

# Avoiding Mind-Control Groups and Groups with Cult-Like Practices

Everyone is capable of being persuaded to do something that we did not want to do, and that susceptibility is what mind-control groups use to incrementally take over people's lives. Mind-control and cult-like activities do not start with something dramatic like the tragedy at Jonestown but with incremental efforts to control people's thoughts and lives little by little.

New students and others experiencing major life transitions are often especially susceptible to mind-control groups, which often seem extremely friendly, provide many opportunities for community, and seem to create stability in a time of change. For that reason, these groups often try to recruit people in times of transition. However, unlike healthy spiritual and ethical communities, these groups do not ultimately support students' intellectual freedom and academic success, physical and mental health, and positive relationships with family and friends as part of a healthy, balanced life.

Mind-control groups are not welcome at Emory University and this information is provided to help you avoid these groups and to connect with Emory's many healthy spiritual and other campus communities. Emory University's policies for recognized religious and philosophical communities prohibit behaviors such as deceptiveness, proselytizing (outreach that involves pressure or exploits vulnerabilities), and harassment. Therefore, we strongly encourage students to begin their exploration for religious and philosophical communities with those listed on the Emory University Office of Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL) website (<http://religiousofspiritualandreligiouslife.emory.edu>). For your protection and that of all members of the Emory community, if you believe you have encountered a mind-control group on campus, please contact Emory OSRL at 404-727-6226.

Mind-control groups can be hard to recognize at first, and there is a spectrum in the aggressiveness of these groups' tactics. Some mind-control groups seem to share some of the beliefs or features of mainstream religious groups—the issue is not their beliefs per se, but their emotionally abusive and destructive practices. These groups seek to create an all-or-nothing reality and a situation in which people

are totally dependent on the group—spiritually, socially, romantically, financially, and in every way. In the United States today, there are an estimated 5,000 mind-control and cult-like groups.

## Some Characteristics of Mind-Control Groups

1. **LACK OF FORMAL RECOGNITION:** The guidelines that govern recognized religious and philosophical communities at Emory University are put in place to protect your wellbeing. Groups that are not connected with university structures or that refuse to comply with university policies should raise questions. Emory's religious and philosophical communities are expected to operate in a mutually respectful and collaborative ecumenical and interfaith way.
2. **DECEPTIVENESS OR MISINFORMATION:** Mind-control groups generally do not provide clear, complete, or honest information about themselves. Their affiliations, practices, and expectations may not be fully transparent. They may not provide complete details about their activities, activities may turn out differently from what was publicized, and information about leadership, resources, etc. may not be clear.
3. **OUTREACH EXCEEDS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL:** Mind-control groups generally appear very friendly, and you may feel like you are instantly friends with everyone. Their outreach may be uncomfortable in frequency, pressure, not taking "no" for an answer, or occurring in methods, times, and places that are inappropriate (e.g., residence halls). You may be asked or expected to recruit others to the group as your primary goal before you are really involved.
4. **INAPPROPRIATE ADVISING/MENTORING:** Mind-control groups usually involve "advising," mentoring, or supervision that is intense and seeks to pressure and control rather than empower students. Advisors may have little formal training, credentials, or experience. They may make you feel like you are being watched and judged. They may pry into your personal life for private information (sexual, financial, etc.) that can later be used to control you. They may seek inappropriate influence over your life, regarding dating, romance, or sexual

behavior. They may request excessive financial contributions and jeopardize your independence.

5. **ABSOLUTISM:** Mind-control groups generally discourage doubts, differences of opinion, criticism, research, and exposure. They may present only one right way to think and claim to have all the answers. They may regard disagreement as a sign of weakness or lack of commitment. They may demand rigid loyalty, present issues in terms of black-and-white thinking (e.g., saved or unsaved, pure or impure, with us or against us), and suggest catastrophic consequences for difference or disobedience (such as withdrawal of relationship, or graphic descriptions of eternal suffering).
6. **SEPARATION:** Mind-control groups may seek to separate you from your family and friends and encourage you to only be friends with and date other members of the group. They make seek a disproportionate amount of your time and attention so that you are not able to be involved in relationships or activities beyond the group. They may disparage, discredit, or promote prejudice against people who are not members of the group or minorities.
7. **MAJOR CHANGES:** Mind-control groups may pressure you to make major life changes, such as cutting off natural human relationships (family, friends, romantic, etc.), changing courses or your major, disregarding grades and exams, and dropping out of or taking time off from school. These practices are meant to destabilize your connections to your support network and make you less self-sufficient and more dependent. They may make it hard for you to leave easily.
8. **EMOTIONAL DISTRESS:** Mind-control group activities may leave you feeling lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, unworthiness, shame, fatigued, disempowered, or like you have fewer choices.
9. **DENIAL:** Mind-control groups often deny being cults even though they are widely regarded to be. They often disparage people who suggest they might be cults as demonic or the enemy.

## How to Avoid Involvement in Mind-Control Groups

1. Explore spiritual and other groups to become involved in through Emory University OSRL and the other resources listed below.
2. Report any group on campus you think might be a mind-control group to Emory OSRL.
3. Talk to people with different worldviews and maintain relationships with people of different perspectives.
4. Explore and stay involved in multiple groups and activities.
5. Educate yourself. You can research mind-control groups at resources like: International Cult Studies Association ([www.icsahome.com](http://www.icsahome.com))

## Support Resources If You Encounter a Mind-Control Group

- Emory University Office of Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL): 404-727-6226
- Emory University Police Department: 404-727-6111
- Emory University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): 404-727-7450

## Some Resources for Building Healthy Community at Emory

- Civic and Community Engagement
- Emory Athletics
- International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS)
- LGBT Center
- Racial and Cultural Engagement (RACE)
- Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL)
- Student Involvement, Leadership and Transitions (SILT)
- Women's Center



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