F.A.Q.

The following are the general questions that we most often receive.

Despite the often-expressed desire to find simple answers, one must consider that the complexity and specificity of each situation makes it impossible to respond in a clear and consistent manner.

For more information, do not hesitate to contact us. You may also consult our **selected bibliography** or our **links** to other support or informational resources.

What is a cult?

There is no consensus on a definition of the term "cult".

Over time, **many of the definitions proposed to define the meaning of a cult have been derived from other concepts, such as "religion" or "church".** The term is sometimes used to describe a group of people who share the same doctrine or the same ideology (religious or otherwise). It can also be used to describe a group that has broken away from a more traditional organization or institution which generally enjoys greater social acceptance or credibility because of its longevity.

The notion of cult acquired a **negative connotation** after tragedies, notably those of the Manson family in the 1960s, Jonestown in 1978, Roch "Moïse" Thériault in the 80s and the order of the Solar Temple, Waco and Aum Shinrikyo in the 90s. Thus, in the collective imagination and in certain fields of research, the term has since been often **associated with victimization**: exploitation, manipulation, abuse of power or trust, physical and/or sexual abuse, etc.

The ambiguity of the term cult places several limits on the quest to understand different groups or phenomena. As a result, some researchers prefer using terms less restrictive and less prone to stigmatization such as: minority or marginal groups, new religious movements, etc. For others, the adjective cultic also has a pejorative meaning when used in expressions such as "cultic aberrations" or "cultic phenomena" as it relates to particular practices or contexts.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of language and thinking in black and white, Info-Cult recommends using these terminologies with caution, and paying particular attention to the following factors:

· general functioning and evolution of a group;
· relationships between its members;

· power dynamics within the group;

· roles or status assigned to members in the group;

· degree of involvement requested or required.

Is this group a cult?

First, ask yourself about your goals: what is the answer you want to hear? If you were told that this group was not a "cult", how would this be useful to you?

For different reasons, **Info-Cult does not keep a list or directory of groups that can be considered "cults".** Firstly, because a large number of groups of different sizes and vocations (religious, spiritual, political, personal growth, marketing, etc.) are active in our societies. Secondly, the absence of a group on such a list could imply that it is acceptable or harmless, while, on the other hand, its presence on such a list could imply that it is unacceptable or dangerous. Finally, as mentioned in the previous section, **the terms "cult" or "cultic" offer little information about a group, because this type of labeling does not consider the many experiences one might have,** and the factors specific to each situation.

An acquaintance goes to OR is part of a group that I believe to be a "cult". Should I worry? What stance should I take?

The answer to this question depends on numerous factors, and the wide variety of situations makes it preferable to avoid quick judgements and generalizations, and not to forget that each situation is unique (individual, group, family, etc.).

To begin with, Info-Cult suggests you ask yourself about your concerns with regard to:

· the group*;
. the person who may appear vulnerable to you;
· the relation you have with this person.

Info-Cult also recommends the following:

· do not jump too quickly to conclusions;
· learn about the group in question from different sources in order to obtain a variety of perspectives;
· avoid attributing each behavior or attitude of your loved one to their group;
· consider that your loved one is not a helpless victim, because, although the effect of the group may be powerful, it is not "all-powerful";
· keep your mind open, as well as your door and your phone;
·seek support from others who have gone through similar experiences.

Consider also that the group may seem strange to you because of certain practices or beliefs that are unfamiliar or because of uncommon behaviors or ways of dressing.

Can a group be dangerous or damaging to its members?

First and foremost, it is important to consider that a group may be seen as "extreme" or "radical" without necessarily being harmful or dangerous to its members. What's more, some people may have a *positive* experience in a group whose public perception is mostly unfavorable. Conversely, others may have a *negative* experience in a group that is perceived by the public as mostly positive. Therefore, **two people in the same group can have very different experiences**: the first may have a very enriching experience while the second may have an experience of control or victimization.

One must also consider that, like their members, the various groups or movements present in our society are part of a *continuum*. Depending on different factors (location, time, leadership, etc.), these groups or movements can evolve in different ways, particularly with regard to:

· recruitment strategies;
· commitment required of its members;
· openness to the outside world;
· issues of money, schooling, etc.

That being said, certain groups (at different places or moments in their history) can place their members in situations of victimization. However, **groups that have become dangerous are very small in number.**

Identifying risks that may be present within a group requires a thorough analysis for which it is recommended to consult a variety of sources.

Here is a partial list of risks:

Financial Risks

· Fraud;

· Unreasonably excessive financial contributions;

· Unpaid work.

Risks to Physical Safety

· Physical violence or punishment;

· Deprivation of vital needs (food, water, sleep, etc.);

· Limited access to one or more medical interventions;

· Sexual violence.

Risks to Psychological Integrity

· Denigration or attack on self-esteem;

· Limited access to information;

· Limited access to education or education not in accordance with government standards;

· Discrimination (gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.).

How to assess a group's risk potential?

Here is a non-exhaustive list of questions that can help to better understand and evaluate a group, with regards to its structure and orientations:

Leadership:

Who holds power in the group?

How is power distributed within the group?

What are the powers of the leader(s)?

What is the training of the leader or founder?

What is the background of the leader or founder?

How are decisions made about rules and principles?

The group:

· Is the group controversial? If yes, why?

· How does the group view society and the outside world?

· What are the group's concerns (money, purity, proselytism, etc.)?

· What are the group's demands or requirements of its members?

· What are the rules regarding what is allowed to read, listen to, watch, wear, etc.?

Critical thinking:

· Is it permissible to ask critical questions within the group? If yes, how is it perceived?

· Are disagreements tolerated within the group?

· Are there members or former members who have voiced criticisms of their group? If yes, what were these criticisms?

Involvement of its members:

· In general, how many hours per week does a member devote to the group or group activities?

· Are there any fees related to registration or membership in the group?

· Does the member have to give part of his salary to the group?

· Is the member asked to work for the group? If yes, what are the working conditions?

Interpersonal Relations:

· What is the nature of the relationship between the leader(s) and the followers?

· What is the nature of the relationship between members (including family and friends)?

· What is the nature of the relationship between members and non-members (including family and friends)?

Children:

· How are children perceived in the group?

· Are children in contact or allowed to be in contact with non-members (both children and adults)?

· Does the child attend public/private school or the group's school?

· Is the child home-schooled?

· Is the child able to receive medical care from the public health service?

Health:

· What is the group's perspective on certain traditional medical practices or treatments (such as vaccines, in particular)?

· Do the group members have access to public health care services?

· Does the group have its own health practices?

Women:

· How are they perceived in the group?

· What is their role?

· Is power accessible to them? If so, in what form (s) and under which condition (s)?

Intimate Relations:

· How does the group view sexuality?

· What's the group's point of view on the different sexual orientations and gender identities?

· How is the choice of a partner or spouse made within the group?

How and why does an individual come to join such groups or embrace such beliefs or theories?

Some people consider that individuals who become involved in a group perceived as "cultic" or who embrace certain marginal beliefs, theories or ideas correspond to a "typical profile". These people are then considered to be *impressionable, naive, gullible, irrational, undereducated, docile, submissive*, etc.

In fact, anyone can join a group or embrace a given belief during their lifetime. However, there are a number of circumstances that *may* influence or facilitate the process of belonging to a group, including when the individual:

· goes through a period of hardships (separation, illness, addiction, bereavement, financial difficulties, etc.), transition or questioning;

·perceives his lifestyle as "unhealthy";

·feels a lack of interpersonal relationships (feeling isolated);

· consider himself in opposition to dominant discourses or values;

· seeks to flourish in society;

· is searching for meaning, structure, social environment, etc.

Furthermore, although sudden "conversion" experiences or radical transformations may occur, a person's adherence to a belief system or group is often the result of a broader journey and search for meaning. This process may lead a person to adopt a "new" identity that is consistent with the values and beliefs of the group. Thus, what might be associated with "brainwashing" by some people, or "mind-control" techniques, may correspond to a more complex phenomenon.

What are the reasons why an individual may leave a group?

Some people will spend their entire lives in a group, while others will leave on their own or will be forced to leave, for one reason or another. The reasons for leaving a group are varied. For example, the person might:

· no longer need the group;

· get bored or feel exhausted because of the group's demands;

· no longer find the group's values compatible with his goals in life;

· wish to have more freedom;

. question himself because of changes (ideological, doctrinal, structural, etc.) that took place within the group;

· develop doubts about the leadership, beliefs or practices;

· no longer believe, following predictions that do not come true;

· begin to view the group with a critical eye;

· have developed some personality conflicts with other members of the group;

·have been physically or emotionally abused;

· have been influenced, etc.

How can I influence or help a loved one to leave his group or to abandon his beliefs?

Firstly, it is important to ask yourself why you want your loved one to leave his group or give up his beliefs.

Secondly, while your intentions are understandable, you should know that **trying to convince someone against his will can be difficult and may even create a counter-reaction to what you are seeking.**

In this respect, comparisons can be made between situations of dependency (drugs, alcohol, etc.) and group phenomena. Sometimes, a person with addiction problems has to reach a certain limit before considering taking steps to overcome his addiction. This stage, where the person considers his situation to be "problematic", represents a pivotal moment in his journey. Similarly, a person must cross a threshold before he considers leaving a group voluntarily or abandoning certain beliefs that, in some cases, may have meant a great deal to them. However, the time required to reach this point may vary and some people will never leave their group for various reasons (family, job, education, etc.) or because they thrive there and do not see themselves embrace another lifestyle.

Advice for families and loved ones:

· You may have an influence on a loved one, but remember that the loved one may remain in the group forever. It is therefore important to ask yourself what kind of relationship you would like to have with him.
· If possible, keep the relationship alive and try to improve it.
· Even if the situation may change, do not underestimate the fact that your loved one may appreciate his group or some of its aspects… whether or not you agree.

· Be open, tolerant and attentive.

· If the situation permits, and you feel comfortable, be curious about his group, its world view, etc.

· By creating a climate of trust, caring and acceptance, your loved one is more likely to come to you when it is the right time for him.

· In light of the fact that some groups can be demanding with their members, proposing different activities could help your loved one open up to new interests or new relationships. At the same time, it enables the transition away from the group to begin gradually while creating a "welcoming environment". In the meantime, asking open-ended questions may stimulate reflection. Be mindful of the context and be careful not to rush the person.

In the event that your loved one leaves his group it would be understandable for you to feel some relief. However, the experience of leaving a group can be difficult, and so the resolution of your problems might coincide with *new* problems arising for your loved one. While a variety of support resources are available, the support network of family and friends often plays a critical role in the person's reintegration into society.

What to do when communicating with a loved one is difficult?

There have been many testimonials from family and friends whose loved ones have cut ties with them by blocking them on their phone or on social media, so that they no longer have to deal with being confronted. To avoid such situations, it is preferable to avoid discussions that try to convince by reasoning (logical, ideological, theological, etc.), because, in addition to being generally ineffective, these discussions may lead to further polarization of viewpoints. Others might consider giving an ultimatum to their loved one to leave their group or his beliefs. However, it is advisable to **keep communication open by highlighting what both sides have in common.** When possible, this may allow for:

· greater tolerance for divergent points of view;
· more empathy, consideration and acceptance;
· broadening one's perspectives and add nuance to certain deep convictions;
· adopting and developing a critical mindset;
· positioning oneself as a source of trust, support and comfort if your loved one challenges the group or its beliefs.

Nonetheless, any communication between people presupposes a minimum of trust, openness and good faith. When the bond of trust weakens, it may be wise to assess whether stepping back for a moment could be beneficial, because it is good to be open-minded, but not to the point of losing your mind! Finally, it is also recommended to carefully weigh the pros and cons of such a decision, as it is important that you are comfortable with the consequences.

How to help a loved one who no longer is part of his group?

The immediate circle of friends and family can assist in the recovery of a loved one in his post-group experience. This process, however, requires patience, openness and understanding, as the group may continue to exert influence on the person for some time. Although the period of adaptation outside the group can be done more quickly in some cases, former members may experience difficulties or encounter obstacles following their departure:

·Fears, traumas, nightmares, etc.;

. Guilt, shame, etc.;

· Loss of reference points, identity crisis or loss of confidence;

· Feeling of aversion or mistrust towards authority figures;

· Feeling isolated;

. Inadequate or non-existent social network;

· Difficulty accessing specialized professional services because of cost and scarcity of such services;

· Health problems (physical or mental);

· Economic insecurity;

· Lack of education or skills (linguistic, social, etc.).

Info-Cult encourages former members and their families to seek additional professional support to better address these challenges.

Several professional resources are available. Info-Cult can help identify the type of support needed, based on an overall assessment of the individual's experience.

Here are some questions to consider:

· What group did the loved one belong to?

· How was the exit from the group carried out (expulsion, voluntary departure, following an intervention, etc.)?

· Was he a victim of abuse of any kind?

· What is his economic status? health status?

· What is the status of his family and social relationships?

· Did he join this group or did he always live in the group?

Regarding this last question, it is important to consider that the experience of leaving a group can vary greatly. For example, those who were born or raised in a group have no previous identity, unlike those who joined a group when they were older.

How do I assess whether the group I want to join meets my needs?

Take the time to carefully research the group in question;

Do not hesitate to ask questions and seek information from a variety of sources, including:

· current members of the group;

· former members;

· people who have studied or who know the group;

·information centers or research related to cultic phenomena, groups or new religious movements.

When a group solicits a contribution (financial or otherwise), how can we be sure that it will actually serve the cause or the activities advertised?

Before giving anything to anyone, Info-Cult recommends that you:

· don't rush into anything;
· ask questions, research and inquire from multiple sources*;
· ensure the legal existence of the organization in question, and determine whether the contributions are actually used for the cases or activities publicized;
· keep in mind that groups, organizations and their causes may change over time.

Finally, if generosity is a virtue, so is prudence. It is therefore a question of giving with one's heart as well as with one's head!

*The authorities or certain organizations may be able to provide information on groups and individuals seeking financial contributions. For residents of Quebec and Canada, it is possible to find them on [Liste des organismes de bienfaisance](#) in Canada or on [Registraire des entreprises](#) in Quebec.

A group is looking to organize an event in my institution or establishment, what should I do?

Info-Cult first suggests considering a general rental policy that applies to all.

Before deciding to rent a space to a specific group, association or individual, it may be a good idea to consult a professional to add a contractual clause that clarifies the business relationship in order to avoid misunderstandings and anything that could harm the image and public recognition of your institution.

For example:

*In order to avoid any confusion with the activities of (**Name of Institution**), I (**the undersigned**) undertake that the mention of (**Name of Institution**) does not appear in the announcement of the event or on all promotional materials (posters, leaflets and others). However, the (**Name of institution**) may be mentioned to indicate where the event is taking place by including the name of the building and specifying the location of the room, but it must appear in the background and in smaller characters than those of the announcement itself.*

Your institution may also ask tenants to include the following in their promotional materials:

*(**Name of institution**) is not connected to the organization of this event and has only rented the space for the use of this individual or group*

What are the public policies regarding "cults" or cultic phenomena?

Generally speaking, governments tend to be quite tolerant of the different groups at work in so-called democratic and pluralistic societies. With regard to certain issues related to cultic phenomena, interventions involving the use of force (police, military, etc.) are very rare, since the majority of situations involve adults and consenting persons.

Nevertheless, the government's position and response to cultic phenomena can vary depending on a multitude of factors:

· degree of tolerance of society towards the diversity, visibility of certain groups (religious or other);
· usual manner of government intervention;
· degree of openness to legislating or strengthening existing policies or laws framework measures or already existing laws;
· legal tradition(s) at work;
· political, cultural and historical context (tragic events related that have occurred in the country and are related to certain groups, etc.);
· presence or absence of a state religion;
· relations between religious institutions and government*;
· funding or privileges (if applicable) granted to certain groups (religious or other);
· the activism of different pressure groups and media coverage.

Different models can be advocated here and there depending on the interpretation and orientation of certain principles, such as:

·*respect for freedom of conscience and religion (the right to believe or not to believe);*
·*equal treatment of citizens (regardless of their opinions or beliefs);*
·*state neutrality (in fact and/or in appearance);*
·*separation of political and religious powers.*