

Are there happy leavers?

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Introduction

Getting out, managing to leave the group is a long-dreamed-of objective, often dreamed of for many months, by the majority of people who have been recruited into a cult. The exit is the result of a long inner journey. For other victims, it's the brutal expulsion from the group that marks the end of the cult experience. These members are expelled because they no longer meet the expectations of the gurus, ask too many questions or because their mental and/or physical health has deteriorated.

Whatever the scenario of the end of the control, the victims welcomed at the CCMM testify of numerous traumas and after-effects which are the direct consequences of the mental hold they underwent. The negative impact of the mental hold can last for many years and it's very difficult for the victims to build their lives.

So, despite these after-effects, can the leavers be happy? Or are they deprived of a peaceful existence? Of course, the testimonies received at CCMM are all very different and each story is unique. However, it's possible to identify painful patterns in these life stories. These are the constants that led me to ask myself this question: are there happy leavers?

In order to simplify my presentation, I will divide it into 2 parts: I will first present the situation of victims who enter a group as adults, and then I will develop the situation of victims who grew up in the group and left it as adults.

I. Those who enter as adults

The situations encountered are extremely varied. It's not the same thing to join a group at 20 or at 50, to cut oneself off from everything and everyone, or to continue working, to keep one's home, to keep a link, however tenuous, with one's family.

Let's consider the 2 extremes:

- At one end of the spectrum are people who visit a group a few times and then quickly leave. One would naturally think that these people would necessarily be fine because the experience ended quickly. However, it's not that simple.

Let's take the example of Mrs A: Mrs A suffered from alcoholism for many years. She has been through several detoxes and psychotherapy. It worked well and she was able to stay alcohol-free for almost a decade. Unfortunately, events that she did not detail to me led her to use again. She made the decision to seek psychological help again. A friend tells her that she has recently been attending a therapy group and offers to accompany her. Mrs A gladly accepts the offer. The group is led by a therapist and there are about 10 participants. From this first session, Mrs A noticed that there were some issues that she was concerned about, in particular the pseudo-therapist was verbally aggressive towards the participants and physically shoved them when she didn't agree with the answer given. Exchange between participants is not recommended: the therapist stresses the principle "what happens in the group stays in the group". By this manoeuvre, the participants do not feel authorised to interact and Mrs A does not dare to share her feelings with her friend. They go to the next session, which proceeds in the same way, with aggressive language and pushing and shoving. A few days after this session, Mrs A opens up to her friend, explaining that she is shocked by the therapist's attitude and doubts that this can be qualified as a "therapeutic method". Her friend is relieved by this confidence and admits that she also thinks the group is dysfunctional. Mrs A then contacts the CCMM to have their doubts confirmed. During our interview, Mrs A was deeply shaken by her attitude: she said nothing and went

back a second time. Mrs A can't understand why she went back, and she can no longer trust herself because she was disappointed by her behaviour.

- At the other end of the spectrum are victims who spend several decades in a group and then ask themselves after they get out, "but what makes sense then, if everything was a lie?" »

Here, the victims are confronted with an intense feeling of loss of meaning, the loss of an ideal established as an individual and collective goal. This ideal directed and justified their entire existence. In addition, victims must mourn the person they are not: they are neither wonderful nor endowed with powers, and they won't save the world.

These people are in a state of intense distress and find it very difficult to ask for help from professionals and trust them because, in the guru's doctrine, the only possible salvation is through them or through their God, and only magical care is effective and safe.

In all possible cases, from one extreme to the other and everything in between, it's possible to identify certain elements that are recurrently mentioned by the victims. Certain symptoms and consequences appear to be common to the different accounts:

Symptoms:

- Anxiety, depression, sleep and eating disorders.

- Sort of automated thinking: reasoning or conclusions are forced into the victims' minds. These are ready-made phrases, simplistic conceptions and beliefs learned in the group that impose themselves on the ex-follower's thinking when he or she no longer believes in the doctrine. The victim will have to work hard to identify these ideas and then eradicate them by replacing them with personal knowledge. Example of Mr B: Mr B was suffering from health problems that the doctors could not solve, nor even relieve. After the advice of an acquaintance, Mr B turned to a "wonderful" woman, Mrs Z. The latter claimed to be able to help him. Gradually, Mrs Z, who had no official qualification and who did not name her practice, took up a lot of space in Mr B's daily life. He spent many hours on the phone with her (her practice was inspired by psychotherapy). She convinced him to stop trusting doctors and psychologists because they are harmful. She also taught him that if he represented a potentially problematic situation in a positive way, he would no longer be faced with failure; for example: if he wanted to be sure to park his car, he must imagine that he finds a place in the first minutes of his search. If he can't find a space, it's because he has misrepresented the scene! Mr B was able to escape her grip after one year. He headed back to hospital services. But, despite a break in relations with Mrs Z and the rejection of all her assertions, he still couldn't be calm in the presence of the doctors, and he doubted their benevolence. Moreover, he found himself imagining situations in a positive way to be sure that he would not experience any difficulties.

- Physical sensations (much more rare).

Example of Mr C: Mr C. was part of a meditation group for a year and a half. Being used to meditation, he spotted elements that led him to leave the group. In particular, he explained to me that he felt physical sensations outside the group, which he said was completely abnormal. During the meditation sessions, participants were told that they could feel the chakras of others as a stream of cool air on their heads and hands. Mr C felt these sensations and they also appeared outside of meditations, suddenly, without him wanting it, which worried him a lot.

Consequences:

- People come out of the cult experience deeply shaken, with their self-esteem destroyed.

The reconstruction of their self-image is difficult, especially since they have lost confidence in themselves, in others, and equally have lost confidence in doctors and psychologists. Thus, referral to competent professionals is particularly problematic.

- These people face a sense of loss of identity, "I don't know who I am any more".

- Former followers feel a strong sense of shame that paralyses them, prevents them from communicating with others and hinders them from seeking help.
- In addition, victims suffer a lack of opportunity in relation to physical illness and psychological disorders because the necessary care is not provided.

How are they doing?

The victims who contact me are mostly people who are not doing well and are suffering from the hold that has been imposed on them. This suffering can remain acute despite the time, sometimes long, that has passed since their release.

In all situations, when the victims finally manage to leave the group, they find themselves confronted with a lack of reference points and a profound psychological destabilisation. In addition, they frequently face financial difficulties.

Their family situation is often chaotic: Victims are often pressured to divorce; they are often led to be in a relationship with a member of the group.

Some victims took their loved ones with them, especially their children. Can one recover from such guilt? Especially since if they have understood and left the group, it's not necessarily the case for the child, the relative, who will stay in the group and refuse to communicate with the dissident parent (as with all other people outside the group).

Victims also experience distress and frustration related to their lost time in the group. To illustrate this, let's take the example of Ms C: Ms C was suffering from psychological distress and sought help. She found Ms Y on the internet who claimed to be a psychologist and led pseudo-workshops during which the participants did therapeutic work on themselves while receiving training to become therapists in their own right. Ms C remained under Ms Y's control for 2 years, until she was ousted from the group by Mrs Y. Ms C felt deeply distressed and unsettled. It was in this circumstance that she called on Ms V, who claimed to have studied psychology. Ms C remained under the influence of this abuser for more than 2 years. Ms C noted some troubling elements in this 2nd therapy. She asked about Ms Y and found out that she did not have a degree, then she asked about Ms V and found out that she was only enrolled in the first year of psychology studies. In all, Ms C remained under this influence for almost 5 years. During all these years, she did provide the necessary care for her daughter (speech therapy to treat dyslexia and school support, purchase of glasses, orthodontist). Ms C did not provide the care she needed and is now in even greater psychological distress than when she started. In addition, for 2 years she financed training that was not genuine.

From all these testimonies, it appears that the victims are suffering. At least, this is the case for victims who appeal to the CCMM.

However, some of these victims are doing much better than others. The former followers who are doing quite well have in common the fact that they have been out of the group for many years, have not suffered irreparable losses, and have benefited from the support of relatives and competent professionals.

II. Those who grow up in it

Now let's look at the situation of people who grew up in the group with their families. In the situations I have seen, these children have mostly left the group in their late teens or early adulthood.

As with the adult victims, the stories of these victims who grew up in the group are all different and highlight the uniqueness of each account.

For example, some victims explain that they never really believed in the doctrine and understood from childhood that the family system was dysfunctional. Other victims, on the other hand, believed unconditionally and did not question parental education until adulthood. Others are in between: They were able to see the inconsistencies and aberrations in the doctrine and in their family from an early

age, but it took them many years to be able to question the beliefs and rules of life imposed on them, as well as their family's membership of such a group.

Some of the victims who understood at an early age fled the group and their families in their late teens. Other victims kept "one foot in", retained beliefs and practices because of the connection that was maintained with their family, who were continually trying to get them to fully adhere to the beliefs again.

In this wide range of situations, it is possible to highlight common after-effects and suffering.

Symptoms:

- Panic attacks, anxiety.
- Sleep disorder.
- Eating disorders. Diet is often very strictly supervised by the guru, so much so that several victims explained to me that they had used a nutritionist to learn how to eat.
- Sort of automated thinking. Example of Mrs D: Ms D grew up in an evangelical church. The pastor of the church said that the apocalypse was going to happen and that only those believers who obeyed the instructions would be saved. Throughout her childhood, Ms D was terrified of this possible apocalypse and had nightmares about it almost every night. She fled her family and this church at the age of 20. Today she is 30 years old but sometimes the idea of having to save her fellow man by warning them of the apocalypse still comes to her when she is sharing a nice moment with her friends.
- Feeling of emptiness, depressive experience that can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Consequences:

- 2 points are systematically cited in the testimonies: isolation and financial insecurity, or autonomy that is difficult to acquire after many years.

The social difficulties are explained by the fact that the victims were not able to develop social skills during their childhood (because they were isolated from others, others who were presented as dangerous because they did not belong to the group). The consequence is that the relationship with others is deeply disturbed.

Financial insecurity is linked to the inability to build a professional career because the concept of an individual life has no meaning within a group with cult characteristics: only the group counts. In addition, members are often encouraged not to invest in their education.

Financial insecurity is also linked to a lack of knowledge and understanding of how administrative services work.

- Victims suffer from an inability to make personal choices; Not only are the victims unable to imagine a professional career, but the slightest choice is a source of blockage and anguish, even for choices that seem simple, such as the flavour of an ice cream. These victims cannot make choices because they have not developed their own personality; in fact, individual affirmation and respect for choices are prohibited in situations of control.

- Acute difficulties in the couple's relationship are also mentioned. The causes are diverse; for example: both members of the couple were in the group and the departure of one leads to divorce, or the absence of the assertive personality of the ex-member is difficult to manage by the partner who has to "decide everything", or the fear of commitment on the part of the ex-member is not bearable for the partner (commitment is synonymous with imprisonment).

This difficulty in establishing a balanced and fulfilling couple relationship appears in the majority of testimonies. In addition, victims who call us report that their siblings who have left the group also experience this difficulty.

How are they doing?

The victims who call testify about their suffering and their difficulty finding their place in society. They have to face anxieties, fears (for example: apocalypse, the fear of everything that does not belong to the group, i.e. “the outside”) and the guilt put in place by the group.

They suffer from complex feelings towards their families and often a complete break in their ties with the members who remained in the group.

These victims are in for a huge shock: realising that they cannot rely on their parents, and also realising that the parents have lied. For example, one victim told me that she hardly ever saw a doctor when she was a child. When she was sick, her mother claimed that there was no need to call the doctors because they would only see her in 2 weeks. This person understood in adulthood that this lie came from their mother (and not from the group), their mother could not have been unaware that it is possible to have a child treated.

The ban on communicating with a dissident is a specific feature of groups with cultish characteristics. This makes the victim very vulnerable because they cannot benefit from the support of their family, because the relatives have remained in the group and because the links with family members who do not belong to the group could not be established (I am thinking in particular of the grandparents).

As a final remark regarding the complexity of family ties, I would like to stress that it is not easy for these victims to seek relief, to alleviate their guilt, through a report or a public testimony, because this involves denouncing their parents.

I would now like to point out an element that is not virtually systematic, but which is nonetheless very common: the contempt, fear, and even dread, felt towards the medical field. Indeed, doctors and psychologists are presented at best as useless, at worst as dangerous.

This fear of physicians persists for a long time and beliefs about pseudo-care continue to guide victims in their choices. This means that, at first, victims turn to unconventional medicine and to people who have no qualifications. Secondly, they make the connection between these practices and the deviant practices they experienced as children, and they then contact competent health professionals.

One victim emphasised that, when they left the cult, they were told by the associations for the combat against cults with undue influence that the role of a doctor is first and foremost to provide care. Afterwards, many doctors confirmed to them that they are there to heal, which allowed them to gradually put their trust in them.

Of all the problems and after-effects linked to having grown up in a cult group or a deviant movement, one phenomenon stands out, very specific to these victims: they are confronted with the delicate exercise of deconstructing everything that has been inculcated in the group, of identifying all the elements belonging to the group.

Victims perceive the world through the filter of group beliefs and doctrine. In general, all areas of life are impacted by beliefs (for example: novels have no interest because they are false and only certain books are allowed, history is denied or revisited).

To let go of all these beliefs and to deny all that belongs to the group is almost impossible; the victims say: “It's like taking out my spine”.

A long process of building their personality and learning common knowledge will be necessary for them to be able to integrate into society and find their place.

Some victims, in spite of all these pitfalls and difficulties, manage to cope much better than all other victims. They are able to thrive in a job they have chosen, and build lasting relationships with others. It is possible to identify that these victims were more in contact with the environment outside the group, they may have befriended peers and were connected to family members outside the group. In addition, it was the victims who were allowed to continue their education and then enter the job market.

In addition, meetings and exchanges between ex-followers are facilitated by social networks. This is important because this exchange allows victims to better understand what happened to them and to feel less alone.

III. How can I help?

The suffering and after-effects linked to the passage into a group with cultish characteristics seem inevitable. However, help is available to them.

I will briefly present some possibilities for help.

School for those who grow up in it:

The presence of school is essential for children who are victims of cults with undue influence or abuse, but also for those who are experiencing a difficult family situation.

Many victims present school as a refuge, as a place where they can try to exist and forget about the group. Even if schooling does not solve everything, some victims may express that they felt “saved” by their normal schooling.

For other victims, unfortunately, the prohibitions and the fear of the outside world prevented them from using this place.

Training of professionals:

The training of different professionals (health, police, social services, etc.) is essential because it allows them to understand the problems of the victims and to welcome them in an adapted way.

In addition, it will allow professionals not to minimise the suffering and consequences of such an experience.

The content of initial and continuing education is essential. But it is also essential to develop the partnership between the different professions, to develop the idea that, in case of difficulty or doubt, professionals can also call upon the expertise of associations.

On the importance of training professionals, let me share one last situation:

Mr E is 35 years old. Throughout his childhood, it was explained to him that it was dangerous to consult allopathic doctors, and that homeopathy is the best treatment because it is not harmful to the body. Other types of so-called “alternative” care were also the norm in the cult movement to which the family belongs. At the age of 16, he ran away from his family without any clear reason for his action. He wanted to become a gendarme. During his training, he participated in an intervention of the MIVILUDES: Mr E listened carefully to the intervention of Mr Serges Blisko, then president of Miviludes. Mr Blisko mentioned all the terms and methods used during his childhood. Mr E then understands that the family practices are to be questioned, are not normal and that it is that which pushed him to flee this environment at the age of 16 years.

The wife of Mr E also grew up in a cult movement where the use of homeopathy and energy healing was the norm. Mrs E began to have doubts when the French government stopped reimbursing homeopathy. She questioned her homeopathic doctor, but he was unable to give her a precise answer, which worried her more. Mrs E then opened up to her friends who helped to grow the doubt. As a final point, Mrs E consulted a physician in a hospital ward who took the time to answer her questions. For her, it is a revelation: doctors answer questions. For the wife of Mr. E, it was the government's action that allowed him to question his education and take control of his health.

For psychotherapists:

Psychotherapy is required for leavers, but is difficult to follow for a variety of reasons (e.g.: e.g., lack of trust in the other person, the impression of having already done therapy in the group). In addition, there are difficulties related to the therapy itself: remembering can lead to a state of suffering, stress, anxiety, anger, a state that the victim is trying not to feel.

It is essential that the psychotherapist shows empathy at first, recognising the existence of a process set up by the aggressor (more or less consciously). This empathetic attitude allows the victim to open up and feel understood.

Only then can the experience of the hold be placed in the individual context and the victim's personal choice be addressed.

To conclude

It is certainly possible to be happy after a cult experience, but these are not the people who seek help from CCMM. I have heard from people who are doing well, who have managed to integrate and find a balance; In general, these victims contact the CCMM to make a report, give a name of a guru.

However, victims usually report dramatic situations, irreparable damage, lost years and constant doubts about the meaning of their lives.

The magnitude of these testimonies of suffering and trauma leads me to conclude that we must not minimise the nuisance of these groups, charlatans and gurus, nor minimise the damage that can be caused by mental control.

Individual freedoms, freedom of belief and conscience are essential. However, it is a mistake to hide behind this to avoid denouncing, investigating or condemning the actions that are reported to us on a daily basis. I am thinking in particular of a magistrate heard at a conference on children and the dangers of cults with undue influence, who stressed the importance of preserving the freedom of parents to educate their children in a personal and original way. It seems to me that too many children are the victims of practices that can pass for original if we do not take the time to understand what they are in fact about.