



OUT IN THE WORLD: POST-CULT RECOVERY

Gillie Jenkinson explains the need for a relational, psychoeducational approach to working with cult survivors

When I met Jane, she had recently left a cultic group. She had spent the previous 18 years following a guru who was regarded by thousands of international followers as a special spiritual teacher and a wise, god-like man. Jane was now 38, and I was interviewing her for my doctoral research on what helps former members to recover from an abusive cult experience.¹

Most people think such groups are things of the past: phenomena of the 1960s and 70s. This is far from the case; cults continue to flourish in many different forms, capturing and exploiting many thousands of people in their seemingly benign embrace. Some escape or flee, like Jane, and, as I have found in my research, many of those who seek help from counsellors do not achieve a happy outcome.

Jane had followed this man all over the world, watched him online and hung on his every word. When, gradually, she began doubting him and questioning her lifestyle, she suppressed these thoughts, until a boyfriend, who was not a member of the group, challenged her, suggesting she was being conned and that the guru was a charlatan. Something snapped in her and she suddenly faced the truth about this cult leader's status.

She quickly moved from doubt to crisis, from suppressing her feelings and doubts to seeing the past 18 years in a very different light. It was traumatic and overwhelming. She was bewildered, rocked by emotions, as she struggled to make sense of the experience.

'[It] started off with shock, then a kind of period of numbness while the shock was sort of going in, and then, when the shock hit, I would say there were about three months of just really violent emotions, not even knowing who I was. My sense of identity just evaporated; all my coping mechanisms that I had built up over the years [in the cult] just vanished,' she told me.

Jane's experience is not uncommon in both first- and second-generation adult (FGA and SGA) cult survivors.² The person she was while in the cult (her cult 'pseudo-identity'³) was shaken to the core and disintegrating, but she hadn't yet built a post-cult sense of self, leaving her in limbo and crisis.

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Jane's recovery began when, in trying to make sense of her experience, she started searching the internet and found others who had left this particular cult. She joined a forum with other survivors, who affirmed her decision to leave and confirmed her insight that the guru was a charlatan who had become extremely rich from all the money his disciples had paid to attend his spiritual retreats and online teaching sessions.

Seeking therapy

Jane decided to find a therapist to help her with her culture shock and emotional overwhelm. She had no money (she had given it all to the cult over the years) and so she accessed a free local counselling service. She accepted that the trainee volunteer counsellor would not know about cults but hoped she would 'do some research, maybe, and have just a little bit more of a clue next time'. However, the counsellor did not follow up the resources Jane suggested, and insisted on exploring her family history, childhood experiences and the reasons Jane joined the cult in the first place.

This was not Jane's priority at this point: '... my reality had already completely evaporated, so to start smashing all the foundations of my childhood [resulted in me having] a really bad trigger wobble. I was all over the place. I was having a bit of a breakdown. I was screaming in a ball on the floor... How I didn't smash the house up I don't know.'

Jane's reference to 'smashing foundations' is important. All that remained to her when she left the cult was her family, who had patiently waited for her. They were very relieved to have their daughter back, and for her therapist to assume they were at fault was unhelpful and destabilising for all of them at this stage. 'I felt the rug had been completely pulled out from underneath me,' she said.

Jane needed someone who understood her experience and knew something about cult mindset, dynamics and thought reform ('brainwashing'). In time she might need to explore her pre-cult life and the vulnerabilities that may have led to her joining, but focusing blame on herself or her family was not helpful at this stage.

Others on the forum had had similar experiences and discouraged her from continuing with counselling.

Four-phase approach

From my research with cult survivors, I have formulated a four-phase model for working with former cult members to help them build a sense of self post-cult and recover:⁴ FGA and SGA survivors have different needs - the FGA will be regaining their sense of self; the SGA may be finding theirs for the first time. However, the aim of this process is the same: to help the cult survivor deconstruct their cultic pseudo-identity and build (or rebuild) their sense of authentic autonomous self.

- **Phase 1:** leave physically and psychologically.
- **Phase 2:** cognitively understand.
- **Phase 3:** emotionally heal the trauma, loss and pre-cult vulnerabilities where relevant.
- **Phase 4:** recognise recovery and post-traumatic growth.

In this model of 'post-cult counselling', the therapist presents some psychological theories and the client considers how they apply to their experiences - that is, they tell their story *into the theory*.⁵

Johan was different to Jane in that he was an SGA survivor, born and raised in a cult. He was now 35, and from a religious community group that described itself as a church. He had left the cult 15 years before, had been totally shunned by his family, who remained in the cult, and had been forced to find his way in an alien world all on his own.



Throughout his life up to that point, he had been required to attend meetings every evening after school, on Saturdays and all day on Sunday. There had been no time for play and he was subjected to constant, terrifying threats of what would happen if he disobeyed the rules. He had grown up with a long list of behaviours considered 'sinful' or 'bad',

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including eating certain foods, having toys and making friends with children 'in the world' outside the group. This left him feeling he was 'bad' and that no one liked him, feelings that had been reinforced by being bullied at school (he attended mainstream school) for being different and 'weird'. He grew up feeling lonely and that he was an outsider and always somehow at fault. His parents were totally focused on the group's mission and gave all their earnings to the group, which was rigidly rule-bound, controlling, and spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, financially and sexually abusive (a form of group coercive control)⁵.

Johan was devastated when his parents, and all the people he had ever known in his life, disowned and shunned him when he left the group. He was 20 and thoroughly unprepared for life outside. He was also highly suspicious of other people: he believed he was 'bad' for leaving but he'd also been taught that everyone 'in the world' outside the group was 'bad' too. He was terrified whichever way he

turned and didn't know who to trust. He got in with the wrong crowd, ended up homeless and addicted to drugs, and was picked up by the police. Fortunately, a homelessness charity referred him to a drug and alcohol service. Although they didn't realise he had been raised in a cult, they were able to help him get off the drugs and find housing. They also persuaded him to overcome his introjected phobia about education (the cult didn't see the point of further education - the end of the world was expected imminently and so what was the point?).

Johan attended college and then did an access course for university. He realised he loved sport and in time became a tennis coach. Slowly but surely, he began to build a sense of self and establish relationships in his new life.

He came to see me because he realised that, although he had identified many aspects from the cult that were unhelpful and negative, and had begun to build a new sense of self, he was aware that there were bits that were left over.

● **Phase 1: the need to leave**

By the time Johan came to see me, he had left the group physically but, unlike Jane, who had already recognised that her cult leader was a fraudulent narcissist, he had not fully left psychologically. To complete this phase, he needed to take three steps.

1. Face the thoughts and doubts he had suppressed, activate his critical thinking and begin to get in touch with his authentic opinions.
2. Identify and 'diagnose' the group as a cult, in order to be able to reframe his experience in its true light, as one of coercive control and servitude.
3. 'Unmask the cult leader' as the charismatic, traumatising narcissist he was⁵ - an ordinary human being, not a powerful, god-like figure worthy of his trust. It is typical for cult leaders to threaten members with dire consequences for leaving, so Johan needed to believe there was nothing the group leader could do to him spiritually now he'd left (although it is always wise to check with cult survivors whether they might be in physical danger).

● **Phase 2: cognitive understanding**

In Phase 2, Johan needed to continue the tasks begun in Phase 1 and start to unpack his experiences in the cult and understand the

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dynamics of the cultic and coercive control to which he had been subjected. He also needed to understand how his parents were brainwashed and controlled, which helped explain why they had rejected him. In this phase the counsellor becomes an interactive sounding board, helping the survivor identify their blind spots as they consider the psychological theories. This is vital so that the survivor builds their new life on their new understanding and emerging autonomous self, not on their cult pseudo-identity and 'introjects'.

I use the term 'introject' in the Gestalt sense, to describe the negative beliefs and behaviours that a person takes in and that remain sitting in the psychological system like a lump of undigested food in the gut.¹ These introjects build up in layers, forming a sedimented cult pseudo-identity,² suppressing the individual's autonomous self. It is the task of counselling to help them rediscover and give credence to this autonomous self by dismantling the introjects and realising that much of what they formerly believed about themselves - their cult pseudo-identity - is untrue.

I use a workbook with worksheets covering 10 main areas:

1. the definition of a cult and how this applies to the client's group
2. identifying and challenging introjects
3. trauma theory
4. the difference between healthy boundary-setting anger and trauma-related hot and cold rage⁶
5. thought-reform (brainwashing) theory
6. influence theory⁷
7. unmasking the cult leader
8. building an autonomous-self: who were you in the cult and who are you now?

(And, for FGA survivors, who were you before the cult?)

9. critical thinking skills
10. recovery tips.

Johan told me he had never had an opportunity to 'chew over' his experience in detail and it was evident that he still blamed himself for what happened to him after leaving the cult. It was also clear that he still lived, to a great degree, in the 'cult mindset',² even though he had physically left many years before. For example, his view of God was punitive and terrifying and there were many introjects associated with this aspect of his indoctrination. If he did not obey perfectly (perfection, as defined by the cult, was assumed to be possible, even though the cult leadership was constantly changing the rules), he felt shame, guilt and fear, and this reinforced his belief that he was 'bad' or 'sinful'. These introjects kept part of him in his cult pseudo-identity and psychologically attached to the group (a form of trauma bonding)⁸, even though he had left physically.

Johan found it helpful to work through the worksheets with me because it made telling his story far less overwhelming. It ensured he 'chewed over' his experience while gaining understanding at the same time.¹

In this way, by using psychoeducation, working relationally, interactively and dialogically, discussing each worksheet with him, helping him tell his story and highlighting his blind spots, I was able to help him to move on in his life and to visualise a different future - one that was built not on introjects but on his authentic autonomous self. At this point he was ready to accurately address his emotional healing needs.

● **Phase 3: emotional healing**

Facing feelings is a fundamental part of any therapy, including post-cult counselling, but it is essential that it only becomes the main focus when the survivor understands cult dynamics and so is ready to face the feelings. Only when Johan was able to begin to address his own authentic feelings was he ready also to face the feelings he had suppressed in the cult throughout his life, his post-traumatic, developmental and attachment pain arising from his abused childhood and adolescence, and the emotional pain and grief of leaving ►

and losing his family, the leader, the group, his dreams and his idealism.

This phase is likely to be very painful and can be overwhelming. One of my research participants called it 'psychological chemotherapy' - painful, but worth it for the freedom it brings. I use the relational aspects of therapy throughout, but they come into play in this phase in a different way - less interactive and discursive and more aimed at helping Johan with the somatic impact of his trauma. I helped him learn to self-regulate, which he had not been taught to do by his parents. I call this 'restorative psychotherapy'. To support this process, I introduced Johan to trauma theory. I worked with him to identify the symptoms that were evidence of his unprocessed traumatic memories (depression, hyper-vigilance, lack of trust and his previous addiction, for example). This helped him make sense of what was happening in his body, so he could begin to ground himself and address his dissociation, after years of suppression.⁹

Once Johan understood the cult dynamics, had identified and 'chewed over' the introjects and his cult pseudo-identity, and had begun the process of emotional healing, he had truly begun to recover and move towards Phase 4.

● Phase 4: recognising recovery

As he entered this phase, Johan was feeling hopeful - excited even - about the future (although it is important to emphasise that the phases may need revisiting and are not necessarily linear). Johan was in a more integrated place, where he no longer lived out of the cult pseudo-identity or a dissociated state. He was able to move more fluidly between remembering and feeling and thinking.¹ While painful memories could still be triggered, they were no longer too traumatic for him to process, he was able to recognise when he was dissociated more often, and he could seek help if he needed it.

Johan also expressed a level of post-traumatic growth, in that he was able to see this as a unique opportunity to reinvent himself and to appreciate that he had grown through his traumatic experiences, and even because of them.¹⁰

It is my belief that, with or without therapy, former cult members are at risk of remaining in psychological and relational limbo for years. If they come to understand how cults

operate to control their members' thinking and behaviour, and they have an opportunity to tell their personal story within a relational, psychoeducational therapy⁴ that can offer them tools to understand their experience, manage their emotions and process their trauma and loss, there is real hope for recovery of the autonomous self and growth. ■



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About the author

Gillie is a practising psychotherapist, trainer, published author and international speaker specialising in working with former cult members and survivors of spiritual abuse. She is Deputy Chair of the BACP Spirituality Executive Committee. For details of her courses in post-cult counselling and to contact Gillie, visit www.hopevalleycounselling.com



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