

'Totalist' cults prey on idealism, altruism of college students

By Evan Reid
Contributor

Because the number of idealistic, self-sacrificing college students is particularly high, U.S. college campuses are the prime recruiting grounds for potentially dangerous cults, according to the director of the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute.

Louis Joylan West, who is also psychiatrist-in-chief at the UCLA Medical Center, talked about "totalist" cults and their methods of coercive persuasion last week as part of the Learn-at-Lunch series. "Totalist" cults are those that use deceptive and harmful coercive techniques to draw in new members.

Approximately 25,000 cults exist in the United States and their recruitment and coercion methods, though for the most part similar, vary in severity and intensity, West said.

Anyone is vulnerable to cults, West told his audience. They may seem "silly or amusing — that is, until you are victimized by one of them."

The belief that cult victims come from troubled homes or are pilgrims looking for spiritual significance is a misconception, West said. Most don't fall into either of these categories but instead come from relatively normal homes and are only slightly idealistic.

Students in particular may be vulnerable to cults' recruiting efforts because students are often relatively altruistic and not yet accustomed to dealing with the



Louis Joylan West

extreme pressures encountered in college and with the depression that results.

"Idealism, altruism, a willingness to make personal sacrifices and a desire to do good is the number one correlation to vulnerability," said West in a later interview.

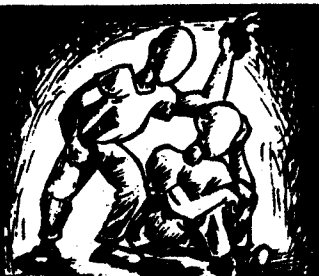
There is a difference between deceptive coercive tactics used by cults for recruitment, and harmless coercive techniques used by organizations such as the Marine Corps or the Roman Catholic church, West said.

While a Roman Catholic or Marine Corps indoctrination lays out expectations before recruiting, cults often fail to fully disclose their intentions or goals to prospective recruits.

"Totalist" cults exhibit great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea or thing, and employ unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and con-

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"WEST PRESENTED A LIST OF THE COMMON METHOD OF COERCION THAT HE SAID MAY ENABLE READERS TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM CULTS



ISOLATION OF THE RECRUIT AND MANIPULATION OF HIS ENVIRONMENT.

CONTROL OVER CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION.

DEBILITATION THROUGH INADEQUATE DIET AND FATIGUE.

INDUCTION OF UNCERTAINTY, FEAR, AND CONFUSION, WITH JOY AND CERTAINTY THROUGH SURRENDER TO THE GROUP AS THE GOAL.

ALTERATION OF HARSHNESS AND LENIENCY IN A CONTEXT OF DISCIPLINE.

PEER PRESSURE, OFTEN APPLIED THROUGH RITUALIZED STRUGGLE SESSIONS, GENERATING GUILT AND REQUIRING CONFESSIONS.

INSISTENCE THAT THE RECRUIT'S SURVIVAL — PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL — DEPENDS ON IDENTIFYING WITH THE GROUP.

ASSIGNMENT OF MONOTONOUS TASKS OR REPETITIVE ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS CHANTING OR COPYING WRITTEN MATERIALS.

Cults

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trol," West wrote in an article on the issue.

Distinguishing between a legitimate religion and a cult, West pointed out that a "legitimate religion has as its bona fide purpose the spiritual fulfillment or salvation or benefit of its members in mind," whereas "cult ministers are crooks, con men, businessmen of the most ruthless kind."

On college campuses, cults are usually advertised as self-improvement seminars, claiming to be able to improve an individual's personality, grades or outlook on life.

Several advertise themselves as religious groups offering fellowship with peers, free dinners or freedom from drugs or disease, West said.

A cult in the guise of a religious or self-improvement group is initially difficult to distinguish from a legitimate counterpart, and thus especially dangerous for unsuspecting individuals, West said.

Any group that asks for money, stresses an exaggerated "we/they dichotomy" or asserts that it or its leader possess an exclusive insight into scripture is one to be wary of, he cautioned.

The next Learn-at-Lunch series lecture, "Plastic Surgery: What It Is And What It Is Not," will be given by Timothy M. Miller, M.D., chief of the UCLA division of plastic surgery, noon Wednesday, May 31, in the Neuropsychiatric Institute Auditorium, C8-183.