

Letter to Former Cultic Group Members: Recovery in the Era of COVID-19

From: International Cultic Studies Association (mail@icsamail.com)

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A Message of Understanding and Hope from

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Dear Friends,

All of us have been severely impacted by the fear caused by the novel coronavirus. Many of us are dealing with ongoing anxiety and a feeling of helplessness when we're faced with a such a powerful threat, as this one, that we can't control. Those who have been traumatized in the past are particularly vulnerable to the anxiety caused by this situation. Past traumas are stirred up by present fears; and, when dealing with a new trauma, we can become lost in memories and fantasies that emanate from earlier traumas. We experience our memories of past situations as if they were a part of our present life and our reaction to these memories can undermine our ability to make the most of our lives in the present.

Probably one of the bravest actions that you ever took was to leave your totalitarian and fraudulent environment. While in the cult, you may have believed that your leader or the leader's doctrine would protect you from frightening things in the non-cult world. When you left, you may have felt that you were risking entry into a more unprotected environment. However, you had the courage to leave the cult despite these troublesome fears.

Since leaving, perhaps you've come to understand Steve Hassan's concept of phobia induction. This phobia induction was the cult leader's "insurance policy" to keep you from considering the fact that you would be better off without the cult.

In this stressful present situation, which might make you feel vulnerable, you may unconsciously yearn for that feeling of absolute protection that you once convinced yourself you had in the cult. Of course, examining the situation realistically, you recognize that cult members are not protected from the virus by their membership in the cult, but your logical mind doesn't always overcome the gut-level fear that situations like this one can evoke.

It might help to remind yourself that the leader, whom you were supposed to regard as a protective savior, dealt with his or her own feelings of insecurity and vulnerability by creating a false front of power and invincibility. (If the leader had not been so insecure, he or she would have tolerated disagreement and challenges from the cult's membership. Despite an outward shell of power, a bully is always a fearful coward who can't tolerate the thought that someone could be wiser, more spiritual, more popular, or more powerful.) By identifying with the leader's false shell of power and invulnerability, you may have believed that you didn't have to deal with the realities of a capricious and, in this case, dangerous universe.

Additionally, and unfortunately, many religious cult leaders also instilled fear into members by creating their version of the Apocalypse, Armageddon, Rapture, etc. In their representations of "end times," these leaders gave their own interpretations to events such as we are experiencing today. However, these were self-serving interpretations to scare and keep the members in line. Events such as our current one, while rare, have occurred before, and obviously none of them resulted in the end of the world. While the events

unfolding now might trigger reminders of leaders' end-times teachings, they are just as false as the majority of those teachings were.

Daniel Shaw, in his book *Traumatic Narcissism*, describes cult leaders as traumatizing narcissists, who take credit for good things but externalize blame for bad things, projecting the blame onto their followers. After leaving a cult, in frightening times, former members might feel a pull towards the fear and self-blame that they experienced while they were in the cult. This pull can occur because the world situation reminds them how they dealt with discomfort while in the cult.

You may unconsciously feel that a pandemic like the coronavirus is punishment for something that the world, or our nation, or society, or you did wrong. Since we are all imperfect human beings and not angels, all of us can find behaviors or thoughts that were far from perfect. You may want to consider Rabbi Harold Kushner's perception in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner suggests that God, like us, is troubled by the crises in the world. Rather than holding us responsible for the bad things that happen, Kushner believes that God's role is to support us during difficult times. If you don't believe in God, there still remains wisdom in this approach. The salient point is that we all can gain from support during difficult times: from loved ones, therapists, neighbors, or co-workers. Creating a community for ourselves helps us. Life is random and often unfair. Kushner urges us to get beyond the unanswerable question, "Why did this happen?" and instead to concentrate on the question that we can have more control over, "What can I do now that it's happened?"

People who do well in crises are the ones who take action on their own behalf and on behalf of others to gain some control over the situation. They might find it useful to regulate the powerful emotions that crises elicit by taking deep cleansing breaths and using grounding techniques when experiencing overwhelming anxiety. They might establish reassuring routines and eat and sleep at regular times. Some find it beneficial to take a break from the news if they find the news to be overwhelmingly upsetting. Others find that exercise helps, or a walk in the sunlight when possible. Some use this down time to involve themselves in creative pursuits such as art, music, or writing. Books and movies can provide needed breaks by allowing for temporarily escape into different worlds. When feeling isolated, some people reach out to others to receive solace from nurturing relationships or they might find satisfaction in offering help.

Living in this confined and scary world makes it difficult for all of us to be our best selves. This is a time to practice self-acceptance (instead of self-blame). Keep your sense of humor. Most of all, please remember, this frightening time will pass.

Keep safe and take care of yourselves!

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