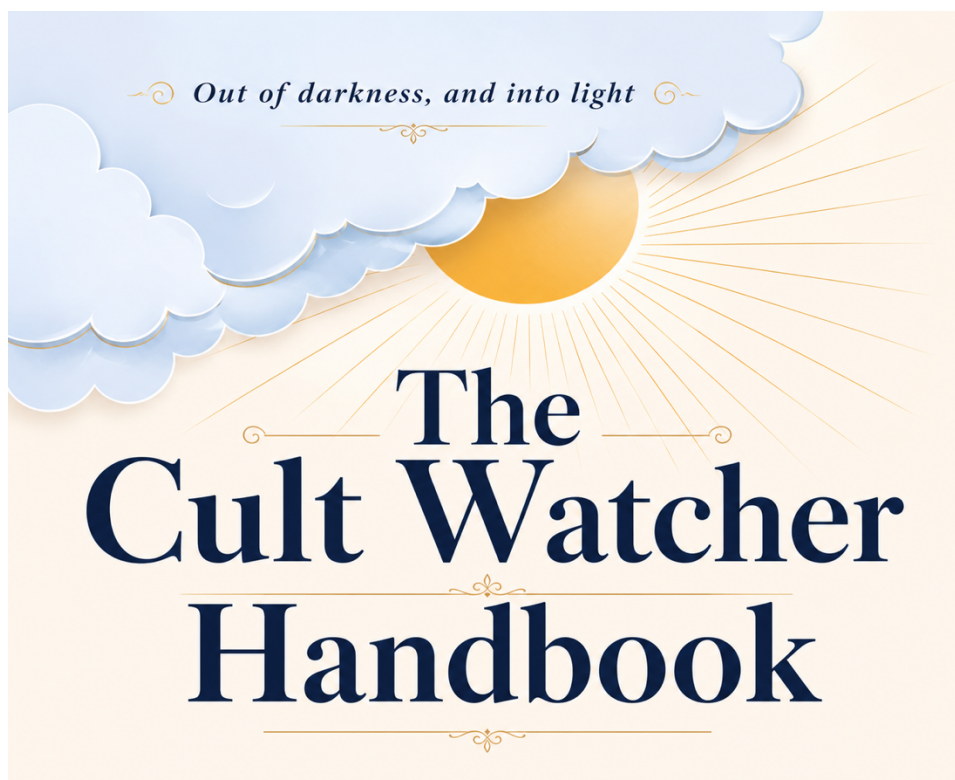




Updated Edition — 2026

Understanding high-control groups and coercive relationships
A resource for survivors, families and supporters

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A Message from the President

CIFS — Cult Information and Family Support — has been walking alongside Australians affected by high-control groups for over three decades. We were the first organisation in Australia dedicated to this work, and we began at a time when that work was far harder to do: before the internet made information freely available, before "coercive control" was part of the public vocabulary, and before anyone in authority was particularly inclined to take these concerns seriously. The people who founded CIFS did so without the legitimacy that institutional recognition confers, without the networks that now exist, and with little more than the conviction that this harm was real and that those experiencing it deserved support. That foundation matters. It is what everything since has been built on.

In the decades that followed, some of the names of the groups have changed and some have stayed the same, the platforms of recruitment have multiplied, and our understanding of coercive control and trauma-informed practice has deepened — but the essential work has remained the same: to make sure that no one faces this alone.

This updated edition of the Cult Watcher Handbook reflects both that continuity and that evolution. It draws on the best current research and practice in coercive control, undue influence and trauma recovery. It is written for the people who need it most: those trying to make sense of what happened to them, and those trying to understand and support someone they love.

I want to acknowledge something significant that has happened since earlier editions of this booklet were produced. In 2025, the Victorian Parliament conducted an Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups — a landmark recognition that these harms are real, widespread, and deserving of serious public attention. The inquiry was the result of years of advocacy, and more importantly, it was made possible by the courage of survivors who were willing to speak openly about their experiences, to name what happened to them, and to do so in the full knowledge that they might face backlash from the very groups they had left.

Those people took a considerable risk. Speaking out against a high-control group — particularly one with resources and a vested interest in protecting its reputation — is not a small thing. It can mean ostracism, legal threats, public campaigns of discrediting, and the reactivation of the very fears the group implanted. That so many chose to come forward anyway is a testament to their strength and to their concern for others who might follow in their path.

Their voices, and the voices of everyone who has ever shared their story with CIFS, are woven through this booklet. This work exists because of them.

CIFS remains, as it has always been, a community of people who have been through something difficult and who are committed to making that path a little less hard for the next person. If you have found this booklet because you are in the middle of that difficulty right now — we are glad you found us.

Renée Spencer

Acting President, June 2026

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About CIFS

Cult Information and Family Support

CIFS — Cult Information and Family Support — is an Australian support and information network based in Sydney, NSW. It was founded by parents and family members of people who had become involved in abusive and high-control groups, and has grown over the years to include families, friends, former members and concerned individuals working together toward a common goal: to provide support and develop awareness for those affected by high-control groups and coercive relationships.

What CIFS Does

CIFS offers a range of practical and peer support services:

- Support and friendship for people concerned about a family member or friend in a high-control group, and connection with others in similar situations
- Regular support meetings for families and former members
- Information resources on high-control group dynamics, coercive control and recovery
- Referrals to counsellors and professionals with relevant experience
- An annual recovery workshop for former members
- Public education and awareness, including in schools
- Advocacy and representation on policy issues affecting survivors and their families

Who CIFS Serves

CIFS works with people affected by a high-control group or coercive relationship — including people currently in a group and considering leaving, people who have recently left, long-term former members, and families and friends trying to understand and support someone they love. There is no requirement to hold any religious or other belief to access support.

High-control dynamics occur across religious, secular, political, wellness and commercial settings. CIFS works across all of these contexts.

Contact CIFS

Website: www.cifs.org.au

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CIFS is a not-for-profit organisation supported by member donations. If this resource has been useful, please consider supporting our work.

Introduction

This booklet is designed to give you an overview of how high-control groups and coercive relationships work, and to offer practical guidance if you or someone you care about has been affected by one.

It is written for two main audiences: people who have recently left a high-control group or controlling relationship and are trying to make sense of what happened, and the families and friends who are trying to understand and support them.

The topics covered include: how high-control groups recruit and why their methods are effective; what makes a person more available to be targeted; what coercive influence is and how it actually works; how these dynamics compare to those found in domestic and intimate partner violence; what distinguishes a healthy community from a high-control one; what recovery really involves; and how to support someone you love who is still inside a group.

A note on language

This booklet uses the term 'high-control group' alongside the more familiar word 'cult' — because both remain useful. 'Cult' is not simply colloquial: it carries recognised meaning in clinical, legal and research contexts, is used in Victoria's parliamentary inquiry, and is often the word survivors encounter first. Discarding it can inadvertently minimise what people experienced.

At the same time, 'high-control group' describes the underlying dynamic — the pattern of coercive influence, information control, and identity reshaping — rather than a particular type of organisation. This matters because high-control dynamics occur across religious, secular, political, wellness and commercial settings, and not everyone recognises 'cult' as applying to their experience.

Both terms appear throughout this booklet, used where each is most apt.

Control, manipulation and coercive abuse — whether in political, religious or other settings — have existed as long as people have sought power over others. The pattern is consistent across contexts and centuries. Learning to recognise it is the first step toward protection, and toward recovery.

Coercive control in groups and relationships follows a consistent pattern. Learning to recognise it is the first form of protection.

“Much cult recruitment is done by family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, teachers and highly trained professional recruiters. They recruit not on the streets or airports, but in contexts that are “home bases” for the potential recruit; at schools, in the home, coffee houses, on the job, at sports events, lectures, churches, or drop-in dinners and free personal assessment workshops.”

~ Philip G. Zimbaro, 1997

Recruitment Really Works

If you're reading this because someone you care about has become involved in a group that worries you — or because you're trying to make sense of how you yourself got drawn in — one of the first things to understand is this: recruitment into high-control groups is not random, accidental, or a sign that someone was foolish or weak.

Recruitment is a deliberate, skilled process. The people doing it are often warm, attentive, and genuinely likeable. The environment they create feels good — sometimes extraordinarily good. That's not a coincidence. It's by design.

Being recruited into a high-control group is not a reflection of your intelligence or character. It is a reflection of how effective the recruitment process was.

The First Step: Being Made to Feel Special

Most people who look back on their entry into a high-control group describe a similar experience: an intense, almost overwhelming sense of being seen, valued, and welcomed. Phone calls returned immediately. Invitations to meals. People who seemed to genuinely care about your life, your struggles, your dreams.

This is sometimes called love bombing — a concentrated period of attention, affirmation and inclusion designed to create a strong emotional bond before a person has had the chance to critically evaluate the group. It works because the feelings it produces are real. The warmth feels real. The belonging feels real. What is manufactured is the context in which it happens.

For someone going through a difficult period — a relationship breakdown, a move to a new city, a loss, a crisis of meaning — this kind of attention can feel like exactly what they needed. It is deliberately timed and targeted to land that way.

Gradual Escalation: One Step at a Time

Recruitment rarely involves a single dramatic ask. Instead, it works through a series of small, reasonable-seeming steps — each one slightly larger than the last.

Come along to a free dinner. Come to a weekend retreat. Read this book. Come to the next level of training. Give a little more of your time. Give a little more money. Stop spending so much time with people outside the group who 'don't understand the path you're on.'

Each step feels manageable. By the time a person reaches a point where they might, if they could see the full picture, choose to leave — they have already invested so much time, money, relationship and identity that leaving feels impossible. Psychologists call this entrapment: the escalating commitment to a course of action because of what has already been invested.

How entrapment works

A person doesn't need to be deceived all at once. They only need to be moved one step further than they were yesterday. By the time the full picture is visible, the cost of acknowledging it feels greater than the cost of staying.

Where Recruitment Happens Now

Recruitment into high-control groups once happened primarily in airports, on college campuses, and in church halls. That picture is now only a small part of the story. Today, high-control groups recruit across every environment where people seek connection, meaning, or help.

Online spaces

Social media platforms, YouTube channels, podcasts, online forums and private groups are now primary recruitment environments. A person might follow an account for months — absorbing a worldview, a language, a set of beliefs — before any direct contact occurs. By then, the relationship feels established. Online recruiting reaches people in their most private moments: alone, at night, in the middle of a crisis.

Wellness, self-help and personal development

Many contemporary high-control groups are not religious. They operate under the language of healing, transformation, success, health or spiritual growth. Yoga communities, life coaching programmes, multilevel marketing structures, trauma recovery networks and online courses can all function as high-control environments — or as entry points into them. The absence of religious framing makes it harder for families to recognise what is happening.

Friendship and family networks

Research consistently shows that most people are recruited by someone they already know and trust: a friend, a workmate, a family member, a neighbour. A trusted person extending an invitation feels like care, not recruitment.

Crisis and transition points

Grief. Divorce. Job loss. A health diagnosis. Moving somewhere new. Leaving a previous religion. High-control groups actively look for people at these junctures — because a person in transition is genuinely looking for community, answers, stability, meaning. There is nothing wrong with that search. The problem is groups that position themselves to intercept it.

Recruitment doesn't target weaknesses. It targets very normal human needs — for belonging, purpose, safety and love.

Why Leaving Isn't Simple

Families often ask: 'But why didn't they just leave when things started to seem strange?' By the time concerning patterns become visible from the outside, a person's sense of reality has often already been shaped by the group. They may have been taught to distrust outside perspectives as evidence of jealousy, spiritual immaturity, or corruption. Leaving is not simply a matter of deciding to go. It involves dismantling an identity, losing a community, and facing the psychological consequences of realising that something deeply believed was not what it appeared to be.

“Victims primarily fear consequences; anything they do may be disagreeable and could worsen the situation.”

~ Philip G. Zimbardo, 1997

Common Recruitment Patterns to Recognise

These are patterns — no single item is definitive. High-control groups vary widely in how they present.

•	Intense early warmth and attention that feels unusually personal
•	Gradual escalation of time, financial or personal commitments
•	A sense that this group has uniquely important truth, healing or access
•	Encouragement to distance from family or friends who are 'not ready' or 'won't understand'
•	Information about the group revealed slowly, with deeper beliefs kept back until trust is established
•	A leader or central figure presented as having special authority, insight or divine connection
•	Discouragement of questions or independent research about the group
•	Use of online content — podcasts, video series, private groups — to build familiarity before direct contact
•	A feeling that leaving would mean losing everything: community, identity, spiritual safety, relationships

For families and friends

Knowing how recruitment works may help explain why confrontation, argument or ultimatums are unlikely to help — and may push someone further in. What tends to be more effective is maintaining connection without pressure, expressing care without contempt for the group, and staying curious rather than dismissive.

“Cults clearly differ from such purely authoritarian groups as the military, some types of sects and communes, and centuries-old Roman Catholic and Greek and Russian Orthodox Orders. These groups, though rigid and controlling, lack a double agenda and are not manipulative or leader-centred. The differences become apparent when we examine the intensity and pervasiveness with which mind-manipulating techniques and deceptions are or are not applied.”

~ Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Who Joins a High-Control Group?

This is one of the questions people ask most often — and one of the most frequently misunderstood. The short answer is: anyone can. The longer answer is more useful than that.

The framing ‘what type of person joins a cult?’ contains an assumption worth examining. It implies there is a recognisable profile, a particular kind of person who is susceptible in a way that others are not. This framing, however well-intentioned, quietly places responsibility on the person who was recruited rather than on the group doing the recruiting.

Current research is clear: there is no personality type that predicts involvement in a high-control group. What matters far more than who a person is, is what situation they are in when a high-control group finds them.

Anyone can be drawn into a high-control group. The relevant question is not ‘what kind of person joins?’ but ‘what circumstances make a person more available to be targeted?’

Myths and What Research Actually Shows

Common myth	What research shows
People who join cults are weak, naive or emotionally unstable.	Most people who become involved in high-control groups are of average to above-average intelligence, socially functional and motivated by genuine idealism. Pre-existing mental illness is present in only a minority of cases.
It couldn't happen to me or to someone in my family.	Research consistently shows that recruitment works across all education levels, professions, ages and backgrounds. Confidence that ‘I would never fall for it’ can itself reduce alertness to warning signs.
People who stay must want to be there on some level.	Leaving a high-control group means dismantling an identity, losing an entire community, and facing consequences that have been deliberately engineered to make departure feel impossible or catastrophic.
Members have been brainwashed — they can't think for themselves.	Members are often actively engaged, intellectually committed people. Coercive influence works by shaping what information a person has access to — not by disabling their capacity to think.
They were looking for a cult.	Nobody seeks out a high-control group. People seek community, meaning, healing, purpose or answers — entirely normal human needs. The group positions itself to meet those needs while concealing its true nature.

Circumstances, Not Character

High-control groups actively seek out people at transition points — moments when usual support structures, sense of identity or relationship with the world has been disrupted. These moments create genuine openness to new ideas and communities. That openness is not a flaw. It is a normal part of being human.

Circumstances that tend to increase a person's availability to recruitment include:

- Moving to a new city or country, especially without an established social network
- The end of an important relationship — divorce, bereavement, a significant friendship breakdown
- Leaving a previous religion or structured belief system
- A health crisis, either personal or involving someone close
- Job loss, career change or a period of financial instability
- Early adulthood — a period of identity formation when questions of meaning and belonging are especially live
- Experiences of trauma, marginalisation or discrimination
- Prolonged social isolation, including the kind increasingly produced by online-only social lives

None of these circumstances make a person naive or deficient. They make a person human. High-control groups are specifically structured to identify and intercept people at exactly these moments.

The question is not why someone was vulnerable. The question is why a group chose to exploit that vulnerability.

The Role of the Group

High-control groups are not passive environments that vulnerable people stumble into. They are active, skilled recruitment systems. They identify promising targets, script initial conversations and create environments specifically designed to produce particular emotional responses — safety, belonging, excitement, purpose — before a person has any accurate information about what they are joining.

Joining a high-control group is not truly a matter of free choice. Vulnerabilities do not simply lead individuals toward a group. The group manipulates those vulnerabilities and uses deception to draw people in and, eventually, to make leaving feel impossible. This moves responsibility where it belongs: onto the group.

Who is being recruited now

Early research concentrated heavily on young adults, particularly university students, who remain a primary recruitment target — but vulnerability does not end there. Data from cult information organisations now shows that the largest group seeking help involves people in their thirties, forties and fifties.

High-control dynamics are also increasingly recognised beyond traditional religious settings: in intimate partner relationships, in family systems, in workplace environments, and in online communities. There is no age, background or life stage that confers immunity.

How Coercive Control Works

Coercive control — sometimes called thought reform or undue influence — is not the science-fiction concept of brainwashing. It does not require technology, hypnosis or drugs. It works through ordinary human psychology: the need for belonging, the desire to avoid pain, the tendency to conform to our social environment, and the powerful effect of sustained pressure on our sense of what is normal and real.

Neuroscience helps explain why. Chronic stress and fear activate the brain's threat-response systems — particularly the amygdala and the stress hormone cortisol — in ways that narrow thinking, heighten dependence on others for safety cues, and make it harder to access the clear-headed reasoning we rely on to evaluate our situation.

Understanding how it actually works helps explain experiences that are otherwise difficult to make sense of — including why people stay in situations that outside observers find baffling.

Coercive influence works not by disabling the mind, but by controlling what the mind has to work with.

How It Develops

Environmental control

The person's environment is gradually restructured to limit access to outside perspectives — who they spend time with, what they read or watch, where they live, how they spend their time. As outside reference points are removed, the group's worldview becomes the only available frame for interpreting experience.

Identity reshaping

The person's existing sense of self is systematically undermined and replaced with an identity constructed by the group. Old relationships, values and ways of being are reframed as inferior or dangerous. The new identity is rewarded; the old one is punished. Over time, the person may genuinely lose access to who they were before.

Manufactured reality

Once outside reference points and a stable sense of self are removed, a new reality is installed — one in which the group's beliefs, the leader's authority, and the necessity of obedience all seem self-evident. This is not a sign of diminished intelligence. It is the predictable response of a human mind to sustained environmental manipulation.

Guilt and complicity

Members are often encouraged to act in ways that, from outside, seem contrary to their own interests or values. Having done so, they feel a degree of complicity that makes it harder to step back and evaluate the situation clearly. This self-doubt is not incidental — it is a mechanism of continued control.

Why People Stay

One of the most painful questions asked of former members is: why didn't you just leave? This question assumes that at some point the person could clearly see the group was harmful, and chose to remain anyway. This misunderstands how coercive control works. By the time the patterns are visible from outside, the person inside may have:

- Lost access to outside perspectives that might confirm their doubts
- Been taught that doubt itself is a sign of weakness, disloyalty or spiritual failure
- Built an entire social world inside the group, which leaving would mean losing completely
- Invested years of time, resources and identity — making the cost of acknowledging the loss feel unbearable
- Been subjected to explicit or implicit threats about what leaving would mean

None of these are signs of weakness. They are the predictable outcomes of a system specifically designed to make leaving feel impossible.

For families

The appropriate response to learning someone stayed in a coercive environment is not judgement. It is recognition of what they were up against. Pointing out the group's flaws, however accurate, is rarely the most effective form of support. Sustained, non-judgmental presence tends to make more difference.

“Creating A New Personality: All cults, no matter their stripe, are a variation on a theme, for their common denominator is the use of coercive persuasion and behaviour control without the knowledge of the person who is being manipulated. They manage this by targeting (and eventually attacking, disassembling, and reformulating according to the cult's desired image) a person's innermost self. They take away you and give you back a cult personality, a pseudo personality.”

~ Janja Lalich, 1996

High-Control Groups vs. Authoritarian Organisations

A common question is whether authoritarian institutions — the military, boarding schools, some religious orders, strict workplaces — are simply milder versions of the same thing. They are not, and the distinction matters.

Authoritarian institutions can be rigid and demanding. But they differ from high-control groups in ways that are consistent and meaningful. The critical distinction is not the presence of rules, hierarchy or obedience. It is the presence of deception, the suppression of independent thought, and the deliberate engineering of exit costs.

Area	Healthy community	High-control group
Transparency	Members know in advance what is expected of them. Obligations and restrictions are disclosed, not concealed.	Core beliefs, obligations and the full extent of demands are revealed gradually. Prospective members are often actively deceived about what they are joining.
Purpose	The organisation's goals are stated and consistent. Authority serves a defined institutional function.	Authority is centred on the leader's personal interests — power, money, loyalty. The stated purpose and actual purpose diverge significantly.
Questioning	Independent thought may be discouraged in operational contexts, but critical evaluation is not systematically suppressed.	Questioning the leader, doctrine or practices is treated as disloyalty or spiritual failure. Critical thinking is systematically undermined.
Exit	Leaving is permitted and, in most cases, procedurally straightforward. Former members are not typically shunned or punished.	Leaving is made to feel catastrophic. Former members may be shunned, publicly condemned, or subjected to ongoing harassment.
Recruitment	Recruitment is transparent. Applicants know what organisation they are considering and what joining would involve.	Recruitment often involves deliberate concealment of the group's nature. The full picture is revealed only after significant investment has been made.
Member welfare	Even in demanding environments, member welfare is a recognised concern. Welfare obligations exist and are generally enforceable.	Member welfare is subordinated to the leader's interests. Exploitation of members' labour, finances and relationships is common at the severe end.

A useful test

A demanding institution that is honest about what it demands and allows members to leave is categorically different from a group that conceals its nature and traps members inside.

A useful question when evaluating any group: what happens when someone asks a sincere question about the group's practices, expresses doubt, or attempts to leave? The answer is usually revealing.

Coercive Control: Groups and Intimate Relationships

Researchers have long noted the significant overlap between the dynamics of high-control groups and those of coercive intimate partner and family relationships. Both involve a systematic pattern of control, isolation, identity erosion and manufactured dependency. Understanding this overlap helps people who have left coercive relationships recognise the dynamics they experienced as a recognisable pattern with a name — and helps families understand why their loved one's experience inside a group may have felt very different from what an outsider would observe. In some instances, victim-survivors report experiencing both intimate partner control and high-control group dynamics occurring simultaneously.

Intimate partner coercive control	High-control group dynamics
Environmental control: the perpetrator controls who the person sees, talks to, what they read, and where they go.	The group controls who members associate with, what they read and watch, where they live, and how they spend their time.
Financial control: restricting access to money, preventing employment, controlling household income.	Members are expected to contribute significant financial resources; assets may be signed over, and financial dependency on the group is cultivated.
Using children: threatening harm to children, manipulating parental guilt, alienating children from one parent.	Children may be used to bind parents to the group; threats involving children are used as a control mechanism.
Coercion and threats: using fear, guilt and emotional manipulation to maintain control.	Fear, guilt and shame are primary control mechanisms; phobias about the consequences of leaving are deliberately cultivated.
Denial and blame: the perpetrator refuses responsibility and attributes harm to the person being abused.	The group ensures that any difficulty is attributed to the individual member's failure, never to the group or its leaders.
Manufactured helplessness: the person is made dependent and their capacity for independent action is systematically eroded.	Helplessness is cultivated through a system of rewards and punishments, and through removal of practical and social resources needed for independent functioning.
Erosion of self: sustained abuse results in a profound loss of sense of self and personal identity.	The group systematically dismantles the member's prior identity and replaces it with a group-defined identity.
Performance orientation: safety depends on compliance. Behaviour is monitored and evaluated constantly.	Members' commitment is measured through observable performance. Failure to perform has consequences.
Trauma responses: post-traumatic stress responses are common in survivors, including hypervigilance and emotional dysregulation.	Post-traumatic stress responses are among the most frequently reported outcomes for former members of high-control groups.

The dynamics of coercive control follow a consistent pattern whether they occur in a relationship, a family, or a group. However, supports for domestic violence are more readily available when it occurs in intimate violence than high-control groups. NOTE: CIFS specialises in group-based coercion.

What Distinguishes a Healthy Community?

The distinguishing features of a high-control group have nothing intrinsically to do with religion. They occur in secular communities, in therapeutic and wellness contexts, in political movements, in commercial organisations and in online communities. The markers are about power, information and exit — not doctrine.

Area	Healthy community	High-control group
Leadership	Leaders are accountable to members and to external structures. Authority is role-based, not personal. Leaders can be questioned and replaced.	The leader's authority is absolute and personal. Questioning the leader is treated as a fundamental violation. There is no meaningful accountability.
Disclosure	The community is transparent about its beliefs, practices, expectations and history. People joining know what they are joining.	Core beliefs, practices and demands are revealed gradually. Significant information is withheld until the person is already deeply invested.
Questioning	Doubt, questioning and disagreement are accepted as normal parts of engagement. Independent thinking is encouraged or at least tolerated.	Doubt is pathologised — treated as spiritual weakness, disloyalty or outside interference. Critical thinking about the group is actively suppressed.
Outside relationships	Members are encouraged to maintain healthy relationships with family and friends outside the community.	Outside relationships are discouraged or forbidden, particularly with people critical of the group.
Finance	Financial contributions are voluntary and transparent. Members are not pressured to give beyond their means.	Significant financial contributions are required or pressured. Members may be expected to sign over assets or income.
Exit	Members are free to leave without penalty. Former members are treated with respect.	Leaving is treated as betrayal and met with shunning or hostility. The consequences of leaving are deliberately made to feel catastrophic.
Personal growth	The community supports members' individual development, autonomy and flourishing beyond the group itself.	Personal development is defined and controlled by the group. Independence outside the group's framework is discouraged.
Emotional atmosphere	A range of emotions is accepted. Members are not required to perform particular emotional states.	Prescribed emotions are required. Doubt, dissatisfaction or negative emotions are suppressed, reframed or punished.

These are patterns, not checklists

No single feature definitively identifies a high-control group. The pattern matters more than any individual indicator.

The most revealing questions: What happens when someone questions? What happens when someone tries to leave? Is there genuine accountability for leadership? Is information shared honestly?

Recovery After a High-Control Group

Leaving a high-control group is not a single event. It is the beginning of a process — one that is different for every person, rarely linear, and often more complex than either survivors or their families expect.

This section is written for two audiences: people who have recently left a group or are in the process of leaving, and the families and friends trying to support them. It is not a clinical guide and not a substitute for professional support — but it is a starting point for understanding what recovery actually involves.

Leaving is an act of enormous courage. Recovery is the work that follows — and it takes as long as it takes.

What You Might Be Carrying

The aftermath of high-control group involvement is not just about having believed something that turned out to be untrue. Survivors commonly experience:

- Loss of community — often an entire social world, sometimes including close friends and family members still in the group
- Loss of identity — the sense of self built inside the group may have replaced a previous identity almost entirely
- Loss of a belief system — the framework through which life, meaning and the future were understood
- Grief and disorientation — which can feel confusing when mixed with relief at having left
- Shame and self-blame — internalised messages from the group that are slow to shift
- Difficulty trusting your own judgement — a direct result of having had your perception systematically managed
- Anxiety, hypervigilance or emotional numbness — common nervous system responses to prolonged coercive environments
- Guilt about people left behind — especially if family members remain in the group
- Financial or practical consequences — if resources were signed over, careers disrupted, or education interrupted

None of these responses are signs of weakness or ongoing vulnerability. They are normal responses to abnormal circumstances. They are also, with time and the right support, workable.

Recovery Is Not Linear

Most survivors move through periods of relative clarity and periods of doubt, confusion or even longing for the group. This is not a sign that recovery is failing. The following phases are common — though not universal, and not necessarily in this order:

Phase	What this can feel like
Exit and immediate aftermath	Disorientation, relief and shock can coexist. Practical decisions may demand attention before any emotional processing can begin.
Questioning and inventory	Examining what was real, what was constructed, and what was exploited. Often intellectually exhausting. Former members frequently describe reading voraciously about the group and about coercive influence.
Grief and anger	The full weight of what was lost — time, relationships, resources, a version of the future — often arrives in waves. Anger at the group, its leaders, or oneself is common. Both are valid.
Identity rebuilding	Gradually recovering a sense of self not defined by the group. Rediscovering old interests, values and relationships. Learning to trust one's own perceptions again. This phase can take years.
Integration	The experience becomes part of a larger life story rather than its dominant feature. This does not mean the experience is minimised — it means it has been processed enough to sit alongside everything else.

Recovery timelines vary enormously depending on how long a person was in the group, how central it was to their identity, whether family members remain inside, and what support is available. It is not unusual for meaningful recovery to take two to five years.

The Question of Identity

High-control groups ask members to reorganise their identity, relationships and sense of self around the group's worldview. When a person leaves, they are not just leaving a set of beliefs behind. They are often leaving the only version of themselves they have known for years.

Rebuilding a sense of self after this kind of disruption is not about going back to who you were before the group. It is about discovering who you are now, with the knowledge and experience you have.

You are not starting from nothing. You are starting from everything you have learned — including what you have learned about yourself in the most difficult circumstances.

What to Believe In Now

Former members often describe a period in which all belief — spiritual, political, philosophical — feels unsafe or impossible. This is an understandable response to having had one's beliefs exploited. Some practical starting points:

1. Give yourself permission to not know. The pressure to replace one certainty with another is worth resisting. Sitting with open questions is often more nourishing than rushing toward a new framework.
2. Separate the need from the group's answer to it. The need for meaning, community, purpose and transcendence are genuine human needs. The fact that a group exploited those needs does not invalidate the needs themselves.
3. Be cautious about speed. The pull toward a new group, movement or framework can be strong in the period after leaving. Taking time before making significant new commitments is generally advisable.

A note on spirituality

For survivors from religious high-control groups, the relationship with faith after leaving can be particularly complex. Spiritual beliefs, practices and communities may feel contaminated, threatening, or deeply mourned — sometimes all at once.

Many survivors eventually find a way back to some form of spiritual life on their own terms. Others do not, and that is equally valid. If spiritual recovery is part of your process, approach it with the same care and time as any other aspect — and with support from people who understand the specific damage that religious coercive control can cause.

Making Room for Emotions

High-control groups typically manage members' emotional lives carefully — prescribing which emotions are acceptable and suppressing others. After leaving, the full range of emotions that were suppressed may surface — often intensely, and in ways that feel disorganised or disproportionate.

Some things that support emotional recovery:

- Giving emotions time and space rather than trying to resolve or explain them immediately
- Therapy with a practitioner who understands coercive control and trauma — standard counselling approaches can be insufficient without this specialisation
- Body-based approaches — movement, creative practice, time in nature — which support nervous system recovery in ways that talking alone cannot always reach
- Peer support from other former members — the experience of being understood by someone who has been through something similar is often irreplaceable

**There is no correct emotional response to leaving a high-control group.
Whatever you feel is the right place to start.**

The Pull Back Toward the Group

One of the most difficult things for families to understand — and for survivors to admit — is the experience of missing the group, or of doubting the decision to leave. This is extremely common and does not mean the decision was wrong.

High-control groups create powerful attachments. The community was real, even if it was coerced. The sense of meaning was real, even if it was manufactured. Losing them involves genuine grief.

If the pull back becomes a pull toward re-joining — or toward a different group with similar dynamics — this is a signal to seek support rather than a sign of failure. It is a very common pattern, and one that can be worked with.

Professional and Peer Support

Not all therapeutic approaches are equally well suited to recovery from high-control group involvement. The most important factor is that the practitioner understands coercive control, undue influence and the specific dynamics of high-control environments. It is reasonable to ask a prospective therapist directly about their experience in this area.

Peer support — connection with other former members through organisations like CIFS or in therapeutic group settings — can complement individual work in important ways.

Finding support in Australia

CIFS — Cult Information and Family Support — offers support meetings, an annual recovery workshop, and referrals to counsellors with relevant experience.

Website: www.cifs.org.au | Email: info@cifs.org.au | Phone: 0423 332 766

“A cult experience is often a conflicted one, as those of you who are former members know. More often than not, leaving a cult environment requires an adjustment period so that you can put yourself and your life back together in a way that makes sense to you. When you first leave a cult situation, you may not recognize yourself. You may feel confused and lost; you may feel both sad and exhilarated. You may not know how to identify or tackle the problems you are facing. You may not have the slightest idea about who you want to be or what you want to believe.”

~ Janja Lalich, 2023

If Someone You Love Is in a High-Control Group

Discovering that someone you love is involved in a high-control group is frightening, disorienting and often isolating. You may feel helpless, angry, or consumed by urgency. These feelings are understandable. Acting on them directly is usually counterproductive.

Exit from high-control groups is ultimately a process the person has to navigate themselves. What families can do is stay present, stay informed, and avoid actions that make reconnection harder.

What Tends to Help

1. Understand this is not a reflection on your family. High-control groups successfully recruit people from all backgrounds across all family structures. Being recruited is a comment on the skill of the recruiters, not on you or the person you love.
2. Maintain the relationship. Keep communication open, non-confrontational and warm. Avoid ultimatums. The group has almost certainly told your loved one that you will react with anger or ridicule — and that this proves they are right. Don't confirm that prediction.
3. Educate yourself about coercive control. The more you understand how high-control groups work, the better equipped you will be to respond effectively. CIFS can assist with resources.
4. Ask questions rather than making statements. Direct challenges to the group's beliefs tend to activate defences installed against exactly this kind of outside criticism. Genuinely curious questions are harder to dismiss and can plant seeds of doubt that grow over time.
5. Take care of yourself. Supporting someone through high-control group involvement is a long-term process. Your own wellbeing matters. CIFS support groups exist for families for this purpose.
6. Be patient with a non-linear process. Your loved one may move toward the exit and then move back. They may leave and return. None of these are signs of failure — they are normal features of an inherently complex process.

What Tends Not to Help

7. Ultimatums. Forcing a choice between the group and you typically produces the outcome you most fear and makes future reconnection harder.
8. Direct attacks on the group's beliefs or the leader. These activate pre-installed defences and tend to deepen rather than loosen commitment.
9. Destroying materials, blocking contacts, or attempting to cut off the person's access to the group. These actions are likely to push them further in.
10. Attempting to join the group yourself in order to understand it better. Without significant preparation, this is likely to increase your distress or put you at risk.
11. Expecting rapid recovery after they leave. Leaving is the beginning of a process, not the end of one. Recovery takes time and requires sustained support.

Your presence matters more than your arguments. Staying connected, over time, is the most important thing you can do.

Support and Resources

The following organisations offer information, peer support and professional referrals for former members of high-control groups and their families.

Australia

CIFS — Cult Information and Family Support (NSW)

The organisation that produces this booklet. Peer support meetings, family support groups, annual recovery workshop, and referrals.

www.cifs.org.au | info@cifs.org.au

Other Australian services:

- SOCCHG — Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-control Groups (Advocacy, Law Reform, Support & Education): www.socchg.org
- ACSN — Australian Cult Survivors Network (Private Facebook Group; Information, Support & Advocacy Hub)
- RTC — Religious Trauma and Cults (Formally known as Religious Trauma Collective; Education & Listing of Counsellors with cult awareness training): www.thereligioustraumacollective.com
- Recover From Coercive Control (Education, Online counselling & Information on groups): www.recoverfromcoercivecontrol.com
- Olive Leaf Network (Advocacy & Support): www.au.oliveleaf.network

International

- ICSA — International Cultic Studies Association (Research, Education & support): www.icsahome.com
- DeCult (Annual Conference, Support & Advocacy): www.decult.net
- Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion (Education for Professionals): www.lalichcenter.org
- Freedom of Mind (Dr Steven Hassan cult resources): www.freedomofmind.com
- Rick Ross Institute (Information on groups): www.culteducation.com
- Cult Podcast — (Database of podcasts and videos about cults): www.cultpodcasts.com

Crisis Support

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, please contact emergency services on 000.

- Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24-hour crisis support)
- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636
- 1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 (domestic and family violence support)

Further Reading

The following books informed the content of this handbook and are recommended for anyone who wants to understand high-control groups, coercive control and recovery in greater depth.

High-Control Groups: Foundational Texts

- Singer, Margaret T. & Lalich, Janja (1995). *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*. Jossey-Bass. — The foundational text on cult dynamics and coercive persuasion. Drawn on extensively throughout this handbook.
- Lalich, Janja & Tobias, Madeleine (2006). *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships*. Bay Tree Publishing. — Practical, survivor-centred guide covering recruitment, involvement and recovery.
- Hassan, Steven (1990). *Combating Cult Mind Control*. Park Street Press. — Introduces the BITE model (Behaviour, Information, Thought and Emotional control) as a framework for understanding coercive influence.
- Lifton, Robert Jay (1961). *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. Norton. — The original academic analysis of thought reform; introduces the eight criteria of totalism that underpin much subsequent work.
- Lalich, Janja (2004). *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*. University of California Press. — Scholarly analysis of how members come to embrace a system that constrains them.

Coercive Control

- Stark, Evan (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press. — The book that established coercive control as a distinct pattern of abuse, and the basis for the comparison in this handbook between group and intimate partner dynamics.
- Herman, Judith (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books. — The definitive account of complex trauma and its treatment; directly relevant to understanding the aftermath of prolonged coercive environments.
- Walker, Lenore (1979). *The Battered Woman*. Harper and Row. — Introduced the concept of learned helplessness in domestic abuse contexts; referenced in the coercive control comparison section.

*“Encourage survivors to talk about what happened to them.
Listen. Empathize.
Offer words that may describe what the person is feeling, since
they may not be able to identify it themselves at first.
Limit feedback and comments to supportive statements.
Keep confidentiality. Be trustworthy.”*

~ Attributed to Sharon Hilderbrant (unverified source).

Recovery and the Self After Coercive Control

- Jenkinson, Gillie (2023). *An Unbeliever's Guide to Cult Psychotherapy*. PCCS Books. — A trauma-informed, non-religious recovery guide written by a therapist with lived experience of a high-control group.
- Tobias, Madeleine & Lalich, Janja (1994). *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*. Hunter House. — Practical recovery guide for former members and their families.
- van der Kolk, Bessel (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking. — Essential on somatic and nervous system dimensions of trauma recovery, relevant to the recovery section of this handbook.
- Langone, Michael D. (ed.) (1993). *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*. Norton. — Multi-author clinical reference on assessment and treatment.

Influence and Persuasion

- Cialdini, Robert (1984). *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Harper Business. — The standard text on social influence principles; provides context for understanding why coercive recruitment techniques work.
- Lifton, Robert Jay (2019). *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry*. New Press. — Updates Lifton's original framework for contemporary political and social contexts.

Australian and Parliamentary Context

- Legal and Social Issues Committee, Parliament of Victoria (2025). *Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups*. Victorian Government. www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg
- McIvor, P., McIvor, C., Spencer, R., & Lalich, J. (2025). *Beyond belief: Responding to cults and high-control groups*. Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-Control Groups (SOCCHG) & Stop Religious Coercion Australia (SRCA).
<https://socchg.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/final-survivor-submission-to-parliamentary-inquiry-no-signatures.pdf>

Finding these books

Many of these titles are available through Australian public libraries, including via the Libraries Australia network. Several are also available as ebooks and in audio version.