

Troubles Overcome Are Good to Tell

Alexandra Stein

Alexandra Stein spent 10 years in a political cult in the Midwest. She documented her experiences in her book, Inside Out: A Memoir of Entering and Breaking Out of a Minneapolis Political Cult. Currently she is completing her PhD. in sociology, specializing in the social psychology of political extremism. Also she continues to write creative nonfiction on a variety of less heady topics.

I was in a left-wing political cult called the “O” for about 10 years, from the age of 26 to 36. At this writing, it is eight years since I left. I was recruited at a time of great instability in my life, and because of the location of the group’s headquarters, I moved from California to Minneapolis. While in the cult, I married another member, and then we adopted two children; both of those actions were “recommended” to me by the cult leader. Eventually, after 10 long and miserable years, I was able to leave the group. Three of us left together; the following year, another seven members left. About a year after I left, my husband managed to leave also.

My postcult recovery can be divided into three stages: the immediate crisis of leaving, getting back on my feet, and longer-term issues. I will describe the central issues in each period, and then activities, behaviors, and people that did and did not help me in dealing with those issues.

The Immediate Crisis

This period lasted about a year, an extraordinarily difficult year. Most of the work in this period was, on some level, merely to survive the crisis and not cave in to it.

Much of the survival was practical as well as psychological. Many former members struggle to find housing, at the same time as perhaps fighting a custody battle, as I was doing. Often,

finances are a huge issue, including disentangling financial arrangements and employment. Reconnecting with family members may be another issue. The quantity of problems is overwhelming, especially if you have children. You have to sort out priorities. And while you're coping with these practical problems, you also have to deal with a kind of psychological earthquake, with its own quantity of issues.

The major emotion of this period was fear, and there were three types of fear. One was extreme fear that the leader would cause physical harm. That first year I woke up in the middle of the night, almost every night, certain that he was in the house and about to enter my bedroom to assault or kill me. Did I have cause for this fear? Well, he had murdered a man and I knew that. We didn't think he would actually kill us, but we had to constantly work through this fear and deal with it. I did receive anonymous threatening and abusive phone calls during this period.

The other fear was of other nonviolent means of retribution. In my case, I feared I would lose my children. The leader did instruct my husband to try to gain full custody of the children, which drove me into a fiercely protective mode of defending the children and myself from the leader's attempt to keep them in the cult. My days were filled with a kind of unknown foreboding: "What is he going to do next?"

Finally, and no less terrible than the other types of fear, was what I call an existential fear, the fear of disappearance, of nothingness. This was the feeling that by having left the cult, you had thrown yourself into a vast empty space. It was an absolutely primal kind of terror. You feel completely alone, your roots have been destroyed and your identity is gone. There is no ground beneath your feet, no history, no fellow human being, no culture, no belief system. You have lost both your self, and your connection to others.

I believe this feeling to be key in understanding both cult recruitment and recovery. There is something here, something very deep and human about being connected, and the opposite, that complete disconnection that also is central to this experience. Leaving a cult brings up this feeling full force and inescapably. Part of the courage it takes to leave a cult is facing this fear, along with the other fears I mentioned. Somehow you have to grapple with it, or learn to move through it and “disarm” it. In a way, this summarizes the process of psychological recovery: you have to work through this existential fear to find yourself and your connection to others.

Depression was another commonly felt emotion. Depression and exhaustion. I know I had to put in a lot of sleeping hours. Even now, years later, I still resist any attempts to cut short my sleep. Somehow I feel that the sleep helped relieve the depression; there was some curative element to resting.

Terrible regret and sadness over the lost years overwhelmed me at times (and I’m sure this increases depending on the length of time in the cult). What would I have done? What would I have been? There was a kind of tragic sadness.

Also a feeling of uselessness was a major issue in the first year, thinking to myself all too often: “I have totally failed. I tried to dedicate my life to helping the world, and I did the opposite. I am completely useless.” To counteract that feeling (which also came from some of the cult-induced phobia: “You’ll be nothing if you leave us”), many of us from the group I was in felt we had to prove ourselves right away and tried immediately getting involved in some kind of political activity. Of course, that was not sustainable at the time, and generally such attempts didn’t last long.

There was a great sense of shame. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have treated people like that? How did this happen to me? What did I do to bring this on myself?

And of course there was rage. Lots of it. Hatred of the leader. Overpowering rage. Lots of rageful poems.

But there was, for me, also a lot of joy in that first year. The exhilaration of freedom was intense. I was lucky enough to have the support of the others who left with me, and we formed an ad hoc support group. We met regularly, told our stories, and analyzed what had happened. We also looked after each other in various ways. We cried and laughed a lot, a kind of cathartic hysteria that often came as we told stories about our experiences in the O. We engaged a lot of sensory things, waking ourselves back up from the numbness we'd been in all those years: eating good food, drinking, reading and writing poetry, buying new clothes, listening to music, and so on.

Particularly important to me was nature. I came out of the group in spring, which was psychologically important to me: I identified with the new growth pushing through the soil. I understood that I had to recreate myself in some way, but also recognized that I was resilient, and that inside me was still *me*, even though it would take work to nurture myself back again. Also from nature I got an important psychological feeling of connection with the larger world, what some might call a spiritual connection. In nature I could feel that what I was going through was just a small piece of ugliness, but that there was a world outside that that didn't rely on dogma or cruelty or manipulation, that the beauty there existed in and of itself, and somehow I was connected to that.

What Helped in The First Stage

- A close, trusting, and supportive relationship with my sister who listened and did not judge.
- Contact with other ex-members, both new and old. Our ad hoc support group was critical to my recovery.

- The local support and education group in Minneapolis for former members and their families, Free Minds and Answers Inc. Also the folks there provided me with resources to begin learning about cults and cult dynamics.
- Nature, having fun, enjoying music, art, books.
- Permission to sleep and rest as much as I needed, do nothing for long periods of time. My husband had the children half time so I was able to do this.
- A beginners writing class, which gave me permission and encouragement to write after my 10-year hiatus.
- Seeking out old friends. I made amends and tried to mend some of those broken connections.

What Didn't Help

- Therapist who dropped her mouth open when I began telling her the story.
- Therapists who didn't know what they were dealing with and weren't open to learning. Focusing on family of origin issues and not wanting to look at the cult issue. Later I would learn to tell them, "I've got more family issues than you can shake a stick at, but that's *not* what I'm here for."
- My mother's judgmental, blaming, and angry response.
- Assuming that in getting my husband out as that would solve our problems and make everything better, even though I was warned about this by an exit counselor.

Getting Back on My Feet

Family Issues: After the immediate crisis, when I had sorted out housing, a custody settlement, and so on, my husband finally did come out of the cult. We tried to get back together, and much of the next year was spent trying to repair our marriage, which ultimately had sustained too much

damage. Much of this period was taken up with our deciding, finally, to divorce, and then coping with that transition, which, however, was made a whole lot easier given that he was no longer in the cult.

Children: Although I was totally committed and connected to my children, I still had to look at my relationship with them. I was told to have kids, and I adopted them while in the cult. I had to sort through and untangle the cult piece of this. I had to establish clearly in my own mind my noncult relationship to them. This was intellectual work rather than emotional, as emotionally I didn't doubt our connection. Nevertheless, I had to pick through, deconstruct, if you will, the cult piece.

Postcult Relationship: I got involved with one of the other people who left the O that year. After 10 years of repressing feelings and intimacy, as we did in our cult, it was intoxicating to allow myself to be emotionally close to someone, especially someone who understood what I had gone through. I knew that, for various reasons, it was not a relationship that could last, but we did give each other a great deal of support around the process of recovery.

The Redefinition and Reintegration of Self: Redefining myself began to occur at this point. There were a lot of areas where I had to take stock and try to figure out my direction. I continued to learn about cults. For me, this study happened to mesh with my precult interests, which had already been heading toward social psychology, so I think this was a natural direction for me.

Writing: I began to write soon after getting out, and continued to do so in this period, completing a manuscript about my experience. I got three things from this:

1. Writing about my involvement involved a close review and analysis of exactly how I had been manipulated, so I relived the whole experience, which, while difficult, helped me understand it and integrate it.

2. By the end of writing the book, I felt I could say I was a writer, which was very important in rebuilding a sense of identity that I could call my own.

3. It helped a great deal with the shame I was feeling. I decided early on to “come out” about my cult experience because I felt that the shame was part of what allows cultic abuse to continue to be a very hidden issue. I was able to more or less turn this around and, in a sense, be proud, and regard my experience as socially useful, to refuse to be shamed about it. That is why becoming a cult-awareness activist was very important to me.

Interests: Given I’d been in the cult for so long, it was hard to know what I really wanted to do. So a group of ex-members came up with the idea of “toe-dipping.” That was that we simply had to try things, but we could just dip our toes in. We didn’t have to launch ourselves into a full-time commitment, which obviously was very frightening to us. So dip your toe in to this or that interest. Visit a group. Try a class. We discovered that if we kept dipping our toes in, eventually it was clear that each of us kept coming back to certain areas of interest. It took a long time, but eventually we saw that our interests emerged in this kind of organic way. For me, that was a combination of writing and my study of social psychology.

Identity: The whole issue of identity was, of course, very important. Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? The dislocation that comes with the lost years, that you’ve lost step with others your generation. How do you deal with having been through this trauma? Can you ever be normal again? I decided I would just have to identify with others who’d been through trauma, whether chemical dependency, death of a loved one, other forms of power abuse, political refugees. It was easier for me to identify with others from complicated backgrounds, but that could be a wide span, not just other cult members.

Beliefs: I had to revisit my politics, which up until that had been shaped by the dogma of the group. There were many parts of this that I actually felt comfortable not resolving. I looked around at the world and saw that (a) no one else seemed much clearer than I, and (b) it was okay to be unclear, to have open questions. I really let go of the need for dogma. I learned to say, “I don’t know” and to be very comfortable with that. I did, however, gather together some basic values, mostly from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I saw and appreciated the need to keep these values as broad, inclusive, and open as possible.

Friends: It was extremely difficult trying to break out of isolation. I worked very hard at this for many years and had a number of false starts. It took me a long time to find the kind of social strata in which I actually felt at home, as I’d been more or less removed from that by the cult. I ended up finding that I was much more comfortable among artists, writers, intellectuals, and activists rather than, say, corporate and business professionals, which were the kinds of connections encouraged by the cult.

What Helped in The Second Stage

- Continuing my study of thought reform and the social psychology of cults, and becoming a cult- awareness activist.
- Receiving the continued support of other ex-members and other friends and family.
- Being able to go to therapists and hand them copies of chapters from various books, particularly *Cults in Our Midst* (Singer and Lalich), *Recovery from Cults* (Langone) and *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds* (Lalich and Tobias). I would tell the therapists they had to read it these handouts I gave them. If they weren’t willing, I didn’t go back.

- Having a therapist willing to treat me as an equal, willing to show herself as a human being rather than as a god (the kind of overly rigid boundaries of Freudians). I needed to be able to ask, “How was your vacation?” and get a normal reply.
- Having a therapist willing and able to do some deep work, willing to go to that dark place with me, and help me navigate it, find my feet, so to speak.
- Studying personality and temperament, along with tools like the Myers-Briggs typing exercise, helped me name some of my attributes that transcended the cult experience. It was a validating exercise to say, “Yes, I’m an introvert and a thinker...” and so on. And to recognize these as pre- and postcult pieces of myself. Of course, in the cult those qualities had always been scorned, but now I could reclaim them as basic pieces of my personality.

What Didn’t Help

- Overly-brief, practical problem-solving therapies. Also pop psychology.
- Therapist overly eager to prescribe drugs. I wanted to have some feelings, after 10 years of repressing my feelings.
- Therapists wanting to try hypnosis or other weird techniques. It was okay if they could hear me react and respected that immediately, but not if they tried to convince me.
- People telling me to “get over it.” It takes a long time to get over long-term abuse.

Longer Term Issues

Eight years after leaving the cult, some significant issues remain to be dealt with. Primarily, these have to do with triggers, career, geography, and relationships.

Triggers and flashbacks trouble me from time to time. I think that this will be a lifelong issue, but one that can be handled as long as you can identify that you are being triggered and then deal with it on that level.

I am still trying to make a career transition. I continue to work at a career chosen for me by the cult leader, and I continue to resent that. However, I am more at peace with it as the years go by and as I develop as a writer and open up new doors for myself in the field of social psychology.

I still live in Minnesota, which is not a place I'd have chosen; yet I feel I have to stay here until my children are grown. There is a sense of rootlessness that predates the cult. However, I have gotten better at deciding to "be here now," and I am active and involved in my community.

As a single woman with a complicated history, I find that trying to enter the dating world has been daunting. This is normal for many women my age, but the addition of the cult experience makes it yet more difficult. When do you break the news? I'm still trying to learn different ways to answer the seemingly innocent question, "And what brought you to Minnesota?"

On the positive side I can say that:

- I know myself well now, and I use that knowledge to direct my activities. I am assertive about not doing things I don't wish to do.
- I'm very good at recognizing abuses of power and I'm not afraid to call them what they are.
- I recognize when I am triggered and I can name it and move on.
- I have a strong, supportive, and diverse community of friends.
- I'm no longer in therapy, although it is important to me that I can call my therapist for a tune-up if I need it. And I have done that a few times over the past several years.
- My children (now 10 and 12) are doing well. Their father and I have a cooperative parenting relationship. I feel I've been honest with them, and they understand a good deal about cults and power abuse.

- I feel I've been successful in taking that abusive experience and making it something useful, both to myself, but most importantly to others.

What Helped in The Third Stage

- Trying to keep a balance in life: family, work, vocational work, exercise, nature, culture.
- Continuing with my work in the cult-awareness field.
- Trying to have good closure with things. For example, when I quit working, say, on a specific volunteer project, making sure I ended in a positive and clear way.
- Enjoying a “be here now” mentality, which means learning to appreciate the moment.
- Working on projects where my skills and experience are valued.
- Maintaining a strong social circle with reciprocal relationships.

What Didn't Help

- Lapsing into despair about the lost years. For instance, questioning how I could go back to school, how would I ever “catch up.” I work to quiet those voices.
- Indulging feelings of isolation and lack of community. I still have to fight with myself about that, but also I see those as general social issues of our time, and I just have to join in the conversation about that.

Finally, I firmly believe that we have to keep telling our stories because it is in these stories that we will understand more and more about this issue. Primo Levi, an Italian writer and survivor of Auschwitz, has written much that is relevant to those of us interested in totalism and power abuse. I think often of the Yiddish proverb he uses in his book *The Periodic Table*: “Troubles overcome are good to tell.” That sounds about right.