

CULTS: The techniques of attraction

by Dina Lebo

"When you meet the friendliest people you have ever known, who introduce you to the most loving group of people you've ever encountered and you find the leader to be the most inspired, caring, compassionate and understanding person you've ever met and then you learn that the cause of the group is something you never dared hope could be accomplished, and all this sounds too good to be true . . . it probably is." (Jeanie Mills was a former cult member. She was murdered in 1985.)

Last week the Jewish Students Federation, the York Catholic Community and the office of student affairs hosted a series of lectures, demonstrations and films called "Mind Games 89: Pulling Your Own Strings." These events are part of an ongoing programme designed to increase awareness of deceptive recruitment practices and mind control techniques. These methods are often used by cult recruiters who find university campuses a rich spawning ground for potential candidates.

I hear some of you saying, "No, no it can't happen to me . . . I'm intelligent and aware and I would never get caught up in such an obvious con . . ." Be careful, it can happen to you, it can happen to anyone, according to Bob Fellows, magician, educator and one of the guest speakers at the two-day event.

Fellows explained that destructive cults are not composed of bumbling idiots stumbling through life.

He described the leaders of these organizations as smart businesspeople who know that all individuals go through periods in their lives when they are in transition and are more susceptible to suggestion and influence. They know that the university years are a time when a student may be new to a city, far from close family and a bit lonely, lost or unhappy.

They also know that students are, for the first time in their lives, embarking on their own personal journey of individualization and are idealistic, more emotionally open to change and receptive to new ideas. This unwittingly makes students perfect targets.

Check the following list for characteristics which may describe you:

- I am considered bright in most things.
- I am a curious person about the world around me.
- I have been a leader among my friends at school, in my youth group, and/or in extra-curricular activities.
- I have been a member of a group and consider myself a follower.

- I have moments when I doubt myself and my ability to succeed.
- I am afraid of the future from time to time.
- I am considered idealistic by parents and/or some of my friends.
- I enjoy being liked by those I like, and I enjoy receiving compliments from them.
- I sometimes like taking risks.

How many of the preceding statements did you check? According to Judy Israel, a psychologist and educator working out of Boston, if you circled at least three of these statements, you are a prime candidate for a cult. All that is missing is the right time, place and a cult recruiter. She explained that awareness is the key and that you don't have to be stupid to be taken in. In fact, she said, quite the opposite is usually true.

In their book *Kids and Cults*, Irvin Doress and Jack N. Porter discuss several reasons why cults are extremely appealing to a lot of people. The primary reason, they state, is the need to find a supportive family. Family life today can be a very trying series of conflicts and problems for many the home environment has become both painful and hurtful.

Cults can be seen as a surrogate family which provides a positive environment characterized by ego-support, non-belligerence and persuasion rather than negativity and browbeating.

Secondly, the authors believe we are living in an age of "spiritual searching" and when a cult comes along that offers complete

and definitive answers, it can be very tempting to jump right in and get caught up in the lifestyle of the people who have all the answers. Because of this unfulfilled need for family and the quest for answers, many people feel a constant and continuing sense of insecurity. Doress and Porter explain that cults often seem to be able to offer all the security, belonging and acceptance which may be missing from an individual's life.

Research findings have con-

- a religion that is totally different
- communal living vs. nuclear family
- spirituality vs. materialism
- austerity vs. extravagant spending
- a different culture or subculture
- a different set of customs and traditions
- a different set of attitudes
- a different set of clothing and hairstyle.

All, or some, of these choices mark the period of differentiation. They are all ways to detach oneself from parental values and develop a new and different set of values necessary for life as an adult. The need for adventure, achieving instant recognition and attention as well as idealism are also listed as contributing factors to the attractiveness of cults.

Follows emphasized that some groups are constructive and allow you to grow and be independent while others are destructive, manipulative and deplete your energy. He outlines some characteristics of destructive groups in his book *Easily Fooled*. He states that a group can be deviant or heretical in its beliefs and even be a cult without being destructive. But on the other hand, a group can also be extremely destructive without holding any particularly unusual

sively and inappropriately friendly, who have simple solutions to complex world problems or who invite you to join them for free meals, free lectures or isolated weekend workshops which have nebulous and undefined goals.

2. Exclusivity

A destructive group usually claims to have the only "right" answer to a specific question. In this kind of group you are pressured to change your beliefs as proof of personal commitment and progress. You are prohibited, discouraged or made to feel badly if you express doubt or hesitate to do something that you really don't want to do. The group generally speaks in terms of "we" or "they" where "we" are the exclusive possessors of the truth and cannot be questioned.

3. Psychological or Financial Exploitation

Destructive groups want all your time and money to the exclusion of all your other pursuits. Exploitation is carried out by extensive use of guilt and fear which, when induced by others, rarely leads to productive behavior.

4. Totalitarianism

Members are expected to think, feel and act in the manner prescribed by the group all of the time.

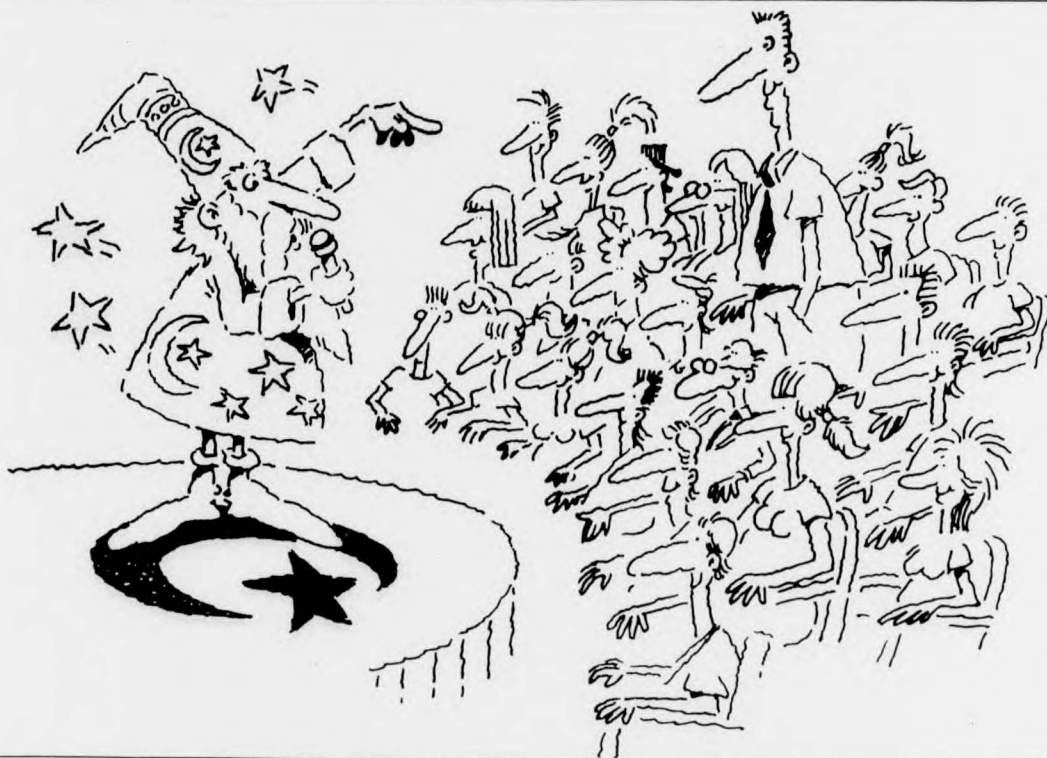
5. Psychological Damage to Members and Families

In general terms, destructive groups try to separate you from your past. Friends, family and all outside connections, not affiliated with the group itself, become very threatening to group control and influence.

friends, or discuss your thoughts with people you trust who are not in the group?

- Do they demand your entire life, without even small corners left belonging only to you?
- Is the group reluctant to accept you as you are? Is it essential for you to transform yourself into a totally new person and to suppress thoughts you previously believed acceptable?
- Does the group view all aspects of your former life as bad?
- Is it proper to deceive people for the sake of the group?
- Is it wrong to deviate from the teachings of the leader or the group, even in small ways? If you are to remain within the group, must you view the teacher as always right about everything? Do they make you feel guilty if you have doubts about their teachings?
- Is the group's teacher reputed to do miracles? Are they revealed only to the initiated?
- Are you uncomfortable with the group's attitudes to women?
- Are the rules for the group's leaders different from the rules for its followers?

According to Israel, breaking with your past in some significant way can be a healthy change for the better. Joining groups can help although all groups try to impose at least some values on their members. However, if you answered "yes" to more than a few questions on



and definitive answers, it can be very tempting to jump right in and get caught up in the lifestyle of the people who have all the answers. Because of this unfulfilled need for family and the quest for answers, many people feel a constant and continuing sense of insecurity. Doress and Porter explain that cults often seem to be able to offer all the security, belonging and acceptance which may be missing from an individual's life.

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beliefs. Psychologist Michael D. Langone has characterized a destructive group as one that employs any or all of the following tactics:

1. Manipulation and Deception

These techniques are used specifically in the recruitment practices for new members. Beware of someone who has a business proposition for you but won't tell you what it is before you attend one of their meetings. Also beware of people who are exces-

In the book *Cult and Consequences*, psychologist Dr. Richard Israel has created a checklist of questions that you should ask yourself before you join any group:

- In the group do you find yourself without enough time? Enough nourishment? Enough sleep?
- Does the group make it difficult to place phone calls, receive letters, visit with old

the checklist, you had better think again about what you are doing. You should be especially careful if you become interested when you are lonely, depressed or detached from your normal networks. You could be losing control of yourself to people who have their best interest in mind more than yours. Israel's advice to confused students is to continue to explore. "It's healthy, but try not to dig yourself into a deeper hole than you can climb out of."