

Surviving Spiritual Abuse

By M.E. Hagaman



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Truth Congregation*

Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. - John 17:17

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Web site note: *This article is being made available as an informational source on the subject of spiritual abuse. We have had no contact with the author M. E. Hagemann, neither is the author affiliated with us in any way. Those of us who have experienced spiritual abuse in the past were greatly moved by this article. It specifically deals with abuse in the charismatic movement but has striking application in all cases of spiritual abuse. We republish the article for the benefit of those who have suffered from spiritual abuse in the hope that they will receive help and comfort in their time of need. Any changes which we made to the text have been shown in brackets. Those changes reflect our doctrinal differences with the author in regard to the Sacred Names of Yahweh and Yahshua and in the use of the term church verses congregation. In no way do these changes alter the material presented in this article.*

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(*Note* Sacred Names inserted by YPTC)

Understanding Spiritual Abuse By M.E. Hagemann

Prologue

Ezekiel 34:1 And the word of [Yahweh] came unto me, saying, 2 Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith [Yahweh] unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? 3 Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. 4 The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them. 5 And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. 6 My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them. 7 Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of [Yahweh]; 8 As I live, saith [Yahweh], surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock; 9 Therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of [Yahweh]; 10 Thus saith [Yahweh]; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them. 11 For thus saith [Yahweh]; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out.

For our purposes, it is enough to state that spiritual abuse is "the misuse of power, position and influence for the personal gain or egotistical needs of the leader or leaders of an organization or a movement". There are many excellent books that have been written on this subject. Spiritual abuse, rooted in hyper authoritarianism is not a new phenomenon, it has been a part of religious life for centuries and elements of spiritual abuse can be found across the entire spectrum of Christian and quasi-Christian faith groups. Lately, it seems that spiritual abuse is becoming more common in Charismatic [congregations] churches.

Spiritual abuse **is always about the misuse of power and authority**. We need to make it emphatically clear, from the beginning, that [Yahweh] is an [Elohim] of order and that within the [congregation] there has to be a healthy (mutual) submission between [congregation] members and the authority that [Yahweh] raises up. Having said that, it is a disturbing fact that authoritarianism and power posturing is evident in many [congregations] churches. There are two reasons why it is so disturbingly common in charismatic groups.

The first is that flimsily constructed and often unbiblical teachings on authority are popular and circulate within the charismatic movement where they are seized upon by “leaders” who would seek to establish themselves as “legitimate” spiritual authorities. We must not underestimate the power of these teachings. Most originate out of America and range from the views of Dr. Mark T. Barclay who would label familiarity between a pastor and his [congregation] church as “sin”; to the doctrine of “fathering” that holds sway in many charismatic [congregations] churches. The fathering doctrine is based on a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 4:15 *“Even though you have ten thousand guardians in [Messiah], you do not have many fathers, for in [Messiah Yahshua] I became your father through the [good news]”*. Upon this simple description of the founding relationship Paul had with the Corinthian [congregation] church, some dare to build a teetering edifice of complicated, hierarchical relationships in the [congregation] church.

Secondly, it must be noted that amongst the Charismatics, bible scholarship is poorly established as a personal or group discipline. This is as true of charismatic [congregation] church leaders as it is of individual believers in charismatic groups. Unlike the Bereans who queried and tested every word that Paul brought to them; many modern Charismatic Christians accept anything and everything that flows to them out of their Perspex pulpits. Most modern Charismatics have not read the Bible through, and too many rely upon Bible paraphrases such as *The Message* in their moments of biblical reflection. Serious study and intellectual application is commonly sneered upon in charismatic circles, further complicating the situation.

Recognizing Spiritual Abuse

Spiritually abusive situations can be recognized quite readily. People involved in an abusive situation begin by feeling that generally things just don’t seem right. As they focus attention on their growing dis-ease; a typical pattern of abuse might manifest itself with one or more symptoms much like these:

- The leader(s) will always need to have absolute control and the final authority over a ministry. If there is an eldership, it will be composed of only a few men (and women) who are chosen not according to the “leadership qualifications” (as listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-13) but **because they can be controlled by the “set man” and relied upon to defend all things he says and does.** It is unlikely that the leader will be in any meaningful relationship with people or [congregations] outside of his group. He will avoid being held accountable by a denomination or his peers in the so-called “professional ministry”. It is quite likely that the set man will justify the lack of interaction with other [congregations] churches via a disapproval of their doctrines or even a spiritual smugness.
- The leader or “set man” will be insecure in his calling and will likely interpret any questioning as a direct challenge to his authority. And insecure leader will need to bolster his position by “teaching” on authority in the [congregation].
- The abusive [congregation] church will exhibit a clear hierarchical structure. Despite the fact that scripture (in 1 Corinthians 12:12-24) uses the analogy of the body, where all parts are knitted together, none more special than the other, and where each has a unique place, the abusive [congregation] church will have a clear rank oriented hierarchy. At the top of the pyramid will be the “set man” or founding pastor - the man with “the vision”. Underneath him will come another usually a senior elder or assistant pastor, whose job it is to act as the set man’s bodyguard and “hit man”. A little lower will come the rest of the elders, and even here there might be another rank split, with some within eldership being more “trusted” than others, and so permitted into the inner circle of the set man and his assistant. Underneath the elders will come the home group leaders - the last of the “ranked” members. Underneath these will come the “dumb sheep.” The 98% of any [congregation] church.
- The abusive leader is deceptive. The abusive leader cannot afford to be transparent and is likely to be a master at slick speech and manipulative words. The abusive leader is not above lying or deliberately engineering circumstances to get his own way. When the abusive leader chooses to confront or discipline members, the atmosphere is typically that of a kangaroo court. Judge, jury, prosecutor and executioner are roles filled by the “set man” and maybe one of his trusted henchmen. The accused will be “tried” in secret, and no reliable records kept. As the abuser lays waste to his victim, he will cover his tracks as best as he can.
- The abusive leader and his cohorts have a list of unwritten, unspoken rules. Whilst “freedom” might be preached, in reality, a complex series of unwritten laws apply to “the sheep”. The sheep, of course, never know what these rules are until they have unwittingly broken one of them. Many of these unwritten rules are attempts to govern the way that sheep relate to their leaders. Thus one can be

found guilty very quickly of having “a bad attitude”.....

- There is little or no financial accountability in an abusive ministry. Tithing will be required of ordinary members, but despite the enormous revenues that tithing can generate in a [congregation] church, the [congregation] church books and accounts will not be freely available for inspection. It is unlikely that annual congregational meetings will take place at which balance sheets and accounting of expenditure will be made available. The salary and benefits of the set man will be a closely guarded secret and the congregation is likely to be unaware of debts incurred on their behalf. Neither will their permission or advice be sought for placing the congregation in debt (i.e. to finance a mortgage bond on a [congregation] church building).
- Abusive leaders tend to have dominating “in your face”, attitudes when they choose to confront apparently errant sheep. Haughtiness and anger, instead of gentleness and a loving spirit are too often experienced by those unfortunate [members]Christians who do not meet the tyrant’s demands or conform, as quickly as might be required. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:2-3 that “the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, ***self-controlled***, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, ***not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome***, not a lover of money” [emphasis added]. Persons on the receiving end of tongue lashings from abusive leaders are demeaned, humiliated and systemically broken down by leaders with haughty attitudes who rail, uncontrolled and unchecked, against a fellow brother in [Messiah].
- The abusive leader is somewhat paranoid. He will compound this paranoia by a reluctance to keep written records or minutes of meetings etc., This further fuels communication problems as he will get vital information mixed up and confused as the net closes in.
- The abusive leader loves things and uses people. One of the hallmarks of an abusive [congregation] church is how many people have left the group because they could no longer stand being used and manipulated.
- The abusive leader or religious system works very hard at creating and maintaining a superlative image - spectacular programs, public ministries etc., There will likely be [congregation] church schools, feeding programs, youth groups, bands and outreach ministries that are spectacular in nature. Look carefully at them; do they reflect back on the glory of [Yahshua] or, are these monuments to the group leader?
- There is likely to be a noticeable discrepancy between the “vision statement” and the actual state of the ministry’s various programs. Thus [congregations] churches with a declared aim of moving into a certain region or area, are unlikely to have done so in any meaningful way.
- Performance based approval is heavily promoted. Apart from the fact the performance is the opposite of [Yahweh’s] grace, many charismatic groups are quite open about their requirement for members to “perform” or demonstrate their commitment. A South African independent charismatic fellowship published a positional paper that included this statement: to function in the gifts and calling of [Yahweh] (true riches) we must prove ourselves faithful in that which belongs to another (whether [Yahweh] or man)”. Quite often, this performance is linked to indeterminate time spent in menial “service” (cleaning toilets) for example. Quite often, too, abusive leaders will have the uncanny knack of honing in on a member’s [Yahweh]-given gifts and talents and specifically excluding them from service that utilizes those gifts. An example would be a talented musician who may not play on the music team until he had shuffled a few thousand seats around a hall for a year or two. ***Abusive ministries are notorious wasters of talent.***
- An over - reliance on untested prophecy and “words of knowledge” in deciding the direction of a ministry or program within the [congregation] church.
- Any occurrence of teaching or practice that has the effect of watering down or nullifying an individuals ability to hear [Yahweh] for himself. Specifically ordinary [congregations] church members might be required to “submit” for approval any ideas, even decisions of a personal nature, that they might have or believe that [Yahweh] is guiding them into. Scripture warns us that there is safety in the counsel of numbers, but it is a fine line between getting a second opinion and being told what one may or may not do.
- People who choose to leave the group will do so under a cloud. They will not be released with love or any kind of public farewell usually. There will likely be shame and slander directed at them as they leave. Over time, an abusive group will have quite a collection of alumni with similar horror stories of abuse to talk about. A grossly abusive group, will, of course, not be experiencing increase in membership.
- Victims of abusive [congregations] churches very often manifest broken lives and crushed spiritual faith after departing a dangerous religious group. Divorce, depression, drug and alcohol addictions, family and work problems are the price of religious addiction. This further fuels the abusive [congregation]

church leaders who thrive on scary stories about what happened to 'so and so' after he / she left the group...

The twisting of scripture

One of the most common “tricks” employed by abusive religious groups is the out-of-context use of scripture or blatant “cut and paste” of pieces of scripture to support an idea or pet doctrine that they seek to impose upon their followers. This is probably the direct result of the overall appalling standard of biblical exegesis and theological training in charismatic circles. The normal rules of biblical interpretation (an academic science called hermeneutics) are thrown overboard precisely because so many charismatic leaders have no theological training worth mentioning. Whilst there are some scriptures that stand as Christian[Biblical] truth on their own ([Messiah's] virgin birth and resurrection for example), there is an exceptionally large proportion within the body of Holy Scripture that cannot be lifted out and applied willy nilly to an aspect of life. The established principles of scriptural interpretation are roughly as follows:

- What does this verse appear to say?
- What does it say in the context of surrounding verses/chapters/books of the Bible?
- What is the historical and social context of the set of scriptures?
- How does the interpretation of this scripture change as it reads in the original languages?

These are important issues and it is because of the sheer lack of scholarship and the smug attitudes many charismatic leaders have towards theological training, that so much hurtful rubbish is preached out of charismatic pulpits around the world. Some classical examples of scripture twisting are reviewed below.

Most commonly, authoritarian leaders will use 1 Chronicles 16:22 (or its parallel Psalm 105:12-15) to justify stifling any criticism directed at leaders. This scripture says quite clearly (or so it seems):

“Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm” (NIV)

Thus, any number of authoritarians will claim the divine right to do as they please. The problem is that the verse is taken completely out of context and applied to a contemporary situation that was the furthest thing from the mind of Ezra, the author. The original intention of the scripture was to record the historical fact of [Yahweh's] ongoing provision and guidance of the **patriarchs** (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the historical fathers of the Hebrews/Israelites). Thus when we read the verse in Biblical context it becomes very different in character and meaning to that which modern authoritarians would have it be applied: When they [meaning the patriarchs] were but few in number, few indeed, and strangers in it. They wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another. He allowed no man to oppress them; for their sake he rebuked kings; 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm' (1 Chronicles 16:19-22 NIV)

Interestingly, all Christians are “[Yahweh's] anointed”. A quick look at 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 describes this amazing fact:

Now it is [Yahweh] who makes both us and you stand firm in [Yahshua] He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Thus the twisted logic employed by authoritarian wielders of 2 Chr. 16:22, flounders entirely on the simple fact that as[believers] Christians we are all [Yahweh's] anointed...Leadership have the [Yahweh]-given duty to lovingly correct; rebuke and even excommunicate brothers caught in obvious sin (e.g., fornication, drunkenness etc.), [Congregation] Church discipline always has as its goal the repentance and restoration of the sinner caught in scripturally defined sin, but the leader's right of correction never, under any circumstances, whatsoever, ever extends to the hateful scolding, slandering, humiliating, breaking down, abusing, shunning, attacking or in any way tearing down a fellow Christian.

A similarly twisted piece of scripture is that in Hebrews 13:17

“17 Obey your spiritual leaders and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls and they know they are accountable to [Yahweh]. Give them reason to do this joyfully and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.”

This scripture is often cited by certain political groups as scriptural justification for not resisting even the foulest and most corrupt of civilian governments. The key to understanding this scripture is that we are only required to obey authority that is legitimate and to the point that our obedience does not clash with scripture or our consciences. When [congregation] church authorities make requirements of you that you know are not biblically justifiable; or when [congregation] church authorities stop being servants and become, instead, tyrants, (thus becoming illegitimate authorities) then we are not required to obey them. David “disobeyed” Saul by fleeing from him. [Yahshua] regularly flouted the laws and traditions of the Jewish religious leaders. Peter and Paul bluntly told Jewish religious leaders that they would obey [Yahweh] before man. The principle of Hebrews 13:17 is to obey legitimate authority; but we are certainly not required to obey mad men or people who would lead us astray with their teachings.

Often people in abusive situations find themselves in situations where they need the protection of civil authority. This is when the hoary favorite of scripture twisters, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 is flashed around with impunity.

1 When you have something against another [believer]Christian, why do you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter, instead of taking it to other [believers]Christians to decide who is right? 2 Don't you know that someday we [believers] Christians are going to judge the world? And since you are going to judge the world, can't you decide these little things among yourselves? 3 Don't you realize that we [believers] Christians will judge angels? So you should surely be able to resolve ordinary disagreements here on earth. 4 If you have legal disputes about such matters, why do you go to outside judges who are not respected by the [congregation] church? 5 I am saying this to shame you. Isn't there anyone in all the [congregations] church who is wise enough to decide these arguments? But instead, one [believer] Christian sues another - right in front of unbelievers! 7 To have such lawsuits at all is a real defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated? 8 But instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your own [believing] Christian brothers and sisters.

This scripture illustrates a very important Biblical principle - that it is infinitely preferable for petty matters to be sorted out within the [congregation] church. The problem here is that the sort of disputes that can arise in abusive situations are no longer petty matters of offence taken and so on. Very often, civil or common laws have been breached and there is absolutely nothing wrong in approaching the police or the courts to prosecute and resolve such issues. A clear instance of this is seen in Acts 22: 23- 29 where Paul, accused by Jewish religious leaders of various “religious” crimes, makes full use of the extraordinary benefits of his being a born Roman citizen, to prevent himself from suffering an illegal beating. Further into the Book of Acts, Paul uses his legal right of appeal to Caesar in order to defend himself against the false charges brought against him by the Jewish leaders.

“7 On Paul's arrival in court, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn't prove. 8 Paul denied the charges. “I am not guilty,” he said. “I have committed no crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government.” 9 Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, “Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there?” 10 But Paul relied, “No! This is the official Roman court, so neither you nor anyone else has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!” 12 Festus conferred with his advisers and then replied, “Very well! You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you shall go!” (Acts 25:7-12 New Living Translation)

Another favorite of the scripture twisters is 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

“But [Yahweh] chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; [Yahweh] chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things and the things that are not- to nullify the things that are.” (NIV)

This verse has been offered up countless times as justification for some of the silliest things ever done in the [congregation] church - the appointment of incompetents to positions of leadership for example. Whilst this scripture seems like a license to do weird things and get away with it, the actual intent of the scripture is less liberal. In these words, Paul is showing us that the way of the [stake] is so simple that anyone can understand it; that salvation is totally from [Yahweh] and not dependent on works that we might do.

There are other examples of scripture twisting that we can quote, but most often the best preparation against scripture twisting is to know what the Bible has to say about leadership and how leadership should conduct itself. J. Lee Grady, in his book: *What Happened to the Fire: Rekindling the Blaze of Charismatic Renewal*, writes these inspired words on the subject of leadership and authoritarianism:

The Apostle Peter laid down a set of guidelines for [congregation] church eldership when he wrote his first epistle to the early [congregation] church:

To the elders amongst you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of [Yahshua's] sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of [Yahweh's] flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as [Yahweh] wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not "lording" it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

We "lord" it over others naturally. That is the way of the world. But Peter reminded the believers in Asia minor that [Yahshua] had introduced a revolutionary new approach - - leadership through humility, servant hood and example. [Yahshua] demonstrated that radical approach to leadership when He dressed like a slave and washed His disciples' feet. When two of His closest followers entertained a lust for power, [Yahshua] told them:

You know that the rulers of the gentiles "lord" it over them, and their high officials exercised authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)

This [righteous] method of governing, however, has not been the rule in most charismatic [congregations] churches, particularly independent ones. Since the renewal blossomed in the late 1960's, many groups that began with vibrant faith degenerated quickly into legalism and authoritarianism. **Some ministry leaders have exalted themselves as kings over their own kingdoms, giving their [congregations] churches or ministries the characteristics of cults** [emphasis added].

When and how to escape an abusive [congregation] church

Many people will agonize over leaving a group they have begun to see as manipulative and abusive. No matter how bad the situation might be, the wrench of leaving threatens an impact similar to the traumas of death and divorce in a family. Some, clearly desperate to do the will of [Yahweh] to the end, will stick it out and justify their staying with genuine cries of: "[Yahweh] hasn't told me to leave." The only kind and logical response to this, is the single question: "Has [Yahweh] told you to stay?"

One of the reasons why people are reluctant to leave is a misunderstanding of who owns the sheep in [Yahweh's] flock. The pastor most certainly does not own the flock; they belong to [Yahweh]. The passive acceptance of staying in the [congregation] church where one appears to have been placed by [Yahweh] needs serious debunking. The Bible warns us most severely against being led astray by false teachers and false prophets. We, as [believers], have a duty to know our doctrines well and to test everything that is taught to us. We have no business sitting in [congregations] churches where false teaching is tolerated.

Another aspect to consider is this. One of the major purposes behind belonging to a [congregation] church group is that one can be encouraged and grow in faith and maturity. If one is not being encouraged, if people are experiencing harshness instead of love; if the people are marking time or regressing in their spiritual walks, then clearly something is seriously amiss with that particular group and it would be wise to consider moving "home".

Leaving an abusive [congregation] church is, however, something that only the people involved can decide upon. Concerned friends and family cannot make that decision for them. The decision of whether to stay or leave must be made with the full knowledge of the consequences involved.

If you stay

If you choose to stay in an abusive [congregation] church, you have two options: fight for truth or submit entirely. An abusive leadership will not allow you to pick your fights selectively, so it's a commitment to fight for truth (note not a fight against people) or a resolution to surrender to the ways of the leaders. The option to fight is not one that is open to people who lack the stamina for a protracted battle or for people with thin skins and thinner theology. It is for the determined and mature believer only. Someone who knows how to fight error with scripture and who will not be intimidated by the posturing of leadership.

If you leave

Those who choose to leave an abusive [congregation] church will not find immediate relief. When David fled from Saul, he did so alone. It will be the same if you choose to leave. No one will go with you and it is likely that friends and family still in the group will shut you out. This isolation is sometimes enough to cause people to stay in an abusive group. Furthermore, if you leave, then it is almost certain that gossip about you will circulate, at the highest levels even, gossip that is malicious and about which you can do nothing.

Is there any hope?

Recovery from spiritual abuse is a lengthy process. I am not a psychologist, but my own experience and research would lead me to believe that recovery is a sometimes lengthy process that will go through the following cycles or stages:

- Disbelief (in the initial stages one numbs out the awful reality of what is happening)
- Anger (deep and bitter anger directed at the abusers)
- Despair (a feeling of utter despair and hopelessness; people feel that recovery from the abuses they have suffered will never occur)
- Acceptance of what had happened (an acceptance of the reality of the events, not an approval of what happened)
- Reexamination of core doctrines and beliefs (a healing process)
- Forgiveness and moving on (a decision one has to take, eventually)

My own experience was that the advice of friends etc., "put it behind you", "don't dwell on it" was sincere, but misguided. The person who experiences spiritual abuse had been grossly violated by people he trusted implicitly. That this has happened in the [congregation] church, the one place supposed to be safe and secure, compounds the problem. The wounds inflicted reach so deep into one's psyche that no band aid, no little prayer, no little sermon or comforting word is sufficient to undo the damage. Recovery from this abuse is a process that depends on:

- A determination to recover, knowing that one has to forgive for recovery to happen
- A retelling of the story to someone who can listen empathically. (This was absolutely vital in my case as I had to go through a process where the experience was validated, i.e. that I came to know that I did not make it up or imagine it. **As my abusers told me I did!**)

I am exceptionally reluctant to make the claim of PTSD for myself, but in my research I came across the American Medical Association's criteria for the diagnosis of Post - Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is a condition most commonly experienced by soldiers who have been in combat, but the disorder is now commonly diagnosed in people who have suffered the effects of many other kinds of traumas. Listed below is an extract from a university psychology department's web site on PTSD. I can, however, identify with some of the intrusive and avoidant symptoms described in the web site article below:

While PTSD usually appears within three months of the trauma, sometimes it can surface months or even years later (APA, 1997). Psychiatrists categorize PTSD symptoms in four categories:

- Intrusive symptoms
- Avoidant symptoms

- Symptoms of hyper arousal
- Associated features

Intrusive symptoms

The symptoms in this category are perhaps the most distinctive and readily identifiable. Here the traumatic event remains a dominating psychological experience that evokes panic, terror, grief, or despair as manifested in daytime fantasies, traumatic nightmares, and psychotic reenactments known as PTSD flashbacks (Friedman, 1996). These flashbacks are so strong that the individual thinks that he or she is actually experiencing the trauma again. When a person has a severe flashback, he or she is in a dissociative state (APA, 1997). When this occurs, the individual may actually start to act out the incident as if he or she was experiencing the traumatic event again.

Avoidant Symptoms

Avoidance symptoms are characterized by emotional constriction or numbing - - a need to avoid feelings, thoughts and situations reminiscent of the trauma, a loss of normal emotional responses, or both (Long, 1997). These symptoms reflect the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional strategies used by PTSD patients to attempt to reduce their psychological response to the traumatic stimuli (Friedman, 1996).

Patients try to avoid all situations that might serve as stimuli for the traumatic event. When taken to the extreme, this may superficially resemble agoraphobia because the PTSD patient is afraid to leave the house for fear of confronting reminders of the traumatic event (Friedman, 1996). Dissociation and psychogenic amnesia are included among avoidant/numbing symptoms by which individuals cut off conscious experience of trauma based memories and feelings.

Because PTSD patients can not tolerate strong emotions of any kind, they perceive only the cognitive aspects of psychological experience and not the emotional aspects. This "psychic numbing" acts as an emotional anesthesia and makes meaningful interpersonal relationships extremely difficult (Friedman, 1996; Long, 1997).

Symptoms of Hyper Arousal

Individuals with PTSD often act as though they were constantly threatened by the trauma that caused their illness (Long, 1997). These symptoms most closely resemble those seen in panic and generalized anxiety disorder (Friedman, 1996). Although some symptoms such as insomnia and irritability are generic anxiety symptoms, hypervigilance and startle are more unique. The hypervigilance in PTSD may sometimes become so intense that it appears to simply be paranoia. The startle reaction of PTSD patients also has neurobiological implications (see "Etiology" for more on the neurobiological causation of PTSD).

Associated Features

The person with PTSD may attempt to rid themselves of painful flashbacks, loneliness, and panic attacks by abusing alcohol and other drugs. These serve the purpose of blunting the patient's emotions and helping them to forget their trauma. Related, a PTSD patient may also show poor control over his or her impulses, increasing the risk of suicide (APA, 1997). (See "Epidemiology" for statistics on drug abuse and suicide among individuals with PTSD).

Now that you have read my article, take this self quiz below. Be honest. Where you are unsure of an answer, give your potentially dangerous religious group the benefit of the doubt and record a "no" vote.

The "Am I A Member of A Dangerous Religious Group?" Self Quiz

A group starts with two people, And two individuals can find themselves embroiled in many of the same fundamental destructive group dynamics that large organizations fall prey to. Are you "UNDER THE INFLUENCE" of a destructive group or belief system? Find out with this:

SELF QUIZ

- Does your group discourage doubts, criticism or ideas that differ from their belief system?
Yes _____ No _____
- Do you tend to rationalize whatever the group does even when it goes against your sense of right and wrong?
Yes _____ No _____
- Do you often feel exhausted from lengthy group activities, meetings and projects?
Yes _____ No _____
- Does your group have its own unique words, clichés, slogans, chants, prayers and doctrinal phrases that reinforce the group viewpoint?
Yes _____ No _____
- Are doubts viewed as a lack of faith , dedication, commitment or disloyalty?
Yes _____ No _____
- Have "your thoughts" become "the enemy"?
Yes _____ No _____
- Do you often find yourself doing more and more things in the group or because of group peer pressure, that you would not have done on your own?
Yes _____ No _____
- Does your group publicly humiliate or criticize members?
Yes _____ No _____
- Does your group have a system of punishments and rewards for behavior?
Yes _____ No _____
- Group paranoia: Does your group obsessively think other groups or people with different beliefs are out to get them?
Yes _____ No _____
- Does the prospect of leaving your group seem scary, difficult?
Yes _____ No _____
- Do you feel the need to leave in secret?
Yes _____ No _____
- Have you been told something bad might happen if you leave?
Yes _____ No _____
- Does your group/belief system think they have/are the only or highest truth, or have the solution for the world's problems?
Yes _____ No _____
- Are your leader's ideas or belief system considered beyond reproach or sacred?

Yes _____ No _____

• Do you follow a particular individual or belief system that requires unquestioning obedience and loyalty?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do members of your group feel specially chosen, superior, exclusive, elite?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do you feel the need to save or convert others to your belief system or ideology?
Yes _____ No _____

• Is your group secretive to outsiders about its inner workings, teachings, activities or beliefs?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group equate purity and goodness to being in your group, and impurity or evil to those outside your group?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do you place your group's mission or agenda above your own goals and ideals? Do group interests come before your own interest
Yes _____ No _____

• Do you find yourself thinking in a we-they, us-versus-them mind set?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group/system have a clear outside enemy?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do you see less and less of your family and friends who do not belong to your group or who do not subscribe to your group's belief system?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group use frequent public testimonials, confessions, or sharings that reinforce the group's mission or agenda?
Yes _____ No _____

• Is communication within, into and out of your group controlled or censored in any manner?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group criticize, shun, abandon or demean individuals who leave the group?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do members seek approval or get permission from group leader(s) for personal life choices?
Yes _____ No _____

• Do you feel pressured to attend meetings, events, lectures, seminars? And do you feel guilty if you don't attend?
Yes _____ No _____

• Are the group's financial needs more important than your own economic well-being?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group discriminate against anyone regarding race, gender, belief, or sexual orientation?
Yes _____ No _____

• Does your group have a totalitarian structure: a strict, top-down centralized control?
Yes _____ No _____

- Do you wonder if you have been in a destructive group?
Yes_____ No_____

- Do you have difficulty forming new friendships and intimate relationships?
Yes_____ No_____

- 1 Do you have low self-esteem, poor self-image or loss of identity?
Yes_____ No_____

- 2 Do you have difficulty making simple decisions and choices?
Yes_____ No_____

- 3 Do you often feel depressed, anxious and nervous?
Yes_____ No_____

- 4 Do you feel isolated, lonely, guilty, cynical?
Yes_____ No_____

- 5 Do you feel like you are just now growing up, becoming a mature adult?
Yes_____ No_____

- 6 Do you have short term memory difficulties?
Yes_____ No_____

- 7 Do you feel you have nothing to believe in?
Yes_____ No_____

- 8 Do you often feel anger and rage towards the group?
Yes_____ No_____

- 9 Do you have nightmares or unpleasant dreams?
Yes_____ No_____

- 10 Do you find it difficult or impossible to stop mental or other group ritualistic practices?
Yes_____ No_____

This quiz has no scientifically predetermined number of "yes" answers to indicate a destructive group. However, answering "yes" to any of the above questions means you may need to examine your group and its influence in your life in those areas.

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References:

This paper was written in an attempt to collate together material that I had noted or come across in a number of sources. For more information on this topic, I suggest one look at the following books:

Marc Du Pont - *Walking Out Of Spiritual Abuse*

David Johnson & Jeff Van Vondern - *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*

Lee Grady - *Where's The Fire? Rekindling the Blaze of Charismatic Renewal*

Ken Blue - *Healing Spiritual Abuse*

Stephen Aterburn & Jack Felton - *Toxic Faith*

Hank Hanegraaf - *Christianity in Crisis*

Gene Edwards - *Tale of Three Kings*

Some good web sites to begin researching this topic are:

www.spiritualabuse.org

www.discernment.org

www.wellspringretreat.org

www.testingthespirit.com

www.watchman.org

For more Bible Truth literature, you can contact us on the Web at:

YahsTruth.org

*Or write to:
Yahweh's Truth Ministries
P.O. Box 547
Loganville, GA 30050*

