

# Rebuilding the jigsaw

**Gillie Jenkinson** spent years in an abusive cult. Now she specialises in counselling others recovering from similar experiences

I was thrilled when I discovered Christianity in my late teens. The people I met were well meaning and many were genuinely kind. Christianity answered many existential and emotional questions for me, but sadly, at that stage in my life, I had neither learned to think critically nor was I encouraged to do so.

I did not have a close mentor who could help me make safe choices; indeed I did not think I needed to be wary; and my passion led me down a road into 'community' (the in-thing in the 1970s) and into what ultimately became an abusive cult. Like the allegorical frog being slowly heated in the pan, by the time I might have realised I was in hot water, it was too late to get out.

## A word about the term 'cult'

Cults occur in any setting, including psychotherapy, politics, religion, spirituality; and there are also 'one-on-one' cults: a two-person intense domestic abuse relationship where the more powerful partner asserts their superiority and leadership, often on a spiritual level.

The term 'cult' is controversial and raises many more questions than it does answers, but a suitable alternative has yet to be found<sup>1</sup>. I have been asked: 'Are all cults harmful?' The answer to that question depends, of course, on how you define a cult. Langone<sup>2</sup> states that, 'Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups'. Of course, some groups harm everyone, such as the community that I joined. Groups or relationships may be positive in some aspects, but harmful and pathological in others, and this can occur on a continuum within one setting and in relation to wider society<sup>3</sup>. Langone defined a cult in 1993<sup>4</sup> and there has been no reason to change this. His definition is from

a psychological perspective, which acknowledges the potential for harm: 'A group or movement that, to a significant degree

- exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing
- uses a thought-reform programme to persuade, control, and socialise members (ie to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values and practices)
- systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members
- exploits members to advance the leadership's goals
- causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community.'

I cannot move away from the term because there is at least some popular understanding that cults are phenomena that society has to grapple with. Sadly there are many myths, and cult members are often seen as weird, crazy or plain stupid – 'I couldn't be duped like that' being a common response to the genuinely outrageous and extreme stories that occasionally get cited in the press<sup>1</sup>.

## My personal journey

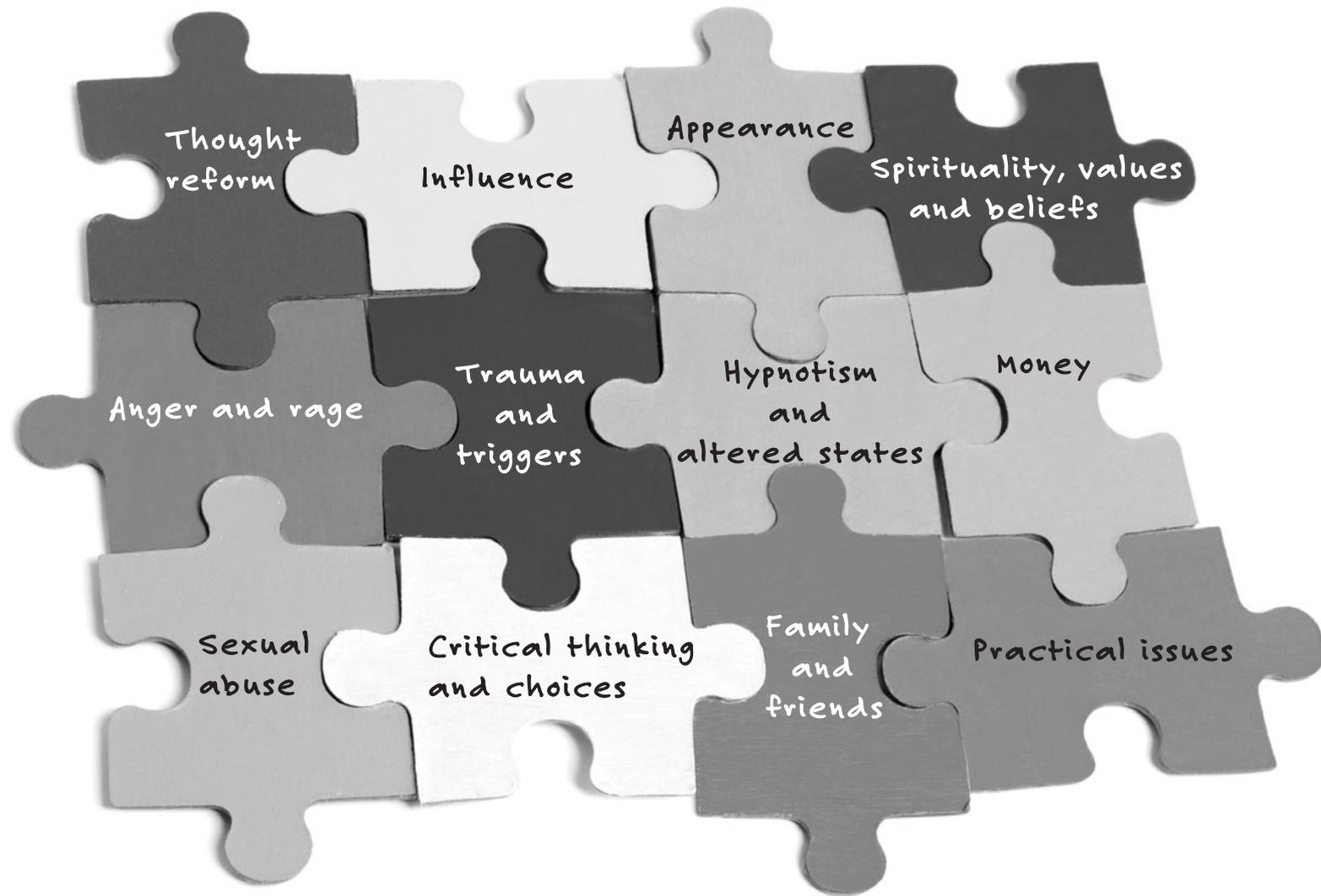
The community I joined in 1974 was a breakaway independent group that was open and free to begin with but which I have since come to see developed into an extremist environment, with 'all or nothing' thinking. 'Sin' was punished by physical beatings, slapping, shunning and rebuking. The leadership redefined the word 'sin' to mean anything that they disagreed with or that didn't comply with their requirements. They engendered regression and dependency. They engaged in illicit sexual contact with the women in their community households and these double standards

caused cognitive dissonance in many of the members, cognitive dissonance being the emotional state set up when there is a conflict between belief and behaviour<sup>5</sup>. It was a confusing and terrifying milieu to live in, and the psychological imprisonment, like the dog in the electrocuted cage that does not realise the door is open, was nearly total for me. At that point in my life, I was living in an environment of total control.

I lost myself completely and had no thought of leaving – that would have been 'rebellion' and the punishment would have been eternal damnation or hell. I really believed that – it was not a metaphor to me – I could picture it, as I had heard it so many times from the community.

I have since come to realise that, in order to be a full member of the community, I developed a 'cult pseudo-personality'<sup>6</sup> of which I will say more, later. I became very different to how I had been before joining, or how I am now. I was serious, lacking any humour; intensely focused on my religious beliefs (not boys as I had been before – yet I was only 18); I stopped swearing (hard for my friends to imagine!) and dressed quite differently – resembling a 1950s' housewife instead of wearing my usual long hippy dresses.

I learned many years later that others have written about the cult pseudo-personality. Singer<sup>7</sup> notes that it forms as part of the change process expected in many cults. She adds that people take on a 'new social identity, which may or may not be obvious to an outsider'. Many groups talk about being 'transformed, reborn, enlightened, empowered, re-birthed, or cleared' (I would add to that: saved, and surrendered). 'The group-approved behaviour is reinforced and reinterpreted as demonstrating the emergence of the new person. Members are expected to display this new social identity'.



It is hard even now to share this soft underbelly of my experience. It took many years to heal my heart, broken by spiritual abuse from a form of 'Christianity' that had started out so well. Over the years I have received many different reactions from people I have spoken to about this time in my life, ranging from: 'How could you have done that to your family; they must have been so worried about you?' to 'I could never join something like that'; and 'If it was that bad, surely you would have left?'. Anecdotally, I know of others who have received similar reactions. I have rarely experienced shock from others that a group that promised to bring God's love, healing, life, creativity, fun, Christian truth and to make the world a better place, could wear someone down and treat them in

such an abusive way.

I know that I was naive and idealistic; but West notes that idealism is a positive aspect of spirituality<sup>8</sup>. Sadly, I believed the hard sell: that we – the community – would change the world and make it a better place. But as the years passed and as my already underdeveloped critical faculties were worn down, I did not question whether we were actually saving the world or what was going on. And so the abuse continued.

It is rare for a cult to do so, but in 1981 the community I had joined, disbanded, following a coup by the women who were being abused in the leader's house. And I left.

I continued with church attendance but did not examine the full force of the abuse until 14 years later, when I attended another abusive church,

and was reminded of the community. I was now healed enough to realise that I had finally had enough, and I left this latter abusive church, too. I received psychoeducational exit counselling, which helped me to leave and understand what had happened to me. Giambalvo<sup>9</sup> defines the purpose of exit counselling as being to 'promote critical thinking skills especially regarding the use of mind control. Exit counsellors will not violate clients' rights to self-determination nor will they unduly influence clients' ideological or spiritual orientation'

### My professional journey

At this point I decided that I wanted to help others who had left an abusive cult and I began pastoral counselling diploma training. I was not able to

attend a secular training, as I was still too afraid of the consequences of moving out of the Church/Christian field of training. The diploma was a vital part of healing my thought processes because I met Christians who were not immersed in cultic thinking, who were allowed to think for themselves and therefore gave me the space and kindness to think for myself without any agenda other than gaining my diploma.

I initially decided to leave any thoughts of working with ex cult members on one side as I undertook this core training and healed myself. I did voluntary work with Cruse, Mind and Sheffield Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Service. By the end of the third year of my diploma in 1998, however, I was starting to think about working with ex cult members and tentatively informed my training group that I was considering attending an International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) conference in Chicago. I went to the conference, and ended up doing my dissertation on the theme of 'What does a pastoral counsellor need to know about cults and ex cult members to be an effective helper?'

As a result of attending the conference I met Dr Paul Martin of Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center in Ohio ([www.wellspringretreat.org](http://www.wellspringretreat.org)) and he agreed that I could attend Wellspring as an Intern, which I did in the summer of 1999. That internship was where I learned the basic theory of working with ex cult members as I shadowed him in the counselling sessions and learned how the Center's psychoeducational 'Thought Reform Model' worked. Dr Martin became my mentor until he tragically died in 2009 of leukaemia.

I had been attending therapy for some years since starting my diploma. Although my first therapist had been unable to engage with the cult issues, my second, a Gestalt therapist, has always been open to my cult experience and to learning from me. I loved her approach and in 2001 I began an MA in Gestalt Psychotherapy.

I felt it essential that I fully understood my cult experience before entering psychotherapy and completed my own healing before working with

others, so I specifically chose a group-based training in order to attend to any residual group-based issues. The training proved to be enriching and healing in many ways.

In order to move my work and experience away from myself I decided to do research. For my final MA dissertation I asked eight self-confessed ex cult members what had helped them recover from their abusive cult experience. The aim of the research was to give former cult members a voice and to investigate the most effective therapeutic approach for them.

Given my own experience of not being able to find a psychotherapist who was trained in working with the cult problem, I hypothesised that many former cult members were probably similarly floundering around, trying to find the right sort of therapy. Paul Martin<sup>10</sup>, perhaps controversially, stated that it is only half true that former cult members should seek help from mental health professionals (therapists). He qualified this by saying that therapy is 'only helpful if the therapist has some expertise regarding cultic phenomena. Unfortunately, therapists have been known to fail miserably if they are not sensitive to the issues of cult involvement.' This statement intrigued me and verified my own experience and that of others to whom I had spoken.

### My research

My data has highlighted a number of areas that help former cult members recover and I have spent the intervening years since 2005 developing my thinking through further reading, client work, returning to Wellspring, and writing.

The heart of the recovery process is helping clients to shed the cult pseudo-personality, described earlier, enabling them to return to the pre-cult personality and move forward into a post-cult personality.

I have investigated through reading and clinical work how this cult pseudo-personality forms. Cult pseudo-personality is part of the conversion to a new belief system and compliance mechanism. A number of writers refer to it as a dissociated part of the personality. I suggest, however, that cult pseudo-personality *mimics*

dissociation<sup>7</sup>. The essential feature of dissociation is a 'disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. The disturbance may be sudden or gradual, transient or chronic' (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*). I do think dissociation is present for many, if not most, former cult members, but as a separate (coping) mechanism.

My research and experience with clients leads me to suggest that cult pseudo-personality is in fact an introjected part of the personality that needs chewing over and digesting, allowing what is nourishing to remain, and eliminating the rest. Introjection may be thought of as a 'material way of acting, feeling, evaluating – which you have taken into your system of behaviour but which you have not assimilated in such a fashion as to make it a genuine part of your organism, yourself'<sup>11</sup>.

The cult experience needs chewing over but if, as a therapist, you do not understand the process of how this introjected cult pseudo-personality has formed, how can you effectively help a client? Singer states: 'The array of necessary adjustments [post cult] can be summed up as coming out of the pseudo-personality. I present them in a sequence... a kind of peeling off of the outer layer of identity that was taken on while in the cult. The process is a matter of recovering one's self and one's value system, and of keeping whatever good was learned during cult days while discarding all the not-so-good.'<sup>16</sup>

I now work predominantly with former cult members, and the therapeutic approach that I have found to be most effective in assisting recovery for these clients is a relational psychoeducational model. I envisage the cult pseudo-personality being laid down like pieces of a jigsaw (Singer's layers) and I use this metaphor with clients. Each psychoeducational area I work on with clients is a piece of the jigsaw that correlates to the layers of the cult pseudo-personality laid down in the client while they were in the cult. The psychoeducational subject areas needing to be addressed to facilitate recovery include: thought reform (see Lifton's work which

explains how control and conversion occur<sup>12</sup>); influence; dealing with trauma, including rape and sexual abuse; returning to family and friends (many former cult members have been cut off from their family); changing the way they look (many cults expect their members to adhere to a dress code); sexuality (many have become celibate or in some groups have had to prostitute themselves to recruit others); owning their own spirituality; learning how to handle money and practical issues of being in the 'real world' (many cults take all the members' money and the group takes control of managing money); and other areas that are specific to that former cult member's particular experience.

I give each client a folder of handouts and resources so that, once they understand the dynamics, they have the tools and resources to go forward with their recovery process without becoming dependent on me.

I have called this model 'Post Cult CounsellingHVC'. The HVC stands for Hope Valley Counselling and describes my approach as opposed to any other using a similar label. In order to overcome the challenge of people living a long way from me and the time required to pass on the psychoeducational information, clients come and stay in a B&B or holiday cottage in the beautiful Derbyshire Peak District. This is followed up by telephone sessions, if needed. Once the former cult member understands what they have been through and can put the pieces of the jigsaw back together for themselves, then they can work with any other open-minded therapist, with the knowledge of what has happened to them clearer in their own mind.

## Conclusion

I find myself in my late 50s doing things that 30 year olds are doing. I lost my 20s to the cult I joined and my 30s as a result of not realising I was still lost in the cult mindset (but the best thing is I had my lovely children then!). I therefore spent my prime studying and business-building years in another 'mental universe' (to borrow BBC journalist Jeremy Bowen's description of Gaddafi's world view).

I have since built a psychotherapy service with my husband; I am coordinator for a charity originally set up by a couple born and raised in a cultic group ([www.encourage-cult-survivors.org](http://www.encourage-cult-survivors.org)); I have started to train other therapists to recognise the specific needs of ex cult members; and I have begun to gather a small group of therapists together who would like to specialise in this work or at least find out more about it so that I can pass on what I have learned.

I have been on this road now for many years; it has been a long journey and there is still much to do. ■

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## References

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## Resources and further reading

- The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic groups, alternative movements, and other environments. ICSA's mission is to apply research and professional perspectives on cultic groups to educate the public, and help those who have been harmed. ICSA is holding its annual international conference, titled 'Manipulation and Victimisation' in Montreal, Canada, from 5-7 July 2012. For more details, visit the ICSA website: [www.icsahome.com](http://www.icsahome.com)
- The Cult Information Centre, London is a charity providing advice and information for victims of cults, their families and friends, researchers and the media. [www.cultinformation.org.uk](http://www.cultinformation.org.uk)
- INFORM (The Information Network on Religious Movements) is an independent charity that aims to provide information about alternative religious, spiritual and esoteric movements. [www.inform.ac](http://www.inform.ac)
- *Combating Cult Mind Control and Releasing the Bonds*, by Steven Hassan [www.freedomofmind.com](http://www.freedomofmind.com)
- *Take Back Your Life: Recovery from Abusive Groups and Relationships*, by Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias, 2006
- *Cults in our Midst*, by Margaret Singer, 2003