

Healing Crippled Self-Trust

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Many people who give themselves to authoritarian groups and later become disillusioned end up deeply mistrusting themselves. In order to surrender to an external authority, some self-mistrust already has to be present. This includes not believing one could get “it” (whatever “it” is) on one’s own. Ironically, people usually implicitly trust their capacity to recognize the authority who can lead them to what they want. But unfortunately, given how easy fear and desire are to manipulate, this is possibly the last thing that should be exempted from mistrust.

The deeper one surrenders to an authoritarian structure, the harder it is to detach from it because one’s very identity becomes wrapped around that context—one’s emotions, beliefs, images, worldview, relationships, etc. In fact, the group, with the authority figure at the center, becomes the foundation of all meaning, intimacy, and even possibility for the future. Those in the inner circle or high on the organization’s rungs have an even more difficult time unhooking. Most have achieved more power and feelings of specialness than they ever had before. Each becomes a minor authority to those below.

Leaving a group after having surrendered to it often puts one back into the confusions and lacks that initially made the group appealing. In addition, another sometimes paralyzing form of self-doubt may occur—doubting one’s capacity to find a way out of the confusion. One’s sense of reality is delicate because many things previously believed now seem the opposite of what they were. What seemed right and good then appears wrong and malevolent now. The

guru’s seeming unconditional love was really about wanting unconditional power; his selflessness was egomania in disguise; his purity was corrupt. The burning questions in one’s mind are: “How could I have been so taken in?” “How can I trust myself to know what’s real or good for me?” The difficulty of leaving is compounded by the reality that doing so rarely feels good initially. Instead there’s bewilderment, anger mixed with depression, and self-blame.

Fear is a large part of what keeps many in these groups—not only a fear of returning to the uncertainties of being on one’s own, but a deep fear of being awash without being able to trust one’s own judgment at all. This also impacts trusting others, for disillusionment around basic beliefs often breeds a generalized cynicism. So the stakes in believing or not believing in the authority are very high. The followers’ fears of going back to a life that could be even worse than before give the guru more power over them. This is similar to an addict’s fear of returning to the drab, dull life the addiction was trying to alleviate. Dependency on an authoritarian group displays many similarities to addiction.

Leaving such a group creates more than an identity crisis, for it involves mistrusting one’s deepest emotions and basic perceptions of self, others, and the universe. In addition, one doubts the wisdom of following one’s passion. Whereas passion about a cause used to be a sign of authenticity, it, too, can no longer be trusted. The ex-disciple’s world has turned on its head: What the guru and group presented as unconditional love was conditional upon accepting their authority; the egoless guru was

found to be on a manipulative, even crass, power trip. For people who surrendered totally to a guru and thus experienced passion more deeply than ever before, seeing “The emperor wears no clothes” can be devastating. So it’s no wonder people have tremendous resistance to anything that causes them to doubt the veracity of the authority.

Surrendering to an authority makes it easy to overlook or rationalize what would ordinarily be considered unethical. Even more unsettling, one might have found oneself doing, or willing to do, very hurtful things to others. Some ex-cult members later admitted with shame and embarrassment that they would even have killed if the authority had ordered it. Having seen the extent of their capacity for self-delusion and for being so under the sway of another, it is not surprising that many upon leaving the group not only fear themselves, but the world in general. They saw others who were also willing to follow the leader’s dictates no matter what; so they realize people are capable of doing most anything, which makes the world a much scarier place.

Ex-cult members often describe themselves as crippled, sometimes even a decade or more later. What is crippled is the capacity to trust oneself which, when lost, is difficult to regain. This is the serious challenge those who leave authoritarian groups face. People usually try to overcome this through a determination never to be duped again. Unfortunately, this stance brings about defensive postures that leave the person cynical and closed. Underneath such cynicism is fear of commitment and openness—both of which previously brought considerable pain. Behind most cynicism there is a disillusioned idealist. This protective posture can make people more functional, but with it they become guarded, rigid, emotionally cut off, and vulnerable to depression because of a deep reservoir of fear and anger. Depression commonly coats fear and anger.

It’s difficult to make a deep connection with the world when one is afraid to be conned, deceived, or to follow one’s passion.

This mistrust can also affect one’s personal emotional life. In some cases, people become afraid to involve themselves in real intimacy. Becoming disillusioned with the nature of surrender and passion can limit one’s capacity to love, because what was previously thought of as love was found to be only image, and essentially a lie. Defending against involvement often leaves ex-cult members with greater boundaries and limits than they had before their cult experience.

What real healing must involve is rebuilding self-trust. This is not an easy task, for having been seduced by the cult experience gives one little reason to trust oneself. Of course, it is possible another person’s love or care could break through the deep misgivings, enabling some openness and trust to come. However, being open to one person does not necessarily remove the fear of susceptibility to being taken in by charismatic people, groups and causes, or any other kind of involvement. One can still be basically afraid of oneself.

The most extreme form of mental control occurs when the authority is trusted completely and becomes the center of one’s identity. Sadly, society and parents insidiously put out messages from childhood on that others know what’s best. Many people are deeply conditioned to expect and hope some outside agency, power, or person will solve their problems. Letting go of expecting or even wanting this is difficult, partially because what one is left with is oneself, and all of one’s limitations. But moving past the often-great disappointment that there is no ultimate authority who knows what’s best for others can allow one to be open to what others offer without fear of being taken over by them. The very ability to do this, however, is linked with self-trust. The capacity to trust oneself has a feedback loop in it: the more you can do it, the more of it you build; likewise, self-doubt breeds self-doubt. Once a person has been hurt and crippled in a way that deeply damages self-trust, the question is how to turn this around?

True healing can be accelerated by understanding the deep mechanisms of what happened, and of authoritarian dynamics in general. Then people can be more confident they won't be taken in again. Part of maturation is realizing that no other person can know with certainty what is appropriate for others. By remaining the ultimate judge of what's right for oneself, one can receive and integrate what others offer without fearing dependency.

One motive for writing this book is our belief that a deeper understanding of the dynamics and pervasiveness of authoritarianism enables people to be less susceptible to it. This does involve becoming more aware, for a real correlation exists between self-trust and awareness. The person who entered the cult had great illusions that were later shattered; the person who left the cult was disillusioned, but did not fully understand or integrate what really happened. Self-deception, in varying degrees, is part of the human condition. Awareness of how easily fear, need, and desire can be manipulated enhances critical intelligence.

Disillusionment in itself is not the real problem. Awareness involves breaking through illusions, which, of course, is disillusioning. Often the real obstacle is being so attached to whatever emotions or meaning the illusions were feeding that letting go of illusions feels like a loss instead of a gain. To see how one's previous good feelings contained illusion can be a bitter pill at first. But even though the caring and sharing in the authoritarian context were found to be mechanical and ephemeral, real caring and sharing are a needed aspect of life. The illusion lay in believing in the authenticity of blind surrender and in the instant intimacy doing so offers.

Part of self-awareness is also seeing the poison and ultimate isolation of the self-defensive posture. The little voice inside that warns not to trust others is deadly. It's the same voice that often comes after being deeply hurt in a love relationship. Its purpose is to ensure that "This will never happen again." Rigidly controlling against further hurt and disillusionment not only closes the door to passion, but also to the possibility of living without fear of oneself. The fear is that without self-control, one would again succumb to being taken over. Such control brings conflict and internal division because something basic is being denied. A whole person is open to love, which means risking the possibility of again being taken in and hurt.

If one has been truly dis-illusioned (that is, lost one's illusions, rather than merely being disappointed) about authoritarian relationships, there is far less likelihood of falling into the same traps or becoming cynical. Cynicism indicates one has not totally given up the illusions, but still blames others or the world for being let down. Often what is held onto are the ideals that mask authoritarianism, even though one has been disillusioned by a given leader. This is why people feel susceptible and do not trust themselves, for as long as they have unlivable ideals, they are manipulable. It is the ideals that are the illusion, not the failures of others or oneself to live up to them.

Letting go of illusions is just that—letting go of all of it, including the emotions and expectations they and their loss generate. Then one can be open to the kind of love that is not an illusion.