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ICSA Recovery Workshops: The Colorado Model

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For the past sixteen years, ICSA has been developing a brief, time-limited, yet comprehensive group model for cult recovery, which we call the Colorado Model because it was developed and refined in that state. This model consists of weekend workshops that are

open to former members of destructive cults who have applied and been screened for their compatibility for attendance. The Colorado Model differs from other workshops in its strong emphasis on psycho-education and its use of former member facilitators who are mental health professionals. The ex-member facilitator team, equipped with the important credentials of cult experience and clinical training, models healthy cult recovery and often instills hope for those struggling with cult trauma.

The Colorado Model is similar to the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM). This approach uses an educational and supportive, skill-building curriculum that allows members to understand and acknowledge the impact of abuse while focusing their energies on developing techniques for mastery and enhancing their existing strengths for coping with current life events (Harris & Fallot, 2002). The Colorado Model adapts this approach to unique workshops that address the needs of former cult members.

The Evolution of the Colorado Model

The early recovery workshops offered by American Family Foundation (now International Cultic Studies Association [ICSA]) were held in conjunction with their Annual Meetings at Stony Point Conference Center (NY) and consisted of two tracks. Track 1, "Mini-Exit Counseling," was for those former members of cultic groups who had not had a family intervention or were recently exited from their groups. Track 2, "Recovery," was for those who were out of their groups for longer periods of time or who needed some follow-up work to an intervention. The first track consisted of psycho-education that presented information about how the thought-reform programs used in cults affected individuals in the group. The second track addressed recovery issues, such as coping with triggers, anxiety and decision-making, anger, grief, and re-establishing trust in oneself and others. The facilitators of the first track were exit counselors who volunteered their time and knowledge. The second-track facilitators were, for the most part, therapists associated with AFF. Dr. Paul Martin, using a model that he developed at Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center, gave The Overview of the Recovery Process, which opened the workshop for both tracks.

When Carol Giambalvo became AFF's Director of Recovery Programs in 1993, the Colorado Model began to be developed, building on AFF's first workshop at Stony Point in 1992. The framework for the workshop has always been an integration of Dr. Robert Lifton's criteria for a thought-reform program, and the many lectures and articles (and, later, books) of Dr. Margaret Singer, who stressed the importance of psycho-education in recovery—that is, of ex-members being able to understand and label the techniques and influences used in a cultic group and their effects on individuals. When former members begin to understand what was done to cause their changes in personality, their way of viewing reality, and their complete dedication to the goals of the group/leader, they are able to disengage from the cult mind-set and feel empowered. The workshops were never group therapy; they were simply psycho-education offered in a safe environment by people who understood, most of whom had gone through the recovery process themselves, and who shared their own stories when appropriate.

The first Colorado workshops in 1994–95 were similar in structure to the ones held in New York. One difference was that, in Colorado, we found a wealth of therapists who were also former cult members. We also noticed that more people were attending who had been able to find helpful information on the Internet, and fewer people were leaving a group after having family interventions. It was no longer necessary to devote an entire track to describe the effects of a thought-reform program. We also noted a difference in the attendees' response to facilitators who were both former members and therapists. Participants commented on how empowered they felt to find people who understood them and had experiences so similar to their own and were willing to share. In particular, attendees over the years have commented again and again that it was especially comforting to have

therapists who were not only there to teach them, but there to share their own experiences, when appropriate.

In part, we became aware of these feelings because in Colorado we began to use the last workshop session for comments and feedback from attendees. This session proved to be invaluable in developing and refining a sequence of sessions that were more beneficial to participants. In Colorado, we also initiated a facilitators' meeting after the termination of the workshop to discuss what we had observed and to make suggestions about modifications to the program. Improvements to the program were made as a result, and their positive effect has resulted in a workshop venue that meets participants' needs and allows for an increasing intensity of sharing and trust.

As the model evolved, Giambalvo revised the opening session on the Overview of Recovery, which describes step-by-step the techniques used to effect changes in cult members. She integrated Dr. Paul Martin's overview model, Singer's work, Lifton's thought-reform model, and Cialdini's techniques of influence (Cialdini, 1984) to walk participants through what was happening to them during recruitment and indoctrination in the group. Explaining how these techniques were used to manipulate them is important because former members need to understand that involvement in cults is not about personal defects. In fact, groups intentionally tend to use and abuse their members' talents, interests, and strengths for the group's/leader's benefit, crushing those aspects of members' selves that are not useful to the aims of the leader and the group. While this presentation is informative, it also is presented interactively. Flip charts are used to note participants' experiences, and examples, questions, and comments are encouraged. The process of induced change is the format for the topics of the following agenda items:

- How did they change your view of reality?
- How did they mold your personality into one useful to the group's agenda?
- How did they alter your consciousness in order to produce an experience, and then reinterpret it for you to lead you to conclude that this is *the only truth*?
- How did they discredit your other sources of feedback and make you more dependent upon the group?
- How did they break down your healthy boundaries between you and the rest of the group?
- How did they construct unhealthy boundaries between you and the outside world?
- How did they disable your ability to question and think critically?
- How did they turn you against your own inner voice?
- How did they emphasize trusting only them and then abuse that trust?
- How did they encourage you to do things you never would have done and to participate in doing this to other members of the group?
- How is it affecting you today?

Another piece of psycho-education on thought reform from the early workshop—i.e., dealing with triggers—came to be discussed in a session on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We also added a session on Critical Thinking and its importance in the recovery process.

Over time, we have also placed more emphasis on the fact that there is no cookie-cutter approach to recovery. Everyone's experience in a group is similar but different, and one's recovery has to do with many factors in a former member's experience as well as the individual's own vulnerabilities at the time of recruitment.

Another factor over the years that has effected a change in the content and structure of the workshop is that more and more people who were born and/or raised in cultic groups began attending our workshops, and some of the information presented was not addressing their needs. We listened to attendees and we discussed their needs with the leadership of ICSA. With the help of a grant, we were able to research and develop a special workshop for

Second Generation Adults (SGAs). Then we added to the facilitator team two SGAs whose graduate theses focused on treatment of this population. With these additional facilitators, we were also able to add a second track to our Colorado workshops for Second Generation Adults.

Over time, we also discovered that the workshop venue, although it usually is similar every year in content, still attracts participants to repeat attendance. Their feedback has been that each year they are able to hear and deal with issues at different levels. The participants are also setting up a support network for themselves with other participants, which is invaluable.

The Colorado Model Today

The team of facilitators interacts respectfully with participants and offers the safety that former members require to be able to do the work of the workshop. Team members are quick to respond without being intrusive when and if participants seem to be struggling. They make themselves available at any time during the weekend if a participant wants someone to talk to. Until approximately five years ago, these volunteers even paid their own tuition and travel expenses. They are committed to this work, and it is through their selfless dedication and team effort that the model has been developed.

Because creating a safe environment to do cult recovery work is the first priority of these workshops, participants learn to trust the facilitators and the group process. As a result, they begin to open up and reveal only those parts of their stories that they feel comfortable sharing. There is no pressure to disclose, and even a caveat that full confidentiality from the other participants cannot be guaranteed. Once former members feel safe and have achieved some stability, they begin to feel empowered to take more control of their lives.

The following is the published agenda for the Colorado Model (SGA breakouts have the same topic):

- Welcome and Introductions
- Overview of the Recovery Process (SGA breakout)
- Critical Thinking
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, with section on Triggers
- Dealing with Anger and Grief (SGA breakout)
- Re-Inventing Yourself (breakout "Inventing Yourself" for SGAs)
- Boundaries: Re-establishing Trust
- Relationships and Intimacy
- Open Discussion
- Wrap-up and Feedback

Participants are given a packet of information, including articles on most of the topics presented, worksheets, and suggested reading lists. This serves as backup information for their reference and research. Facilitators also give handouts during their sessions. Documentation is important for participants' ongoing work. Some participants have indicated that the handouts and packets are very helpful to give to their loved ones so they can better understand their recovery process.

Some participants have had a loved one accompany them to the workshop. The loved ones do not participate, but are there for support. One of the facilitators also is available to those support people by presenting them with an overview of the recovery process.

It is important to understand the challenges former members face when registering and preparing for their first attendance at a workshop. These individuals have had their trust abused and have found the agenda of a group to be entirely different from what they thought they were becoming a part of. Yet, here they are: trusting an organization and

going to a workshop where they do not know anyone there. Doing this, unsurprisingly, produces anxiety and demands a lot of courage from most participants. The facilitator team members make themselves available by telephone or email if a person wants to share concerns or ask questions; but even then, taking the step to attend is a challenge for former members. And this is the reason that so many remarks have been made about how participants cherish the safety and the supportive, rather than challenging, nature of the facilitators.

The Colorado Model of cult recovery helps to foster the process of safety, stabilization, and empowerment through careful exploration of the following topics.

Overview

ICSA'S workshops begin with introductions of the participants and facilitators and an extensive Overview of Cult Recovery. The presenter describes the context of cult trauma by defining destructive cults and explaining cult recruitment and Lifton's criteria for a thought-reform program. The material is presented as an informal lecture, and group participation is encouraged. In fact, facilitators often ask the participants many 'how' questions, such as How did this work in your group? How did you handle this?

Critical Thinking

Issues with Critical Thinking follow the Cult Recovery Overview. Here, psycho-education and cognitive restructuring are used to help survivors understand how their ability to think critically was systematically undermined while they were in the cult. Defining and discussing critical thinking helps ex-members understand the rigid and over-generalized negative thinking that was imposed on them. Facilitators often challenge the former members' perspectives, encouraging them to develop new interpretations of their experience and practice different ways of thinking.

PTSD

The next session focuses on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and how to cope when they are triggered by reminders of the trauma. Understanding what PTSD is and how the symptoms evolved is helpful to them in gaining control of their bodies and minds. This structured cognitive approach encourages survivors to recount specific aspects of their cult trauma, the impact of the events, their responses, and coping methods. Exposure is contained and brief, with the facilitators' redirection to specific recovery-skill goals when necessary. Learning about PTSD in this way helps survivors understand that most of their reactions were normal responses to an abnormal (cult) environment.

Anger and Grief

Dealing with Anger and Grief follows this trauma session; here, concepts are defined, contexts described, and feelings processed. Validation of these important feelings is healing and stabilizing for participants when presented in this structured and responsive format. Ex-members are asked to compare how they handled these emotions while in the cult and how they manage them today.

Reinventing Yourself

Following an important two-hour break after Anger and Grief, the Reinventing Yourself session begins with a more cognitive approach. Deconstructing and rebuilding one's identity is discussed and processed. Brainstorming and problem solving helps participants increase self-awareness and accuracy in defining themselves and others.

Boundaries: Recognition and Repair

Identities continue to be solidified in the Boundaries: Recognition and Repair session. Here, cult survivors learn what boundaries are, why they are confused about boundaries, how cults manipulate boundaries, and how to begin to define and protect their boundaries.

Relationships and Intimacy

Stabilizing boundaries is an important stepping stone to Relationships and Intimacy. This final session addresses the impact of the cult's interference in many of the former members' significant relationships, and also presents models of healthy mutual relationships. The group members often process their relationship failures and sometimes their successes. The focus is on understanding what happened in the cult, accepting where they are now, and identifying tools to improve their relationships tomorrow.

Play

One last important piece of the Colorado Model focuses on the healing power of play. The model sets aside time on Saturday night for those who want to join in on group fun. "A truly healing environment must have room for light-heartedness, spontaneity, laughter, joking, goofing off, and general silliness" (Williams & Sommer, 1994, p. 485). Allowing time for facilitators and participants to play games or simply enjoy each other's company usually increases the feeling of safety for participants. Game night is well attended and well received. In fact, it often helps the group become more cohesive, which may bring the next day's workshops to another level.

Wrap Up

The Colorado Model of cult recovery wraps up with an open discussion of loose ends from any session, as well as feedback about the entire weekend. Participants are also asked to fill out a workshop evaluation form, which the facilitators use to inform changes for the next recovery workshop.

Summary

Several techniques and modalities of dynamic and interactive group treatment are used in the workshop sessions described above. Psycho-education is the communication of psychological concepts in an educational framework that employs lecture and discussion. Through cognitive restructuring, participants are encouraged to re-evaluate negative schemas about themselves and others, and consider new worldviews and interpretations of their cult experience. Contained exposure focuses on participants processing only manageable pieces of their trauma narrative and how they have responded. Such exposure is usually brief and then redirected by the facilitators into specific recovery-skill goals. Skills training occurs throughout the weekend, covering such domains as self-soothing, assertiveness training, and emotional modulation. Lastly, activities to enhance and sustain peer support helps to foster safety, stabilization, and empowerment in cult survivors.

Why the Colorado Model Works

With Margaret Singer's invaluable insights, Robert Lifton's brilliant framework, and ICSA's ongoing commitment to cult recovery, the Colorado Model has evolved into a unique and useful mode of cult trauma treatment. The small group size of twelve to twenty-four participants allows great flexibility and responsiveness. The Second Generation Adults track was created at the request of those former members raised in cults who didn't *join* their cult, who were angry and sad *for different reasons*, and who struggle with identity issues *in a more profound way* than those who entered cults in their adulthood. ICSA takes cult survivors' feedback seriously and regularly incorporates their suggestions into the workshops.

Listening to each other’s stories and reflecting on the commonality of their experiences brings the group members together in a profound way. Empathy and acceptance provide a powerful antidote to feelings of shame, alienation, and loneliness, as survivors learn that other *normal* people have gotten involved in destructive groups and struggle in similar ways. Like support groups, these workshops provide a useful means for participants to begin reducing social isolation, create an opportunity for them to experience contact with others in a safe and structured context, and give them help in facing the many ongoing symptoms, stressors, and problems related to the traumatic experience (Ruzek, Young, & Walser, 2003).

The cognitive and educational focus of the Colorado Model helps former members develop understanding of the larger context of their cult trauma more quickly than traditional psychotherapy does. Participants are given a comprehensive psychosocial framework within which to evaluate their cult experience. For instance, they learn in the first session how they were recruited, why they stayed, and the impact this has on their lives today. This cognitive focus allows them to stay more grounded to process their experiences with the comfort and support of the facilitators and the group. Dealing with cult trauma using critical thinking and cognitive restructuring is more accessible to more survivors at different stages of cult recovery in this context. Focusing on the participants’ strengths and how to build skills is more motivating and empowering for participants while it helps them manage their anxiety, so they may continue to process different aspects of their trauma.

ICSA’S Colorado Model is structured and carefully sequenced. Each workshop builds on the previous one and carries the group through the critical recovery issues identified by Dr. Singer.

The order of the workshops that has evolved also mimics Judith Herman’s Stages of Recovery (1997):

Colorado Model	Trauma & Recovery
Overview of Cult Recovery Critical Thinking PTSD and Triggers	Establish Safety
Anger and Grief Inventing/Reinventing Yourself	Remembrance and Mourning
Boundaries: Recognition and Repair Relationships and Intimacy	Reconnection

As Dr. Herman learned, this progression through recovery is necessary and important.

Another critical reason for the Colorado Model’s success is the trained facilitator team comprised of former members who are mental health professionals. Their personal and professional experience, with active leadership and healthy modeling, helps to create a safe environment more quickly. They are in a unique position to show others how to take care of one’s self, how to adapt to the world, how to learn to trust one’s judgment again, and how to begin to trust others. The resiliency and cohesion of the facilitator team inspires participants to do this work and feel empowered to create a new life after the cult.

ICSA helps to set the stage for cult recovery to occur, but nothing is possible without the will of the individual survivor and the strength of the group. Every year, the facilitator team

has encouraged each group of attendees to establish some identity, cohesion, and trust. Since most survivors were harmed in a group context, it is extremely helpful for them to see how healthy group dynamics work. Members support each other by listening to their stories and understanding where they have been, as well as where they are today. They learn to connect and collaborate and sometimes challenge the facilitators or each other in appropriate ways.

- The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience.
- Trauma isolates; the group recreates a sense of belonging.
- Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms.
- Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her.
- Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (Herman, 1997, p. 214)

ICSA'S Colorado Model provides a unique venue for cult recovery in a group context. The small group size, cognitive and educational focus, experienced facilitator team, and encouragement of group solidarity appeals to many cult survivors at different stages of recovery. It is comprehensive and carefully designed to increase the speed of recovery to those courageous enough to deal with the after-effects of cult involvement.

Over the years, there have been relatively few changes in facilitators. When we have added facilitators to the team, it has been done slowly and only after we have observed the response of team candidates to the process of healing and recovery within the workshops. With the possibility of few exceptions, we feel strongly that facilitators who are former members of cultic groups and are mental health professionals are best able to meet the needs of participants. We are open to adding new facilitators to the team and expect the person wishing to join the team to attend at least one recent workshop as a participant. It is very important that facilitators have dealt with their own cult trauma before they help others. We have developed a mentorship program for those who so desire. Our approach to the Mentorship Program for mental health professionals who apply to become facilitators has been informed by the Special Report: Training to Help Traumatized Populations (Barsalou, 2001).

Since our recovery weekends work only when the attendees feel safe, we have implemented two cardinal rules for the workshop: 1) No one may attend who is not a former member of a cultic group; and 2) no audio or video taping is permitted. As much as we understand that it would be extremely helpful for a mental health professional to attend and observe, we have to put the safety of the participants first. We have regularly asked the question of participants: Would you feel okay if we had therapists attend who are not former members? The response they have given has consistently been that they would feel as though they were under a microscope and wouldn't feel comfortable sharing in any depth.

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