

Out of the shadows

Michael Wolloghan talks with post cult counsellor Gillie Jenkinson about abuse, pseudo-personalities and introjections.

Gillie Jenkinson is the popular and respected director of Hope Valley Counselling in Derbyshire, England. She specialises in offering counselling and psychotherapy to those who have left manipulative, destructive cults. Jenkinson has made a reputation as an effective and engaging speaker and will be venturing to Brisbane and Sydney this April. She will be presenting a seminar on the mental health issues faced by ex-cult members and a recovery model that assists ex-members find their feet again.

She demonstrates a unique ability to combine her insights, skills and experience to help others. It was my pleasure to talk to Jenkinson about her upcoming Sydney seminar.

Q *Firstly, I'd like to briefly know about your experience and qualifications in helping people recover from toxic, abusive cults.*

A There is no specific training course for therapists to help people recover from toxic and abusive cults, so it is difficult to get qualifications for this specific work. Because of this I decided to get trained as a regular professional counsellor and psychotherapist and am now accredited in UK, have supervision and work to a code of ethics. On top of this, I attended Wellspring Retreat in Ohio twice as an intern and learned a great deal from Dr Paul Martin (who sadly died in 2009) and the whole setup there. I also visited MeadowHaven, a residential therapeutic community south of Boston, USA, for a few days to see how their setup works. Both these visits taught me a great deal.

The other way I have learned about this work is by regularly attending International Cultic Studies Association conferences which are always a great

place to learn about working with cult leavers. The publications produced by ICSA are very informative and it is a good network of others interested in this field.

My own experience of being in and exiting a cult in the 1970s also informs my work with others. I have many years' experience supporting and counselling XMs [ex-members].

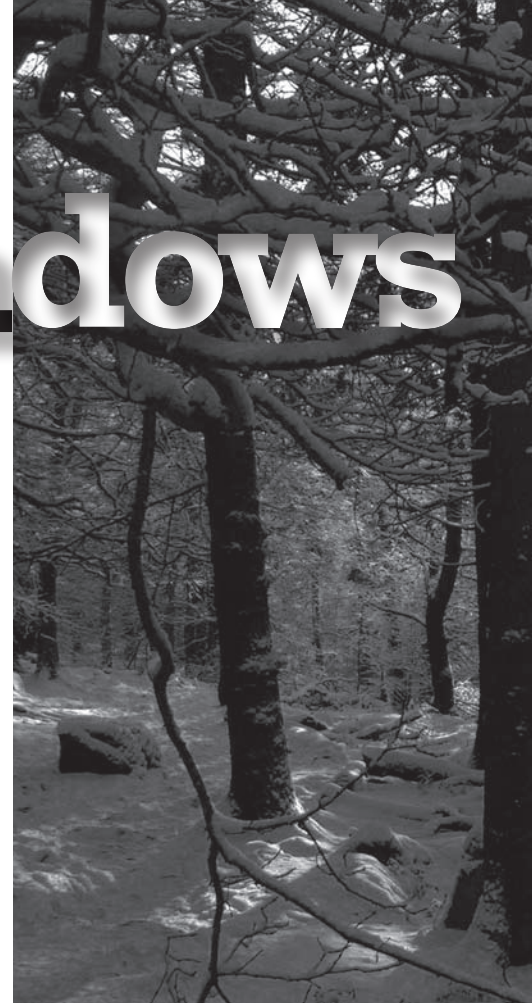
Q *What are the common issues in post-cult recovery? What are the effects after leaving a cult?*

A I find that cult leavers often feel a great deal of shame at having been taken for a ride and often blame themselves for being 'so stupid' instead of realising that they may have been subjected to deceitful recruitment techniques (what was in the box was not what they were expecting because the box had a different picture) and that the whole thing is more complex than they realise. Margaret Singer said you cannot be subjected to thought reform and know it. I agree and so I try to highlight this side of things to cult leavers.

Many cult leavers also suffer disorientation, depression, traumatic side effects such as dissociation and may have developed a cult pseudo-personality which is a new personality formed in order to be a member of a particular cultic group/relationship.

Q *Do you think there are similarities between recovering from domestic abuse, work place bullying and cultic abuse? What are the differences?*

A I do agree there are similarities. I think the following (and more) occur in all:



- Harassment
- Authority structure is coercive
- Intimidation
- Making you unnecessarily distrustful of others – paranoia about those who are 'outside' the relationship
- Upsetting you on a regular basis over minor things to reiterate control
- Threatening behaviour
- Violence
- Abuse - psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional
- Putting you down in front of others.

Which in turn causes:

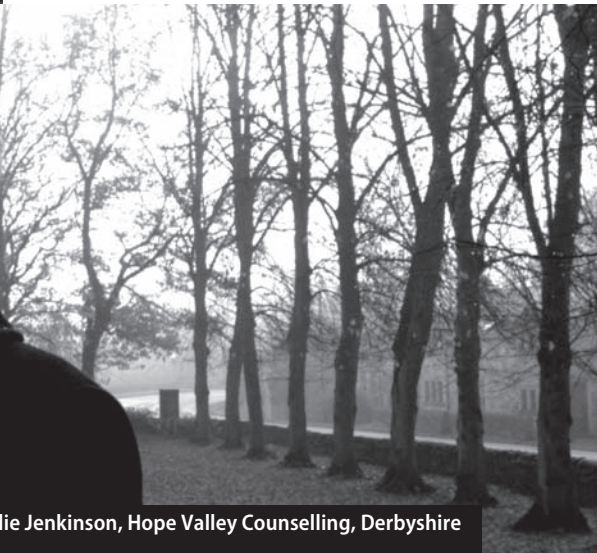
- Anxiety
- Dread
- Low self esteem
- Undermined confidence
- Ashamed to admit it is happening
- Believe it is 'my fault', and
- Feeling inadequate.

I believe for those who have been in a cult it may be all these and more.

Recovery from these is challenging and it's vital that the therapist knows about the dynamics that occur with domestic abuse, workplace bullying and cults. They need to know about thought reform (sometimes called mind control),



Gillie Jenkinson, Hope Valley Counselling, Derbyshire



influence, narcissistic personality disorder among other things. They need to be able to offer a relational therapy but also offer psycho-education so that those who have suffered these terrible abuses can be helped to understand what has happened to them.

Without the therapist understanding the issues, it is possible that the client will continue to flounder and may even end up being victimised again because they cannot recognise what has happened to them. It is important to look first at the abuse they have suffered and not to interpret the situation as being to do with early childhood.

Those issues can be addressed later when looking at what may have made the individual vulnerable to the abuse. Of course the vulnerability may simply be being in the wrong place at the wrong time - you cannot necessarily know when you go into a new job, get married or join a class or group that it will turn out to be abusive. You cannot know when you leave home to go to university that trying to find new friends may result in your being recruited into a group which takes up years of your life and harms you.

Q *I've heard you will be discussing the 'cult pseudo-personality' at your Sydney seminar. Can you explain what that is and how this new identity gets created within a cult?*

A XMs who have been seen shortly after leaving a cult often show character traits and attitudes of their group – I suggest this is the cult pseudo-personality because it is different from who they were before the cult. I believe that the cult pseudo-personality forms in the cult by 'introjecting' the beliefs and behaviours of the group. Introjection is a normal developmental process but, like anything, it can be used in an unhealthy way.

Introjection is defined by Gestalt writers Perls et al [Gestalt Therapy:1951] in this way: "Material – a way of acting, feeling, evaluating – which you have taken into your system of behaviour but which you have not assimilated in such fashion as to make it a genuine part of your self. The self takes the 'material' in on the basis of forced acceptance, a forced (and therefore pseudo) identification and that although it is a foreign body, the organism resists it being dislodged."

Q *Why do you think the concept of the pseudo-personality is important to understanding the cult recovery process?*

A I think the issue of cult pseudo-personality is key to recovery and suggest many mental health issues faced by XMs may be held within the pseudo-personality (although there may be pre-existing mental health issues that need addressing over time).

It is important to have a framework in which to work. In regular counselling and psychotherapy the framework is clear from the training but because of the very particular abuse suffered in cults and domestic abuse and workplace bullying the abuse needs addressing in a particular way – as I've said above – with a psycho-educational/relational approach because the client may not understand what on earth has hit them. It is vital to understand the client's belief system and not dismiss it as crazy or psychotic until it has been fully explored.

Q *How does your post-cult counselling differ from others? What exactly does it involve?*

A When I work with XM clients, the first thing I do is, as with any client, set the boundaries and make clear what they will receive from me, my training etc; we discuss my 'agreement for post-cult counselling'. Because many XMs need more input than a 50 minute

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session once a week, I offer 'time away' in the Derbyshire Peak District where I live. I have an aim to see a centre set up in this area, but until that happens clients stay locally in a hotel, B&B or holiday cottage and come and see me for approximately four hours a day, depending on funds.

We usually start with their telling me what has happened to them and alongside this we address a number of psycho-educational areas. I believe the pseudo-personality is laid down in layers, like pieces of a jigsaw, and I address these pieces under a number of subject headings:

- Thought reform
- Anger & rage
- Influence
- Hypnotism and altered states
- Spirituality values
- Profiles of a narcissistic cult leader or guru
- Critical thinking and choices
- Boundaries to relationships
- Trauma and the body
- Sexual abuse and rape, and
- Reconnecting with family and friends.

In practice, I will often start with Lifton's eight components of thought reform and give a sheet to my client to fill out their experience under each heading. This can work for cult, bullying and domestic abuse. These components are:

- Milieu control – don't look out and don't look in – internal/external control of communication
- Mystical manipulation – they are so spiritual you believe them. Planned spontaneity creates mystique justifying extensive personal manipulation
- The demand for purity – you were no good before and must become pure as defined by group/relationship
- The cult of confession – spill all the beans. Tell them everything and

especially that you are at fault

- The 'sacred science' – they know 'The Truth' better than you – the ultimate moral vision
- Loading the language – don't think about the words – you use thought terminating clichés
- Doctrine over person – what the cult believes is most important replaces reality of the individual
- Dispensing of existence – we know who should exist and who shouldn't, those who have a right to exist and those who do not.

Q *What ethical standards, philosophy and approach do you have to counselling?*

A I am accredited with the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy and follow their code of ethics. I think it is vital that I always remember that the therapist has more power (and information) than the client and that I am constantly aware of this and give my clients as much choice and power as possible.

For example, where to sit in my room, which subjects to address first, how to go about the post-cult counselling.

My training is mixed as I did a diploma in Pastoral Counselling, which was an eclectic approach and we looked at a number of different modalities as well as Christian spirituality. This helped me question how to work with spirituality issues and taught me to be open to people's beliefs while bracketing off and holding my own background and spirituality. I am open to sharing if a client wants to know where I am coming from spiritually.

I then did an MA in Gestalt psychotherapy. This was an integrated training and taught me about the Gestalt approach, which I really enjoy. It also taught me how to work with developmental issues and transference. The mixture of developmental and psycho-educational (raising awareness) has been very helpful for working with XMs as I understand the depth of pain and trauma as well as the

need to deal with things on a cognitive and behavioral way. On my MA I did research into "What helps ex-cult members recover from an abusive cult experience?" This was qualitative research and I asked eight XMs what had helped them recover.

Q *Do you think governments need more programs and initiatives in the area of cult recovery?*

A Of course. Many XMs leave the group disorientated and un-socialised (if that is a word). For those born and raised in a group, it is often terrifying to leave, especially as society has very little understanding of what they have grown up in and have no idea of the world in their head which is so different to society's view of life.

Many leave cults destitute and unable to pay for any sort of support or counselling. Because of this, and because our government or society in UK don't recognise the problem, we have set up a charity EnCourage Survivors of Cults and Abuse. We are currently fundraising in order to subsidise post-cult counselling for XMs and to fund a centre in the Derbyshire Peak District, so if you have a spare million do contact us!

Most European governments address the problem of cults by providing information, but this is not enough because for some it is too late. Governments need to address the problem from all angles; information giving – warning; funding exit counselling; funding places for those to go when they leave; and post-cult counselling. ■

Note: Gillie Jenkinson's seminars
Brisbane: 7pm, April 12,
Quakers Meeting House,
10 Hampson Street, Kelvin Grove.
 (infoqld@cifs.org.au; 0413-082-344)

Sydney: 6pm, April 19 "Golden Grove", 5 Forbes St, Newtown
 (www.cifs.org.au/)



About the interviewer:

Michael Wolloghan is an investigator of cults and strange religions.