physical symptoms such as personality changes and changes in appetite and sleep patterns (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). It may take former members from one to two years “to return to their former level of adaptation, while some may have psychological breakdowns or remain psychologically scarred for years” (Langone, ICSA website, accessed 10/11/06).

According to Hassan (1996) those most deeply affected are castaways (those who have been kicked out) as most of them dedicated their whole lives to the group, handing over their bank accounts and property when they joined. Then after some years, despite the promise they would be looked after for the rest of their lives, they were told to leave. These people, “phobic toward the world outside their cults, have been cast into what they view as utter darkness” (Hassan, 2000, p170). Similarly, Lalich and Tobias (2006) note that unless castaways receive counselling, many are prone to suffer an extreme sense of loss and isolation, which may, in turn, lead to deep depression and push some to the brink of suicide.

The perceived high prevalence of feelings of depression experienced by former members is also supported by formal research. A study by Malinoski, Langone and Lynn (1999) found that one-third of former members scored in the moderate to severe range of depression compared to two percent of participants in the non-cultic groups. Research conducted by Martin et al.

(1992) with 111 self-described former cult members from different groups seeking treatment for cult-related issues produced similar findings.

## **2.4 Loss and Loneliness**

Research conducted in Belgium by Saroglou, Christians, Buxant and Casalfiore (2006) with a sample of 471 current and former members, shows that leaving a cult constitutes a dramatic experience which leaves long lasting marks on a person. The researchers concluded that for many leaving a group constitutes a serious moment of breakdown marked by loneliness, few contacts and relationships, and a feeling of failure.

Similarly, a study by Goski (1994) with a sample of 80 found that nearly all respondents had experienced the first two years out of the group as causing tremendous distress. The study identified the following five aspects of loss as most pertinent:

- 84% experienced a loss of innocence (the result of feeling that one had been spiritually “raped, used, betrayed”)
- 71 % experienced grief over the years “lost” in the group
- 71 % experienced grief regarding “what could have been . . .”
- 69 % experienced loss of meaning/purpose in life
- 68 % experienced loss of trust in religion

As Goski (1994) explains, although leaving a high-demand group signifies hope of a new life filled with individual freedom, departure also means coming face-to-face with an array of losses.

## **2.5 Anxiety and Panic Attacks**

Singer (2003) explains that it is common for former cult members to experience panic attacks and other panic disorders, especially by those coming out of groups that focus on stimulating fear and guilt. Panic attacks can be defined as periods of intense fear or discomfort in which a number of the following symptoms develop and reach a peak within about ten minutes: pounding heart, sweating, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, feeling of choking, chest pain or discomfort, nausea or abdominal distress, feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or faint,

fear of losing control or going crazy, fear of dying, numbness, tingling, and hot and cold flashes (Singer, 2003).

Similarly, Hassan (2000) highlights anxiety, panic attacks, phobias and PTSD as commonly experienced by former members. He stresses that “cults instill fear to bind members to the group, to such an extent that members may become paranoid or phobic” (p53).

Anxiety and disorientation as experienced by former members may be the result of trying to free themselves of the unwanted remnants of a cult belief system, while at the same time trying to recover some confidence in either a pre-cult belief system or some new post-cult belief system (Dunlop, 2001).

## **2.6 Anger**

It seems clear from the previously outlined research that anger is commonly experienced by former members. This, according to Lalich and Tobias (2006) is a healthy, first sign of recovery. They explain anger as an appropriate response to abuse and exploitation.

Furthermore, they argue that suppression of anger while in the group may have contributed to depression and a sense of hopelessness. However, as anger expressed inappropriately or unconsciously (through, for example, self-blame) can increase a person's isolation, it is important for anger to be focussed on its source (often the leader) (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Rage towards the abuser turned against the self can cause irrational guilt or shame, and in turn, may lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and suicidal thoughts (Lalich & Tobias, 2006).

## **2.7 Guilt and Shame**

As the cultic system is a continuous cycle of guilt, shame and fear, it is common for former members to struggle with feelings of guilt (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Former members who may be especially prone to experiencing guilt and shame may have participated in cult actions and activities that in normal life they would never have considered, such as acts that are morally reprehensible. For example, they may have hurt their family, recruited friends, witnessed abuse (that they did not stop or try to prevent), or participated in cult activities that went against their own sense of integrity (such as lying, stealing, spying on friends, etc.) (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Similarly, Goldberg (2003) highlights that many former members struggle with guilt over neglecting and/or abusing their children while in the cult.

Closely connected to feelings of guilt, is shame. People generally feel shame when they see themselves as bad in the eyes of others (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Lalich and Tobias (2006) note that the guilt and shame experienced by former members of cults and abusive relationships can be equated to that of rape victims. Regarding the experiences of rape victims, trauma specialist Judith Herman (1992) notes that "traumatised people struggle to arrive at a fair and reasonable assessment of their conduct, finding a balance between unrealistic guilt and denial of all moral responsibility" (p68).

Furthermore, even though many former members carry a burden of guilt and shame, they continue to regard their former leader as "paternal, all good, or godlike" (Lalich & Tobias,

2006, p53). Lalich and Tobias (2006) explain this to be quite common in those who walk away from their groups, and a similar phenomenon is often found in battered women and children who are abused by a parent or other adults they love.

## **2.8 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

When a traumatic event occurs that corresponds to nothing like the security of past events, and the individual's mind is unable to successfully answer basic questions of how and why it occurred, and what it means, a crisis follows. This crisis, in turn, may lead to the development of PTSD (James & Gilliland, 2005).

PTSD involves the re-experiencing of a traumatic event through memories (including flashbacks) and nightmares. Sufferers avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma, they display restriction or numbing of emotional responsiveness and may be unable to remember certain aspects of the event. In addition, victims are typically over-aroused, easily startled and quick to anger (DSM IV, cited in Barlow and Durand, 2005, p152).

Regarding the potential development of PTSD, concerns for cult involvement have been expressed by former RAF psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon Turnbull, who debriefed Beirut hostages Terry Waite and John McCarthy. Dr. Turnbull saw great similarities between hostages who had been kidnapped and rescued, and cult victims who were re-emerging into 'normal' life. The main similarities were in their efforts to regain control and responsibility (Newsnight report on cults, BBC 2 16th July 1993, cited in Dunlop, 2001).

It is clear a trauma may lead to the development of PTSD; however, why former members are susceptible to the development of PTSD needs to be explained. Some contributing factors may include:

1. Prolonged, repeated trauma as occurs in circumstances of captivity, under the control of the perpetrator, as can be found in religious cults (or prisons and concentration camps) may lead to PTSD (Herman, 1992).
2. Some cults use emotional arousal techniques (such as guilt and fear induction) and excessive criticism and blame (Singer, 2003). Brewin (2003) explains, that such mental events (i.e., self-critical thoughts and painful, conflicting emotions) may lead to PTSD.

3. As outlined by Goski (1994) former members often experience many separations and losses (separation from their pre-cult identity, the leader, friends/family and other members). The experience of traumatic separations may lead to PTSD (Barlow and Durand, 2005).
4. A lack of support when leaving the group may also increase the risk of PTSD (Barlow and Durand, 2005).

## **2.9 Dissociative Identity Disorder/Pseudo-Identity Disorder**

The DSM III, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (a comprehensive classification of officially recognised psychiatric disorders) notes “Atypical Dissociative Disorder”: “trance-like states, derealization accompanied by depersonalization, and those non-prolonged dissociative states that might occur in persons who have been subjected to periods of prolonged and intensive persuasion (brainwashing, thought reform and indoctrination while the captive of terrorists or cultists)” (p277).

In line with Dissociative Disorders, Gasde and Block (1998) have identified “pseudo-identity or altered persona” as a common phenomenon among cult members. Pseudo-identity or altered persona is a dissociative coping response to unexpected circumstances such as profound changes in an individual’s life, prolonged environmental stress, or both. Gasde and Block (1998) explain that “the pseudo-identity” is induced, strengthened, and maintained by the cult environment, and becomes superimposed upon the true personality (which is suppressed by the cult environment). The symptoms associated with the pseudo-identity syndrome are dissociative, trance-like states, depersonalisation, derealization, emotional numbness and floating. Research by Martin et al. (1992) supports the view that dissociative processes are central to the cult experience.

As stressed by Singer (2003) most people leaving a cultic group have a period in which they need to put together the split or doubled self they upheld while in the group, and come to terms with their authentic self.

## **2.10 Family Related Issues**

Marriage and parenting issues may also be of concern. Goldberg (2003) explains that cult leaders often control the member's married and sexual life to guarantee that the member does not form a genuine intimate relationship with other members. In some cults, members are encouraged to have sex with numerous partners; in others, celibacy is required (Goldberg, 2003). In addition, in some groups, cult leaders match members for marriage; or, at least, they are consulted before marriage between cult members is permitted. Within the cult, even mismatched couples can be held together if their need to hold on to cult beliefs is stronger than their desire for personal happiness. However, after leaving the group, former members who are married also have to deal with their marital relationship and, in turn, with their cult-influenced reactions to their spouses (Goldberg, 2003).

Many former members also experience difficulty taking a parental role after leaving the group as cult leaders may interfere with the couple's ability to parent their own children (Goldberg, 2003). As a result of the leader's narcissistic need to be the most important relationship in the members' lives, cult leaders often discourage parents from involvement with their children. Consequently, parenting difficulties after leaving the cult are sometimes related to the fact that they acted as siblings to their children, because the cult leader was the "parent" for them all (Goldberg, 2003).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Aims and Objectives**

An overview of the literature suggests adverse after-effects of cult involvement exist. However, as there does not appear to be any formal research conducted on the nature of these effects in Australia, an investigation into the experiences of former members of cults in Australia is required. Accordingly, the present small study examined whether symptoms experienced by former members in Australia are consistent with those experienced by former members overseas.

The aim of this research is to promote better understanding of the impact of cult involvement. It is believed that greater awareness may lead to greater cult related expertise among health professionals, which, in turn, may bring about an improvement in support offered to former members. Increased awareness could also work as a preventative measure as it may encourage members of the public to be wary of deceptive recruitment techniques such as “love-bombing” (making someone feel special by overwhelming them with admiration) (Hassan, 2000), and to critically reflect on the nature of a group prior to joining.

#### **3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis**

To ensure all participants were exposed to the same ‘stimulus’ a questionnaire was designed. The aim was to collect basic demographic data on ex-member populations, to collect data on the experiences as a group member, and to evaluate post-group psychological health. The following non-directive, open-ended questions were posed in an exploratory fashion as not to influence the responses:

- Please write approximately ½ to 1 page on your experiences as a group member.
- Please write approximately ½ to 1 page describing how you felt after you came out of the group. How long did these feelings last? What did you do when you felt like this?

For the purpose of this study, the use of questionnaires has been chosen over a re-analysis of the available data or Clinical Case Studies. A re-analysis of the available data would not be sufficient as, firstly, there does not appear to be significant data available in Australia and

secondly, because researchers using different definitions of "cult" may tend to focus on different types of groups. Therefore, comparing research studies on cultic groups can be hazardous. Clinical Case Studies were not used as this does not significantly illuminate questions of prevalence (because their samples are tilted toward those needing help).

After an extensive review of the data obtained through the questionnaires, themes emerged. These themes were compared and contrasted as to identify similarities and differences in the responses.

### **3.3 Sampling**

The questionnaires were posted or emailed to 12 former members of a number of different cultic groups in Australia. Of the 12, eight returned a completed questionnaire.

It was anticipated for the sample to be small as former members have shown to be reluctant to participate in scientific studies (Gasde & Block, 1998). A number of factors such as embarrassment at having been manipulated, ridicule from those who lack understanding, fear of retaliation from the cult, and a need for closure may motivate this reluctance (Gasde & Block, 1998). Therefore, some difficulties were encountered when attempting to find subjects.

#### Participants:

##### *Lauren*

Lauren, aged 25, left a cultic group five years ago after 12 years of involvement. Lauren and her family joined a religious group (started by an immigrant who conferred upon himself the titles of guru, enlightened master and teacher) when she was eight years of age. The guru preached bizarre, contradictory, confusing and ever-changing beliefs. She believed that the guru was a self-realised being, and she came to think the leader was omniscient, omni-present and omnipotent. She was told that he knew all her secrets, and all the secrets of the universe; and that he held the power of life and death over her and her family. He treated her as his 'daughter' or 'blessed child', subjecting her to endless sessions of 'teachings' and withdrawing alternative sources of social support until she became totally dependent on him. At age 20 she left on her own accord.

### *Kristina*

Kristina, aged 29, left a cultic group one year ago after seven years of involvement. As she was attracted to the charismatic group leader's unconventional belief, which promised the attainment of a "true" understanding of the world, she quit university to devote all her time and money to the courses offered. Kristina came to believe that through her involvement she was "helping bring a new era of peace and love on the planet". The group's many inconsistencies and ever-changing rules caused Kristina to become fully dependent on the leader's validation and she swiftly lost her ability to make independent decisions. Kristina witnessed "emotional breakdowns, verbal abuse, kidnappings, holding back of food, physical exertion to the extreme, group nudity and more". She was occasionally hit in front of the group by the leader, "emotionally torn down" and told that she was a "waste of time". Kristina explains she was transformed into an "indoctrinated approval seeking, workaholic". After seven years of involvement (and a lot of 'wasted' money) Kristina was expelled.

### *Thomas*

For 11 years, Thomas, now age 53, was committed to a group founded by an ex-pastor who claimed to be the "end time prophet 'David' spoken of in Ezekiel 34:23". At a time of disillusionment with life, Thomas was attracted to the "group members' happiness, zeal, and apparent freedom from the norms of society". He considered their 'faith' and ability to trust God to supply their needs refreshing, and joined with the hope of "reaching the world for Jesus". In line with the Biblical teachings, Thomas informed his father he was no longer needed as his only and true father was God. For his first three months as a member Thomas had a 'buddy' with him at all times as to weaken his exposure to alternate views and perspectives. Furthermore, radio and TV usage was heavily censored. As Thomas grew in 'the faith' he was gradually introduced to the more controversial beliefs of the group (for example, beliefs such as "the end justifies the means", which extended to breaking the law). Pre-group values were put aside for the values of the group and anything not "of faith" was considered a sin. Shortly after Thomas' marriage to a fellow member, recruitment strategies such as "religious prostitution" (as to win males to the group) were introduced. This led to wife swapping, STDs, mixed families, separation and remarriage. In time, the couple became 'middle leaders' and moved to India to further the cause through the teaching of religion in schools. While in India,

a change in group practice lead to “middle leaders” (such as Thomas) being belittled, scrutinised, criticised, put down and exorcised. In 1986, after four years in India, when Thomas started asking challenging questions, he and his family (with five children and one on the way) were kicked out of the group with no where to go.

### *Sophie*

Sophie, now aged 53, left a group in 1986 after 14 years of involvement. Shortly after leaving home, Sophie met a group of young people who had found answers to life’s questions and “lived what they believed”. Even though Sophie was a bit cynical at first, she was touched by their constant demonstration of love for her, their sincerity, and idealism. Consequently, when invited to live with them, she agreed. (She now lived in a house with 70 people and one toilet). Sophie was given new clothing to wear, a new name, and was assigned a ‘buddy’ to stay with her at all times. Furthermore, she was asked to cut contact with friends and family until her faith had grown stronger. Sophie enjoyed the constant meeting of new people and loved the support she gave to, and received from, fellow members. Days consisted of Bible study and recruitment of new members. Contact with the outside world was minimised and radios and televisions were not permitted. Members were told they had been handpicked by God to “lead the world through these troubled times”. The group had a very well organised leadership structure where everything (from which activities to perform, to whom to associate with or date) needed to be approved by leadership. At the very top, was ‘the Leader’, who had been prophesied about in the Bible and was in direct communication with God. In his role of sharing God’s message with the world, the leader wrote letters which were distributed to disciples and “people on the street”. (The letters pertained mostly to the bad things that were going to happen to the world). Shortly after Sophie married a fellow member, the leader started criticising the selfish nature of marriage and, as a result, the concept of open-marriage was introduced. Open-marriage was an innovative way to entice men to join. As birth control was not permitted Sophie had six children in 8 ½ years. When instructed by the leader, Sophie and her family moved to India as missionaries. Sophie had by now obtained “middle level leadership” and had the authority to excommunicate people, allocate money, arrange visas (and blackmail when needed), and deal with police. During this time, as “everything that happened was a reflection of one’s spiritual condition” Sophie and her husband were required to write “daily reports on one’s lessons learned and spiritual progress”. Sophie became very weak, and the rigorous regime of selling literature, meetings, home schooling, raising funds and living in one room

with six children resulted in a “nervous breakdown”. This ultimately led to the family choosing to leave to return to Australia.

### *Michael*

Michael, aged 37, joined a group at age 31 to gratify his wife and potentially avoid a family breakdown. Within days of meeting the group, Michael’s wife (who had been referred to the group for respite care by her doctor) accepted the group’s philosophy that “Christianity is the Harlot of Revelations and under the control of Satan”; and that “only group members are living out the life described in the Bible”. Consequently, she came to see herself as “a sinner going to hell” who could only be “saved” through total commitment to the group. To join, Michael gave up all his possessions, gave up his successful company and dropped out of post-graduate studies. As a member his days now consisted of long hours of voluntary work, followed by morning and evening “gatherings”. Resources for community facilities, food, and medical care were grossly inadequate (resources for luxury items for some of the leaders, however, were available). Furthermore, his children suffered “excessive corporal punishment”, a lack of toys, playtime and friendships, lack of access to grandparents and extended family and inadequate education. Despite the initial guarantee that the communities are hierarchy free, it soon became clear to Michael that there was indeed an ultimate authority (an apostle) who claimed to be in direct communication with God. The “elders” were “infallible” (and, in turn, not held accountable) as it was believed that “the faults of the leaders bring out the rebellion of the sheep”. Acts of terrorism were applauded (not for their taking of life, but for the terrorist being “so focused on what they were doing that nothing else mattered”), and members were warned against the dangers of the ‘world’. As the teaching became more and more bizarre, Michael started challenging and questioning the many inconsistencies, and, consequently, was “kicked out” after 2.5 years of involvement. Michael’s wife has remained in the group and has left their three children in his permanent care. She has had no contact with them for nearly 5 years.

### *Emily*

Emily, aged 35, was a member of a group for 2.5 years. As Emily was attracted to the group’s exciting atmosphere she joined at age 20, and subsequently pledged total commitment to them. Emily was told that as *only* members were true disciples of God and would be saved, all her

time, money and energy was to be given to the leaders and the cause. Consequently, all her spare time was taken up with activities such as morning prayers, fund raising, recruiting, church meetings, more prayer, etc. Furthermore, as a symbol of her commitment, Emily had rejected her family and friends and only associated with other members. Furthermore, within four months of joining, when asked, she quit her job to become a leader in the group. The practice of 'discipleship' (meetings where all your peers would sit around you and tell you all of your sins) were common practice. Often the accusations were fictitious, or personal information shared in confidence was used against the members during 'discipleship'. To prove her worth to the group Emily had become aggressive towards her family and the group of women she was now leading. Emily left after an intervention (exit counselling) organised by her family.

### *Madeline*

Madeleine, aged 56, lived in an ashram in the jungle in the foothills of the Himalayas. The ashram was like a prison, fenced all around and "very austere". Daily activities started at 5 a.m. with exercises and meditation, followed by cooking, cleaning and getting provisions. All disciples dressed in white, buckets of cold water were used for bathing, and there were only two meagre meals a day. The guru was charismatic and manipulative, and had many "under his spell". He was the ultimate authority and permission was to be sought for everything, even to leave the ashram to see a doctor. He often resorted to verbal or physical abuse, or would kick people out on a whim. Furthermore, as part of the "spiritual practice" he entered into a "secret" sexual relationship with most females. This was regarded as "cleansing" and considered an honour. As a result, almost all of his "consorts" fell pregnant and were ordered to have abortions. Madeline suffered two abortions (one late term) and on several occasions was severely beaten for speaking up. In 1977 (after four years of commitment), as it had become clear her "time had passed" and she was no longer welcome, Madeline left. When she returned to Australia she was suffering malnutrition, and had hepatitis.

### *Patrick*

Patrick, 47 years of age, was involved in a commercial cult, a group he refers to as a "cult of greed". Patrick was attracted to the promise that joining the "special programme for success" would lead to becoming very rich. Leaders were held up as examples, and it was explained that

if you do what they say you will be successful too. Consequently, during his involvement Patrick paid for an endless stream of motivational tapes, videos, books and seminars all of which were supposedly designed to help him succeed. In reality, Patrick explains, it was a controlled environment designed to keep him believing in an almost impossible dream of success. In addition, members were encouraged to cut ties with those family members and friends who were not interested in the business proposal. The endless pressure, and Patrick's unwillingness to approach friends with proposals, resulted in Patrick leaving the group in 2004 after one year of involvement.

### **3.4 Research with Current Members of Cults**

No research was conducted with current members of cults as the results may not be reliable. When working with current members the question of subject motivations to participate may be important. Some researchers have encountered Elevated Lie scales in studies with current members, which cast doubt on the credibility of the findings of these studies (Langone, 1993). It seems possible for subjects to want to appear “normal” in order to help their groups in court proceedings, or to attract new members.

It can also be argued for research with current members to be unreliable as “cult recruits assume 'cult' personalities and subsume their core personalities” (Langone et al., 1998, p32). Many ex-cult members report that while they were in the cult they experienced a personality replacement; with some former members explaining they lost touch with their own feelings and became emotionally numb, while putting on a happy front when with parents or non-cult friends (Langone et al., 1998).

Furthermore, Swartling and Swartling (1992) note that according to the teaching of some groups, members are not to admit that they suffer from depression or any other symptoms of illness. In some groups, disorders, such as anxiety or a lack of will to live, are explained as attacks by the Devil, while in other groups, psychiatric disorders are not to be viewed as warning signals but rather as a sign that one is working for God and therefore is subject to attacks (Swartling and Swartling, 1992).

## 4. FINDINGS

To the question “please describe how you felt after you came out of the group” all the participants outlined how they had undergone a difficult adjustment period. In line with clinicians’ and researchers’ findings, common themes to emerge from this study include feelings of depression, feelings of loss and loneliness, anxiety and panic attacks, anger, guilt, symptoms of PTSD, dissociative symptoms and family related issues. In addition, themes that had not become apparent in the initial review of the literature also emerged. Additional themes identified include feelings of confusion, embarrassment, exhaustion, feelings of rejection, a sense of failure, worthlessness and low self-esteem, self-doubt and difficulties making decisions.

### 4.1 Depression and Suicidal Tendencies

In line with research findings (Conway et al., 1986; Martin et al., 1992; Swartling & Swartling, 1992) and clinical observations (Hassan, 2000) 62 percent of participants highlighted feelings of distress and depression. These feelings were expressed in the verbalisations of Kristina, Thomas and Emily.

Kristina:

*I felt depressed and confused. It took me about six months to figure out what was real and not real... I felt that I had no purpose for living anymore... For the first six months there were days I could not leave my bedroom out of fear and depression... I felt like I had to find the ground again and find the strength of will to retrieve myself...*

Thomas:

*I was in such an emotional state that whenever we would sing hymns at church I would cry uncontrollably... I was having an emotional breakdown... For the first two years I was drunk virtually every night, the following three years I was very unstable emotionally and confused though things were improving with a satisfying job and money coming into the household. For another five years my self-esteem and decision-making were still a problem...*

Emily:

*I felt like the love of my life had been ripped away from me. I often thought 'what was the point', I had stuffed up. Many times I contemplated driving in front of a truck or over the edge of a cliff.*

## **4.2 Loss and Loneliness**

In line with findings of Saroglou et al. (2006) 75 percent of participants described the exit as a serious moment of breakdown marked by loneliness and fewer contacts and relationships.

Consistent with Goski's (1994) findings, a number of different types of loss were identified. For example:

Lauren, Kristina and Sophie expressed a loss of social contacts:

Kristina:

*I felt lonely.*

Lauren:

*I noticed soon after leaving I had lost most of my friends and was very lonely.*

Sophie:

*When you leave the group there is no ongoing relationship. You have demonstrated which side you are on... I was acutely aware of the isolation we felt as a family, we didn't feel like telling people our story, explain our poverty, all these children, etc.*

Kristina expressed Goski's (1994) loss of faith in spirituality:

*I threw out my spirituality completely and therefore lost that part of my identity...*

Thomas and Sophie touched on Goski's (1994) "years lost in the group":

Thomas:

*Re-entering mainstream society with an eleven year gap wasn't easy. We were out of touch with news, sports, current affairs, music and pretty much everything that 'normal' people do or talk about. We had been removed from everything in our lives that mattered, career, friends, and dignity as we slowly began to realise that we had been duped into living a lie. We felt stupid ashamed and alienated. Our trust in people was shattered to the point that we could not trust anyone to help us either.*

Sophie:

*I had not listened to radio or TV for the better part of these years. We had no idea who was the Prime Minister or what music was popular. We missed lots of movies. We arrived in Australia in 1986, penniless, pretty confused and lonely...*

And lastly, Michael highlighted issues regarding the loss of possessions:

*Upon joining you are expected to give up all your possessions and give it to the group. This makes it very hard to leave ... Once you leave you have nothing to start over with.*

### **4.3 Anxiety and Panic Attacks**

Consistent with Singer (2003) and Hassan (2000), issues regarding anxiety, panic attacks and fears were described by half of the participants. These feelings were highlighted in the verbalisations of Lauren, Kristina, Sophie and Emily.

Lauren:

*When I first left the group I experienced a lot of panic attacks ... The guru repeatedly stated the outside world was possessed by demons, and was evil... I was told that I stood no chance of survival if I was ever to leave ... we were warned that the end of the world was nearing but as the chosen, most highly developed 'disciples' we would be saved... When I left the group I for a long time really feared the world ... I can manage panic better now but I'm still very anxious... My anxiety has made it hard for me to keep a job or even enjoy friendships and relax...*

Kristina:

*When I do anything as part of a group (eg at uni) it freaks me out and I have at times had panic attacks in these situations.*

Sophie:

*My initial feelings were of great uncertainty. This uncertainty was pertaining to my grave fears that by leaving the group I was now opening myself up to the wrath of God and really anything could go wrong for me or my family from now on.*

Emily:

*Major fear. I was afraid of meeting or bumping into anyone from the group. (Up to two years with severe panic attacks – the severity and time between them decreased over the next 3-4 years).*

#### **4.4 Anger**

Also in line with previous findings (Conway et al., 1986; Langone et al., 1991), most participants reported feelings of anger. Verbalisations by Kristina, Michael and Patrick include:

Kristina:

*I felt angry that I had missed out on normal activities and that I was in so much debt because of those stupid courses... I felt angry that my family was right and that my dad used this to laugh at me to my cousins and uncles.*

Michael:

*I started to get very angry at the group for what they had done to me. I got very angry at my wife for abandoning her family. I got angry at myself for allowing it all to happen...*

Patrick:

*I was angry with myself for being sucked in...*

#### **4.5 Guilt and Shame**

In line with observations by Lalich and Tobias (2006) over half the participants expressed feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. Most simply stated “*I blamed myself*”. Other comments include:

Kristina:

*I felt embarrassed telling my old friends where I had been for the last few years... I felt guilt towards my family.*

Michael:

*When I got the baby seat out of the car I saw that she (his wife) had a rod there to discipline him on the way down. This filled me with rage and at the same time shame for what I used to do as well.*

#### **4.6 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

In line with Herman's (1992) and Dr. Turnbull's (cited in Dunlop, 2001) observations, almost half of the participants described an experience of crisis, followed by symptoms of PTSD. The experiences of crisis were highlighted by verbalisations by Lauren, Sophie and Michael.

Lauren:

*For some time I found it hard to concentrate... I have nightmares ... can't sleep and often don't have much of an appetite... I experienced a real time of crisis. Really couldn't function as usual. I drank to numb myself ... I felt emotionally separated from everything, especially myself...*

Sophie:

*I started to identify with women who had experienced Domestic Violence and PTSD I started to identify the "tapes in my head" and rewire my thinking... I often experienced dreams in which I took off leadership in the group, or where I was rescuing other members to come out.*

Michael:

*When I was kicked out I needed to sort things out for my immediate survival... The pressures led to my mental state being very strange. At nights going to sleep my head was like it was on another dimension and I would only fall asleep listening to music. It was not a bad state to be in but incredibly intense. Sort of like when you fall madly in love with someone that it can affect you physically... I guess I was trying to deal with so much that everything was reduced in its intensity so I could function.*

#### **4.7 Dissociative Identity Disorder/Pseudo-Identity Disorder**

In line with Gasde and Block (1998) and Martin et al. (1992) some participants reported dissociative symptoms such as "floating". Martin (2006) explains floating as a regression which is most commonly triggered by certain sights, sounds, touches, smells, or tastes that were ever-present in the cult environment. These symptoms were highlighted by Lauren and Michael.

Lauren:

*Initially I didn't want to talk about my experiences. I felt emotionally separated from everything, especially myself. I still sometimes do this when I get upset. It's like separating yourself from yourself... For a long time I felt like an impostor, like I'm observing life from a distance, in a way like it's not really me living ...*

Michael:

*I felt during this period almost like I was on drugs. My head felt like it was floating particularly at night when I tried to get to sleep.*

It seems important to note that a relationship between dissociation and PTSD exist. As Herman (1997, cited in James & Gilliland, 2005) explains, dissociation at the moment of the trauma is perhaps the most important long term predictive variable for PTSD (and is invariably connected to “complex” PTSD).

#### **4.8 Family Related Issues**

In line with Goldberg's (2003) findings, family related issues also appear to be commonly experienced by former members in this study. Thomas', Sophie's and Michael's verbalisations highlight pertinent issues regarding post-cult marriage difficulties (Thomas and Sophie met their partners while in the group. Michael joined a group together with his wife, but left the group without her).

Thomas:

*I was drinking heavily about a litre of red wine a night, my marriage was on the brink of disaster ... We have witnessed many fragmented families leaving (the group) and often the fallout in their lives is horrendous. Due to the free sex policy children and teens are often the result of mixed families, have left a parent or relatives in the group and have had a harshly disciplined childhood...*

Sophie:

*As a couple we were together, but very different in our recovery and totally missed each other's needs, which often led to great arguments.*

Michael:

*I started to deal with the fact that my marriage was finished, that it never really was a healthy relationship despite my best efforts, that I had my three children with me and that I needed to be able to provide for them a life...*

#### **4.9 Additional Themes to Emerge**

Additional themes that emerged from this study include feelings of confusion, exhaustion, feelings of rejection, a sense of failure, worthlessness and low self-esteem, self-doubt and difficulties making decisions. These themes did not emerge from the initial review of the literature; however, a re-examination of the literature has identified that these experiences are also in line with clinical observations and researchers' findings.

#### **4.9.1 Feelings of Worthlessness and Low Self-Esteem**

Over half of the participants described feelings of low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

Kristina:

*I believed I was a terrible person, actually one of the worst people on the whole planet...I believed I was stupid, and intellectually behind because I had been told so. I felt worthless.*

Emily:

*People that had put their entire trust in me were now hating me. I found this hard.*

Lalich and Tobias (2006) explain that it is common for former members of cults to experience a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. As cult members are taught to regard themselves and the group as special, or as the chosen few (Lalich & Tobias, 2006), it seems logical that when leaving a group, the loss of 'elitism' may cause a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.

#### **4.9.2 Self-Doubt and Difficulties Making Decisions**

Half of the participants raised issues regarding self-doubt and difficulties making decisions. These issues were highlighted by verbalisations by Kristina, Emily and Madeline.

Kristina:

*I felt that I wanted my own space and my own decision-making abilities back.*

Emily:

*I questioned myself and my abilities in all things. I couldn't make my own decisions. What should I eat? What should I wear?*

Madeline:

*I had lots of self-doubt...*

Lalich and Tobias (2006) explain that by dictating all rules cults create child-like dependencies in their members. This type of environment causes the members to become incapable of complex, rational thought and, in turn, making decisions unaided becomes difficult (West & Singer, 1980; cited in Lalich & Tobias, 2006).

#### **4.9.3 Feelings of Rejection and Sense of Failure**

Half of the participants expressed feelings of rejection and failure:

Kristina:

*I felt hurt and rejected... I thought I deserved to be rejected by everyone I knew.*

Emily:

*I had a feeling of being rejected.*

Madeline:

*I felt devastated and confused. I believed it was my fault, my bad karma, that I had fallen "out of favour" ... and replaced by another girl as chief consort... I felt I had failed.*

Patrick:

*I felt I should have achieved more – I felt I had failed.*

Again, Madeline's and Patrick's feelings of failure are in line with Lalich and Tobias' (2006) findings. These authors note that former members frequently feel that they are failures for not having stayed.

#### **4.9.1 Feelings of Exhaustion and Confusion**

Feelings of exhaustion were highlighted by Emily's and Madeline's verbalisations.

Emily:

*Exhausted. I think I slept for the first week.*

Madeline:

*A part of me wanted to go back, try again. But another part was just too exhausted... I felt devastated and confused.*

Exhaustion and confusion are used in many groups as a technique to reduce cult members' ability to act. As in most groups, members are made to work all day long, it is not surprising they become exhausted and unable to think rationally (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Consequently, it seems logical for some former members to feel exhausted and confused after leaving the group.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this small study indicate after-effects of cult involvement as experienced by former members of cults in Australia to be in line with after-effects identified by studies conducted overseas. Consistent with previous findings, common themes that emerged from the study include feelings of depression, feelings of loss and loneliness, anxiety and panic attacks, anger, guilt, symptoms of PTSD, dissociative symptoms and family related issues. Additional themes that emerged include feelings of confusion, exhaustion, feelings of rejection, a sense of failure, worthlessness and low self-esteem, self-doubt and difficulties making decisions.

The most commonly expressed concern by the participants of this small study is a feeling of loss. Regardless of sex, length of involvement, or method of leaving, most of the participants came face-to-face with a sense of loss and loneliness. This experience was highlighted by Thomas' words: "*We had been removed from everything in our lives that mattered, career, friends, and dignity as we slowly began to realise that we had been duped into living a lie*".

Feelings of depression also appear to be commonly experienced. All participants, except for those who left on their own accord (i.e., walkaways), described feelings of depression. For example, as Emily, who left through an intervention organised by her family, stated "*I felt like the love of my life had been ripped away from me*". In the same way, all the participants who had been expelled, Kristina, Michael and Thomas, expressed feelings of depression and emotional breakdown. Furthermore, Madeline, who had left the group as she no longer felt welcome, expressed feelings of depression. In line with Hassan (2000) it appears that castaways are most deeply affected when leaving a group. It could be argued that Madeline was, in a sense, a castaway as she left because her "*time had passed*" rather than out of personal choice.

An interesting observation is that 80 percent of female participants, but none of the male participants, described experiences of fear, anxiety or panic attacks. These feelings are highlighted by Sophie who experienced "*grave fears that by leaving the group I was now opening myself up to the wrath of God*". Yet this observation is in line with a number of studies of the general population that have identified a higher prevalence of panic disorders in women than in men (Sheikh, Leskin & Klein, 2002).

When looking at the experiences of the female participants, Lauren's and Sophie's experiences of symptoms of PTSD stand out. It seems possible that there may be a relationship between the length and depth of their commitment (for Lauren 12 years and Sophie 14 years) and the experiences of crisis after leaving.

When looking at the experiences of the male participants, a high prevalence of feelings of guilt and shame stand out. All male participants reported these feelings, compared to less than half of the females.

Also noteworthy is that those participants who were married during their involvement, Sophie, Michael and Thomas, all touched on the difficult family related issues they have experienced as former members.

From the findings it seems clear that post-cult distress levels appear to be high. However, what seems noteworthy is that regardless of these high distress levels, the majority of members do eventually leave (Barker, 1984, cited in Martin et al., 1992). Many of those that do leave then struggle with the temptation to return to the group for some time (Swartling & Swartling, 1992). Swartling and Swartling (1992) compare this "floating" phenomenon to an ex-addict's craving for narcotics when confronted with needles. In the same way, an ex-member runs the risk of returning to the group if he or she meets old cult friends or participates in a service.

In the face of these difficulties it is remarkable that many people leave cults permanently. As Langone (1992, cited in Martin et al., 1992) questions:

*If they were unhappy before they joined, became happier after they joined, were pressured to remain, left anyway, and were more distressed than ever after leaving, what could have impelled them to leave and to remain apart from the group?*

On this note, Martin et al. (1992) concluded that the cult experience may not be all that it appears to be. This is highlighted by Sophie:

*No matter how awful I felt, I somehow felt that leaving at any cost was better than staying, and any harm that would happen to us would not be as bad as the hurt and betrayal I had experienced in the group.*

It seems that clinical observers are correct in their argument that dissociative defenses help cultists adapt to the inconsistent demands of the cult environment (Singer, 1978; cited in Martin et al., 1992). As long as members are not rebelling against the group's psychological controls, they can appear to be 'normal', much as a person with multiple personality disorder can sometimes appear to be 'normal' (Martin et al., 1992). This normal-appearing personality is referred to by West (1992) as "pseudopersonality" (cited in Martin et al., 1992).

In short, it seems clear that leaving a cultic group constitutes a period of distress. As Langone (1995, cited in Gasde & Block, 1998) insightfully remarked the reason why cult members generally do not return to the cult is because:

*The suffering they experience after leaving [the cult] is more genuine than the 'happiness' they experienced while in it. A painful truth is better than a pleasant lie (pp8-9).*

## **5.1 Treatment**

Cult experiences have to be worked through during a recovery period, which usually takes months and sometimes years (Hassan, 2000). Professional help, such as counselling, may be required to assist former members in their efforts to regain a sense of identity and re-define individual responsibilities, needs, beliefs and values. As Hassan (2000) explains, counselling is required in order to avoid long-term trauma. When choosing a counsellor, however, it is important to find someone who understands the cult experiences (Lalich & Tobias, 2006) and is knowledgeable about common after-effects of cult-involvement.

Research conducted by Goski (1994) identified the three most helpful factors in post-cult recovery as: learning about mind control (49 percent), having other former members to talk to (47 percent) and reading books on the subject (40 percent).

From her work as an exit counsellor, Giambalvo (1993) suggests it helpful to explain to former members that, given the situation, what they are experiencing is normal and will not last forever. Also vital to the recovery process is developing an attitude that there are some positives to be gained from the cultic experience (Giambalvo, 1993).

In addition, contact with a support group can be a valuable recovery tool (Walsh & Bor, 1996). Research found that former members in contact with support groups showed reduced levels of psychological difficulties compared to those who were not in contact with support groups (Walsh et al., 1995, cited in Walsh & Bor, 1996).

Regarding the experience of castaways, Giambalvo (1993) notes that as those who were thrown out of a cult are especially vulnerable, they need most help understanding their recovery process. This is in line with the findings of this small study that castaways appear most depressed, therefore they may need most support during the recovery period.

In respect to treatment and recovery, Kristina and Madeline reported the following:

Kristina:

*Also talking to other people who have left the group helps at times (though sometimes this can not be good if they start using the language from the group)...*

Madeline:

*Sometimes wrote my experiences down, did therapy... Emotional release work helped more than anything else.*

Unfortunately only a tiny percentage of former group members seek help from experts knowledgeable about cults, primarily because they don't know these resources exist (Langone, 1993).

## **5.2 Limitations of the Study**

It is important to note a number of limitations to this study. The most significant limitation of this study is the small sample size. Other limitations include: because many questions are retrospective, the responses may reflect faulty memories; the responses may reflect psychological variables that incline subjects to answer inaccurately; and questionnaires may not be able to detect subtle variables, such as ambivalent motivations.

Also, as CIFS provided names of former members willing to participate, limitations of working with samples derived from networks associated with organisations critical of cults need to be considered. For example, the sample may be tilted towards those who found the experience harmful (as those who did not find the experience harmful may not contact support networks). However, in some cases participants may not have established contact with CIFS out of their own need for support, but as the result of connections established by the parents (or other family members) while they were still in the group.

Lastly, time constraints have limited the scope of this project.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this small study was to evaluate whether the after-effects of cult involvement as experienced by former members of cults in Australia are in line with those experienced by former members overseas. From this small study it appears clear that the experiences of former members in Australia are indeed very similar to those identified overseas.

It seems clear that leaving a cult can bring about a period of distress, psychological breakdown and scarring. Kristina's words highlight the extent of this suffering:

*I felt depressed and confused. It took me about six months to figure out what was real and not real. I felt hurt and rejected. I felt guilt towards my family. I felt lonely. I felt angry. I felt that I had no purpose for living anymore... For the first six months there were days I could not leave my bedroom out of fear and depression... I felt like I had to find the ground again and find the strength of will to retrieve myself.*

To assist former members in Australia re-integrate into society and work through the after-effects of their cult involvement, counselling offered by knowledgeable practitioners is an essential component of the recovery process.

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