

C.A.T. — Christianity Awareness Training

Christianity Awareness Training For Clinicians And Helpers Who Are Working With Former Members Recovering From High demand Christian Groups

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Abstract: Many in the therapeutic community are first hand witnesses to the destructive effects of high control religious groups. To honor and respect those who come to us for help, let's take the opportunity to examine our own possible biases including how we define healthy Christianity. There is much diversity of belief within Christianity. Our biases might include our thinking about what is "mainstream," and how loaded that language is. Perhaps Freud is mainstream and Jung is not? Understanding enhances our therapeutic intervention capability. Our attention and care helps us become part of someone's healing support system, instead of yet another person violating their boundaries from an authority differential. Isn't that what happened to them in the cult? The Christian's relationship with God may have been distorted by the high control group, but does that mean God or faith are the problem? An abused wife and her therapist will work cooperatively so she can thrive in future healthy relationships with men. A Christian seeking help isn't necessarily wanting to jettison his or her God any more than that abused wife's health includes no more men. Do we see it as healthy when a Christian wants nothing more to do with God or faith? Are we intentionally faith-supportive of Christians who wish to retain or restore their relationship with God? If our biases are inflexible, can we abstain from working with that population so as not to cause harm? Recovery inherently challenges beliefs. This paper gives some perspective on history, present day challenges, and possible guidelines and educational solutions for clinicians who want to be a more helpful part of the support system for people recovering from high demand Christian groups.

This is a summary brief of the complete paper which is located online at:

www.sanfranciscobaydesign.com/icsa or www.sanfranciscobaydesign.com/cat

The online paper includes the full text and bibliography. This brief includes the abstract, section headings for topics covered, and appendices. The appendices include suggested guidelines, a list of "trigger" words & phrases, and questions to ask oneself to further explore one's presuppositions. Increased awareness gives more opportunities to be proactive in support of Christians who seek clinical or educational assistance in exiting and recovering from high demand relationships and cults.

"The map is not the territory" - Alfred Korzybski

Section Headings For Topics Covered In This Paper

1. General Application And Issues Specific To Christianity
2. Playing Well With Others
3. Restoring Dignity And Respect
4. Labels And "Trigger" Words & Phrases
5. Diversity Of Religion
6. Exploring The Word "Mainstream" By Drawing Our Own Conceptual Pie Chart In A Familiar Area
7. Why Take The Time To Raise Awareness Specifically About Christianity?
8. How Do We Decide What Is Christian Mainstream?
9. How Do We Determine Religious Legitimacy Or The Health Of Someone's Faith?
10. A Perspective Of Longevity And Prevalence:
11. Who Are The "Problem Groups" In Our Eyes?
12. Difficulties In Studying And Categorizing Religious Faith And Practice
13. How Some Christians View Other Christians
14. How Our Views On Religious Groups Are Formed
15. Professional And Peer Group Influence
16. What Is Influencing Our Prejudices Now? — Media Influence
17. Which Side Are You On?
18. Christians Are Not Paranoid By Nature, But Someone Is Out To Get Some Of Them
19. What We Learn From Those Who Come To Us For Help
20. Our Personal Experience And World View
21. Diversity Of Religious Practice And To What Degree It Comprises A Part Of Someone's Identity
22. Comparing Spouse Abuse With Religious Abuse
23. The Value Of Faith & Belief In The Care Of The Soul
24. Unique Situational Need Of Each Person Coming For Help Is Primary
25. The Benefits Of Revealing And Openly Stating Known Bias
26. Knowing Our Limitations
27. Taking On The Attitude Of Exploring And Experiencing A Foreign Culture
28. What They Say, What They Do, And How It Functions
29. Historical Basis For Psychology Having An Anti-Christian Bias
30. Historical Basis For Christians Having An Anti-Psychology Bias
31. Modern Christian Psychology

Appendix I: Suggested Guidelines For Those Working To Help Christians Recover From Cults & Other High Demand Or High Control Groups & Relationships

- Take time to be aware of your personal life experience of Christianity and Christians.
- Understand how the stories of those who have come to you for help have influenced your thoughts and feelings about specific Christian denominations, subgroups and practices.
- Understand how personal life experience, professional training, peer group, media and social media have each influenced your thinking about Christianity and Christian practices.
- When helping a person with a Christian background, begin with the same respect for their faith that you would have when traveling to a foreign country to explore its culture. Although Christianity is a common identification, we tend to assume familiarity we often don't have. There's a reverence we tend to have for indigenous cultures that preserves the honor and dignity of the people group we visit and explore. We respect their customs, even ones that are very different from our own.
- We can choose to have the attitude of being learners, instead of experts. This can facilitate goodwill while helping someone.
- Identify any Christian practices that you now believe are inherently pathological, allowing room possibility that you have prejudged some of them.
- Take time to study the history of the particular stream of Christianity of those you are helping.
- Learn about the historical context and how the group or practice came to be. Look into multiple

sources from within and outside that group to help you understand the intent and value of their beliefs and practices.

- In those areas where you do have known bias and prejudice, make a proactive effort to look at things from the vantage point of those you are helping.
- Draw a pie chart of your internal representation of world religions, Christianity being one of them.
- Draw a pie chart of your internal representation of the different branches of Christianity.
- Do some internet research of census bureaus and other statistical data of religious faith, and see how your impressions line up. Compare the results of several surveys to see where they agree and how they are different.
- View the list of "trigger" words and phrases in Appendix II. Add some of your own. Examine your responses to these words. Are they neutral or do they evoke a strong response?
- Examine whether you are affected by descriptions of affiliations of those you help. Perhaps they identify as "fundamentalist" and you immediately read that as "cult-like" Remember the map is not the territory.
- As a tool for increasing rapport and understanding, remove any habits you might have of labeling or depersonalizing Christians or subgroups of Christianity.
- Recognize that some coming to help will look to you for cues, and try to please you. Try not to make giving up their Christian identity or practices part of the plan for helping them recover.
- Be aware of prematurely placing blame on a religion or branch of religion for the problems caused by individuals in the high demand and high control Christian group unless it proves to be true.
- Don't assume something is a "trigger" for the person you are helping until they tell you so or until it proves to be one. It will help to evaluate the pros and cons of recommending any kind of "time out" on a Christian practice. The practice may also have beneficial function in the person's life.
- It may not be helpful to suggest alternate Bible versions. It can be sometimes, but not always, especially if a person has taken time to come to a conclusion about a preferred version.
- It may not be helpful to not work with a recovery modality or technique that goes against deeply held beliefs (i.e. if they consider it occult, "energy medicine," or trance inducing).
- Honor the boundaries of people you help. Some have strong beliefs against hypnosis, and other therapy, grounding or relaxation strategies, either because of their non-Christian spiritual origin or because they are similar to things practiced in the high demand or high control group.
- Make a list of ways you can help restore dignity and respect to those whom you help or educate. You might think of how the abusive religious group invalidated their self worth or trusting their own thinking. Strategize ways to affirm and honor those who seek your assistance.
- Seek to legitimize the person and their genuine interests and pursuits. Help rebuild confidence and appropriate self trust, including where that is connected to faith and their belief in God.
- Recognize that for some Christians to seek help outside their church, it is a very high risk activity. The person has probably suffered being treated as "less than" on a repeated basis in the church.
- Beware of your own body language and what you are communicating through vocal intonation. Rolling eyes, mocking, expressions of disdain will destroy trust and discourage people from seeking outside help. Take care not to signal the same rejection cues they received the cult.
- In the high demand and high control group, the person substituted the leader's and peer group's validation for a point of reference. Explore how the person's faith in God and belief system can be part of that a sense of self regulated value and worth.
- Examine the positive function of Christianity in the life of people you help who wish to retain their faith.
- Take time to understand what you personally consider a religious addiction and why.
- Remember that most Christians are not as polarized in their faith and practice as the media makes them out to be. However strong someone's beliefs appear, they are not as black and white as you have been led to think. It is likely that your beliefs are not that black and white, either.
- Remember you are dealing with a whole person, not just a set of religious programming, even if the cult created some of that. That whole person has dreams, desires and reasons for their faith

that may have come before, after or as part of their cult experience.

- It may not help to assume that you are already knowledgeable about Christianity. Investing your time in learning can expand the opportunities for those you help to utilize their faith in recovering from the damage of high control and high demand groups.
- Consider the longevity and prevalence of the Christian faith, even in a people-helping context. Have a healthy respect that 126 or more years ago there was no formalized “talking cure.” The the human race did flourish and thrive in many ways. Sometimes when we see too much runoff from abusive Christian groups, we forget this wider point of view. The helping professions are facilitators of health and recovery, but not the only source of it.
- Explore avenues for cooperation with other Christian sources of help. Often another ex-member, peer or other minister can be an advocate and ally in an ex-member’s support system.
- Remember that expressing negative feelings (toward God or religion) is part of the process some people go through in exiting an abusive group. It is not necessarily an enduring desire to become an atheist, nor to reject all things Christian. It’s common to go on a pendulum swing, and to throw out anything remotely associated with the cult, some of which they will later want to reclaim.
- If your bias is pro-Christian, allow people to be mad at God and other people as they may find a place for forgiveness down the road. It is very helpful to refrain from specifying someone’s time table or process in healing. Rejecting something that may later be retrieved is part of someone’s process of free choice. He may later freely decide something that was initially chosen for him.
- Suggesting atheism may not be the best response to a bad experience in a cult (i.e. could be like suggesting that women should swear off all men because of a bad relationship when one mans abuse was the source of her problems). Is it God or people that are the problem?
- Leave room for the possibility that people may not really want to shut the door on God or Christianity. They may — over time — want to evaluate different facets of their belief system and practice, then continue to discard the dysfunctional, and retain or reclaim the good.
- Develop the desire to understand the positive function of faith in the person’s world without assuming this is invalid because it is part of what you see as their cult identity
- Be a safe space for people to explore belief system change without directing or bounding that system in ways that are motivated by your own prejudices.
- Examine whether you have any “doctrine over person” stances with respect to what you believe are destructive and counterproductive elements in Christianity which impede healthy living.
- Make a list of Christian practices that you would think will be non-negotiable with people whom you are working (i.e. any practices that you think are seriously self-harming to warrant sanction)
- Explore how you and those you help are influenced by media, peer groups and the cult.
- Be aware of how you and the people you help may have adopted polarization on socio-political issues that relate to Christianity. Most people are not that black and white, but there are pressures to become so.
- Give time and space for expression of beliefs on love and hate, war, guns, sexual preference, abortion, sexuality, equality, environmentalism, authority, other religions and a variety of generally “heated” issues as pertains to Christianity.
- Employ your listening skills not only to understand, but to allow a person to hear their own thoughts and feelings in the presence of a caring witness. This facilitates the restoration of a person’s dignity and encourages more flexibility and tolerance
- Be aware of some of the inherent anti-Christian prejudices in the history of psychology, and take steps to mitigate them for Christians you help.
- If you have strong biases, say so, and share how that might effect your helping them.
- If you can’t coexist with the strong views of the person you are helping, then refer them to someone who can make a safe space available.
- Be aware of some of the reasons some branches of Christianity have for mistrust in psychology.
- Be respectful of the right of those you help to say “No,” to some cherished methods in your helping repertoire.

- As a resource someone seeks out as part of their recovery from a high demand group, remember that you have been entrusted with the care of someone's emotional well being. It is a great risk for some former members to seek help outside of some branches of Christianity. Usually they only do so when attempts within the church have proven unsuccessful.
- Consider that some Christians from more conservative or fundamentalist backgrounds may well have been abused in the cult. Social prejudice from secular media and other branches of Christianity can subject a person to a "one-two-punch," of getting it from multiple sources. Part of helping can be buffering and mitigating the real effects of this social sanctioning.
- Think about how you can be welcoming of someone and not replicate their prior negative experiences when they sought help and it did not work.
- Recognize that there are real historical and social reasons some Christians will avoid psychology therapy or anything influenced by it. These people are often more open to education in critical thinking. You also can earn trust over time by how you act toward — and respond to — them.
- Do recognize that you belong to a population of people known to be unsafe to some Christians. To make it safer for them, you may have to alter your style or approach to therapy or education.
- Respect others boundaries, even if you believe a helping technique to be safe and "know" it to be effective.
- Take time to learn about the religious and personal world of those you seek to help. When done from a desire to understand — and not manipulate — It engenders great trust that paves the way for cooperative relationships. Study their personal journey as well as the history of the forms of Christianity they practice.
- Don't push.
- Someone who disagrees but has the ability to allow and encourage someone else to have the space to be themselves, can be a powerful ally in another person's healing process. It takes mindful intent to become a better helper. Include this in your own goal setting as it fits for you.
- Inherent in the Christian faith's foundations — and the goals of most helping professions — is the principle of Love. We all make mistakes in our attempts to practice what we believe. It helps to be reminded that Love is part of our shared intent. If we really care about a person we are helping, and they know we do, it gives breathing room to the art of helping Christians and non-Christians.
- Unless necessary, refrain from telling people to "stay away from anything religious for a while."
- Don't do anything to de-legitimize the person's sense of worth, value, credibility or legitimacy. They've had enough of that in the cult.
- If you have a negative view of Christians or Christianity or a prejudice against "fundamentalist" Christianity or "new religions" and are strongly biased against them, be honest with yourself and the person who wants some help, and refer them to someone who you believe can help them.
- This paper has gone deep into territory that is challenging. Give yourself a pat on the back and a big hug for being willing to examine your own feelings and process in working with Christians.

Appendix II: Trigger Words & Phrases. Which, If Any Of These, Are Trigger Words For You?

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| • "Biblical" | • "Protestant" | • "Reformed" |
| • "Mainstream" | • "Sin" | • "Worship" |
| • "Catholic" | • "Holy Spirit Inspired" | • "Submission" |
| • "Jesus Christ" | • "Evangelist" | • "Satan" |
| • "New Religion" | • "Liturgical" | • "Priest" |
| • "Adultery" | • "Anti-Christ" | • "Traditionalist" |
| • "Obedience" | • "Ecumenical" | • "Baptist" |
| • "Salvation" | • "Crusade" | • "Mainline" |
| • "Fringe Religious Group" | • "Apostle" | • "Angels" |
| • "Christian" | • "Born Again" | • "Speaking In Tongues" |
| • "Fundamentalist" | • "Saved" | • "Reformation" |
| • "Witnessing" | • "Right" | • "Hell" |
| • "God" | • "Pastor" | • "Heaven" |

Appendix III: Questions To Ask Ourselves: For Christian And Non-Christians Who Help Christians

Questions For Increased Awareness

1. If I were to divide up a pie chart to represent the different branches of clinical psychology or therapeutic practice, how would I do it? [Draw a pie chart or other diagram on a piece of paper]
2. What forms of Christianity do I consider mainstream and why?
3. Do I believe a Christian recovering from an abusive religious group should be steered toward agnostic, atheist or other religious options? Do we I that as an essential part of recovery?
4. Do I have an anti-Christian or anti-fundamentalist or anti-[other Christian subgroup] agenda?
5. Do I believe people who are abused in religious groups should "stay away from religion?"
6. What do I think of someone who sees Jesus as the only way to salvation or heaven? Do I have a problem with that?
7. Am I intolerant of those whom I believe are intolerant?
8. Do I equate mutually exclusive belief systems with intolerance or can I separate the two?
9. If someone I am helping comes to me and says "I hate God and I'm never going back to the Christian religion," what would I say? What information would I need in order to respond to that question in a way that gives the person room to reevaluate that decision at a later date?
10. Do I fear certain Christian groups in the sense that I believe their inherent bias would make them more likely to be abusive and to fit the stereotype of bigotry and small-mindedness portrayed of some groups in the media?
11. Do I project that thinking onto other unknown groups I have not yet investigated personally?
12. What bothers me about Christianity? To what part or subset of Christianity does this apply?
13. What do I like about Christianity? To what part or subset of Christianity does this apply?
14. Do I feel motivated to control their beliefs?
15. Do I feel motivated to stop them and change their thinking?
16. Do I consider someone who can't embrace my point of view as equally valid as theirs is a bigot?
17. How would I want to respond if someone I'm trying to help holds this view (not able to accept my beliefs as much as I can make room for theirs)?
18. Do I think I "know" what "The" Christian religion is? How would I describe it explicitly (making conscious my thoughts by being explicit and putting them down on paper)
19. What Christian words or phrases are "triggers" for me? And why? [See Appendix II for a start]
20. Which Christian practices do I consider to be inherently problematic and unhealthy?
21. What do I believe is healthy and positive in the practice of Christianity?

Questions For Awareness of How Biases May Have Been Formed:

22. What forms the source of my personal opinions about Christianity and its practices?
23. What was my family religious upbringing? What was positive about it? What was not?
24. What is my experience in other spiritual traditions or faiths?
25. How many religious faiths or traditions are there in which have I participated deeply in my lifetime? Which ones and what branches of them?
26. What is my current religious or spiritual path, if any? Does it play an important part in my life? A minor one? Is it not significant at all?
27. If I was Christian, and now am not, why?
28. Where did I receive education and training about Christianity? Who contributed to the knowledge and opinions I have about it?
29. Do I feel I have been victimized by Christians or a group of them? If so, do those sentiments transfer to other groups of Christians I don't know as well?
30. Am I helping people who feel victimized by Christianity or God? Does that inform my thoughts and feelings about groups that appear similar by association?
31. Do I exhibit any avoidance behavior toward Christians? If so, can I pinpoint which experiences precipitated those choices? Do all Christians do those things?
32. In my clinical training, as I think about professors, mentors and supervisors, which of them took a favorable view toward Christianity? Which took a negative view? Which were neutral or unknown?
33. How have my colleagues and peer group contributed to my views on Christian belief and practice?

- 34.If I think about the media reports of Christians and Christian activity do they lean in a favorable or unfavorable view towards Christian groups?
- 35.If I think about what I've read, watched or listened to over the past year, concerning Christianity, was the material predominantly positive or negative?
- 36.Is there a media bias that is somewhat anti-Christian, or is that thinking unfounded?
- 37.Have I read any books or studies that inform me about the degree of influence media and social media have in the shaping of public and personal opinion?

Egalitarian Or Authoritarian

- 38.Do I believe and see those who come to me for help as equals? Does that change based on their religious background or which form of Christianity they practice?
- 39.Do I view those with mutually exclusive religious views to my own as more in need of education than those who have agreeable harmonious views with my own?
- 40.Do I see socio-political change (i.e. stopping bigotry, stopping the subjugating of women, uncompensated child labor or regulating education...etc) as part of my role in people helping?
- 41.Could those goals ever put me at odds with the immediate needs of a Christian I am helping?
- 42.Is helping the individual Christian in front of me with their recovery my top priority?
- 43.What do I believe about religious addiction, and how do I determine the difference between someone who has deeply held values which are different than mine versus someone unhealthily addicted to religion?
- 44.In my own thinking, do I correlate a higher degree of mental illness with those who have strong religious convictions?

Neutrality Or Disclosure

- 45.Am I completely neutral regardless of what religious background or current beliefs someone has?
- 46.Do I feel comfortable disclosing my prejudices or biases with those who come to me for help?
- 47.Do I see myself as a change agent influencing their belief system?
- 48.Am I okay with referring someone elsewhere if I do have strong prejudices that don't agree with — and might interfere with — those I am helping?

Building On the Positive

- 49.What do I have in common with the Christian person or people who seek my assistance?
- 50.Why would a Christian find me a valuable resource?
- 51.How can I ensure I am not someone who — in the process of trying to help — de-legitimizes and discounts another person's faith, God, values or person-hood?
- 52.What can I do to convey more honor, respect and dignity to those Christians who come to me for help regardless of whether I agree or disagree with their belief systems?
- 53.What helpful and life giving functions do their beliefs and practices serve for them?
- 54.If I have a negative view of religion — or Christianity in particular — what can I do to find out the parts of a person's faith and practice which are positive? How can I help them within the positive part of their faith, rather than just focus on the parts of it I believe are dysfunctional in it?
- 55.If I discovered that I had some unconscious bias which was not my intention, what can I do to become more educated about the varieties of Christian experience?
- 56.What can I do to increase my ability or repertoire to be a better facilitator of Christians exiting cults and abusive religious settings or relationships?
- 57.In what ways has this paper invited me to think about how I can better help Christians exiting from cults and high demand relationships who may come through my doors for help?
- 58.[Note: Please read the complete **C.A.T. Christianity Awareness Training** paper online] If this paper were to be revised at a later date what would I suggest could be done to make it a better facilitator of awareness — for clinicians, educators and other helpers — of the challenges of helping Christians in recovery.

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