

HANDOUT: WHAT MAKES A CULT?

The information in this handout was compiled from the [International Cultic Studies Association](#), particularly the [article](#) "Characteristics Associated with Cult Groups—Revised" by Dr. Janja Lalich and Dr. Michael D. Langone (2006); a Wikipedia entry on [Robert Jay Lifton](#); and "Common Characteristics of How the Cults Operate" (2009) on the [Let Us Reason Ministries](#) website.

What Makes It a Cult?

The answer depends on how you define the word and to whom you are talking. For purposes of liberal religious examination, this is our working definition of a cult:

A religion or sect, generally considered to be extremist or false, under the guidance of an authoritarian, charismatic leader for whom members exhibit fixed, even religious, veneration.

Groups that meet this definition tend to have an escalating negative impact on the lives of followers. These groups exhibit many common characteristics:

- One charismatic leader is the group's sole authority on truth; only this leader decides, or has the right to approve, all policies and practices.
- Members are zealous, protective, and unquestioningly committed to the leader.
- Members regard the leader's beliefs and practices as truth and law; the leader affirms and enforces this idea.
- Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or punished.
- The group's leadership dictates how members should think, act, and feel. Members require the leader's permission to change jobs, date, marry, or have children. The leader tells members where they can live and how to teach and discipline their children.
- The group uses public humiliation or punishment, debilitating work, sleep deprivation, or other practices to create group-think and to suppress individualism and doubt.
- Criticism or jokes about the leader or group are taken very seriously and likely punished.
- The group is elitist, claiming special status for itself, its leaders, and its members.
- The leader and members maintain theirs is the only path to truth and salvation.

HANDOUT: BEHAVIOR OF ABUSERS

Abusers can be hard to identify because at first they can be completely charming. Skilled at gaining people's trust, they often seem approachable, honest, generous, and kind, as they ease into people's lives and hearts. Slowly, though, things start to go terribly wrong. The abusive behavior escalates as the relationship advances, gradually becoming more controlling, demeaning, and aggressive. Only after the victim feels hopelessly trapped does the situation become unbearable.

It is essential not to let positive impressions blind one to a person's behavior as it develops over time.

The list below includes many common behaviors of abusers, though it does not include the most obvious forms of violence, such as screaming or hitting. An extremely manipulative, predatory abuser might never physically harm a victim. Nonetheless, all behaviors listed here should be considered violent.

Abusers:

- Insist that their own thoughts and feelings be respected, but are not respectful of others' thoughts and feelings
- Blame the victim for inciting abuse: "You made me do it."
- Generally will not take responsibility—constantly blame everyone and everything but themselves
- Keep people isolated by preventing or discouraging contact with friends or family
- Shove, push, block the way, or stand or behave in a threatening manner
- Threaten to hurt people or their friends or family
- Discount other people's worth and opinions
- Encourage dependence; tell others they cannot get along by themselves
- Control access to finances, telephones, television, computer, cars, and other family resources
- Criticize, devalue, insult, humiliate, and otherwise make people feel small, worthless, stupid, clumsy, helpless, unwanted, or inferior
- Use intimidation or manipulation to get their way and control people
- Abuse or threaten to abuse pets
- Destroy or threaten to destroy things other people value

- Act distrustfully; intrude on privacy (e.g., barging in, reading mail)
- Withhold conversation or affection to control or punish
- Exhibit jealousy; make unfounded accusations
- Have unpredictable outbursts of anger or rage
- Cite authoritative sources to justify their oppressive behavior (e.g., quoting a religious text to justify physical punishment or assert superiority)