

# For Families Who Suspect That a Loved One May Be Involved With a High-Demand Group (*Cult*)

By Steve K. D. Eichel<sup>1</sup>

**How can I tell if my loved one is in a high-demand group (HDG) or cultic relationship?** Deception is the key to whether a group or person is cultic, or just more dedicated than the rest of us. Historically, groups and persons who have had a beneficial effect on the world have done so without disguising their beliefs or misrepresenting their practices. Every member of a mainline religious community is given lengthy exposure to the beliefs and practices of the community before the member is permitted to make a commitment. Legitimate groups and individuals can do this because they are capable of delivering what they promise.

HDGs and cultic persons, in contrast, promise what no one can deliver. Naturally, because they promise what can be had nowhere else, they can make extraordinary demands on their followers or partners, since the expected reward is also extraordinary. If these persons or groups could deliver on what they promise, we should all be members. Since they cannot, they have to build systems that trick people into joining and staying in the system. This goal is usually accomplished with a kind of bait-and-switch technique.

For example, a group promises eternal inner peace and then trains new recruits in relaxation techniques. The techniques, available in any library, are presented as the secret “wisdom of the ages.” The new recruits are actually able to relax using the technique. Their new ability is ascribed to the uniqueness of the group and proves that the group can deliver on its promises. When the new technique fails, the members can be blamed for not doing it right or can be commended for rising to a new level and needing more training in other techniques. Either way, guilt or praise, the group keeps its devoted without delivering anything else it promised.

Just believing strongly in or committing deeply to a cause, a group, or a person does not mean that one is in a HDG. Through history, countless devoted individuals, groups, and intense belief systems have served to bring societies back from barbarism to respect for human life and liberty. All these groups have accomplished their lofty goals without indulging in the practices below:

- The group, its leader, or the partner expects unusual commitment of time and resources to the group. For example: Full-time college students are expected to spend in excess of 20 to 30 hours each week on group-related activities.
- The group, its leader, or the partner expects more or less exclusive devotion or focus on the leader or partner, or on the group’s practices or beliefs. Other relationships are discouraged, other honorable persons are overtly or subtly dismissed, and other ideas and lifestyles are ridiculed. The promise is that extreme devotion yields extreme rewards. Members are special, part of an elite; nonmembers are subnormal, and former members are dangerous. Doubts are suppressed by enforcing the practices of the group, in excess: chanting, meditation, speaking in tongues, singing repetitive lyrics, following repetitive work regimens, spending time in endless study (looking up words, etc.).

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- The group, its leader, or the partner acts as if right and wrong are defined by what furthers or inhibits the interests of the group. The world is defined in sharp, black-or-white categories.
- The group, its leader, or the partner emphasizes attracting new members, collection of money, or participation in the group's practices to the exclusion of other activities necessary for normal emotional growth.
- However minor they might be, thoughts, feelings, and actions of members are expected to be under the benevolent care and direction of the leader or partner.

**I think my loved one is in a HDG, or a cultic or abusive relationship; what do I do now?**

- Keep the lines of communication open. If initial concerns and doubts are not effective in helping the member to leave, it is not necessary to label the group or partner as *cultic* or *abusive*. Remember, this is a cherished belief or person; your loved one may not be capable of rejecting the connection on first or second hearing. Instead, try to keep pregroup or prerelationship memories alive; emphasize the care and love that exists in the relationship now.
- Educate yourself. The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) website contains a wealth of information useful to families, along with links to several other organizations and individuals who can provide guidance on specific groups and beliefs. Knowing what you are talking about can prevent miscommunication and promote real understanding in your loved one. Knowledge also prevents you from playing into the hands of the group. Most groups have been incorrectly blamed for things in the past. They will use the media's misinformation and your misconceptions to make the group seem legitimate.
- Create for the loved one a real place to go. More than a job or a place to live, important as these things are, your loved one needs an atmosphere of emotional safety. Extended family and friends also need to be educated in HDG/cult dynamics to minimize awkwardness.
- Consult with a cult-aware professional when necessary. This person can assist you with support, understanding, and concrete suggestions to help yourself as well as your loved ones. Please do *not* take any drastic actions without first consulting a cult-aware professional or consultant. ISCA may be able to help you find appropriate professionals, consultants, or organizations in your area, such as RETIRN, which I cofounded, or Wellspring.

**My loved one just left a HDG, how can I help them?** The concepts above apply: Educate yourself, keep the lines of communication open, and try to create a real place to go. Here is where professional resources fit into the whole process. Once your loved one has decided it would not be in her best interest to return to the group or relationship, there is a growing network of mental-health professionals with expertise in cultic dynamics to whom you can turn for assistance.

Most importantly, your loved one may have questions and emotional needs you feel ill-equipped to handle. Not resolving these issues can result in much longer recovery periods; worse, some individuals will not be able to recover on their own at all. There is an old saying: "Time does not heal the wounds of betrayal." Your loved one may not be able to "get over" the experience the way she might overcome some other obstacle in life.

Many mental-health professionals and clergy feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of former cult members. Our experience is they are better equipped than they think. A background in the social psychology of undue influence and the impact of traumatic experiences—which many professionals have—along with a willingness to listen before judging and "pathologizing" either former members or families, often provides a firm foundation for

effective helping. Consultation with professionals and paraprofessionals (including cultic scholars and former members experienced with helping other former members) is available and often extremely useful.

## About the Author

**Steve K. D. Eichel, PhD, ABPP**, ICSA President, is Past-President of the American Academy of Counseling Psychology and the Greater Philadelphia Society of Clinical Hypnosis. He is a licensed and Board-certified counseling psychologist whose involvement in cultic studies began with a participant-observation study of Unification Church training in its Eastern seminary (in Barrytown, NY) in the spring of 1975. His doctoral dissertation to date remains the only intensive, quantified observation of a deprogramming. He was honored with AFF's 1990 John G. Clark Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Cultic Studies for this study, which was published as a special issue of the *Cultic Studies Journal* and has been translated into several foreign languages. In 1983, along with Dr. Linda Dubrow-Marshall and clinical social worker Roberta Eisenberg, Dr. Eichel founded the Re-Entry Therapy, Information & Referral Network (RETIRN), one of the field's oldest continuing private providers of psychological services to families and individuals harmed by cultic practices. RETIRN currently has offices in Newark, DE, Lansdowne, PA, Pontypridd, Wales, and Buxton, England (UK). In addition to his psychology practice and his involvement with ICSA, Dr. Eichel is active in a range of professional associations. He has coauthored several articles and book reviews on cult-related topics for the *CSJ/CSR*.