

Coping with Triggers

Coping with Triggers and Floating . . . a recovery issue

By Carol Giambalvo

“Floating” is a word often used in association with “trancing out,” “spacing out,” “being triggered,” or “dissociation.” Ex-cult members describe it in several ways, including (but not limited to) feeling disconnected, feeling as though you’re watching yourself live your life, having spells where you experience uncontrollable emotions (usually sadness or anger) that is not appropriate to what is happening at the moment. It is also described as having exaggerated physical sensations, having anxiety or mild panic attacks, or having a fantasy or dream like vision, almost like a dream that invades your waking state. Most ex-members report that these experiences make them feel as though there is something drastically wrong with them; they feel as though they may be going crazy. The purpose of this article is to take the fear out of these experiences and bring about some understanding that they are not abnormal.

Triggered experiences are common to people who have been through a traumatic experience or prolonged periods of stress. Life in a cult is stressful and, for some former members, extremely traumatic. In addition, cults induce altered states of consciousness in many ways. Some cults produce trance-induced experiences through meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, guided visualization, auditing and/or decreeing. Other cults produce dissociative states when putting members through long, confrontational (“struggle”) sessions. Still others overload the senses through rhythmic drumming, music, information overload or simply through long, emotionally-laden sermons or lectures.

Periods of “floating” are usually brought on by a “trigger.” Dr. Margaret T. Singer speaks of the importance of being able to define and label these varying experiences. To define the word “trigger,” she uses the following examples: “It triggered my memory of . . .”; “it reminds me of . . .”; “it made me recall or reexperience memories.”

What is memory?

It is equally important to understand what a memory is. A lot of people think that memories are stored in our mind much like a video tape of an event, to be replayed at some future time. However, memory is actually stored in bits and pieces. Memories are a reconstruction of times past, recalled in the present and can be influenced by new experiences and new information received since the time the bits and pieces were stored.

What causes triggers?

Triggers for post-cult memories depend upon what group an individual belonged to, the philosophy and practices of the group, and individual personal experiences in the group. For former members of an Eastern guru-based group that used incense in meditation or rituals, the smell of incense can be a powerful trigger. For former members of a large group awareness training that uses modern music as people are entering the room and during exercises, hearing one of those songs on the car radio can be a powerful trigger (please pull off the road if this happens to you!). Ex-members of Bible-based groups can be triggered by hearing the word “amen” with the same accent and emphasis that the leader used, or by singing hymns sung in the group or reading scriptures that were overemphasized in the group. The loaded language used in groups can also be a trigger.

What is “floating” or “dissociation?”

In cult experience, members dissociate in order to adapt to the stress of cult life and to protect themselves from the group’s contradictory agenda and demand for subservience. Dissociation is a normal mental response to anxiety. A momentary anxiety arises when internal or external cues (triggers) set off a memory, a related idea, or a state of feeling that has anxiety attached to it. This brief anxiety experience alerts the mind to split off—that is the mind stops paying attention to the surrounding reality of the moment. The person becomes absorbed and immersed in some other mental picture, idea or emotion. This dissociation occurs unexpectedly and unintentionally and it is this dissociation that can be experienced as a floating effect.

When triggered into a dissociative state after leaving a cult, it can also trigger resentment and anger at being restrained while in the group — having been unable to get up and leave lectures, the lack of freedom and lack of other normal defense mechanisms.

When does it happen?

Any non-focused, monotonous, repetitive activity can trigger the old state of dissociation because one becomes flooded by the repetition. There are times when a trigger can arise in a normal, everyday environment. Ex-members are most susceptible to triggers when anxious, lonely, stressed, tired, distracted, ill or uncertain.

For those who were born or raised in a cultic group, you learned at an early age to be hypervigilant, to watch very carefully for any sign of disapproval or that you may be getting yourself in trouble so you could conform to expected behavior. After leaving, that hypervigilance does not just disappear. The expressions on people’s faces, their tone of voice, the use of language that was loaded in the group, certain dynamics – all these and more can become major triggers.

How to deal with triggers

Dr. Singer emphasizes the primary need for education, specifically psycho education. She advises ex-members to learn about trance states, how they are induced, the results of

trance states and, specifically how your group used them. Also, learn the vocabulary used to identify and label the normal human processes that describe triggers:

- Dissociation – a sudden, temporary alteration in the normally integrative functions of consciousness, identity or motor behavior
- Depersonalization – one’s sense of one’s own identity and reality is temporarily lost — “who am I?”
- Derealization – a sense of the reality of the external world is lost—“where am I?” “Is this real?”

Secondly, learn how to protect yourself. After leaving a highly controlled environment, you need your own space and personal time. Learning to establish healthy personal boundaries after a cult experience takes time and patience. You may want to purchase an answering machine and even monitor your calls. Remember, you don’t have to answer all calls, especially calls from the group.

Ex-members benefit tremendously from ex-member support groups. However, not all of us are fortunate enough to live in a location where a support group meets. So you need to establish your own support system. Even one person you can talk to who understands can be very helpful. Some ex-members have set up a support system over the telephone or the internet.

For your own protection, resist the urge to rescue people you left behind in the cult. Remember, they know the guilt buttons to push and all the phobia indoctrination to use. These could cause triggers for you, even as well prepared as you think you are. Third, Dr. Singer recommends that you get exit counseling. This is part of the psycho educational process. This does not have to be a formal exit counseling.

Fourth, Dr. Singer warns ex-members about going to a “normal” therapist, meaning one not knowledgeable about the effects of a thought reform environment. Therapists tend to blame it on the ex-member, on their masochism, their dependency issues, or their parents . . . “blame the victim.”

And let’s take the negative connotation out of the word “victim.” Yes, we were the victims of a very sophisticated system of thought reform, of deception, of guilt and fear manipulation. Perhaps we were in a transitional stage where we were looking for more answers for our life than usual, or were looking for new friends, looking for spirituality, looking for somewhere to belong. A group took our best qualities and used them for their own benefit while taking our vulnerabilities and using them to exploit and manipulate us. The other side of it is that we survived! It took a lot of courage to leave the group and it takes a lot of courage to get our lives back together.

But, what do I do when I'm in the middle of being triggered?

First, respect your fragile moments. The intensity of the triggered states decreases as time goes on and as you educate yourself.

Second, learn what helps you most when you are triggered. Some suggestions Dr. Singer makes are:

- divert your attention elsewhere (exercise, scrub the floor, etc.)
- suppress – you don't have to talk about it or analyze it
- minimize – say to yourself "I'm not going crazy. I'm just a little anxious right now. It will pass"

It helps to learn a way to bring yourself back to reality quickly by getting some sensory change. Some recently departed ex-members find it helpful to wear a rubber band around their wrist and "snap" themselves when they find themselves dissociating. Others, like myself, use the "pinch" method.

Dissociation is a habit. It has been taught to you well over months or years in a cult. It's a tough habit to break. It takes patience. If you want it gone yesterday, you may be experiencing one of the other residuals of being in an intense, high-demand group where everything had to be done yesterday. Taking time and patience with yourself is a post-cult lesson well worth the learning!