

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

HOT TOPIC

Have you ever wondered how people are lured into joining cults?

The world of cults often seems far removed from our own, and just something that appears on the occasional documentary, like *Holy Hell* and Louis Theroux's *America's Most Hated*.

But the terrifying reality is, there are many active cults all around the world. Sometimes cults can lead to exploitation to the point of financial control, sexual coercion, child abuse, withholding of medical treatment, physical and emotional damage, punishments that extend to sleep deprivation, forced labour, controlled starvation and family segregation.

In extreme circumstances, cult leaders may even manipulate their followers to believe that they should physically harm or kill themselves, or others – such

as the Heaven's Gate and Manson Family cults.

The questions about cults that are on everyone's lips is how can they form, why do people want to start their own and how do people fall into the trap of becoming a member?

Zoe Clews, a mental health expert and founder of Zoe Clews & Associates, has all the answers. 'A cult is a collective that is founded on the belief of something sacred and religious,' Zoe explains. 'It's usually centred around a single extremely charismatic leader, or a small group of people demonstrating the same charismatic qualities.'

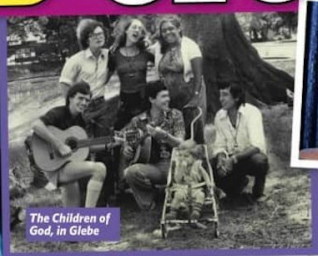
The leader

usually projects ideologies commonly accepted as the 'divine truth' by cult members.

'Cults often lead members into unquestioning devotion to their leaders, including their coercive behaviour which is designed to radicalise and control individuals within the group,' Zoe explains.

But despite these similarities within cults, there are many different types.

'There's a big distinction to be made between the nature of different cults. Some are destructive, advocating violence, and others are harmless, simply with ideologies that are out of line with



The Children of God, in Glebe

Active cults are in the UK

social norms.

'There are also some commercial cults that apply intense pressure on groups to invest financially.'

'Often these cults will have a hierarchical structure in which escalation through the ranks is bought,' Zoe continues.

Individuals create cults for their own personal gain.

There can be complex reasons why cults are started. 'Zoe suggests, the first place to start when thinking about the reasons why someone would begin a cult, is to understand narcissism.

People with a narcissist personality have an over-inflated opinion of themselves. They're obsessed with attention and will manipulate people to get it.

'For narcissists, being admired and seen as special' is their oxygen.

'For the cult leader, the group members are their narcissistic supply.'

'If you fall to do this, in a destructive cult you are either punished or banished.'

'Cult leaders tend to believe that they are acting for the greater good,' Zoe says.

Recruiting members is usually approached in a non-threatening way.

Often it is made to seem that joining the cult will benefit the recruits' lives greatly.

Leaders manipulate their recruits to get them to join.

Sometimes they will do this by showering them with attention and praise, or by making promises of some sort



Marshall Applewhite, the leader of Heaven's Gate

of prize – like being told secrets about the world that no one else knows.

In other cases, the leader will guilt trip their recruits to join, or get members by rewarding good behaviour and punishing for bad behaviour.

But unfortunately for some, they are born into the cult with little means to escape.

Once someone is sucked into a cult, advanced techniques will be used to keep them there – such as isolating them from friends and family.

'Destructive cults are always dishonest from the beginning.

'They lie to new members about their true intentions.

Members leaving destructive cults often talk of

years of suffering at the hands of their leaders,' Zoe explains. Often cult leaders prey upon vulnerable people or those with little family or friends.

'Individuals who carry unprocessed, unhealed trauma from their childhoods can be particularly vulnerable to cults.'

'Abuse and trauma disturb your fight or flight signals, whereby they may go towards danger rather than away from it.'

'An example of this is the Teens of Christ, which later re-branded themselves as the Children of God.'

'They targeted young runaways and the hippies in the Sixties which became a child sex ring,' Zoe says.

However, this isn't always the case.

'If someone is struggling to find purpose then a cult will fill that gap.'

'People looking for an explanation for their suffering find a lot of comfort in the purpose which the cult

initially promises to provide for them,' Zoe says.

But the damaging effects of being part of a cult are often extremely severe.

'Recovering members are left devastated and deeply traumatised.'

'Children that grew up in destructive cults are often nothing short of psychologically shattered.'

It's possible, with a lot of self-compassion, expert support and help, to recover and rebuild,' Zoe says.

It's important to remember that there is suspected to be around 2,000 active cults, in the UK.

So, what are the signs to watch out for, that someone is involved in a cult?

'Initially, you may witness the individual in a cult expressing happiness and joy at finding their tribe.'

'However, over time red flags will appear.'

'Their commitment to their leader goes far beyond admiration and they believe

their word is law. 'You may notice the individual is extremely defensive if you question the cult or their teachings.'

'Mind-altering techniques are used and you may notice that aspects of their life are being controlled.'

'This will display itself in changes in their behaviour such as exhaustion, seeming spaced out, frightened, cutting off from friends and family, loss of interest in previous hobbies and seeming withdrawn.'

'You may also witness them doing things that they wouldn't usually do, acting way off their own previous moral compass,' Zoe says.

Although cults may seem appealing to some at first glance, they are often extremely damaging to an individual, leaving many traumatised with great difficulty to lead a normal life if they manage to escape.

Incredibly, many who have fled, have been brave enough to share their story with the world, to try and save others from suffering, like themselves.

Often cult leaders prey upon vulnerable people

A LUCKY ESCAPE

Sharen Seitz, 33, grew up in a cult. She lived in a world of child abuse, rape, incest, violence as well as physical and mental abuse.

The cult she suffered in was called the Children of God, later known as the Family International Commune.

Although their name may suggest nothing more than a group who worship God, there was a much darker side to it.

Sharen doesn't recall being sexually abused as an innocent three-year-old.

But, she believes the reason for a blank in her memory as a toddler could be due to a coping mechanism, forcing her to forget the abuse that she may have experienced.

However, Sharen's sister claims that the pair of them had witnessed people having sex, and that the adults were often naked.

Sharen remembers filling out colouring books containing sexually explicit images of men having sex with young children with haunting

captions such as: 'God loves you, let me show you that.'

She was also regularly locked in and forced to recite the Bible.

Fleeing the authorities over the years, Sharen never had a place to call home.

Not only this, but she didn't know which of the adults at the commune were her parents – until she was six.

'Everyone is your aunt and uncle,' the leaders would tell them all.

Although she did have a feeling who her dad was, due to the way one man behaved when she was beaten by others.

Luckily, Sharen managed to escape when she was six years-old. One day,



Sharen is recovering from it



when she tripped over another girl while tying her shoelaces she was taken to be violently beaten, once again.

'Come with me,' the leader said.

Using a wooden board, he hit Sharen repeatedly.

This was when Sharen's dad realised that enough was enough, and it was time to leave.

In the dead of night, he gathered his children and escaped.

But life wasn't easy for the family after they left.

They were all traumatised. Sharen's father later committed suicide while she found herself in a damaging cycle of toxic relationships.

But thankfully, after lots of therapy, Sharen has managed to regain control of her life.

She has now found a loving partner and lives a peaceful life in Colorado amongst the mountains.