

High-risk adolescents and satanic cults

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During the last decade the number of teenagers involved in violent behavior and drug abuse increased significantly. Some of these adolescents were involved in Satanic cult activities. Although sensationalism is created by isolated incidents like the Matamoros murders and Geraldo's media coverage of satanism, our observation, in a private psychiatric hospital, reveals that in fact adolescents involved in satanic cults do not differ from other adolescents admitted with a variety of other problems. Psychodynamic factors, family dynamics, and treatment strategies for management of adolescents who are involved in satanic cult activities are discussed.

Recently we have seen increasing numbers of teenagers with such behavior problems as violent behavior and drug abuse. Psychiatrists and mental health professionals as well as police officers confront numerous adolescents who are involved in bizarre satanic cult activities that range from gathering in cemeteries to perform benign ritualistic activities to drinking blood from self-mutilation and animal sacrifices. Although the adolescent population has declined since 1980, the data from police and other resources indicate that the number of teenagers exhibiting violent behavior has increased. Most of these teenagers are alienated with feelings of isolation and powerlessness; they are involved in heavy drug use and listen to heavy metal music, which glorifies violence and encourages sexual activities. As a result these vulnerable young people become attracted to satanic cults. Although sensationalism is created by isolated incidents like the Matamoros murders (human sacrifices) and Geraldo's media coverage of satanism, our observation in a private psychiatric hospital reveals that, in fact, the adolescents involved in satanic cults do not differ from other adolescents admitted with a variety of other problems.

A cult can be defined as a group that follows a dominant leader, accepts his claims, doctrines, and dogma, and obeys a set of determined commands (1). Satanic cults follow a system of religious belief that proclaims an allegiance to the devil. Specific rituals are used to channel power from Satan to the followers. Cult activities give these followers a sense of belonging, identification, and power.

Adolescence includes the period of puberty that is marked by bodily growth, hormonal changes, and development of secondary sex characteristics. These physical changes are followed by a long and difficult period of emotional maturation. The outcome of adolescent development is the result of interaction between natural growth and environmental experience. Adolescents vacillate among divergent moods, points of view, and relationships. These teenagers must deal with pressure from instinctual drives vs external inhibitors. They attempt to satisfy curiosities and to test limits. They express defiant and rebellious behavior to achieve individualism. The search for identity is markedly influenced by peer groups. If these are constructive social groups that provide creative outlets for adolescent energy, the result is a sense of meaningful membership in the community and identification with its goals. But if the peer group is more delinquent with values antagonistic to the larger society, the result is likely to be antisocial personality organization (2).

The family system remains the crucial guiding influence in a child's personality. Parenting that provides clear and consistent expectations and structure with limits promotes the development of healthy self-esteem and a sense of competency. Rigidity and overprotectiveness tend to cause passiveness and self-critical attitudes in adolescents. Overpermissiveness tends to produce a demanding and defiant adolescent. Inconsistencies in parenting tend to result in disturbed behavior. Dysfunctional families and ineffectual parenting are the major contributing factors in the development of behavioral problems.

While most adolescents grow normally, about 15% to 20% of vul-

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nerable teenagers may develop moderate-to-severe behavior problems. Most of these teenagers are involved in drug use and some may be attracted towards satanic cults. These adolescents may be looking for something that will give them a sense of identification, belonging, power, and control.

Several factors motivate adolescents to join cults. *Curiosity and expectations* are the major factors in younger teenagers who are looking for excitement and possibly free drugs to get high. *Resentment and anger* towards parents and authority figures are also contributing factors. The feeling of alienation from the family and society makes teenagers more vulnerable to becoming attracted to cult activities. The youth identify with heroes who support such emotions. These vulnerable adolescents are also influenced by *heavy metal music*, which promotes devil worship. While under the influence of drugs such as amphetamines, cocaine, and alcohol, these youngsters are easily influenced by the lyrics of heavy metal music, which glorify their unconventional attitudes concerning sex, violence, hate, and the occult (3). The study by Trostle offers support to the hypothesis that a segment of today's youth are being influenced by witchcraft and the occult and that heavy metal music is directly correlated with this identification (4). Adolescents who grow with *low self-esteem and poor ego strength* develop a sense of identity with cult activities.

Another dynamic factor for adolescents' involvement in satanism appears to be "*power*." Self-mutilation, animal sacrifices, and ritual drinking of blood give them a false sense of power (5). This sense of power is en-

hanced further with the drug use and the continuous preoccupation with heavy metal music dealing with power, sex, and satanism.

The dogma of freedom of choice and will means doing whatever you want with no God, no guilt, and no conscience. Cults provide an opportunity to satisfy fantasies and offer escape from pressure and the hard realities of life.

Stages of involvement in activities of satanic cults

Experimental stage. Vulnerable adolescents (rebellious children with moderated behavior problems and/or substance abuse) are introduced to cults by peers or lured toward cult activities by adolescent or adult recruiters. The youngsters begin to identify with these groups and show unusual preoccupation with black clothes, darkness, blood and death, heavy metal music, satanic messages, and devil worship.

Excitement stage. Fear and curiosity are replaced with excitement and fun. Completely detached from family and alienated from friends and society, the adolescents develop a sense of belonging and identification with the cult and loyalty to the leader. They participate in rituals that attain religious significance and they begin to participate in ritualistic animal sacrifices.

Involvement stage. The adolescents regularly attend ritualistic activities, including animal sacrifices and drinking of blood. They assume leadership roles and recruit younger adolescents by offering free drugs and indulgence in sexual activities. They engage in violent and sometimes criminal activities without feelings of guilt. These youth collect paraphernalia and literature on sa-

tanic cults and magical powers. They experience a false sense of supernatural power.

Final stage. A very small number of adolescents may belong to highly organized cult groups and participate regularly in highly ritualistic activities including violence and sexual abuse. They believe in satanism as a highly orthodox religion.

Warning signs

Considering the increasing number of vulnerable youth involved in satanic cult activities, we must recognize adolescent involvement early. Psychiatrists, physicians, and parents should be familiar with the warning signs: withdrawal and alienation from family, unusual preoccupation with black clothes and darkness, increased interests in supernatural and occult literature, increased rebellious and aggressive behavior, violence, sexual activity, frequent drug and alcohol use, increased preoccupation with heavy metal music supporting cult activities, drawings of satanic symbols such as 666, upside-down cross, pentagram, circle and goat's head, and the satanic bible.

Diagnostic categories

Patients involved in satanism manifest symptoms of high anxiety and depression. Few patients show florid psychotic symptomatology. Most of these patients satisfy one or more of the following diagnoses:

Axis I

- 305.00 — Alcohol Abuse
- 305.20 — Substance Abuse Marijuana
- 305.70 — Substance Abuse Amphetamines
- 305.60 — Substance Abuse Cocaine
- 305.90 — Conduct Disorder, Undifferentiated type

298.80 — Brief Reactive Psychosis
296.30 — Major Depression, Recurrent
319.00 — Adjustment Disorder with Depressed Mood

Axis II

300.14 — Multiple Personality Disorder
301.83 — Borderline Personality Disorder

Treatment

Adolescent involvement in satanic cult activities reflects the presence of deeper psychopathology and a need for appropriate treatment. Medication should be considered for patients who are diagnosed as suffering from major depression, bipolar disorder, or psychotic conditions. Clinicians often face difficulties in developing rapport with adolescents involved in satanic cults because of their conflicts with authority figures, lack of trust, and allegiance to a cult leader. Therefore, organizing a special-issue group for patients influenced by satanic cults offers several advantages. The group members identify easily with one another and are able to focus on the special issues unique to them, such as the dangerous consequences of joining the cult and particularly of engaging in the cult activities that may make them insensitive to pain. These may lead to serious violent and criminal behavior. The group should also focus on building self-esteem and stronger ego strength to deal with serious codependence on leaders and members of the cult. Group members are encouraged also to find alternative activities for experiencing healthy excitement and thrills. Most adolescents influenced by cult activities also use drugs and need to be in a 12-step substance abuse program. Adolescents under the influence of cult activities often experience difficulty in accepting the concept of

a higher power and often identify the devil as a higher power. They are encouraged to join a "spiritual group" to discuss the importance of spirituality in day-to-day life and the importance of structure and discipline that a church can offer.

Therapeutic involvement of families where children are involved in cult activities is very important. These families need help to understand cults to deal effectively with the situation and to understand what strategies and options are available. Adolescents who come from dysfunctional families, particularly those with a history of child abuse and sexual abuse, are hard to treat. If the home environment is not healthy, a long-term residential program is a better alternative.

Conclusion

Not every adolescent with long hair who uses drugs and listens to heavy metal music is engaged in satanic activities. Most involvement in cult activities is limited to attending cult meetings and developing a false sense of power and identification with the cult group. However, some adolescents who come from dysfunctional families and have some underlying psychiatric problems are vulnerable and prone to become involved more deeply. This may lead to serious ritualistic behavior and possibly criminal activities.

Activities in satanic cults may be symptoms of an underlying psychiatric disorder and, thus, a detailed psychiatric evaluation is needed for appropriate treatment. These patients show resistance to standard treatment programs; therefore, group therapy focusing on special issues should be offered. Group members should focus on their code-

pendence on cult leaders and help build ego strength and self-confidence to detach themselves from cults and to find alternative ways to experience excitement in life. Physicians, parents, and mental health professionals need to work together to identify high-risk adolescents so that early intervention and treatment can prevent the youth of our communities from further destruction. As professionals, we also have a responsibility to protect the public from the mass hysteria produced by sensationalist media.

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